

Three-day trip to Zaamin National Park

From 16th to 18th of June 2021



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Zaamin National Park

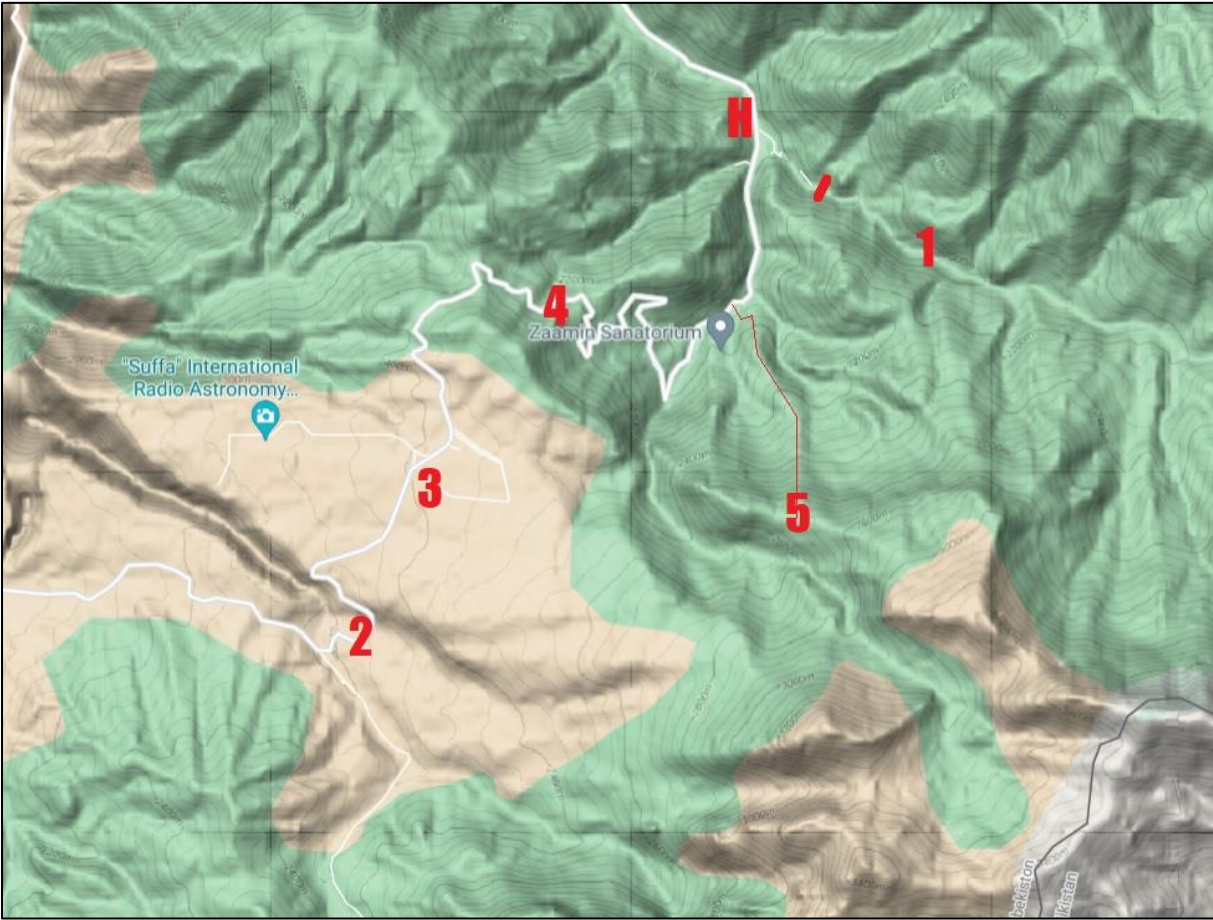
Zaamin National Park is a place of majestic snow topped mountains, dense juniper forests, the purest air filled with the smell of mountain herbs and beautiful flowers. It is situated on the northern slope of the western part of Pamir-Alai Turkestan ridge In Uzbekistan they call it "A paradise of Uzbekistan" or the "Uzbek Switzerland" due to its pure beautiful nature. There is a small entrance fee (12 250 sum) to enter the park.

The Zaamin national park is located 25 km south from the village of Zaamin and 55 km south south-east from Jizzak in the north. The word "zaamin" is translated from Persian and Tajik as "agricultural land", because of the old days these are known for their fertile soil. The National Park shouldn't be confused with the Zaamin Reserve, which is located quite near the national park. The reserve carries the same name, however, visitors are not allowed inside and any economic activity is prohibited in the area. The park was founded already in 1926, being the oldest one in Uzbekistan and covers an area of 24 110 hectares.

Zaamin area is believed being one of the most ancient human inhabited regions of Central Asia. Ustrushana dynasty, located between the ancient regions: Sogd, Bactria, Fergana and Chach, ruled here from the ancient times. According to archaeological sources, the age of Zaamin's dwellings are more than 2500 years old and ancient cities like Panjikent and Istaravshan are not far away.

Large area of the reserve is occupied by forests as well as mountains with deep gorges and hilly terrain. The biggest mountain in the park is called "Shaukartu mountain" with 4 000 m of height.

Sites



1/ Exploring the valley

The first day started with an early walk around the hotel and up a valley going to the east. This valley follows a rather fast-flowing stream and goes up between semi-open juniper forests, stony slopes and cliffs. It begins with many tapchans and leisure places that aren't really interesting bird wise, except for the poplar trees that seem to be good for Azure Tit. As you walk up the valley and get away from human agitation, noise gets replaced by silence and the sound of the stream. The slopes are either dry and stony with sparse vegetation and juniper shrubs or completely filled with juniper forest, depending on their orientation. There you'll be able to find White-capped Buntings, Rufous-napped Tits and White-winged Grosbeaks on the slopes, and the Brown Dipper foraging in the stream. Blue Whistling Thrushes are also quite common along the stream. Please note that this area is close to the border of Tajikistan and much of it is forbidden to access. Although, there are not many signs marking out the limits if you go off the beaten tracks, so be aware that you can easily go through without noticing.



2/The canyon

The scenic canyon of Chortagna crossed by the Yettikachi river is situated south of the Suffa plateau. Made of rocky slopes, many species can be expected there but not enough time was spent there and there's only a flying over Red-fronted Serin to mention here. A walk along the river produced nice sightings of nesting Common Sandpiper, and Blyth's Rosefinch and Hume's Whitethroat in the nearby juniper trees.



3/The Suffa plateau

The Suffa International Radio Astronomy Observatory is located on the high-mountainous Suffa plateau 10 km west from the Zaamin Sanatorium at the altitude of 2500 m. Construction began in the late '80s but was put on hold when the Soviet Union fell. Since 2008, construction had resumed, with modernized equipment for millimeter-wave band observations. With its 70 m antenna diameter, this third unit of the RT-70 telescope design will be among the largest single-dish radio telescopes in the world. Only a little birding was undertaken there as it was the hottest hours of the day, and there's nothing much interesting to mention. The landscape and the juniper trees around the area look promising though.

4/Sher Bulak Spring

Sher Bulak spring is located nearby the Zaamin sanatorium and is easy to reach by car. Its distinctive feature is the stream of water that flows from the stone lion's head. The spring water is very popular for its mineral composition enriched with calcium. This place was the highlight of the first day as the trees above the spring were teeming with nice birds. The most noticeable were a family of White-browed Tit-Warblers foraging or this pair of Hume's Leaf Warblers feeding their hatchlings.

5/Hiking up to the central rocky ridge

The whole second day was spent on a long hike starting from the hotel going all the way up to the rocky ridge. As the sanatorium area is restricted to access, a path following the first ridge east of it was taken and proved to be a good option. From the main road, turn left towards the sewage treatment plant and go through the portal. When you reach a big pipe crossed under the road before the plant, turn right and cross a little potato garden area to reach the path itself, and then follow it until the summit! The whole hike from the hotel all the way to the top is 5.5 km long and elevates from 1 715 m to 2 670 m.

The walk starts with Oriental Turtle Doves, lots of Rock Buntings and White-winged Grosbeaks, and then slowly changes to higher altitudes birds such as Blue-capped Redstarts around 2 400m, and then finishes on an amazing subalpine meadow sided by a rocky ridge. The whole area is quite interesting for orchids as well, so be sure to give attention on what's on the ground too!

Spending the lunch break and the hottest hours of the day on the ridge proved to be productive with lots of raptors taking advantage of the landscape to use thermal and wind uplifts. Birding around the rocky and dry area produced also several Sulphur-bellied Warblers in a perfect habitat, and two more White-browed Tit-Warblers.

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An overview of the sanatorium and the path to follow on the ridge over it

The subalpine meadow looking towards the rocky ridge



Juniper forests topped by alpine meadows and barren slopes east of the rocky ridge, reaching altitudes of 3 300 m and 3 600 m

Accommodation

The hotel booked for the trip was Grand Zaamin. The price isn't too expensive for the area : 500 000 sum for one night. Even this place is not the perfect or cleanest one, it sure is better looking than the hideous NGMK hotel...

Zaamin National Park is quite popular among Uzbek people and the place can get crowded quite quickly, so be sure to have a reservation before coming there.

Another good option for accommodation would be the Sanatorium. This hotel is situated in an ancient Soviet building, by far not the best looking and fitting in the landscape, but it is well situated in the park and you can start to walk directly from there inside the juniper forest and start birding.

Hiring a guide or not

There's one thing for sure, it is quite difficult to reach all of the places in the park if you're on your own and without a car. Hiring a guide can be a good option to reach the plateau, the canyon, and to have amazing views on the highest summits of the Turkestan range. One day with a guide costs around 500 000 sum and you can count on a day from 10 AM to 6 PM. Another pro- on hiring a guide is that you will be able to pass through the sanatorium area to walk into the juniper forest. This is impossible without a guide because the entrance is only allowed to customers of the hotel.

Border controls

Please note that the national park is situated on the border with Tajikistan. Hence, a consequent number of areas are forbidden to access and military controls are done within those areas.

Books

In order to prepare your trip, the best books to look for are:

Birds of Central Asia, Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer, Tobias Roth.

Collins Bird Guide, Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney & Dan Zetterström.

Website

<https://birds.uz/>

<https://uzbekistan.birds.watch/>

https://observation.org/fieldwork/observations/daylist/?date=2021-06-18&species_group=1&province=261&rarity=&search=

PERSONNAL ANNOTATED BIRD LIST (45 species)

Taxonomic order follows IOC World Bird List version 11.1

Chukar Partridge - *Alectoris chukar*

Common on every kind of slopes

Rock Dove – *Columba livia*

Common Wood Pigeon – *Columba palumbus*

Very common all over the park. It is a great delight to see them, or mostly hear them diving from the highest points of the park all the way down the slopes in a fighter jet fashion !

Oriental Turtle Dove - *Streptopelia orientalis meena*

Rather common breeder on the lower parts of the slopes. No sightings above ~2300 m.



Common Sandpiper- *Actitis hypoleucos*

One pair alarming on the slow-flowing stream entering the canyon.

Bearded Vulture – *Gypaetus barbatus aureus*

A pair is nesting on a big cliff in the middle of the park.

Himalayan Vulture – *Gyps himalayensis*

Several adults were seen gliding above the central rocky ridge, taking advantage of the wind uplifts that it provides.

Short-toed Snake Eagle - *Circaetus gallicus*

One adult observed several times hunting over the central rocky ridge.

Booted Eagle - *Hieraaetus pennatus*

One pale morph soaring above the plateau.

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Golden Eagle – *Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*

By far the most observed raptor in the park ! Adults and juveniles seemed to be everywhere, either soaring in between ridges or hunting along the slopes.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk - *Accipiter nisus dementjevi*

One beautiful adult male was soaring above the juniper forest on day 2 after a hunt.

Common Kestrel - *Falco tinnunculus tinnunculus*

One pair hunting on the subalpine meadow over the sanatorium, and another breeding on a cliff in the valley to the east.

Eurasian Hobby - *Falco subbuteo subbuteo*

Several sightings on the plateau and over the central rocky ridge, always hunting.

Indian Paradise Flycatcher – *Terpsiphone paradisi leucogaster*

While leaving the park on the last day, one bird was seen from the car harassing a Magpie. This bird was not in the vicinity of the park itself but in the downer part of the valley which seems to have an interesting birding potential.

Western Jackdaw – *Corvus monedula soemeringii*

A breeding colony is situated on the plateau, at the entrance of the canyon and seems to be nesting in the electric pylons.

Eurasian Magpie – *Pica pica bactriana*

Common all over the park.

Carrion Crow - *Corvus corone orientalis*

Pretty common down in the valley but disappears above 2300 m.



Rufous-napped Tit - *Periparus rufonuchalis*

A rather common bird no matter the altitude as long as there are enough juniper trees.



(Yellow-breasted) Azure Tit - *Cyanistes cyanus flavipectus*

This marvelous looking tit tends to favor the areas with deciduous trees, hence the downer parts of valleys, but it also seen higher on few occasions.



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(Turkestan) Great Tit - *Parus major bokharensis*

Only one bird was heard singing quite high in the juniper forest.

Cetti's Warbler - *Cettia cetti*

A surprising record of two male singing down of the sanatorium.

White-browed Tit-Warbler – *Leptopoecile sophiae sophiae*

By far the bird of the trip ! This amazingly colored bird proved to be really difficult to find. The best way to look for it is to listen carefully while walking into the juniper forest for its high-pitched call it does when flushed. All of the birds observed were quiet skulky, always foraging at the foot of juniper trees and often in dense parts. Although this bird is hard to spot, it is really confident and allows close views at no less than one or two meters !

One family was spotted above the water spring. The other sightings were obtained on the second day, one on the rocky central ridge of a cracking adult male that showed out in the sun long enough to leave me in awe. The other on was seen during the way down.

All the birds were seen above 2400 m.



A typical view of this skulker.



A brilliant juvenile male.

Hume's Leaf Warbler - *Phylloscopus humei humei*

Appeared to be quite common but only above 2500 m. Two birds were observed above the water spring, foraging and feeding young birds, not greedy about calling, and another one just below the rocky central ridge.

Sulphur-bellied Warbler - *Phylloscopus griseolus*

This wonderful warbler was only observed on the very top of the rocky central ridge, matching the perfect habitat for the species. Two singing males and a third bird were observed longly while foraging, calling and singing. What a beauty !



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Greenish Warbler - *Phylloscopus trochiloides viridanus*

One singing male on the plateau, unfortunately not seen.

Plain Leaf Warbler ? - *Phylloscopus neglectus*

A rather tiny warbler seen too briefly that could match the species. Apparently this data would be out of range and then requires a better sighting than this one...

Hume's Whitethroat – *Curruca althea*

This restless species was common everywhere, with numerous singers and even some adults feeding young.

Common Myna – *Acridotheres tristis tristis*

Commonly seen around habitations.

Common Blackbird - *Turdus merula intermedius*

Seen on several occasions in the valley or heard in the juniper forest. Common.

Mistle Thrush - *Turdus viscivorus bonapartei*

Only localized in the juniper forest.

Spotted Flycatcher - *Muscicapa striata sarudnyi*

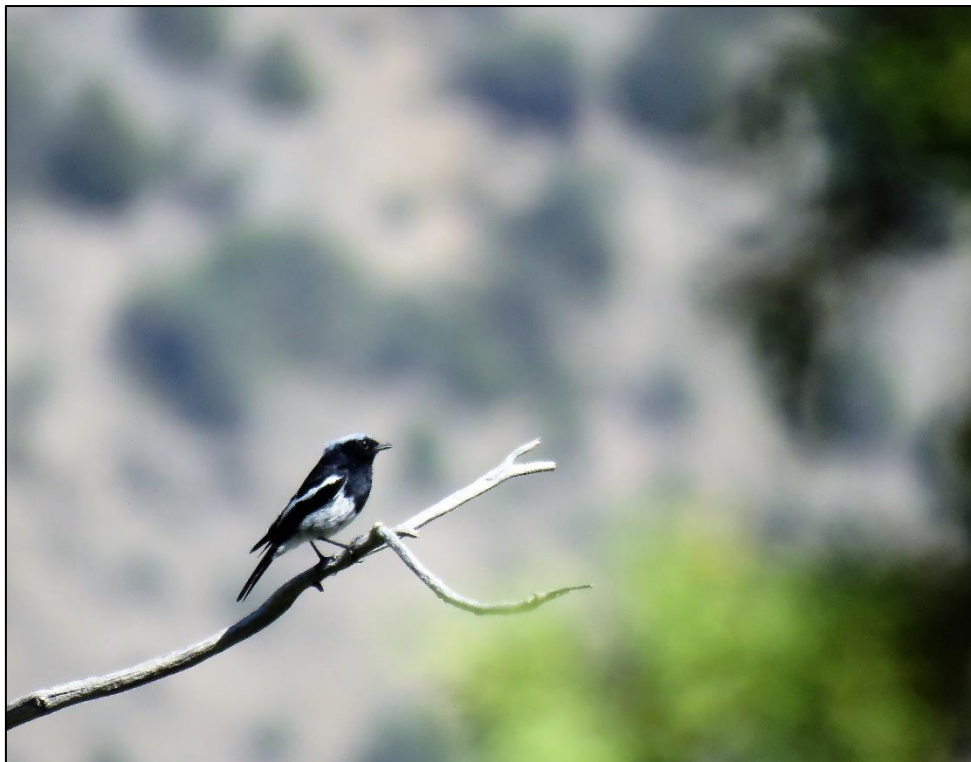
One bird perched on electric wires on the main road.

Blue Whistling Thrush - *Myophonus caeruleus temminckii*

Surprisingly common along streams, even on the main road, often perching on electric wires !

Blue-capped Redstart - *Phoenicurus caeruleocephala*

Only seen above 2400 m, these wonderful birds are not too difficult to spot, often perching on top of juniper trees and commonly heard clicking or calling with its high-pitched *hseet*.



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(Eastern) Black Redstart - *Phoenicurus ochruros phoenicuroides*

Two birds calling and playing in the wind on top of the rocky central ridge.

White-throated Dipper – *Cinclus cinclus leucogaster*

A too brief view of a bird calling and flying along the stream near the tapchan area on day 1.

Brown Dipper – *Cinclus pallasii tenuirostris*

After long hours of walking along the stream in the east valley, one bird finally showed well on day 3 !

Grey Wagtail - *Motacilla cinerea cinerea*

Common along streams, even along the main road.

(Masked) White Wagtail - *Motacilla alba personata*

Seen in habitation area.

White-winged Grosbeak – *Mycerobas carnipes merzbacheri*

This amazing species is luckily common everywhere in the park as long as there is some juniper trees and little human frequentation.

Common Rosefinch – *Carpodacus erythrinus*

A good surprise was to find 2 singing males just around the sewage treatment plan on the way down during day 2.

Blyth's Rosefinch – *Carpodacus grandis*

A really difficult bird to observe with its really shy behaviour. Although, this beauty was commonly heard in every juniper forest above 2200m, giving its characteristic high-pitched down-slurred whistle.



European Greenfinch - *Chloris chloris*

Seen and heard on several occasions.

(Eastern) European Goldfinch – *Carduelis carduelis paropanis*

Only a few sightings down in the valleys.

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Red-fronted Serin - *Serinus pusillus*

Two birds flying along the rocky ridge perched long enough on juniper trees to be admired.

Corn Bunting – *Emberiza calandra*

Three birds were seen foraging and one singing in a somewhat cultivated field on the plateau.

Rock Bunting – *Emberiza cia par*

One of the most common birds of this trip. It is avoiding human proximity and prefers juniper forest or open meadows. The density was higher on lower altitudes (2200 m) than above.



White-capped Bunting – *Emberiza stewarti*

A good density was found along the east valley, always near rocky slopes or cliffs, with numerous male singing on top of juniper trees.

MAMMALS

Tolai Hare – *Lepus tolai*

Central Asian Ibex – *Ibex sibirica alaiana*

