

## Mammals of Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan was stitched in the 1920s from a few old kingdoms and sedentary Turkic tribes (as opposed to nomadic Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Kazakh). In 1950-1980 the country's lowlands were largely converted to endless cotton fields; each resident had to spend a few weeks a year picking cotton (a zoologist friend of mine who was allergic to pesticides was forced to keep working the fields until he nearly died). Corruption was bad even by Soviet standards: some district officials essentially enslaved their subjects. Excessive irrigation caused widespread salinization of the land and near-disappearance of the Aral Sea. The last Party leader Karimov easily transitioned into a typical post-Soviet tyrant and ruled with an iron fist until his death in 2016. His successor loosened some restrictions, but it remains to be seen if any true liberalization will happen. The account below is mostly based on my trips there in 1988-92, with some updates.

Uzbeks are industrious and run most of trade and other commerce in Turkestan. Bazaars in the south of the country are the best in Central Asia – consider visiting in September-October. May is a good time for both the deserts and the mountains. Winters are cold and windy, although there are some nice sunny days in protected valleys of south and east. Summers are very hot, and the country's mountains are mostly too low to provide escape. Most people understand Russian and will get the general meaning of what you say if you try any Turkic language except Yakut. In the southeast, many are Tajiks or Bukhara Jews and understand Farsi. Police are a greater threat than criminals, but violence against foreigners is rare.

Most people visit Uzbekistan to see ancient cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva; Kokand is also worth checking out if you are nearby. Peripheral ruins are often used by **common** and **Savi's pipistrelles**, **common** and **Botta's serotines**, and **Nepal myotis**. Agricultural lands have been sterilized by excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers, but you might still find **yellow ground squirrel**, **tamarisk** and **Libyan jirds**, **grey dwarf hamster**, **short-tailed bandicoot rat**, and (in the southeast) **Himalayan rat**. Widespread dryland mammals include **long-eared hedgehog**, **red fox**, **long-clawed ground squirrel**, **small five-toed** and **Severtzov's jerboas**, **mid-day jird**, **great gerbil**, **Zaisan mole-vole**, and **tolai hare**.

Kyzylkum ("red sand") Desert occupies a large portion of the country. In addition to common species listed above, it has **piebald shrew** and lots of **jerboas**, including **northern three-toed**, **Lichtenstein's**, **Blanford's** (rare), **Bobrinsky's** (local), and **comb-toed**. In a good year you can see nine out of ten jerboa species of the Kyzylkum by driving backcountry roads around Uzunkuduk for one night and northeast of Tahtakupir for another night; the latter is the best area for **Heptner's pygmy** and **thick-tailed three-toed jerboas**. **Vinogradov's jerboa** occurs in the east of the desert around Nurota. There might still be a few **marbled polecats**, **sand cats**, and **caracals** in remote areas.

Small Zarafshan Nature Reserve east of Samarkand protects *tugai* (riparian jungle) with **golden jackals**, **jungle cats**, **badgers** (*leucurus*), **least weasels**, and **boars**; it used to have fenced-in **goitered gazelles** and **onagers**. Kyzylkum Nature Reserve near Gazli has similar fauna plus, reportedly, some **marbled polecats**, **goitered gazelles** and **Bactrian red deer**.

Termez, a hot and generally unpleasant city on the Afghan border, is surrounded by arid plains with many abandoned military installations where **Bukhara horseshoe bat**, **Geoffroy's bat**, and **desert long-eared bat** roosted. **Brandt's hedgehog**, **caracal** and **striped hyena** once occurred around town; watch also for extremely rare **Bukhara myotis**.

The northwestern part of Uzbekistan is a formally autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan. Its native nomads have entirely lost their traditional culture and are difficult to tell from Uzbeks. This is a very poor area with devastated environment. A series of cliffs (*chink*) separates the dry seabed of Aral Sea (accessible through the city of Muinak) from equally flat Ustyurt Plateau; both levels are inhabited by **wildcat**, **steppe** and **marbled polecats** (all very rare), and **small five-toed**, **Severtzov's**, and **Siberian jerboas**. On the plateau, look for **corsac fox**, **saiga** (mostly in winter), **onager** (extremely rare), **goitered gazelle** (likely extinct), **greater jerboa**, **thick-tailed three-toed jerboa** (rare), and **northern mole-vole**. The cliffs might still be inhabited by a few **urial sheep** (subsp. *arkal*), **wolves**, and **caracals**. The best part of the cliffs is the one still facing the deepest (western) remnant of the Aral Sea, accessible by 4x4 from Jasliq. Wastelands around Muinak had abundant **Kazakhstan voles**, as well as **tamarisk**, **Libyan** and **mid-day jirds** and **great gerbils**.

Tien Shan and Pamir-Alai mountain ranges enter Uzbekistan from the east. The former are easy to visit from Tashkent; go to Ugam-Chatkal National Park for **Tien Shan ground squirrel** and rare **Menzbier's marmot**. The latter has many nature reserves and a national park called Zaamin. Montane mammals include **Gmelin's shrew**, **stone marten**, **ermine**, **badger** (*canescens*), **boar**, **Siberian ibex**, **forest dormouse**, **silver mountain vole**, **Bukhara vole** (Pamir-Alai only), and **Turkestan red pika**. Gissar Nature Reserve claims to have **Tien Shan brown bear**, **lynx**, **otter**, and **snow leopard**. Nuratau Nature Reserve near Yangikishlak still has *severtzovi* **wild sheep** (alternatively classified as urials or argali).

Beautiful but difficult to access, Great Aragonite Cave near Andijan had **greater** and **lesser horseshoe-nosed bats**, **Caspian barbastes**, and **Blyth's myotis** (subsp. *oxygnathus*); look also for **juniper voles** around the entrance.