

## Mammals of Kyrgyzstan

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The only country in ex-Soviet Central Asia that is not a dictatorship, Kyrgyzstan is nonetheless poor, unstable, and noticeably backward; its mostly-rural economy depends on income from mining and remittances from men working in Russia and Kazakhstan. It is an undeveloped but delightful travel destination – just be sure to check local news prior to departure. People are generally very hospitable and friendly; speaking some Russian would be very helpful.

Traditionally the Kyrgyz are nomadic pastoralists, so when the country's borders were carved by the Soviets, it got few lowlands as arable lands were all populated by Uzbeks. The Tien Shan reaches 7000+ m, so travel there shouldn't be taken lightly. It's an arid land, but on southwestern slopes facing Fergana Valley there are lush forests of walnut and wild apple. More widespread are neat stands of Tien Shan spruce. In the southeast is the high plateau of Inner Tien Shan, with ridges separated by broad valleys called *syrta*, reminiscent of northwestern Tibet. Travel is best in April-October (June-September at high elevations). In late summer, try wild apples: some trees have better fruit than any domestic variety.

There are many nature reserves in the mountains. My favorite is the beautiful Sary Chelek Nature Reserve above Namangan with some of the best walnut-apple and spruce forests and alpine meadows. I spent two weeks there in late August of 1989 and saw my first **snow leopard**, plus such rarities as **Tien Shan shrew**, **Turkestan otter**, **Tien Shan brown bear**, and **Turkestan lynx**; more common mammals were **common noctule** (check bird nestboxes), **stone marten**, **least weasel**, **Asian badger**, **boar**, **Siberian ibex**, **Tien Shan red deer**, **Siberian roe deer**, **forest dormouse** (also in bird boxes), **Urals field mouse**, **narrow-headed vole**, **silver mountain vole**, and **Turkestan red pika**. The great walnut forest of Arslanbob above Jalalabad is the best place in the country for **wild boar** and **Indian porcupine** (there are also introduced **Northern raccoon** and **American mink**). In the far west is Besh Aral Nature Reserve, reportedly with similar fauna plus rare **Menzbier's marmot**. The most easily accessible nature reserve in the Tien Shan is Ala Archa Nature Park above Bishkek, with good juniper and spruce forests and also similar fauna. I was there in early March, when most of it was under deep snow, and didn't see any mammals except **red fox**, but there were plenty of interesting tracks.

Issyk Kul ("hot lake") is surrounded by upland steppe where **Siberian jerboa**, **tamarisk gerbil**, **steppe lemming**, **grey dwarf hamster**, **Kazakhstan vole**, **Tien Shan ground squirrel**, and **tolai hare** are common. Look also for **lesser shrew** and **least weasel** in coastal wetlands, **Tien Shan shrew**, **red squirrel**, and **Tien Shan red-backed vole** in spruce forests, and **Altai marmots** in montane meadows. In June 1990 I found a **Tien Shan birch mouse** at the edge of a spruce grove above Jety Oguz rocks, and colonies of **Rall ground squirrel** along the road to Karkara on the Kazakh border.

The high inner plateau still has **Argali sheep**, **wolf**, and **Pallas's cat** (I've only seen the sheep plus a **narrow-headed vole**, a **Siberian jerboa** and **tolai hares**). The new Sarychat Ertash Nature Reserve is said to be a good place to see those as well as **snow leopard** and **Siberian ibex**; it borders the lands of Kumtor Gold Mine where anti-poaching protection is the best in the region and **snow leopard** is reportedly common. Another good area is Inylchek Valley, leading to massive glaciers below the Tien Shan's highest peaks. Here and elsewhere at high elevations you can find **silver mountain vole** and **large-eared pika**. Saryjaz Canyon cuts across the mountains and reaches very low elevation before entering China; I am pretty sure I saw **Stoliczka's mountain vole** there, which is officially known only from China.

The mountains of Pamir-Alai in southwestern Kyrgyzstan are less forested than the Tien Shan, and have slightly different fauna. Pamir Tract (Highway) starts from Osh and climbs to Tajik border through a series of high passes; the first one (Chigirchik) is a good place to look for **ermine**. The last Kyrgyz town is Sary Tash; from here you can also go east into China or west into high Alai Valley, known since Marco Polo's report as the world's best pasture. Doroot Korgon is a good base for exploring the area. **Zaisan mole-vole** and endemic **Alai mole-vole** are common in surrounding grasslands (the latter tends to occur at higher elevations where the grass is taller). A good overnight hike to the Tajik border to the south will get you one of the best views in all of Pamir; look for **long-tailed marmots** and **Altai weasels** in small side valleys, for **Himalayan field mice** and **juniper voles** in *archa* (tree juniper) groves, and for **Siberian ibex** at ridgecrests.

Osh is the best place in Kyrgyzstan for bats. Look in hollow trees (there's a lot of big ones lining the streets), old buildings, and small caves in Takhta i Suleiman mountain above the city (note the smooth trail around the peak: it was polished by the bellies of thousands of barren women who used to come from all over Turkestan to crawl around the mountain, believing that the ritual would cure them). Look for **Bukhara**, **greater** and **lesser horseshoe bats**, **Bukhara barbastelle**, **common pipistrelle**, **Botta's** and **Gobi serotines**, and **Geoffroy's**, **lesser** and **Nepal myotis**. **Mid-day gerbil**, **Himalayan rat**, **Kazakhstan vole**, and **gray dwarf hamster** occur around and sometimes in the city.

Lowland areas near Bishkek and Talas used to have **long-eared hedgehog**, **wildcat**, **steppe polecat**, **corsac fox**, **Vinogradov's jerboa**, and **social vole**, but today you'll probably have to cross into Kazakhstan to find any good habitat. **Yellow ground squirrel**, **tamarisk gerbil**, **striped field mouse**, and **Kazakhstan vole** might still be present.