

**URAL RIVER DELTA AND ADJACENT CASPIAN COAST**



The Ural River channel and floodplain are a unique natural system, whose life depends entirely on the moisture, hydrological regime, quantity and quality of water brought to the Ural River by its numerous tributaries. The Ural River is Europe's only river with unregulated middle and southern reaches.

The deltoid site is formed by the Ural River originating in Bashkiria mountains. In its lower reaches the river branches into a number of arms and channels forming an extensive delta. Delta wetlands form a complex system of channels, lakes, stretches and boggy lowlands densely covered with plants.

47 fish species and subspecies live in the lower reaches of the river including 5 species included into the Red Book of Kazakhstan. The so-called anadromous species migrating from the Caspian Sea into the Ural River Delta for reproduction purposes form a special fish group.

This area is important for migratory birds at the West Siberian-Caspian site of Siberian-East African migratory route, with dabbling and diving ducks, geese and whooping swans molting here and such rare and endangered species as European white and Dalmatian pelicans, pond, little and buff-backed herons, spoonbills, glossy ibises and gallinules nesting in the coastal and water ecosystems. Thousands of flamingos and pelicans stop here when migrating.

The river delta and sea water areas are habitats of the Caspian seal, rare endangered ichthyofauna species such as Caspian lamprey, Volga shad and valuable sturgeon species such as European, stellate and Russian sturgeons. The project site has 19,000 people living in 6 settlements.

On February 6, 2009, Akzhaiyk State Nature Reserve was established to preserve the wetland ecosystem of the Ural River Delta and the adjacent Caspian coast.

On April 1, 2009, the Ural River Delta and adjacent Caspian coast were included into the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

There are more than 560 hydrophilous and hydromorphic plant species in the delta including 4 rare and protected as well as 7 relic ones. It has a total of 5,000 terrestrial and water invertebrate species including 24 Red Book amphibians and 14 reptiles including 2 protected ones. There are 26 aquatic and semi-aquatic mammals including 4 protected ones.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF NATURAL LANDSCAPES**

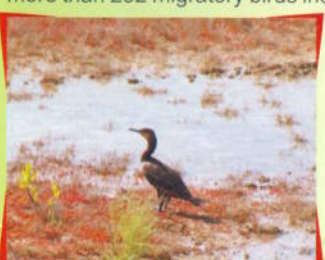
**Ural River Delta**

The Ural River floodplain is a nice combination of tilled steppes and poor pastures where wild boars, muskrats and raccoon dogs found themselves a shelter amidst the virgin nature. Herons, swans, geese, ducks, pelicans, cormorants and sandpipers also nest here.

Outside of Atyrau starts the lower Ural delta with 2 river arms, Zolotoy and Yaitsky. The Ural River is flowing into the Caspian Sea through these and dozens of other narrow channels, *uzeks*, overcoming the distance of 2,400km and passing reed jungles.

Each year shoals of fish consisting of sturgeon, European, stellate and Fringebarbel sturgeons migrate to the Ural River. After the spawning season, the breeding stock and baby fish migrate to the Caspian Sea.

The Ural River valley is an important migratory path for birds. Being unique for Caspian steppes and deserts, this ecological complex acts as a sort of 'highway' for millions of feathered travellers. For them, the Ural River is a road not only to the Caspian Sea, but also to more southern latitudes. The Ural River delta is lying on one of Eurasia's largest Caspian - Black Sea - East African flyway and is a habitat for more than 292 migratory birds including about 110 wetland species, of which 42 enjoy the status of protected species.



Some of them, e.g. Dalmatian pelican (more than 600 nesting pairs, accounting for 12% of its world population), pygmy cormorant, cattle heron, little egret, whooping swan, pond heron, gallinule and great black-headed gull reproduce in this site. Others, e.g. spoonbill, white-headed duck, bustard, houbara bustard, little

bustard, lesser white-fronted goose, red-breasted goose and Siberian white crane use this site for resting during migrations. About 3 million birds stop in the URD during migrations.

Almost the entire Ural River delta is fringed by a reed and cattail jungle forming a solid wall along river arms and *uzeks*. Land that only recently was released from under the sea becomes very quickly covered with thick saline vegetation.

**AKZHAIYK STATE NATURE RESERVE**

Due to intensive economic development of the Northern Caspian coast and its water area that accelerated over the past decades, conservation of aquatic and coastal ecosystems in this region and its plant and animal biodiversity became increasingly pressing issues.

The wetlands of the Ural River delta and adjacent Caspian coast are Eurasian most important wetlands supporting millions of aquatic and semi-aquatic birds during nesting, molting, seasonal migrations and wintering.

In order to conserve and restore the Ural River delta's unique natural complexes of particular environmental, historic, scientific, aesthetic and recreational value, the Government issued Resolution No. 119 dd. February 6, 2009, "On Some Issues of Establishment of State Institution "Akzhaiyk State Nature Reserve" to set up, on the basis of Zolotenok husbandry, Akzhaiyk State Nature Reserve, a protected area enjoying the status of a nature protection and research institute and including terrestrial and water ecosystems intended for protecting, restoring and maintaining biological diversity of the Ural River Delta and adjacent Caspian Coast natural complexes at an area of 111,500 ha.

**DESCRIPTION OF ECOROUTES**

**Route 1 "Nature World"**

An educational car route for groups of 20 to 30 people. Weekly. Route points: Atyrau - Zhanatalap Village - Damba Village - Atyrau. Open on April 15 - July 1.

The route is designed for school students. Buses depart at 10 a.m. from Atyrau to Damba Village. Students are accompanied by a teacher and an Akzhaiyk guide.

While on the route, school children will be told about the history of the sturgeon plant and procedures for fishing in the Ural River



and will learn about the fish biology. Standing at the opposite high river bank on the roadside, children can see the fishing site at work.

On the route, a 45-minute stop will be made in Zhanatalap Village for visiting a *berkutchi* (eagle hunter) site. An experienced guide will tell children about and demonstrate falconry.

Then, students will go to Damba Village.

Tourists will visit the observation deck to watch birds with the help of field glasses and telescopes. The guide will tell them about protected bird species. Glossy ibis, common and little egret, common heron, whooping swan, bald coot, seagull, garganey, steppe lark are quite widespread in Zaroslava river floodplain.

At the monitoring platform, the guide will provide insight into the diversity of green landscape and uniqueness of local flora.

Aquatic vegetation is represented by reed, narrow and broad-leaved cattail, common bulrush and sea clubroot.

Ground vegetation includes tamarisk, bearbind, elecampane (a medicinal plant), licorice, couch grass, shoregrass, xanthium, plantain, dandelion, marsh-beet, etc.

A breakfast (children should bring box breakfast from home) and a demonstration of postcards featuring biodiversity of the project site will be arranged in the open air.

**Route 2 "Water World"**

A car and water route, in groups of up to 9 people. Weekly. Route points: Atyrau - Peshnoy Village - Caspian coast - Atyrau. Open on July 15 - September 15. A tour will be completed by 4 p.m.

The route is designed for all tourists willing to visit the water area of Akzhaiyk SNR. At 10 a.m. tourists will depart from Atyrau to Damba Village by road. At the 7km section of the road between Damba and Peshnoy Villages they will have a chance to watch typical habitats of aquatic and semi-aquatic birds (bald-coot, glossy ibis, little and



common egret, cormorants). The guide will tell visitors about biology of birds.

Upon arrival in Peshnoy Village, tourists will be offered tea. Then, accompanied by the guide, they will take a boat ride along the dug channel (1 km long) into the water area. During the ride, tourists will be told about bird nesting grounds, avifauna biology, vegetation and importance of the protected area.

During the tour visitors will observe pelicans, bald-coots, red-crested pochards, swans and their brood using field glasses and telescopes. They will learn about vegetation (reed, narrow and broad-leaved cattail, water caltrop).

Then tourists will return to Peshnoy village and stay in a guest house where the guide will tell them about the reserve's flora and fauna diversity. It will be followed by a light dinner and departure for Atyrau by road.



**Route 3 "World of Steppes"**

A car and a horse route, in groups of 12 to 15 people. Weekly. Route points: Atyrau - Yerinkala Village - Kamenny Village - Atyrau. Open on July 15 - October 15.

At 10 a.m. tourists will leave Atyrau for Erinkala Village by road. Then, depending on the chosen mode of transportation, they will start their journey. The route follows along the dam most of the time. On their way they will see a garden site, a yurt camp, an observation deck and a watch tower. Travelling conditions are satisfactory. Visitors' attention should be drawn to more significant ecological phenomena such as surging and constant changes in the Caspian Sea regime. The guide will tell them about the history of landscapes and protected bird species.

On their way, tourists can watch interesting and picturesque 'lunar' landscapes of the dry Caspian bed and fringing vegetation, which makes a case for adaptability of living organisms. The route is built quite successfully in that a picturesque, yet fruitless plain will be followed by the bank of a channel with abundant vegetation and nesting birds. On their way back, tourists can either take the same road to Yerinkala village or the other one through Atyrau.

According to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Protected Areas" individuals are allowed to stay in a state natural reserve only if they have obtained permits to do so.

Tourist and recreational activities can only be performed in security zones of state natural reserves. At the same time, actions aimed to conserve the fauna and flora habitat and reproduction conditions, migration paths and animal concentration grounds should be stipulated and performed; integrity of sites having particular value as wild animal habitats and other sites in the state natural reserve fund should be secured (RoK Law on Pas).



**Rules of Tourists' Conduct at Ecoroutes**

- One can only take a route in the security zone if accompanied by a security inspector or a state reserve guide.
- No deviations from the route shall be permitted.
- When watching birds, it is prohibited to disturb them (make noises, shout, talk loudly, wave objects; one must always stay close to the accompanying inspector).
- Vehicles should be equipped with a fire extinguisher.
- No fires can be made using gasoline or gas devices; no open flames shall be allowed.
- It shall not be allowed to cut and pull out bushes, reeds and other plants during stops.
- No glassware can be left in the site as it may set the plant cover on fire in case of sunny, hot and dry weather.
- Visitors must clean after themselves and dispose of garbage and household waste in designated garbage sites.
- Bathing shall only be permitted in designated sites.
- To prevent a heat stroke, no person shall remain in the open air for a long time unless he or she is wearing a cap.
- Watch out for Orsini's viper.

**Dear Tourists, if you have noticed the fire, please inform the local fire service - 01 and Akzhaiyk SNR Immediately. tel.: 36-62-58**

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**GEF/UNDP Project**  
**Integrated Conservation of Priority Globally Significant Migratory Bird Wetland Habitat: A Demonstration on Three Sites**

The goal of the project is to select and demonstrate innovative approaches to the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources of globally significant wetlands.

**Project Outcomes:**

1. National wetland biodiversity conservation policy-making.
2. Strengthened protected area operations.
3. Increased stakeholder awareness and support.
4. Stakeholders empowered to sustainably utilize the productive landscape around priority sites.
5. Biodiversity Conservation Fund.

**Outline Map of Ecological Tourism in the Ural River Delta and Adjacent Caspian Coast**

<http://www.wetlands.kz>