

# Georgia and Armenia 2025

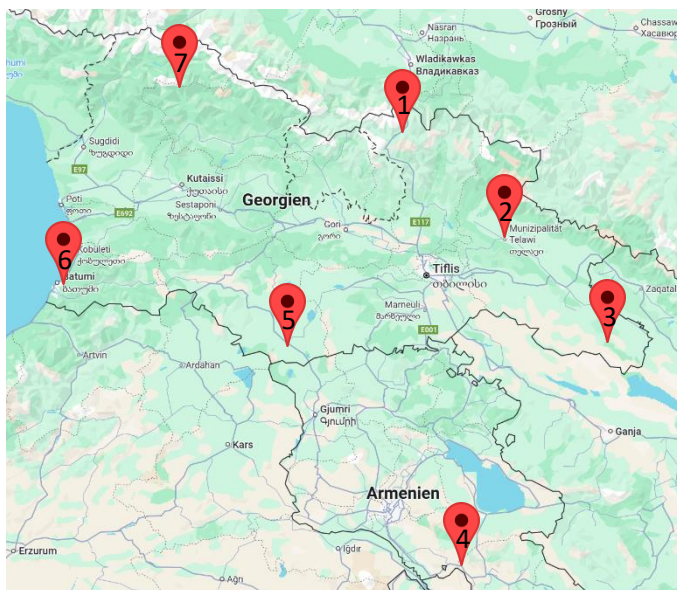
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## Introduction

This was not a dedicated mammal trip, but rather a combined family-culture-nature tour. At the same time, it was the first one where I specifically looked for mammals and searched for information beforehand. August might not be the best time of the year to find mammals and some other species groups, but we were still lucky with 13 (16) mammal species observed during our three-week trip (10.8. – 31.8.). Many of the sightings were either very short or far away, so I wasn't able to get good photos of most. I've also included some practical information about the places we visited. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at [claudia@claudia-weidner.de](mailto:claudia@claudia-weidner.de). Apologies for my bad English.

Mammals seen in **bold**, mammals mentioned, but not seen, in *italics*.



- 1 – Stepanzminda
- 2 – Telavi
- 3 – Vashlovani/Chachuna
- 4 – Areni/Vedi
- 5 – Javakheti Plateau
- 6 – Batumi
- 7 – Mestia

## Stepanzminda (10.- 13.8.)

After our early arrival in Tbilisi (most flights from Europe arrive around 5am) we picked up our rental car just to learn they forgot to request our permit for Armenia. As we wouldn't come back to Tbilisi before our visit to Armenia, they offered to deposit it near the border and we couldn't do anything other than hoping this would work. We then departed towards the Greater Caucasus. The only mammal on our way up were three **Red Foxes**, despite some effort to find *Caucasian Squirrel* in the Ananuri area. There is usually heavy traffic on the road to Stepanzminda, as it's important for the trade with Russia, and we passed several lines of dozens of trucks waiting for the permission to move on. At the moment, there's also construction work going on by the Chinese to renew the road and built a new tunnel as an alternative to Jvari Pass (actually it looked like the tunnel itself is already finished, but the access roads are not). Upon arrival, I had originally planned to look for *Eastern Tur*, but instead noticed that I had caught a cold and went to bed early.

The next morning, I was up at sunrise and spent the first hour scanning the slopes on the other side of the valley from our hotel without seeing anything, before the rest got up. During the day we visited the area around Mt. Kuro searching for *Turs*, spent some time around Gergeti Trinity Church (no *bats* inside) and drove a side valley further down towards Russia. There were quite a few animals around, but no mammals apart from the usual free-roaming livestock and dogs. In the late afternoon, my father and I tried again for the *Turs* around Mt. Kuro, while the others decided to stay behind. After some more scanning, there they finally were! **Eastern Tur**! It was a group of at least eight animals, far away as I had expected given the time of the year, but with the scope I was able to observe them moving along the rocky slopes until the light started fading.



How many *Turs* can you spot?



With rain predicted for the next few days, I woke up with the positive surprise of a clear sky and again spent the first hours scanning different slopes without any mammal sightings. This continued for much of the day which was spent exploring the Juta Valley (to reach the upper part you have to park and drive with some of the locals – we didn't do that) and getting higher up with the Kobi-Gudauri ski lift. Bear in mind it closes at 5pm during the summer, we noticed just on time and they start taking down the gondolas! Afterwards we paid another visit to Mt. Kuro slopes and I managed to find some more **Turs** for the two of us that missed them the day before, although they were fewer, even further away and disappeared after a few minutes. We then drove back into Juta valley, parking at a promising looking location and waited in the hope of a *Brown Bear* or even *Lynx* to appear. Unfortunately, part



An unidentified bat my brother managed to photograph

of my family insisted on having dinner at a restaurant shortly after sunset, so we didn't have a real chance. It was still worth it as there were some – unidentified – **bats** flying around. I know you can't really see anything on the photo, but if anybody has an idea about the genus or even species, please let me know!

The next day we had again perfect weather. During breakfast, my father mentioned casually he'd seen some *rodent holes* and maybe even movement at Mt. Kuro while I was searching for *Turs*. Of course, this meant we then had to go up there again to at least have a look before heading south, but it turned



Mount Kazbeg on a clear day

out they weren't even rodent holes... we also decided to have a "short look" at the sinter terraces in the Truso Valley – in the end we needed around three hours, as our rental car was a 4x4 as we had booked, but turned out to be a would-be offroad vehicle without much ground clearance, but thousands of functions no one needs, which meant we had to drive very slowly whenever the

road was in bad condition – this was quite annoying and cost us a lot of observation time during the trip. Beforehand, I had expected it to be the other way round, the road through Juta Valley as a track, through Truso as a tarred road. There were many hikers around who got hit by the dust whenever a car went by (which is quite often) and some people drove right through the terraces. I hope that in the future it won't be allowed to go there by car anymore. The drive to Telavi was uneventful in terms of mammals.

## Telavi (13.- 14.8.)



A beautiful and unexpected Least Weasel in the rain

Arriving in Telavi, it was already getting dark and I only saw a single **bat** flying near our accommodation, but wasn't able to identify it/take a photo.

Before breakfast, I luckily spent about half an hour on the balcony of our room despite some heavy rain, when I suddenly saw something moving – a **Least Weasel** running through the garden! It was still there when I got my camera and was able to observe it for a few minutes. What a start into the day! Afterwards, we made our way towards Kasristskali near the Vashlovani National Park. We stopped at some cultural sites – unfortunately again without any *bats* – including Tsinandali park/museum where I saw a **Caucasian Squirrel**, which appeared at the entrance road when we were about to enter. I had hoped for that as I missed it in Ananuri and there were already some sightings reported – I think it should be a reliable site and is worth a visit if one is in the area, even with little time. I didn't see any other mammals on the drive to Kasristskali.



Caucasian Squirrel – one of the species I really wanted to see



## Vashlovani and Chachuna (14.- 18.8.)



Landscape of Vashlovani National Park

We stayed in Kasristskali close to the entrance to Vashlovani National Park. Please note the following: The road between Dedoplistskaro and Kasristskali was tarred maybe twenty years ago, but now consists of more holes than asphalt, so better use the tracks running on both sides of the road. It took us around one hour, but as mentioned before, our car didn't have much ground clearance, so you'll be faster with a better car. The owners of our guesthouse are going to move away in a few months, so as far as I know there'll be only one accommodation left in Kasristskali. Your other options are staying in Dedoplistskaro or staying at one of the bungalows inside the park. Bear in mind that for the latter you always have to drive up a track that might be in bad condition depending on the time of the year and can cost you a lot of time depending on your vehicle! I highly recommend camping in the park, at the moment there are no designated areas, but you can just park where you want. Generally, in Georgia it's very easy to find a beautiful and in terms of mammals promising place for camping and it can save you a lot of time (we had to go back to our hotel in the evening/night just to return to the same place the next morning several times)! The only petrol station in the area is in Dedoplistskaro, so it can be helpful to take an extra can with you. To enter Vashlovani National Park, you have to buy a permit (it's not very expensive) in Dedoplistskaro or online and fill some papers at the police station there, which, depending on how many people you are and how motivated they are, can take some time. The woman at the National Park administration was very friendly and can give you some more helpful and up to date information, just ask her and mention you're interested in animals. Also mention if you plan to drive to Chachuna (and the connecting track from there to Vashlovani) as an additional permit is needed for that. We had no problems driving anywhere in the area at night and spotlighting, it only took us a bit longer at one of the border police posts in Vashlovani as they take a closer look at your documents than during the day.



Goitered Gazelles have finally returned to the steppes of south-east Georgia

Our first full day was spent exploring Vashlovani. Originally, we'd planned to drive to the area with *Goitered Gazelles* early the next morning, but it happened we were there on the first midday. Again, we were lucky with the weather, as some clouds covered the sun. Still, we decided to stop and have lunch as temperatures reached well over 30 °C. I just wanted to take a last look around before starting to eat, when I realised there was a group of **Goitered Gazelles** and we had the best view possible from where we parked! We spent a lot of time enjoying the group of at least 14 Gazelles, some of them moving away after some time. They went extinct in the area a few decades ago, probably due to hunting, but after several failed attempts were successfully reintroduced and since 2013 their numbers have increased to over 200 individuals, with a rapid increase in the last few years. Apparently, they're hoping that this will also help to increase predator numbers, and, in the long term, even lead to a population of the in the area (probably) extinct *Caucasian Leopard* (a single male was camera trapped over several years in the late 2000s) and *Striped Hyena*, which, of course, would be fantastic! We then grabbed some sleep in the car in the shadow of a tree with some promising looking



The House Mouse at the guesthouse

holes around (but it was definitely the wrong time of the day to see their inhabitants), paid a visit to the river near the bungalows and then had to head back as we had booked dinner, seeing a **Red Fox** and a single **European Hare**, as well as finally getting a (phone only) photo of a **Mouse** that already had been around the guesthouse the day before. It turned out to be a **House Mouse**.





The mystery hole



A European Hare in Chachuna

The following day was spent exploring some areas around Dedoplistskaro as well as Chachuna Managed Reserve including Dali Reservoir and the mud volcanos a few kilometres behind that. Again, we were annoyed by our car, with which it took us a lot longer to get there than previously thought and therefore we didn't have a lot of time in the interesting area itself before we had to go back. Between the reservoir and the mud volcanos, there was a big, definitely inhabited, hole, visible from 41.2801, 45.8143 if anybody wants to check – we'd have loved to wait there until dusk. We also saw a single **European Hare** close by. Back at the reservoir we looked for *Golden Jackals* who frequent the area, without luck. A few kilometres after that it finally got dark and we started spotlighting, but the first mammal we saw was running on the road in front of us: A **shrew**, extremely tiny (it took me a moment to realize it was actually a mammal and not a large insect), so might well have been an *Etruscan Shrew*, but unfortunately I was unable to take photos or a closer look. Shortly after, there was a **White-breasted Hedgehog** running and disappearing into the vegetation. It seems like most hedgehogs in the region are declared as *Southern White-breasted Hedgehogs*, but at the same time Georgia seems to be in the zone of overlap with *Northern White-breasted Hedgehog*. I guess nobody has ever really looked at it? Then, after some more time, there was an eyeshine, but it vanished before we could get a better look. We already thought we wouldn't see any other mammals, when we localized another eyeshine. It also disappeared and we thought we'd lost it, when I saw something sitting next to the road further down and I was at least able to get some bad record shots – for me it looks like a **Jungle Cat** (which would be extremely cool!), but please correct me if I'm wrong. On the way from Dedoplistskaro to Kasristskali we didn't see anything else of interest, arriving around midnight.



Northern or Southern White-breasted Hedgehog? No one knows



The possible Jungle Cat we found while spotlighting





Tristram's Jird – no matter how long we waited, it didn't dare to really come out

On our last full day in the area, we got up at 5am, hoping for some activity before and during dawn – there wasn't. We didn't see anything interesting (there weren't even birds around). All the more delighted I was when we found a **Tristram's Jird** (ID based on location and the white spots above the eye and behind the ear) right next to the road! During midday we rested and tried to grab some more sleep, waiting for the darkness. In the

late afternoon we had a nice and long observation of a family of Little Owls to pass the time and again visited the **Tristram's Jird**, but without getting a better view.



This Golden Jackal saved the night!

For a long time (at least it felt like) we spotlighted without seeing anything, until my brother spotted a **Golden Jackal**. We found some more eyeshine, but all of them belonged to **Red Foxes** and a few **European Hares**. Still, I think the area has some potential for mammal watching.



## Between Vashlovani and Areni (18.- 19.8.)

We departed in the late morning, stopping at Sighnaghi (somewhat disappointing, but at least we got something to eat) and visited the David Gareji monastery. I looked for bats there, but a large part is closed at the moment as it's close to the border/partly on Azerbaijanian territory (it's not worth climbing all the way up, there's nothing more than a spring, better visit only the parts further down



One out of two Coypus at Jandari Lake

unless they open up the other part), so once more I didn't see any. We also went to Jandari Lake, which produced two **Coypus**. Again, with our "beloved" car everything took us longer than we would have liked. By the time we had picked up our car permit it was already dusk and we arrived at the border in darkness. Passengers have to get out and go through a separate control. Inside were already many people waiting and somehow they didn't control but just let everybody wait for the next hour or so,

before slowly starting – at first we thought we were lucky as the next bunch of people had to wait outside, until they started letting them pass through one of the car control lines (which, for reasons unknown to me, was a lot faster) while we had to wait... after two hours or so we finally made it and met my father, who'd been waiting for us on the other side. The Armenian part was very easy and fortunately it was only about half an hour to our guesthouse. It was, and there was even another **Golden Jackal** next to the road, but it took us at least another half an hour or so to actually find it... we were glad the owner of the guesthouse was friendly enough to wait for us until we finally arrived at 1am instead of the planned 8pm.

The next day we started relaxed and visited some (bat-less) cultural sites. Again, it was already dark when we arrived at our hotel in Areni. Only mammal of the day was an unidentified **rodent** (tail about 1,5 times the body) dashing over the road.

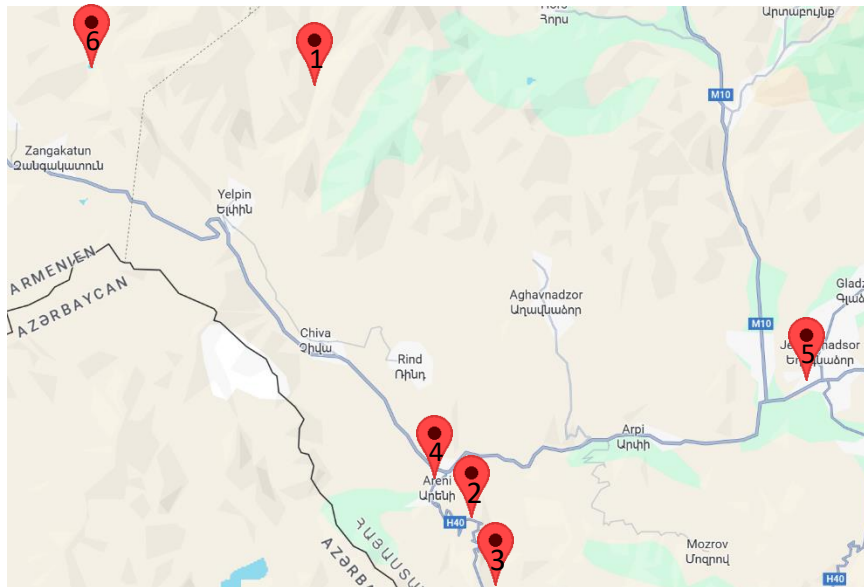
## Areni/Vedi (19.- 23.8.)

Early in the morning we drove up towards Mount Gndasar and once more cursed our stupid car. After some time scanning the slopes – there are sometimes *Brown Bears* recorded in the area – I suddenly saw a **Bezoar Goat** up on the ridge. It turned out to be a small group of four and, although not close, we were able to observe them for some time. A local told us they sometimes come down to drink. Afterwards, we drove towards Noravank Monastery, stopping at the Magellan Cave.



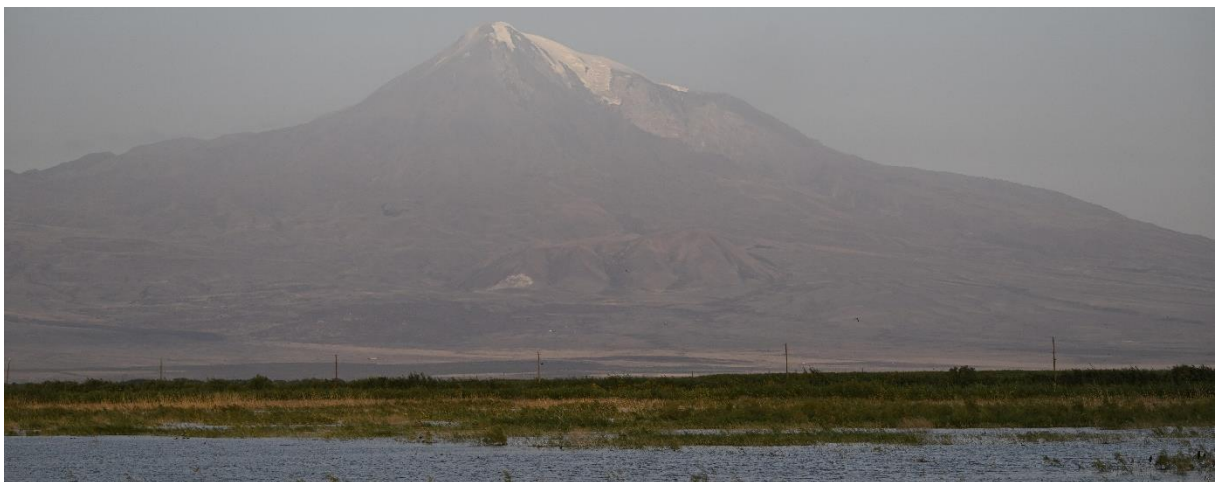
Bezoar Goat early in the morning, part of a small group of four

Officially opened up for tourists a few years ago and advertised as a bat cave, I hoped to finally see some roosting *bats* there. To cut a long story short, it was very disappointing. Although they told me there are 11 species in the cave, with six of them on the Red List, they couldn't even tell me which species those are. You also have to do a guided tour, and it seems like they light the cave up and only occasionally see any bats at all, it seems more like the tourists go there to see the cave, not the bats, and on the day we got there no bats were seen, so we didn't even go in. Either the bats now roost deeper down in the cave or they've found another cave without people and light.



- 1 – Mount Gndasar
- 2 – Magellan Cave
- 3 – Noravank Monastery
- 4 – Areni Cave
- 5 – Arpa Environmental Visitor Center
- 6 – Zangakatun Reservoir

We arrived at Noravank in the midday heat and I was glad I'd already seen the *Bezoar Goats*. At Areni cave they had at least an old poster about the bat species inside. After these disappointments we decided to visit the Arpa environmental visitor center to get some information. They didn't know much themselves, but called some rangers. They can also organize a tour. Based on the information we got there, we drove up to Zangakatun reservoir to look for *Mouflons*. You have to park your car shortly before the reservoir and we weren't allowed to take our camera with us, but the officer there told us there were indeed *Mouflons* in the area, although usually deeper inside the valley. Nonetheless, we tried, without success, but I think it should be possible to arrange getting further in if you plan in advance.



Armash Fishponds with Mount Ararat in the background

The next two days were spent around Vedi and at the Armash fishponds, with a short visit to Yerevan. We didn't see any mammals, as a night drive on the road towards the official entrance to Khosrov Forest Reserve only produced a dead *Southern White-breasted Hedgehog* and we entered Armash later than planned due to problems with the permit.



## Javakheti Plateau (23.- 24.8.)

This time we had no problems at the border (only took around 20 minutes). We arrived at our hotel late in the afternoon and reached *Marbled Polecat* habitat (area between Vardzia and Sulda wetlands) at dusk. When I saw the first eyeshine of the night, I didn't only see the eyes in the light of my torch, but also a huge number of midges. I decided to ignore that, at least until I found out to what mammal the eyes belonged to, but the rest insisted on closing the windows. 15 minutes later we finally got rid of the last of some dozen midges and I was told to leave the window closed until we reached a drier area. Spotlighting there produced several **Red Foxes**. We were already on the way back to the hotel, when my brother saw a big orange eyeshine just close enough to get it with the torch, but despite some effort we weren't able to relocate it. Only a few minutes later I saw another eyeshine from an animal whose size fitted a *Marbled Polecat*. But, again, it disappeared and we weren't able to find it again. A frustrating night.



I finally managed to find some roosting bats in Vardzia cave town

The following morning, we made our way towards Vardzia cave town. After so many times looking for *bats* at different locations during the trip, I was close to giving it up. There was always too much light or too many people or the interesting parts were closed for tourist. But then, finally!, I found three roosting (*Pipistrellus*?) **bats**. Would be very happy about some opinions as I'm completely new to identifying this group!

Photos are bad as I didn't want to disturb them by lighting them up. There were no other mammals on the way to Batumi (there's a LOT of construction work going on on this route at the moment, and it doesn't look like they're going to finish soon).

## Batumi (24.- 28.8.)



The pier in Batumi seems to be a reliable spot for Common (Black Sea) Bottlenose Dolphins

The only reason we visited Batumi was to experience raptor migration, and maybe see some *dolphins*. It was rainy the first two days, then it cleared up a bit, but afterwards I learned they had the first big migration with more than 40 000 Honey-buzzards the day we left... but we were lucky in seeing a few streams on our last full day and our way to Mestia. I scanned the sea for *Harbour Porpoise* from Chorokhi Delta without success, but found a pod of **Common Bottlenose Dolphins (ssp. ponticus)** from the pier one late afternoon after just a few minutes while the rain was only light.

## Mestia (28.- 30.8.)

With only one day and no guide, it was clear to me that the chances of seeing *Western Tur* were extremely slim. Still, I scanned the mountains shortly the evening we arrived, and visited Tetnuldi Ski Resort very early both mornings. The weather was perfect, but I didn't see any mammals apart from a few not identifiable **rodents** dashing over the road and in fact none of the animals I'd hoped for. We then drove down the newly tarred road (since 2024; they only have problems with landslides, but at least at the moment they soon find a solution and fix it). On our last day we explored some cultural sites in and around Tbilisi before our evening flight home.



Mestia – wonderful weather but no mammals

## List of mammals observed

1.	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
2.	Eastern Tur	<i>Capra cylindricornis</i>
3.	Least Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>
4.	Caucasian Squirrel	<i>Sciurus anomalus</i>
5.	House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>
6.	Goitered Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>
7.	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
8.	Jungle Cat	<i>Felis chaus</i>
9.	Tristam's Jird	<i>Meriones tristami</i>
10.	Golden Jackal	<i>Canis aureus</i>
11.	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>
12.	Bezoar Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus</i>
13.	Common Bottlenose Dolphin (Black Sea)	<i>Tursiops truncatus (ponticus)</i>
	(Southern?) White-breasted Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus cf. concolor</i>
	Shrew sp.	
	Pipistrellus sp.	



