

Mammals of Turkmenistan

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Turkmenistan is the most arid and the less populated of Central Asian countries. Turkmen tribes, once the scourge of surrounding agriculture-based civilizations, did not become a unified nation until the 1920s. The construction of Karakum Canal in the 1960s allowed the largely nomadic Turkmen to become sedentary, but contributed to the disappearance of the Aral Sea and of the traditional culture; most arable land along the canal has been destroyed by salinization. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the local Party leader Niyazov easily seized absolute power, renamed himself Turkmenbashi (“the father of Turkmen”), and used huge oil and gas revenues to turn the country into a richer and slightly more benign version of North Korea. He eventually succumbed to deep paranoia and died or was killed in 2006; his less extravagant successor shows no intent of changing the political system. The economy is now almost entirely dependent on natural gas exports.

In Soviet times the country was a Mecca for zoologists who couldn’t travel abroad, particularly for herpetologists. As a teenager I used to go there once or twice a year to make money for summer travel by catching snakes for snake farms. Today travel is severely restricted, especially in border areas where most nature reserves happen to be located. But some people do visit, so below is a brief description of the best mammal-watching sites in case some mammalwatcher manages to arrange such a trip. Many nature reserves have been downsized or abolished in the last decades, but there’s still plenty to see. Late April-May and September-early October are the best times to visit. Winters can be surprisingly brutal for such a southern country, and summers are very hot (up to 50°C in the east). All precipitation normally falls in January-May.

The mountains

The arid, rocky Kopetdag Mountains stretch along the border with Iran. The easiest place to access them is Firyuza, an ancient Kurd village just south of Ashgabat, from where it used to be possible to hike to surrounding peaks (be careful, the border is very close) and look for **red fox** (yellow subsp. *kurdistanica*), **wild goat** (subsp. *blythi*), **European snow vole**, and **Afghan pika**. The best sites were all behind the barbed wire fence that followed almost the entire border of the Soviet Union. Orchards in the town were inhabited by **gray dwarf hamster** (also common in Ashgabat), **forest dormouse**, and **steppe field mouse**. There is now a new road to Iran through the mountains; I don’t know if it’s any good for mammals.

Moving west, Bakharden Cave near Baharly once sheltered tens of thousands of **greater**, **lesser**, and **Blasius’s horseshoe bats** and **pallid bentwings**. Their numbers plummeted as it became a tourist destination; no idea if there are any left.

The town of Kara Kala, surrounded by “lunar” badland landscapes, is the access point to the wonderful Sünt-Hasardag Nature Reserve (ask directions to Aidere), the wettest place in Kopetdag. A few nights of spotlighting in the main canyon and in rocky cliffs above Kara Kala should get you **Brandt’s hedgehog**, **masked mouse-tailed dormouse**, **Goldwin’s** and **Afghan mouse-tailed hamsters**, and **Kopetdag pine vole** (watch for huge, mean-spirited blunt-nosed viper, locally called *gyurza*). Hills above Aidere have **Baluchistan voles** and gorgeous spring wildflowers. Abandoned buildings shelter **Etruscan shrews**, **Kuhl’s** and **Savi’s pipistrelles**, **Geoffroy’s** and **Tschuli myotis**, and Oxian cobras. **Leopard**, **striped hyena**, **marbled polecat**, **honey badger**, and **stone marten** might still occur in the mountains. If visiting in late summer or fall, try the endless variety of fruits in the orchards of the former Institute of Subtropical Agriculture (if they still exist).

Balkanabat is located at the foot of the isolated Uly (Greater) Balkan Range. The highest mountain not on the border, the range was a good place to look for **honey badger**, **mouflon** (subspecies *cycloceros*), **wild goat** (subsp. *blythi*), **Afghan vole**, **Goldwin’s** and **Afghan mouse-tailed hamsters**, and **Afghan pika**. **Persian jird** was common around the town.

The mountains end in Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk) on the Caspian Sea. Rocky slopes above the city have many small caves, likely still inhabited by **Turkmenian long-eared bat** (a highly localized endemic) and **Nepal myotis**. The plateau above had **yellow ground squirrel** and **dwarf fat-tailed jerboa**. Ferries to Baku in Azerbaijan pass by a sandy spit at the exit from Turkmenbashi Gulf where **Caspian seals** were often hauled out (look on the starboard side).

The southeastern part of Turkmenistan is occupied by two rolling plateaus, Badkhyz and Karabil, covered with scattered wild pistachios and (in early spring) with millions of giant tulips. Serhetabad (formerly Kushka) on Afghan border was once known to every Soviet kid as the southernmost point of the Soviet Union. In the fall it was invaded by lots of **common serotines**; surrounding hills and fields had rare **Zarudny’s jirds** and abundant **short-tailed bandicoot rats**, respectively. **Least weasel** and **golden jackal** occurred along Murgab River, but were rare.

The highlight of the area is Badkhyz Nature Reserve with herds of **onagers** (called *kulan* in local languages, the onagers in Badkhyz are the only ones in Turkestan that are not reintroduced) and **goitered gazelles** (*jeiran*), plus a few **wolf** packs and

less conspicuous **small five-toed jerboas** and **Afghan voles**. A rocky canyon inhabited by **striped hyenas**, **leopards**, **mouflons** (subsp. *cycloceros*), and **Indian porcupines** leads to Yor Oilanduz, a tectonic crater of the type known as *makhtesh* in Israel. It was the second last place outside Iran where Asian cheetahs survived, and its northern wall should still have a large colony of **European freetails**. In the 1980s the reserve looked almost like an Asian version of the Serengeti, but more recently poaching and trophy hunts by visitors from the Gulf states have reportedly taken a heavy toll: leopards, wolves, onagers and mouflons might be gone by the time you visit, and gazelles might be difficult to find.

Köýtendag Nature Reserve in the far east of the country, in isolated Kugitang mountains at the border with Uzbekistan, reportedly has **Gmelin's shrew**, **Bokhara horseshoe bat**, **leopard**, **lynx**, **urial sheep** (subsp. *bocharensis*), **markhor ibex** (subsp. *heptneri*), and **Bukhara vole**, plus the world's most beautiful cave. Difficult to access even in Soviet times (a long hike from the Uzbek side was required), it is now practically off-limits, although a British expedition was planning to try in 2017. Of all places in the former Soviet Central Asia I haven't visited, this is the one I'm most sorry to have missed.

The desert

Much of Turkmenistan is covered by Karakum ("black sand") Desert, a sea of dunes crossed by *uzboi*, dry channels through which Amu Darja has occasionally reached the Caspian Sea in prehistoric times. The largest *uzboi* stretches for hundreds of kilometers and is very spectacular in some places; it crosses the main highway just east of Balkanabat but that's not its best part. **Desert long-eared bats** often roost in *uzboi* walls; **wolves** and **honey badgers** like to den there.

The best place to get acquainted with the Karakum is Repetek Nature Reserve, conveniently located along the highway to Uzbekistan. It has the best remaining groves of huge black saxaul trees, scattered in depressions between dunes; in early May these depressions turn into lakes of scarlet poppies and other wildflowers. The dunes were inhabited by **piebald shrews** (rare), **long-eared hedgehogs**, **sand cats**, **caracals** (only one or two pairs), **marbled polecats** (very rare, I've only seen tracks), feral **dromedary camels**, **long-clawed ground squirrels**, **Lichtenstein's**, **three-toed**, and **comb-toed jerboas**, **Libyan** and **mid-day jirds**, **great gerbils**, and **tolai hares**. **Common pipistrelles** roosted inside building walls at the headquarters. On the northern side of the railway is a patch of clay desert inhabited by **small five-toed jerboas**.

The Caspian Sea coast between Okarem and the Iranian border is dominated by *takyr* (playas normally covered by cracked clay), mud volcanoes, and gas rigs. **Desert long-eared bats** and (from October till May) **particolored bats** often roost in abandoned buildings here. **Small five-toed jerboa** and **southern mole-vole** are the only common mammals. Mole-voles living in *takyr* areas survive on bulbs brought in by occasional flash floods; they exist at the point of starvation and can often be seduced into showing themselves by placing a slice of carrot into an opened tunnel.

The northwestern corner of the country is almost entirely covered with sagebrush deserts. The bleakest part of it is on the saltbrush-dominated shores of Kara Bogaz Gol, a very salty gulf of the Caspian Sea connected to the rest of it by a unique waterfall. This is a great area for jerboas, particularly north of the gulf, on the Kazakh border: a night of cross-country driving should get **Siberian**, **dwarf fat-tailed**, **Blanford's**, **northern three-toed**, and **thick-tailed three-toed jerboas**.

A more interesting place is Gaplaňgyr Nature Reserve, bordered by huge man-made wastewater Sarykamysh Lake on the north and by tall cliffs (*chink*) in the south. The area along the cliffs once had the country's last cheetahs, and still has **wolf**, **urial sheep** (subsp. *arkal*), and **caracal** (rare). The very flat plateau above the cliffs is inhabited by **piebald shrew** (in rare sandy patches), **corsac fox**, **red fox** (small, pale-grey subsp. *flavescens*), **wildcat**, **steppe polecat** (very rare), **onager** (recently reintroduced), **goitered gazelle**, **yellow ground squirrel**, **northern mole-vole**, many **jerboas** including **Severtsov's**, **Bobrinsky's** and **Blanford's**, and **tolai hare**. **Saiga antelopes** sometimes visit in winter. The reserve can almost be reached by a new road across the Karakum, through Darvaza Gas Field, but you need a 4x4 to explore it.

The river

The far northeastern part of Turkmenistan along the Uzbek border is dominated by the huge floodplain of Amu Darja, now almost entirely covered by pesticide-laden cotton fields and lifeless areas where excessive irrigation has led to salinization of the soil. Amyderýa Nature Reserve northwest of Turkmenabat protects the last remaining patches of dense riparian jungle of downy poplar, silverberry and Russian olive, known throughout Turkestan as *tugai*. Once the refuge of Caspian tiger, the *tugai* were still inhabited by **jungle cat**, **golden jackal**, **boar**, **short-tailed bandicoot rat**, and (along the edges) **tamarisk jird**. **Wildcat**, **yellow ground squirrel**, **Zaisan mole-vole** and various **jerboas** occurred in the surrounding wastelands. In the 1980s the reserve had major problems with boar poaching, which tells you a lot about Islam in the country. Reintroduction of Bukhara red deer was planned, but apparently never happened.