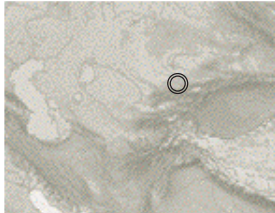


Tien Shan Mountains

BY IAN GREEN

INFORMATION



Location | From western China through Kazakhstan and Kirghizia to the borders of Uzbekistan. The most accessible part is between Almaty in Kazakhstan and the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve.

Reasons to go | Amazing tulip show in spring with diverse species, colours and forms. A huge range of attractive species in summer including many endemics. Great bird and mammal life, especially in the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve.

Timing | The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve is botanically exceptional from the start of April through to the start of July, whilst the Karatau area is good from late March until the end of June.

Protected Status | A large swathe of pristine mountain country is protected in the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve, and areas to the south of Almaty are also protected. Big Almaty Lake National Park lies to the west.

Opposite: A beautiful mountain meadow with foxtail lilies *Eremurus regellii*.

This is the home of the tulip, and probably the evolutionary epicentre of this fine genus. Around 25 species of variously coloured tulips adorn these steep and beautiful mountains and the surrounding steppes and semi-deserts, the bulk flowering in April. But they are only the tip of the botanical iceberg, for the floral diversity is exceptional and a visit in mid-summer will stretch both your camera and your notebook. Saxifrages and the fabulous *Paraquilegia anemonoides* populate cliffs, whilst high ridges host a variety of stunning alpinines. Snowmelt communities last into July, so you can see many of the spring bulbs even during June. The variety of colourful alliums is perhaps unparalleled and there are irises, milk-vetches, *Eremurus* and *Eremostachys* at every turn. Many of these, particularly in the western Tien Shan are found nowhere else, and the nearby Karatau Mountains have one of the highest levels of endemism found anywhere in the world.

Despite its size, the Tien Shan has relatively few places with easy access. Two areas stand out: the former capital, Almaty, and a small village at the western end of the mountains, Dzhabagly, reached either by road or overnight train from Almaty, which has the additional advantage of being only just over an hour's drive from the much older Karatau Mountains, with incredible spring displays of Greig's Tulips, in all colours, as well as Waterlily Tulip, and the lovely pink *Fritillaria stenantha*. Various roses and endemic fruit trees make a colourful backdrop for bright yellow *Corydalis severzowii* and the rare *Corydalis schanginii* var. *ainii*. The famous Karatau Onion can be found here in its wild state along with various bulbs, and yet more tulips.

When the higher areas above Dzhabagly are still snowbound, white stars of *Crocus alatavicus* and the stunning little iris *Iridiodictyum kolpakowskianum* appear at the lower snow patches. Tulips such as *Tulipa tarda* and *T. bifloriformis* grow with the strange tall fritillary *Korolkovia severzowii*. A little later, the yellow *Colchicum luteum* appears with large white-flowered *Eremurus olgae*. *Iris tianshanicus* and both *Eremurus lactiflorus* and *E. regellii* herald the start of summer. Now the subalpine meadows are lush and Wild Boar, Argali and Brown Bears are feeding on rich variety. Tall pale blue *Codonopsis clematidea* has a most striking orange and black pattern inside the bells, and louseworts, borages, honeysuckles and milk-vetches abound. Near snow are the two junos, *Iris subdecolorata* and *Iris orchioides*. High ridges are home to rock jasmines, macrotomias and various bellflower relatives, and cliffs have fine paraquilegias.





From Almaty you can take day trips out to Kapchagai Lake or the Kordoi Pass where tulips mix in a fabulous array of strong colours. The Ketmen Mountains are also superb for tulips in spring. Cimbulak, the ski resort above Medeo is full of wonderful plants in June. You can find accommodation (at almost 3,000 m) at the old Observatory at Big Almaty Lake a little further to the west. A rough track allows sturdier vehicles to continue beyond 3,500 m at the Cosmos station, where the rocky peak above the track hosts many wonderful saxifrages and high alpine specialities.

Opposite: A fabulous clump of the alpine *Paraquilegia anemonoides* growing high in the Tien Shan.

Below: A spectacular display of the globeflower *Trollius altaicus*.

