

# VASHLOVANI

NATIONAL PARK

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

## Vashlovani National Park, 2012

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# CONTENT

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| The Park and The Inhabitants.....  | 6  |
| Scientists and The Research .....  | 20 |
| The Shepherd and Sheep Flocks..... | 29 |
| Rangers .....                      | 40 |

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Negin Angoshtari** has made it her personal challenge to travel and learn about different cultures. She has lived and worked in five different countries and still is looking forward to more. She enjoys writing about the experiences as much as experiencing them.

**Temo Bardzimashvili** is a documentary photographer, focused on ethnographic, environmental, and social projects. Passionate about outdoors, Vashlovani National Park has been a long-time personal interest. His work has been published in a number of international publications, and exhibited both in Georgia and internationally.

# VASHLOVANI NATIONAL PARK



Dedoplistskaro, Eagle Canyon: ~50 km  
 Chachuna National Park: ~90 km

Kakia Kure: 3 km

- Park entrance
- Ranger station
- Observation point
- Bungalows
- Camping place
- Hiking route
- Border police checkpoint
- Picnic place
- Fishing
- Mollusc shells

- National Park
- Strict Nature Reserve

- Geifon Vulture and other birds of prey
- Gazelles
- Pheasant
- Roller
- Black stork
- Viper



## THE PARK AND ITS INHABITANTS



In the easternmost part of Georgia, right on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border, the scenery changes from the lush green hills and vineyards so characteristic of Kakheti, to the arid steppe moonscapes of Vashlovani National Park.

Vashlovani State Reserve was created in 1935 on the initiative of two Georgian scientists, Niko Ketskhoveli and Vasil Gulisashvili, to preserve its unique flora. Years later in April 2003, the Strict Nature Reserve area was expanded to 84.80 km<sup>2</sup>, and the bigger area of Vashlovani National Park with an area of 251.14 km<sup>2</sup> was established around it. The Strict Nature Reserve is closed to visitors. Only park staff and scientists are allowed in that area.

Vashlovani National Park is a unique region in Georgia: it is the only area in the country where semi-desert steppe and arid light woodlands dominate the landscape. The name *Vashlovani* means “apple orchard” in Georgian. The wild pistachio trees that are abundant in the Park are the reason for this title. As it turns out, the wild pistachio trees (*Pistacea mutica*) or *Sakmlis khe* (their Georgian name) resemble apple trees, and their wide spacing (15-20m) is associated with that of an orchard, hence the name.

Vashlovani provides visitors with abundant opportunities for outdoor activities, as the Park is a refuge to many animals. Bird-watching has become quite popular. Birds are abundant: thousands of blackbirds and rosy starlings, sparrows, wheateaters, bee-eaters, goldfinches, little bustards, and sometimes, though more rarely, great bustards, black francolin, and chukars. The Eagle Can-

yon region, is one of the few places that black stork can be sighted in Georgia. Many pheasants live on the shore sides of the Alazani River, and in the clay precipices live colonies of house martins that take advantage of a portion of the 700 recorded species of insects in Vashlovani.

Among the birds of prey, Vashlovani is home to imperial eagles, griffon vultures, harriers, buzzards, short-toed snake eagles, and egyptian vultures. This is only to name a few of the 26 species of raptors that soar in Vashlovani skies.

Some of the more prominent trees in Vashlovani are the wild pomegranate, oak, ash, wild pistachio, juniper, maple, and cistus. Some of the shrubs in the park include barberry, jerusalem thorn, and peashrub.

16 species of fish swim in Alazani, including sheat-fish, carp, pike-perch, tusk, barbell, and Caucasian herring to name a few. Sport fishing is allowed in the Mijnis Kure area. Alzani River runs along the eastern border of the protected area.

Vashlovani shelters about 25 reptile species. Among them are: the Mediterranean tortoise, Schneider’s skink, Caucasian agama, and Caucasian sand boa. The Levant viper, the only deadly venomous snake in Georgia, also lives in Vashlovani. 46 species of mammals live in Vashlovani, among them: jackals, foxes, hares, wolves, lynxes, porcupines, and brown bears among others.

In 2003, the scientists from NACRES found out about a lone leopard roaming in the park. He was dubbed Noah to recognize his survival through the great flood





1. Black-headed Bunting (*Emberiza melanocephala*)
2. Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*)
3. Roller (*Coracias garrulus*)
4. Collared Dwarf Racer (*Eirenis collaris*)
5. Caucasian Agama (*Laudakia caucasica*)
6. European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)
7. Snake-eyed Lizard (*Ophisops elegans*)
8. Levant green Lizard (*Lacerta media*)
9. Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*)
10. Levant Viper (*Macrovipera lebetina*)
11. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)

of hunting. They succeeded in taking a few photos by the means of remote camera traps, but he has not been sighted since 2008.

Vashlovani was the last area in Georgia to shelter goitered gazelles. They disappeared from Georgia mainly due to unsustainable hunting practices in the 20th century. They prefer the vast, open areas as the sparse cover offers a defence against their predators. Therefore, Vashlovani offers them the ideal environment. A small number of them were brought from Turkey and are kept in an enclosed area in the Buga Moedani steppes.

#### BIRD-WATCHING:

1. Pantishara Canyon is a good area for bird-watching where the information board has some useful information about local species and how to find them.
2. Samukhi Valley is also a great area for bird-watching. Raptors can be sighted there.
3. The Swallow Town. Swallows arrive in Vashlovani in April. Their colony is located in the small cliff in Pantishara. Spring is a good time to see them build nests and raise their young.
4. Pheasants can be spotted in Black Mountain (morning time) and Kaklis Kure.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY

1. Bear Canyon. The entrance of the canyon has a nice picnic spot. From here, you can hike to see the fossilized sea molluscs and the southern elephant bone. The route from the picnic spot to the southern elephant bones is about 1.5 km.
2. The southern elephant bone. Fossilized bones of a southern elephant from millions of years ago have surfaced due to soil erosion. Since the full skeleton of a similar elephant has already been found not so far away (in Taribana), and is now

kept in the national museum. Therefore, it was decided to leave the Vashlovani bones in place as a local attraction, until environmental effects made it necessary to transfer the bones to the museum at a later date.

3. Samukhi Valley is home to a rather large settlement that was discovered and studied by Georgian archaeologists in 2009. Archaeologists are working to study and date the settlement. It is located in one of the canyons that start from Samukhi valley.

#### LONELY LEOPARD AND GAZELLES

1. Dzabrebi Area, or the “Funnel Place” is the spot that Noah the leopard was first documented by a remote-sensing camera.
2. Buga Moedani is where a small number of goitered gazelles are kept in an enclosed 5-hectare area.

#### VIEWPOINTS

1. The Usakhelo (Unnamed) Mountain. The road winding between the juniper and pistachio trees suddenly opens to an open area with a gorgeous view. In spring, this is the place for many beautiful flowers (irises, tulips etc.). In good weather, the Great Caucasus Range is visible from the spot.
2. Black Mountain is the highest place in Vashlovani. It is characterized by broad-leaved forests and meadows, not typical for the park. In the morning, the chance of spotting pheasants is very high. In April, the slopes of Black Mountain are covered with peonies.
3. Pantishara Canyon. This place has a gorgeous view of “*alesilebi*” (vertical rock saturated badland landscape), and is a good bird-watching spot.
4. From Dzabrebi, the oldest protected territory can be seen (the original territory that was founded in 1935). If the weather is clear, a small part of the Eldary valley (or, as called by locals, Samukhi) can be seen from

here. Dzabrebi means funnels, and the name originates from the pseudo-karst landscape, which is full of funnel-like ‘wells’ formed by seasonal floods.

#### STATIONS AND BUNGALOWS

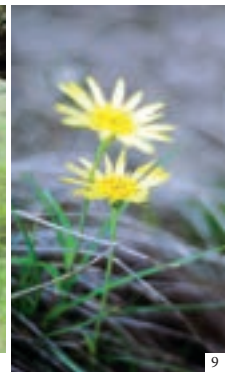
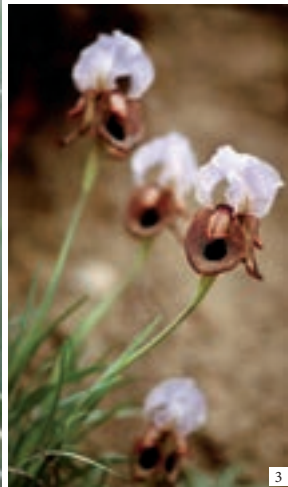
1. Mijnis Kure: One of the most beautiful places in Vashlovani. It is perfect for sport fishing, hiking and bird-watching. Mijnis Kure is located in the most eastern part of Georgia, where the Alazani River cuts through dry rocks (called “*alesilebi*” in Georgian), making the scenery even more interesting. If fishermen are lucky, they can catch the famous Alazani catfish (*Silurus gianis*). In Mijnis Kure, there are six bungalows in addition to a camping spot.
2. Central Bungalows. This station has 9 bungalows, a picnic area, and a camping spot. Kaklis Kure is an Alazani meander. Here, the river creates a loop, circling around 200 hectares and returning almost to the same place, leaving only an 8-10 meter gap. Pheasants live in the floodplain forest. *Kaklis Kure* means the Walnut Bay, and is named after the many wild walnut trees that grow there.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR HIKING ROUTES

1. Chighoelt Khevi. This is a foot route from Vashlovani ranger station to Central Bungalows. The road follows the edge of the rock, which is the border between two different types of landscapes: Vashlovani Protected Area from the south and Chighoelt Khevi steppes and the pistachio forests from the north.
2. The central bungalows hiking route starts from the station and follows the gorge, where visitors can observe footprints of different animals, and then climbs up to the hill to reach a 360° observation spot.







1. Eichlerian Tulip (*Tulipa eichleri*)
2. Smoke Tree (*Cotinus coggygria*)
3. Iris (*Iris iberica*)
4. Monkey Orchid (*Orchis simia*)
5. Peashrub (*Caragana grandiflora*)
6. Pistachio Tree (*Pistacea mutica*) flower
7. Willow-leaved Pear (*Pyrus salicifolia*)
8. Fern-leaf Peony (*Paeonia tenuifolia*)
9. Tragopogon (*Tragopogon graminifolius*)



The view of Buga Moedani. The Great Caucasus Range is visible in the background.





Willow-leaved Pear trees in Vashlovani National Park.



A road sign at the Samukhi Valley pointing to the Central Entrance of the Park.





An entrance from Samukhi to Kumuro Valley.



Sun rises over Vashlovani Protected Area.





Sunset near Buga Moedani.



The road up from the gazelles' enclosed area, going up to an overview of Buga Moedani.





Vashlovani cliffs from Samukhi Valley.



A juniper tree near Bear Canyon.





A griffon vulture soars over one of the numerous Vashlovani canyons.

## SCIENTISTS AND THE RESEARCH



The team starts the day with an early morning breakfast in the bungalow. The plan for the day is to set traps for bears. In the next few days, they will install 20 bear traps. They plan to install around 4-5 traps per day. “Sometimes, it is much quicker to install a trap, but occasionally the location isn’t so easy, and it takes much longer than planned.” explains Bejan, the senior scientist in the group.

They start the drive around the park, and go to the locations known to be the bear hangouts. After trapping the bears, they will tag and collar them. This way, the animals can be tracked and their movements can be studied.

After all the traps are installed and activated, it is crucial to check them on a regular basis. The sci-

entists are extra careful not to put additional stress on the animal, since being trapped can be stressful. They see it as essential to carry out the tagging with the minimum adverse effect on the animal.

Bejan recalls one case when they were collaring wolves: at the end of summer, in a hot August day, they entrapped “*Chkhinka*”. *Chkhinka*, is the Georgian word for skinny. The sheep - the wolves’ easy prey - were in the mountains over the summer, so maybe he hadn’t had much to eat in the past few months.

Since it was really hot, they kept an eye on him to make sure he hasn’t overheated. They collared and released him after they made sure he was all well. Soon after, they received his first signal.

They tracked him on a regular basis for the next 2 months. He adhered to the boundaries of the park. The sheep were returning to graze in Vashlovani for the winter and he seemed to be following them most of the time. One day, *Chkhinka*’s signal disappeared.

He could have been in a terrain with no reception, maybe hiding in a gorge. One foggy night, the signal came in again. This meant the wolf was within a 200-meter range. After this, the scientists could use their directional antenna to estimate the direction of the signal. Using the triangulation method they would try to estimate the wolf’s location.

They got close to within 100 meters of Chkhinka, but decided not to go further, since wolves are cautious animals, and the scientists didn't want to disturb him too much.

The day after, it was a bright day, and Bejan and his colleagues decided to check upon Chkhinka. They located him, and he was still in the same vicinity. As they got closer, it was clear that something was not right: he has not moved at all since the day before. Fearing the worst but hoping for the best, they got closer to the source of the signal. About five meters away, they saw him lying in the middle of the trampled grass - or what was left of him. He was covered with bite marks and had been dead for a few days.

What really happened, no one can be sure. Maybe he encountered a group of shepherd dogs, and being young, tried to confront them single-handedly. Wolves run much faster than dogs, and he could have easily outrun them, but he did not stand a chance in the fight against the whole pack of dogs.

The challenge of managing conflict between the native carnivore animals on one side, and the shepherds and their domestic animals on the other, is not easy to resolve. Vashlovani has traditionally been the winter grazing pasture for Tushetian shepherds. They move between the highland pastures of Tusheti and Vashlovani in summer and winter. The wolves find sheep an easy meal, but in some instances, they lose the battle to the shepherd dogs or to the shepherds, who are guarding their flocks.

The Georgian Carnivore Conservation Project is jointly run by Centre for Biodiversity Conserva-

tion and Research (NACRES) and Fauna & Flora International (FFI), and is funded by the European Union. One of its key objectives is to improve the coexistence between local population, who have traditionally been grazing their sheep on the park's territory, and the carnivores, who are attracted to the livestock.

Unfortunately, some carnivores have already disappeared from the region. The last time leopards were spotted in Georgia was in 1954, until remote-sensing cameras recorded a photo of a single leopard in Vashlovani in 2003. The scientists recorded and observed the animal regularly till 2008. No sign of him has been seen since then.

Even though no other evidence was found after that, and even though he was the only leopard the scientists found in the park, the glimmer of hope Noah the leopard brought to the revival of a species on the edge of its shrinking range, is a hope worth maintaining.

The goitered gazelles became extinct in the 20th century. They were most likely the natural prey for the wolves, and their disappearance lead to the probable dependence of some predators (particularly wolves) on domestic livestock.







Scientist Bejan Lordkipanidze testing a bear trap in the Vashlovani Protected Area.





Researchers' car after the sunset.



Field researchers discussing the animal footprint.





Field researchers Vano Skhirtladze imitating an animal to test a remote sensing camera.





Bejan Lordkipanidze installing a remote-sensing camera.



Researchers trying to receive a signal from a radio-collared wolf in Vashlovani National Park.



## THE SHEPHERD AND SHEEP FLOCKS



The little shepherds' hut in the middle of National Park is guarded by quite a few sheepdogs that are not pleased to see unfamiliar faces arriving at the farm. The shepherds live here for the winter starting from November, and they herd the sheep in Vashlovani until May. They leave their families behind in Alvani, a Tushetian village in northern Kakheti. The trek from Alvani to Vashlovani takes around 10 days.

Shepherding is a tough job, especially in early spring when the new lambs are born. The newborn lamb needs to be separated from their mothers everyday to allow the sheep to graze.

"Milking sheep is more difficult than milking cows", explains Eko, the shepherd. Milking 200 sheep takes approximately 4-5 hours. At the end of summer and

after they leave Vashlovani, they make cheese with the sheep milk. The Tushetian "Guda" is a dry sharp cheese. It takes its name from the bag it is stored in, which is traditionally made from sheepskin.

"Much has changed in sheep farming in the region", he says. The first time he came to Vashlovani was 31 years ago, when he was in his early twenties. The buildings and the infrastructure were already in place and the salary and bonuses would come from the government. It all changed when the Soviet Union collapsed: the business is no longer supported centrally. They are responsible for maintaining the business and selling the sheep and the by-products. The farms used to have electricity, but the infrastructure no longer exists. Recently, foreign market opportunities have caused some significant improvement in the economical situation of the shepherds.

Shepherding is considered a tradition in Tusheti. Eko originally comes from Omalo, the main village in Tusheti. His father was a shepherd, too, so from his point of view, this job is a family tradition.

Grazing sheep in a national park is no problem in his opinion, even though he thinks the number of wolves has increased over the last 30 years. "Wolves are not a problem if you take care of your security. The wolves have to live somewhere," he explains.

The most common security against the wolves are the sheepdogs. Each farm has a few of them. The sheepdog tradition was changed in the Soviet times, and some useful older traditions were lost. The Georgian Carnivore Conservation Project, an initiative of FFI and NACRES, is implementing its human-carnivore conflict mitigation strategy in Vashlovani and this includes a community awareness program to inform and educate the local communities about how to protect themselves against possible wolf attacks without actually hurting the animals. They have also been working with a number of farms in a pilot project. They supply puppies and training to raise them as effective shepherd dogs in an attempt to revive the lost traditional methods to raise the Caucasian shepherd dogs and improve their working efficiency. The focus is to teach the dogs to protect the sheep, not to chase and kill the wolves. Hopefully, this will reduce the conflict between the carnivores and the human population in the park and will aid the preservation of the carnivore species.







A flock of sheep in Vashlovani National Park.





A shepherd looks at the sheep with a newborn lamb.





A shepherd dog escorting a sheep flock back to the farm after the sunset.





A shepherd with a sheep flock in Samukhi Valley.





Shepherd Beso Gatsiridze returning home in the evening after herding the sheep in Vashlovani National Park.



A shepherd directing a kid.





Shepherds separating lambs from the rest of the sheep in Shiraki Valley.





A shepherd's hut in Samukhi Valley.



Shepherd Adam Ichirauli looks at the shepherd puppy at his farm in Shiraki Valley.





Sheep in Samukhi Valley.



## RANGERS



“To be a ranger, you must love to be in nature,” says Dato - the ranger on duty in Mijnis Kure, as he walks on his patrol over the nearby ridge in the remote station of Mijnis Kure. Mijnis Kure is located on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border. In order to reach it, one must pass the Georgian border checkpoint and then pass a difficult winding road through sandstone

gorges, but all in all, it is worth the reward in the end. In early spring, you’ll see red tulips and irises on the way, as well as some very scenic views.

The area itself is located right on the banks of the Alazani River on one side and some very unique formations on the other.

He says he wakes up at dawn every day, and depending on the day will do various tasks, but going on walking patrols, and taking care of the horses are among his everyday chores. On his walks, his young energetic puppy accompanies him. They call him *Mutaka*, which is the Georgian word for a long, cylindrical shape pillow. He is a curious, energetic dog, eager to follow Dato everywhere. He loves swimming in the river. Dato is worried that he might get himself in trouble, because he is curious and often catches mice and small animals. He worries that *Mutaka* might not survive a viper bite. *Mutaka*, however, oblivious to the worries, is a very happy puppy.

Rangers are on duty with a 9-day rotation. Dato mentions that towards the end of his rotation he starts to miss home, but after going home he starts missing his station.

Mijnis Kure has 6 bungalows with basic facilities, and also designated places for camping and fire. The other bungalow station has similar facilities. The rangers are responsible to make sure the visitors adhere to the Park’s regulations.

Two fishermen who are camping around Mijnis Kure are visiting the station to take fresh water. This makes it a perfect time to make some traditional black coffee on their portable gas stove and to play a game of backgammon on the nearby picnic table. They haven’t caught much fish in the past couple of



days, so the socializing would hopefully take the edge off the frustration a bit. Sport fishing is allowed in Mijnis Kure, and Dato checks on the fishermen regularly.

The border police do regular patrols in the area. They also use the well water and occasionally walk the 12km distance between the border station and the ranger station to stop by for some socializing. The well has become a local gathering spot, as it is the sole source of fresh water in the area.

From Dato's experience, it is very rare that visitors arrive at the station before noon. He considers the morning portion of the day the perfect time for patrols. He checks certain routes everyday in different directions, and sometimes follows animal tracks to check on their routes and status. To his experience, in the warmer months of the year, the chance of encountering vipers is much higher. He says even

though they are venomous, they normally won't bite unless aggravated. Sometimes people accidentally step on them, since their colour so perfectly camouflages them.

When he returns from the daily patrol, he sees two shepherd dogs in the station. Seeing them reminds him of "Bear", a white dog that is a favourite amongst the rangers. He is friends with all of them, and moves from station to station. He is not big but it is said that no shepherd dog in the park can beat him. Dato says that if Bear was there at the station, no shepherd dog would come close to the vicinity.

Being a ranger in a remote region is no easy task, but rangers are dedicated. Hopefully, the future will bring more support for the park, and the rangers can get more funding and equipment to enable them to do their job more efficiently. Guarding a National Park in a border region has special challenges, both politically and logistically, which will certainly get easier with more official support.





Park Ranger Dato Chikaidze while taking care of horses in Mijnis Kure station.





Park Ranger Dato Chikaidze on patrol in Mijnis Kure.



Bird-watching in Chachuna National Park.





A shepherd observes smoke from the steppe fire raging near the Mingachevir Reservoir at the Azerbaijani-Georgian border.



Central Bungalows station.





On the way to Mijnis Kure.

This book has been made possible with the support of Georgian Carnivore Conservation Project (GCCP), implemented jointly by the Centre for Biodiversity Conservation and Research (NACRES), and Fauna and Flora International (FFI), with the financial support of European Union. The overall goal of GCCP is to conserve the unique and globally important biodiversity of the semi-arid landscape in Georgia.

Since 2009, the project has been actively supporting the development of effective mechanisms to improve the conservation status of large carnivores in and around the Protected Areas of Vashlovani and Tusheti. A variety of activities have been undertaken by the project, including those aimed at raising awareness of Georgia's rich biodiversity and the conservation value of the region. This book represents an important contribution to these activities.

Through this book, the reader will experience snapshots of the unique range of landscapes, wildlife, and habitats offered by Vashlovani while learning to appreciate the everyday lives of those who live and work within the Protected Area.





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