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Wildlife and Fauna of Azerbaijan

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Introduction

Azerbaijan, often known as the "Land of Fire," sits at the dynamic crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, bordered by the Caspian Sea and ringed by mountainous, steppe, and forested landscapes. This nation is remarkable for its extraordinary range of climates and environments; in fact, nine of the world's eleven major climate types are present within its bounds. This environmental diversity is central to Azerbaijan's astounding wealth of wildlife, making it a sanctuary for countless plant and animal species.

The story of Azerbaijan's fauna is as old as its ancient petroglyphs and as current as modern conservation initiatives. From the majestic peaks of the Greater and Lesser Caucasus to the subtropical wetlands skirting the Caspian coast, the country's patchwork of habitats harbors a vibrant array of life. Accounts from ancient travelers and scholars, together with observations engraved in stone and preserved in literature, reveal a land historically rich in biological diversity. The formal study and cataloging of this fauna began centuries ago and has evolved into a scientific tradition that continues to thrive.

Today, Azerbaijan stands out as one of the most biodiverse countries in the region, home to approximately 106-115 species of mammals, up to 410 species of birds, dozens of reptile and amphibian species, nearly a hundred types of fish, and a staggering 15,000 to 25,000 invertebrates. The animal kingdom here reflects influences from the Turanian, Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and European regions, lending a unique flavor to the country's natural heritage.

This book is a comprehensive guide to the rich and varied wildlife that inhabits Azerbaijan. It takes the reader on a journey through the country's diverse ecosystems, from the arid semi-deserts and lush forests to the soaring high mountain meadows. We will meet iconic creatures like the critically endangered Caucasian leopard, the elusive East Caucasian tur, and the beloved Karabakh horse, as well as the multitudes of birds that turn Azerbaijan's skies into highways each migration season.

Alongside profiles of animals and habitats, the book explores how Azerbaijan's natural legacy is reflected in its culture and art, the challenges posed by ecological threats, and the ongoing efforts to conserve this living treasure trove for future generations. Through stories of resilience, adaptation, and human stewardship, we aim to foster an appreciation for this wondrous slice of the natural world. Whether you are a naturalist, a traveler, or a conservationist, the wildlife and fauna of Azerbaijan await your discovery.

CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate: Azerbaijan's Natural Diversity

Azerbaijan occupies a truly unique position on the global map, perched at the juncture where Eastern Europe and Western Asia converge. This strategic location, nestled between the Black and Caspian Seas, has historically made it a crossroads of cultures and trade, but it has had an equally profound impact on its natural world. Bordered by Russia to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia and Turkey to the west, and Iran to the south, Azerbaijan also boasts a significant eastern coastline along the landlocked Caspian Sea. This complex set of neighbors and the proximity to diverse large-scale geographical features lay the foundation for the country's remarkable environmental tapestry.

The terrain of Azerbaijan is a dramatic interplay of towering mountains and expansive lowlands, a dynamic relief that shapes everything from weather patterns to the distribution of plant and animal life. In fact, mountains dominate a substantial portion of the country, covering roughly 60% of the total area. This mountainous topography is primarily defined by three major ranges: the Greater Caucasus to the north, the Lesser Caucasus to the southwest, and the Talish Mountains in the southeast. These colossal natural barriers play a crucial role, acting as climatic shields and creating distinct ecological zones.

To the north, the majestic Greater Caucasus range stretches across the border with Russia. Its formidable peaks include Mount Bazardüzü, the highest point in Azerbaijan, reaching an impressive 4,466 meters (14,652 feet) above sea level. This range features dramatic spurs and ridges deeply incised by mountain streams, creating areas of exceptional natural beauty. The Greater Caucasus is a significant barrier, largely protecting the country's lowlands and foothills from the direct influence of cold northern air masses, which contributes to the prevalence of a subtropical climate in many areas.

Southwest of the Greater Caucasus lies the Lesser Caucasus range. While generally lower in elevation than their northern counterparts, the peaks of the Lesser Caucasus still rise to impressive heights, nearing 4,000 meters (13,000 feet). This system includes ranges like Shakhdag, Murovdag, and Zangezur, as well as the Karabakh Upland. The Lesser Caucasus contributes further to the varied landscape, creating a mosaic of mountain environments that contrast with the lower-lying areas of the country.

In the southeastern part of Azerbaijan, bordering Iran, stand the Talish Mountains.

These mountains consist of three longitudinal ranges, with peaks like Mount Kyumyurkyoy. The Talish Mountains, in conjunction with the Lesser Caucasus, enclose the central part of the country, forming a geographical basin that influences regional climate and drainage patterns. This southern range introduces yet another distinct mountainous environment, leading into the subtropical lowlands of the Lankaran region.

Nestled between the Greater and Lesser Caucasus mountain systems lies the extensive Kura-Aras Lowland, named after the country's two major rivers, the Kura (Kür) and the Aras (Araz). This vast, flat plain occupies a significant portion of central and eastern Azerbaijan, making up more than two-fifths of the country's territory. Much of this lowland actually lies below sea level. The Kura and Aras rivers, along with a network of canals, are vital to irrigating this fertile region, supporting agriculture and creating important riparian and wetland habitats.

To the east, the Caspian Sea forms a natural border, stretching along Azerbaijan's coastline for some 800 kilometers (500 miles). As the largest inland body of water in the world, the Caspian Sea is a unique environment in itself, with its own distinct ecosystem. The coastal areas are generally flat, providing a transition from the lowlands to the marine environment. While the Caspian is a saltwater lake, it is entirely enclosed, meaning Azerbaijan, despite its extensive coastline, is technically a landlocked country in terms of access to the global ocean system.

The combination of these dominant geographical features – the mountains and the lowlands – creates a dramatic variation in altitude across Azerbaijan. Elevations span an incredible range, from 28 meters below sea level along the Caspian coast to the soaring heights of Bazardüzü peak at 4,466 meters. This significant difference in elevation over a relatively small geographical area is a key driver of the country's diverse natural conditions.

This varied topography directly influences Azerbaijan's climate, leading to an astonishing array of climatic conditions within its borders. It is often noted that Azerbaijan is home to nine out of the eleven major climate types found globally. This is not hyperbole; the country experiences everything from dry subtropical conditions to cold mountain tundra. The presence of the Greater Caucasus mountains blocking cold northern air is a major factor in this diversity, allowing subtropical climates to flourish in the lowlands.

The central and eastern lowlands, including the Absheron Peninsula where the capital city Baku is located, are characterized by a dry subtropical climate. This means mild winters and long, very hot summers, with temperatures frequently exceeding 27°C (81°F) and occasionally soaring to 43°C (109°F). Precipitation is generally low in these areas, contributing to semi-desert and dry steppe conditions.

In contrast, the southeastern Lankaran region experiences a humid subtropical climate. This area receives the highest amount of precipitation in the country, often between 1,200 and 1,400 mm (47 to 55 inches) annually, with much of it falling during the colder months. This abundance of moisture supports lush evergreen vegetation and dense forests, a stark contrast to the arid lowlands elsewhere.

As elevation increases in the mountainous regions, the climate transitions dramatically. The mountain forest zones experience a moderately cold climate. Higher still, between 1,500 and 2,700 meters (4,900 and 8,900 feet), a cold climate with heavy year-round precipitation prevails, supporting subalpine and alpine zones. Above 2,700 meters (8,900 feet) in the Greater and Lesser Caucasus, and even higher in Nakhchivan, an upland tundra climate takes hold. Here, winters and summers are both cold, and heavy snowfall can make passes inaccessible for several months of the year.

The Nakhchivan exclave, geographically separated from the main part of Azerbaijan, presents its own distinct climatic conditions. Located at altitudes between 700 and 1,000 meters (2,300 to 3,300 feet), it experiences a dry continental climate with cold winters and dry, hot summers. Higher mountainous areas in Nakhchivan have a cold climate with cool, dry summers and cold, snowy winters.

This intricate interplay of geography and climate is the engine driving Azerbaijan's exceptional biodiversity. The dramatic shifts in elevation and the presence of diverse climate types create a mosaic of distinct habitats, each supporting its own unique community of flora and fauna. From the arid semi-deserts of the lowlands and Nakhchivan to the humid subtropical forests of the southeast, and from the deciduous and pine forests of the mountain slopes to the windswept alpine meadows and rocky peaks, Azerbaijan offers a remarkable range of ecological niches.

The altitudinal zonation is particularly important in shaping vegetation patterns, which in turn dictate where different animal species can thrive. Steppe and semi-desert conditions dominate the lowlands and foothills. Moving up the mountain slopes, forests of oak, beech, and pine appear, giving way to alpine meadows at higher elevations. The unique conditions in the Lankaran region support evergreen vegetation and relict forests.

The rivers and lakes, fed by mountain streams, add another layer of habitat diversity, providing freshwater environments within the predominantly terrestrial landscape. The Kura and Aras rivers, the largest in the Caucasus, are central to these aquatic systems. Furthermore, the vast expanse of the Caspian Sea constitutes a major aquatic ecosystem, home to species adapted to its unique brackish waters.

The varied landscapes, from the rugged mountain peaks to the extensive lowlands and the coastal zones, coupled with the presence of nine different climate types, mean

that within a relatively short distance, one can experience vastly different environments. This rapid transition between ecosystems is a key factor in the sheer number and variety of species found in Azerbaijan, creating a rich tapestry of life that is explored in the following chapters. The geographical contours and climatic conditions are not merely a backdrop; they are the fundamental architects of Azerbaijan's vibrant and diverse animal kingdom.

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