

Armenian mammals

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Armenia is a tiny but plucky, densely populated but very scenic, and generally fascinating country in the mountains of the Lesser Caucasus. Its history is a long sequence of genocides and major territorial losses, but its people are friendly, industrious, and exceptionally hospitable. In addition to spectacular nature, it has splendid cultural monuments and great food. The best time to visit is late April-early May, when everything is blooming; in other times of year it is very dry and some mammals stay underground. Lowlands are very hot in summer, and high elevations can be inaccessible in winter.

The information below is based on my visits in 1988-1990, during which time the country successfully liberated some of predominantly Armenian parts of Azerbaijan and became ready for independence. Alas, the independence was mostly nominal: today Armenia is heavily dependent on Russia for the much-needed military aid, and unhealthy shares of land, realty and businesses are Russian-owned. Russian is widely understood; the knowledge of English is reportedly much better than it used to be. The infrastructure is reasonably good for such a mountaneous country. As for the driving style, a quick look at the dates of deaths at local cemeteries will tell you all you need to know. Avoid minivan taxis if you can.

The best place for mammalwatching (hiking required) is Khosrov Forest Reserve, established in 310 AD. In a few days there I saw **Nepal** and **Schaub's myotis**, **red foxes**, a **wildcat**, a **Syrian brown bear**, **mouflons** (subspecies *gmelini*), a **Transcaucasian mole vole** (along the access road), a **Vinogradov's jird**, **steppe field mice**, and **house mice** (possibly non-feral). There are also **eastern barbastelle**, **leopard**, **lynx**, **striped hyena**, **wolf**, **marbled polecat**, **least weasel**, **stone marten**, **wild goat**, **boar**, **Indian porcupine**, **Cape hare**, and many other interesting species. Spring wildflower blooms there are among the best in the Caucasus; look for giant stemless irises. Geghard Monastery near the northern border of the reserve is surrounded by small caves where I found **Mehely's horseshoe bats**, **Botta's serotines** (subspecies *anatolicus*), **mountain long-eared bats**, and **common pipistrelles**. The latter also roosted in Garni Temple nearby.

Another good place to look for bats is Lake Sevan: multiple species swarmed over the reedbeds at its southeastern end. **Nepal myotis** was common; Lake Sevan population has been described as a separate species (**Hajastan myotis**), but apparently without sufficient justification. Tree groves around the lakeshore had colonies of **Daghestan pine voles**.

North from Lake Sevan is the wettest part of Armenia, with lush deciduous forests. Dilijan National Park has a broad variety of forest mammals: look for **Caucasian pygmy shrew**, **particolored bat**, **pine** and **stone martens**, **badger**, **red deer**, **boar**, **Caucasian squirrel**, **forest dormouse**, and **Schidlovsky's pine vole**. There were two species of field mice, most likely **Black Sea** and **Urals field mice** (the former is probably conspecific with **yellow-necked field mouse**). Mountais above Ijevan are also densely forested; I saw a **Major's pine vole** there. More arid hills above Vanadzor have **badger**, **Armenian birch mouse** (a friend of mine once photographed a juvenile walking into a roadside restaurant in broad daylight), and **gray dwarf hamster**. **Wildcat**, **lynx**, **wolf** and **golden jackal** occur in the area, but I never saw any.

The most arid part of the country is Arax (or Aras) River Valley along the (closed) border with Turkey. The area around Khor Virap Monastery had a **least weasel**, **Asia Minor ground squirrels**, **small** and **Williams's five-toed jerboas**, **Tristram's** and **Dahl's jirds**, and a **Macedonian mouse**. **Pallas's cat** is said to have survived here until the 1970s.

Mount Aragatz above Yerevan has road access to high-elevation habitats; look for **stone marten**, **yellow-necked field mouse**, and **European snow vole**. Tiny Erebuni State Reserve near Geghadir on the southeastern outskirts of Yerevan, created for protection of wild wheat and other rare plants, had lots of **Nehring's blind molerats** and **Persian jirds**.

Arevik National Park in the far southeast of the country has habitats ranging from deserts to alpine meadows, and has lots of interesting mammals: **leopard**, **Syrian brown bear**, **mouflon**, **wild goat**, and possibly **Armenian shrew**, **lynx**, **striped hyena**, **wolf**, **Urartu** and **Afghan mouselike hamsters**, and **Setzer's mouse-tailed dormouse**. I've never been there.

Republic of Artsakh, known to the rest of the world as Karabakh, is an Armenian-populated plateau which declared independence from Azerbaijan in 1991 and became a de-facto part of Armenia after a bloody four-year war (the hostilities began before the declaration). The war was followed by massive ethnic cleansing on both sides. You can only travel to Artsakh from Armenia, but have to get Azerbaijan's permission first if you consider later visiting that country. The road is through the so-called Lachin Corridor; it is populated mostly by Kurds and surrendered to Armenia in 1994 (Armenia had very good relations with Kurds in the last few decades, even financing the world's only Kurdish university; that friendship paid off as the opening of Lachin Corridor decided the outcome of Karabakh War). I was there in 1988; at that time **lesser rock shrew**, **roe deer**, **wild goat**, and **European snow vole** were easy to see around Oghti Eghtsi Monastery. The northern part of the republic has many caves and probably interesting bats, but its fauna hasn't been studied well. Most tourists visiting Artsakh nowadays are from the Armenian diaspora; I don't know what the environmental situation is.