

## Mammals of the Republic of Georgia

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Georgia is one of my favorite countries. It has probably the most hospitable people in the world, and local food and wine are sublime: consider taking competitive eating and drinking courses before visiting. The stunningly beautiful scenery is enhanced, rather than defaced, by ancient architecture. There's a lot of cultural diversity: in addition to many minorities, there are distinctive subgroups of Georgians, and their dialects are more like separate languages. But there's also amazing tolerance: Georgia prides itself at being the only country that has always had Jews but has never had anti-Semitism.

Squeezed between Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires, Georgia has for centuries been pillaged by them in turn. As of 2017, Russia occupies two large chunks of already-small Georgian territory, mostly to prevent the country from joining NATO. The occupied parts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) are kept in deep poverty; people there are brainwashed to make sure they don't even consider re-joining Georgia. The rest of the country is a working democracy with steadily improving economy. There is no bad time to visit, but I recommend late September-early October when you can enjoy brilliant sunshine, cool mornings, fall colors, snow-free trekking, and fruit-filled markets. Some of the best hikes are too close to the Russian border to be safe, but otherwise access is reportedly much easier than in 1981-1992 when I traveled there.

Much of Georgia is covered by gorgeous broadleaf forests, particularly lush in the western part. These forests are not very mammal-rich, but have some nice species, and the world's highest density of **wildcats**. At higher elevations are fir-spruce forests, with trees up to 70 m tall; they receive up to 25 m of snow in winter. Above them are alpine meadows; they are invariably used as summer pastures so in summer you have to climb even higher to see wild ungulates.

The only arid part of the country is the southeast. Vashlovani Nature Reserve (where I've never been) reportedly has **jungle cat, leopard, striped hyena, Indian porcupine, small five-toed jerboa, Macedonian mouse, and Tristram's jird**. Dry slopes around Tbilisi were inhabited by **Macedonian mouse, Brandt's hamster, and social vole**, while **Kuhl's** and **common pipistrelles** were abundant in the city. **Common vole** occurred in wheat fields near Sioni.

Common forest mammals include **northern white-breasted hedgehog, bicolored, lesser, Radde's, Caucasian pygmy, and Caucasian shrews, Transcaucasian water shrew, Caucasian and Levantine moles, common and lesser noctules, serotine, brown bear, pine and stone martens, badger, red fox, boar, red and roe deer, Caucasian squirrel, forest and edible dormice, Black Sea, Urals and steppe field mice** (difficult to tell apart), and **Major's pine vole**. The best places to see them include Lagodekhi Nature Reserve and Tusheti National Park in the Greater Caucasus and Borjomi Nature Reserve in the Lesser Caucasus. Mtiral National Park near Batumi has the highest rainfall and in summer looks almost tropical; it is the best place for **southern white-breasted hedgehog, bank vole** of the distinctive race *ponticus*, and **eastern broad-footed field mouse**. Lowlands are mostly deforested, but Kolkheti National Park near Poti is an exception; its forests and wetlands had **Caucasian shrew, golden jackal, Eurasian harvest mouse, and European water vole**. Algeti National Park is very close to Tbilisi, but had **wolves**, and was good for **Daghestan and Schidlovsky's pine voles**. Sataplia Nature Reserve near Kutaisi has a beautiful cave with no bats plus a few small ones where in March I saw **Nathusius's** and **Savi's pipistrelles, lesser myotis** (subsp. *oxygnathus*), and **eastern and western barbastelles**.

A good base for high-elevation treks is Kazbegi. **Kazbeg birch mouse** and **Robert's snow vole** live around town. In summer it usually takes at least a full day's hike to see **East Caucasian ibex** and **chamois**, but in winter/spring they are sometimes much closer. Another great place is Usguli in Upper Svaneti, likely the world's most beautiful village. From here you can search for **West Caucasian ibex, Klukhor birch mouse, long-clawed mole vole, and Caucasian snow vole**. Tviberi Pass used to be particularly good for the ibex, but might be inaccessible now as it is on the Russian border.

Abkhazia (Apsny in Abkhazian, Apkhazeti in Georgian), once a prosperous tourist destination, is now difficult to visit without a Russian passport. Its economy is in shambles; ethnic Georgians (once a majority) and other non-Abkhazians have mostly left or been forced to leave. Roads above Novy Afon access forests where smaller species such as **Levantine mole** and **Caucasian squirrel** were common. Pitsunda has a large pine grove where **Caucasian shrew** was particularly abundant. Mountains around Lake Ritza had **Radde's shrew, Caucasian birch mouse, and long-clawed mole vole**, and in spring just after the road to the lake opened it was sometimes possible to see **wolf** and **West Caucasian ibex** relatively easily, but all these species are more common on the Russian side of the border. **Wildcat** was particularly abundant along that road. Introduced **olive baboons** live in the hills above Sukhumi. Abkhazia has lots of caves, including the world's deepest. Uaz-Abaa Cave near Gumista and an unnamed cave near Tkhina had thousands of **common bentwings**; the latter also had a few **greater, lesser and Mekhely's horseshoe bats**. There's probably more bat diversity in these caves in winter. Shakuran Caves near Tsabal had **Transcaucasian water shrews** and **Natterer's myotis** at the lower level.

There are three species of cetaceans in the Black Sea, all represented by distinctive subspecies. Large herds of **common dolphins** are often visible from shore in summer; **bottlenose dolphin** and **harbor porpoise** are only rarely seen.