

Mammals of Tajikistan

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The most scenic of Central Asian countries, Tajikistan has been a prosperous and happy place for most of its long history. The only country in Turkestan where the main language is not Turkic (Tajik is a dialect of Farsi), it has usually been a quiet, remote part of various empires. But Russian and Soviet empires were different, and brought much bloodshed. Tajiks showed little enthusiasm for Communism, and were punished by Stalin who gave their two main cities, Bukhara and Samarkand, to Uzbekistan. When I traveled there in 1988-1991, the local setup reminded me of Kipling's descriptions of Indian life under the Raj: all positions of real power were occupied by Russians while all nominal posts belonged to Tajiks; any visitor from Moscow was automatically given VIP treatment. The bazaars were full, but Tajikistan was still the poorest of the 15 republics that made up the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Tajikistan was hit the hardest: its economy completely collapsed, skilled Russians and Ukrainians fled, and massive engineering projects could no longer be maintained. An armed conflict between northern and southern clans quickly escalated into a bloody civil war between Iran-backed Islamists and the rest of the population, backed by Russia via Uzbekistan. The Islamists lost, but a low-intensity guerilla movement is still active, fed by drug smuggling money. President Rahmonov (he later dropped the Russian "-ov" ending from his surname) was elected in 1992; all subsequent elections were fake. Today there's still no viable economy; half of the GDP is remittances from Tajiks working in Russia. Russian is still widely understood; English is virtually useless; Uzbek is somewhat understood so you can try Turkic words if you know any.

Tajikistan is 90% mountains, so there's plenty of scary roads and remote villages with weird customs. The best time for travel in the mountains is July-September. The lowlands are very hot in summer, so it's better to visit them in September-November (be careful at the bazaars: tourists have been known to die from overeating) or March-May. The adventurous can also try going to Eastern Pamir in winter, when the thin snow cover creates perfect conditions for tracking larger mammals. Extensive hiking is required to enjoy the country fully. It is said to be reasonably safe most of time.

The lowlands

There are three patches of arid, heavily irrigated lowlands, separated by formidable mountain barriers. The only wild mammals you are likely to see outside nature reserves are **red fox**, **gray dwarf hamster**, an occasional **jird**, and common bats such as **greater** and **lesser horseshoe bats**, **lesser** and **Nepal myotis**, and **common pipistrelle**.

In the far north is Tajikistan's part of fertile Fergana Valley, with its capital Khujand (Alexandria Eschate of the Hellenistic era); it is rich in history, but naturalists would be wise to skip it. The only place with natural landscape is Boboib Mountain near the northernmost tip of the country. It is part of Tien Shan and reportedly has **steppe polecats** (rare) and Tajikistan's only population of **social voles** on grassy slopes, plus **Kazakhstan voles** in juniper groves.

South of Dushanbe (where **Bukhara vole** occurred at the airport) is the country's agricultural heartland. The main attraction here is the large Tigrovaya Balka ("tiger valley") Nature Reserve at the confluence of Vakhsh and Panj Rivers (forming the Amu Darja) on the border with Afghanistan. This is the largest surviving block of *tugai* (dense riparian jungle) in Central Asia; Caspian tigers allegedly survived here until the 1960s. **Bactrian deer** once survived only here; there are currently less than 100 left. More common are **golden jackal**, **jungle cat**, **boar**, **short-tailed bandicoot rat**, **Indian porcupine**, and introduced **coypu**. In late summer, immense clouds of mosquitoes attract swarms of bats that roost in abandoned buildings around the reserve: I found **Savi's pipistrelles**, **Botta's serotines**, and **Geoffroy's myotis**. Upland parts of the reserve are said to be inhabited by **Brandt's** and **long-eared hedgehogs**, **striped hyena**, **wildcat**, **wolf**, **urial sheep** (subsp. *bocharensis*), **long-clawed ground squirrel**, **small five-toed** and **Severtzov's jerboas**, **mid-day**, **Libyan** and **tamarisk jirds**, and **great gerbil**; I haven't been there.

A little-known wonder located south of Kulob is Khojamumin, a mountain of heavily eroded rock salt. In addition to weird salt formations, it has beautiful caves where I found some very rare **Bukhara myotis**, as well as **Bukhara horseshoe bats** and **desert long-eared bats**. **Afghan vole** was common in grassy patches at the base of the mountain.

There is also a small lowland area in the far west of the country, where Zeravshan Nature Reserve is located; it reportedly has similar but poorer fauna of small and midsize mammals plus **yellow ground squirrel** and **Kazakhstan vole**.

Pamir-Alai

A massive mountain range crosses Tajikistan from west to east; it is connected to Pamir and also to Tien Shan. I spent a few weeks exploring its remote reaches, but saw relatively few mammals other than domestic sheep. Some of the best places can be accessed from Dushanbe-Khujand Highway.

Yagnob Valley is famous for its unique language (a dialect of long-extinct Sogdian) and for burning coal veins deep underground; “fiery caves” leading to these layers have been known since Herodotus and are filled with unique minerals. Almost all of the Yagnob were forcibly resettled to Fergana Valley in Soviet times, so their language and culture are near-extinct and the valley has few residents. I found a **lesser rock shrew** in a vacant house, a **red fox** (yellow subsp. *ochroxantha*) along the caves trail, **Siberian ibex** along ridgecrests, and **Himalayan rats** in overgrown fields.

Iskanderkul Lake is a convenient base for short treks; rare **Strelkov’s long-eared bats** roosted in summer in abandoned cabins on the lakeshores, while **Turkestan red pikas** were common higher up. **Least weasels** and **Himalayan field mice** often lived in narrow bands of shrubs along rivers. Farther north, just before leaving the mountains, the highway passes between two huge rocks known since the time of Herodotus as Iron Gates; they were inhabited by **European freetails**.

Sarigon, a small town on the border with Kyrgyzstan, was surrounded by oldgrowth forests of *archa* (tree juniper) where I found a **Pamir shrew** and a **juniper vole**.

Romit Nature Reserve, which I visited only briefly, is reportedly good for forest mammals such as **Caspian barbastelle**, **stone marten**, **forest dormouse**, **boar**, **Bactrian deer**, **Himalayan rat**, and **Himalayan field mouse**, and for high-elevation species such as **Siberian ibex** and **silver mountain vole**. The more recently created Sary Hosor Natural Park with extensive walnut forests is said to have good populations of all these species except the deer, plus **Tien Shan brown bear**, **snow leopard**, **lynx**, **Eurasian otter**, and **urial sheep** (subsp. *bocharensis*). Shirkent National Park has some nice rock formations reminiscent of Utah, but few mammals other than the most common species.

Western Pamir

Panj River and its tributaries have cut a network of very deep, narrow gorges with rock walls rising from 500 to 5000 m. This land, also known as Badakhshan, is shared by Tajikistan and Afghanistan and inhabited by people speaking nine different languages; government statistics list them all as Tajiks although they have very different culture and are Ismailis rather than Sunnis. Panj River between Lyakhsh and Khorog is lined with dense tugai thickets where **short-tailed bandicoot rat** and **ermine** were common. Don’t miss the botanical garden in Khorog: it’s the only place to find apricots in late summer and a good site for **Himalayan rat**. Ancient ruins above Ishkashim in the southwestern corner of Pamir were inhabited by **Gobi serotines** and **juniper voles**. **Red fox** (silvery subsp. *griffithi*) is the most common carnivore.

The gem of Pamir is Sarez, the most beautiful lake in the world. It was formed in 1911 when a colossal rock slide blocked the valley of Bartang River. This remote fjord-like lake provides boat access to some of the remotest valleys; a trail from Irkht Bay leads to Lyangar Pass where **Marco Polo sheep** can often be seen. **Siberian ibex**, **silver mountain vole**, **tolai hare**, and **large-eared pika** are common around the lake. I’ve seen **snow leopard** tracks a few times.

Hidden in the far west of Badakhshan is Dashtijum Nature Reserve, protecting **markhor ibex** (subsp. *heptneri*) and **urial sheep** (subsp. *bocharensis*). The only other mammals I saw there were **Bukhara voles** and **tolai hares**, but others have seen **Tien Shan brown bears**. It is reportedly possible to arrange a photo safari in November when the ibex are in rut.

Eastern Pamir

The southeastern corner of Tajikistan is a high plateau, inhabited by Kyrgyz people and looking like a colder version of Tibet, with many Tibetan bird and plant species. Pamir Trakt (Highway) climbs there from Khorog, crosses Alichur Valley (a good place to look for **long-tailed marmots** in summer and **Marco Polo sheep** in winter), and through a series of high passes reaches Osh in Kyrgyzstan; it is actually faster and easier to access Eastern Pamir from Osh than from Dushanbe. Most of wildlife along the highway has been hunted out, but it’s easy to drive into more remote valleys where **wolf**, **red fox** (pale-orange subsp. *montana*), **Altai weasel**, and **Marco Polo sheep** still occur. Akbaital Pass (4665 m) is a good base for short treks to higher elevations in search of **Siberian ibex**, **silver mountain vole**, **large-eared pika**, and possibly **snow leopard**. In winter, **Marco Polo sheep** can often be seen above the western shore of Lake Karakul.

Tibetan brown bear and **lynx** were once common, but disappeared by the 1980s, except perhaps in the remote, heavily glaciated Tajikistan National Park (originally called Pamir National Park but renamed to discourage separatism).

A small herd of **blue sheep** was recently discovered in the remote area where Afghan and Chinese borders meet, east of Lake Zorkul. This area is also the main stronghold of **Marco Polo sheep** and **wolf**; **Pallas’s cat** might also be present.

Unlike the rest of the former Soviet border, parts of the border with Afghanistan in southern Pamir have no barbed wire fences, so it’s possible to hike into virtually unpopulated Vakhan Corridor of Afghanistan where large mammals (including **Tibetan brown bear** and **Pallas’s cat**) are easier to see. Of course, such a hike can only be done illegally.