

MONGOLIA – Unique mammals & Central Asian Birds at breathtaking landscapes



MONGOLIA TRIP REPORT - 21July-3August 2023



The following is a detailed **Trip Report of a private tour in Mongolia.**

Text by Gabor Orban, photos made by Dorothy Bedford, Andrea Katona & Gabor Orban

All pictures in this material were made by participants and leaders during the 2023 tour

Fact File

- 14-day-long birding & mammal holiday with some butterfly, amphibian, reptile & wildflower species at breathtaking habitats and landscapes;
- start and finish in Ulan Baatar, Mongolia
- most nights are at ger camps with shared facilities, some nights in en-suite hotel rooms

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- this tour is a modified version of our web-signup itinerary at www.ecotours-worldwide.com, please ask for details



Highlights

- wide variety of birds & mammals, plus some amphibians, reptiles, butterflies & wildflowers at breathtaking habitats and landscapes
- visits of different areas nearby UlaanBaatar such as Tuul River and Terej

National Park

- stay at a ger camp and visit high elevation valleys and slopes of Altai Mountain, search of Snow Leopard and Altai Snowcock, Mongolian/Henderson's Ground-Jay
- Central Asian high elevation bird species, Altai Snowcock, buntings, accentors, snowfinches, Bearded Vulture, Cinereous Vulture & many more
- many upclose raptors including Saker, Steppe, Golden and Booted Eagle, Upland and Long-legged Buzzard
- highland night drive to watch Jerboa species, Pallas's Pika, Voles, Ground-squirrels & Long-eared Hedgehog
- birds & mammals of Western Mongolian large lakes & steppes including Mongolian, Pallas's & Relict Gull, hundreds of Plovers, Larks, Wheatears, plus Saiga, Mongolian Gazelle, Siberian Ibex, Argali & many more
- birding & mammal searching at Hustai NP & around, including Amur Falcon, Daurian Partridge, Mongolian Lark, Small/Père David's and White-winged Snow-finches, White-necked Cranes and Pallas's Cat, Wolf, Przewalsky horse and more



Activity level & weather

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The capital city and the Hustai National Park is above 1350 meters but at Altai we spent time at much higher elevation, 2000 meters and above. The tour includes several long drives on bumpy dirt roads but in excellent, comfortable 4x4 cars, professional driving. Walks generally not long and demanding but some areas are rocky so we always take our time.

Although timing was perfect weather-wise, you have to be prepared for great temperature fluctuation between days and nights. Up in the mountains we were very lucky with the weather, we had crystal clear weather most of the time, except the last full day when we got a major change with strong wind and cool off. At semi-deserts and alkaline lakes can be hot without shade. After several rainy periods mosquitoes can emerge even at higher elevations. If we do longer night search than we have mid-day or afternoon siesta time to catch up with rest or sleep.



Accommodation

2 nights nearby UlaanBaatar close to a river with on-site birding possibilities and Terelj NP

7 nights at Altai Mnts., Snow Leopard Camp

3 nights at Hustai National Park Ger Camp

1 night in the city or nearby UlaanBaatar close to a river with on-site birding possibilities



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ULAAN BAATAR VICINITY AND TERELJ NATIONAL PARK – 21 & 22 July 2023



Nearby the capital city there are several good areas to start birding. Our very first birds were Azure Tits in the hotel garden followed by more common species such as Tree Sparrows and Black Kites. We found as well Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, White-crowned Penduline Tit feeding fledged chicks.

Further nearby at a river and at a lake we also added Common Sandpiper, Temminck Stint, Great Cormorant, Redshank, Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Great-Crested Grebe and Ringed Plover to the list.

Next morning we found many loud Azure-winged Magpies and a lovely Long-tailed Rosefinch close to the hotel. Later on

the way towards Terelj National Park we stopped for our first Amur Falcon which caught in front of us an unfortunate Jerboa.

At the Terelj National Park first we birded in a riverside coniferous forest. We could observe beautifully a White-backed Woodpecker family and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.



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There were many more loud Azure-winged Magpies including youngsters, but a pair of Daurian Redstarts and a Siberian Chipmunk stole the show. We added Gray Wagtail, Red Squirrel but another great surprise was a pair of Mandarin Duck walking across in the woods.



After a great lunch at Terelj Lodge we visited a more open, rocky valley which seemed a very good birding area but unfortunately we were caught by regular showers. Still we managed to see and photograph some interesting species, such as Hill Pigeon, Raven, Long-tailed Ground



Squirrel, Pine Bunting, Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Hoopoe, Meadow Bunting, Pine Bunting, Greenish Warbler, Common Swift and Siberian Stonechat.

This was also the first area where we saw Bactrian Camel and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel.



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MONGOLIAN ALTAI – SNOW LEOPARD CAMP, LAKES & GORGES, HIGHLAND DESERTS - 23-29 July 2023



23 July 2023 - Early morning we went to the airport and to check in for the flight to Khovd at the foot of the Altai Mountains where we arrived after a bit more than a 2 hours flight. We were waited by the owner of the Snow Leopard Ger Camp and our young ornithologist guide. The first part of the journey was on a new, perfect road across a mountainous semi-desert area. Later we made a detour to Khar Us -aka Black Water- Lake. From a tower lookout we checked the nearby and more distant group of birds. Grayleg Geese outnumbered Common Pochard, Common Coot and Eurasian Lapwing but we also



saw some Goldeneyes, Gadwalls and Great Crested Grebes on the water. At the edge of the lake many Great Egrets, a few Gray Herons and a Spotted Redshank were seen. Meanwhile few dozens of Barn Swallows, Pacific Sand Martins and Common Swifts were in the air, plus a few House Martin. Of course we saw the first Black Kites, Isabelline Wheatears and Ravens as well. Eurasian Tree Sparrows were noisy as well.

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There were Great Cormorants in large number, few dozens of Caspian Terns, Common Terns and a handful of White-winged Terns.

We saw nearby a group of Mongolian Gulls and around 50 Black-Headed Gulls but in a distance a much bigger group of Pallas's Gulls as well. We drove closer to that group and counted more than 200 of these amazing gulls, even took excellent photos and found a nice feather.



We went back to the main road but after the toll gate soon we hit rough dirt roads and started our ascent up to the Snow Leopard ger camp. During the bumpy ride we could ID Cinereous Vulture, Rock Sparrow, Common Swift and the omnipresent Black Kite.

The ger camp is a permanent home of a local family whose each

member has an important job, either build and maintain the camp, cook and serve the excellent dishes, search and find the Snow Leopard. Each ger is immaculate clean and comfy, even equipped with a hand-washing facility and in the evenings it is possible to charge camera batteries and other electronic equipment.

With a short walk you can see your first Mongolian Finch, Hill Pigeon and even Bearded Vulture with some luck really close.



Our driver drove us up in a dry mountain valley till it was possible, from where we continued by walking down first on a short steep slope which led us to a beautiful flowery meadow with several new species such as Horned Lark, Mongolian Finch, White-winged Snow-Finch, Twite, Isabelline Wheatear, Crag Martin, Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear.

We also found 2 juvenile Golden Eagles on nest where 2 adults were around as well. A nearby skull of a sheep referred to the former menu.

First mammals here were several Pallas Pikas, few Marmots and a Tolai Hare.

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24 & 25 July 2023

We spent 2 days with searching Snow Leopard and highland bird species at different parts of the mountain.



One morning Dorothy found an Asian Desert Warbler. After breakfast we drove up above 3000 meters. On the way Brown Accentor, Saker Falcon and Pale Crag Martin was new. Two immature Steppe Eagles gave us a nice flight show and we had our first Water Pipit as well.



A dark morph Long-legged Buzzard was new. We tried another lookout point as well where we found a beautiful pair of nesting White-winged Redstarts.



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Up in the hills we scanned all the slopes for Snow Leopard but we found 9 Altai Snowcocks instead. On another day we found an even bigger group with amazing 21 adults.

On the way down from the top we saw again the “usual” raptors and songbirds but found also a new species, Blyth's Pipit and of course several Tarbagan Marmots.



26 July 2023

On another day we drove down below the ger camp to search Henderson's Ground Jay. After a while we found a few and even managed to photograph it. We also had Isabelline Shrikes and Rock Sparrows.



Less than 10 miles away we visited a canyon where we birded the road partly driving, partly walking. On the way first we found Pied Wheatear, a female Chukar with 5 little chicks offered great views and we saw about a dozen Rock Sparrows as well.

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Later on beside the usual species we had some Common Whitethroat, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and found a Eurasian Nightjar which we even could photograph.



Further upstream we arrived to a nice Cotton Wood forest with a good bird activity. We had White-winged Snowfinch, Black Redstart, Greenish Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Mongolian Finch, heard Yellow-browed Warbler & Red-winged Rosefinch. This was also the place where we saw 4 Ibexes searching food up in the rocky slopes.



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Later we started a long drive to a small lake which was about 20kms away but we had to negotiate some bad roads. We were just about to arrive when suddenly we got a news that the guys up in the mountains found a Snow Leopard! So fast but not furious we drove back to



camp, had a quick food, pack more warm clothes and drove up to top of the mountain and took our positions behind a rock. We saw a huge Yak mom with a newborn baby and further up a killed horse where 20+ Ravens were circling with 3 Cinereous Vultures as well. All were pretty good signs that the top predator must be around. We could not see the Snow Leopard at this stage but the guys showed a mobile footage where the cat

was running across the slopes and disappeared behind some rocks.

From time to time all ravens and vultures went to the air so we checked every corner for movement. A White-winged Redstart hopped around but we could not care, we concentrated on where the cat might appear. Finally it came out and sat below a rock about 600 meters away from us beautifully clear in the



scope and bins. It was even possible to take some photos. A Steppe Eagle flew so close that it was difficult to fit in the camera frame. We also saw a Gray Fox in beautiful lights at the next slope and a Bearded Vulture appeared as well. The Snow Leopard changed positions a few times but basically enjoyed a rest during the last sunny hours of the day.



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We celebrated with a sip of Hungarian plum brandy at sunset and by the time we arrived back to camp it was dark. We got a tasteful late dinner and enjoyed a cold beer!

27 July 2023 After breakfast participated a bit in the community's ger building activity where we learned how to make a local home from prefabricated elements. Within an hour the new home was complete and ready to work on the inside details.



Today we visited Lake Turgun. On the way we saw Merlin, Hoopoe, Asian Short-toed Lark, Cinereous Vulture, Horned Lark, Isabelline Wheatear, Long-legged Buzzard. A nice upclose dark-morph Upland Buzzard was new and here we saw our first Saiga Antilopes, some of them racing us with 90km/h speed.

At the lake at the first stop we saw Great White Egrets, Mongolian Gulls, dozens of Common and Red-crested Pochards, Great-crested Grebe, Whooper Swan, Eurasian Curlew, Lapwing, Common Tern, Caspian Tern, Barn Swallow.

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As a beautiful surprise we had up close 2 Arctic Loon families, each with 2 chicks. In the reeds Bearded Reedlings were abundant but we also found Paddyfield Warbler, Savi's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Reed Bunting, Blyth's Reed Warbler.



At the shore drinking Asian Short-toed Larks, Temminck Stint, Greater Sand Plover and White Wagtail was new. An unidentified Crake prompted us a bit more search but it did not give us a second chance.

We went further to check out another part of the lake where we saw large number, 200+ Little Ringed Plovers which really outnumbered the only Common Ringed Plover. But that was nothing compared to the 1000+ Kentish Plovers which flew across in front of us. Great Cormorants were everywhere and Barn Swallows outnumbered Pale Sand Martins. At a

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broken bridge we observed an incredibly close Booted Eagle hunting above the reeds. 2 Whooper Swans, 24 Eurasian Spoonbills and a Western Marsh Harrier was new.



A bit further at a sparse bushy area we looked for Saxaul Sparrow, but found a Great Gray Shrike instead. Also saw a lovely Agama, 3 Demoiselle Cranes and dozens of more Mongolian Saiga.



Our 3rd stop was 40kms away alongside the same lake where first we were a bit disappointed to find 200+ goats on the shore instead of birds but with a bit of patience we actually found 27 bird species just here. New ones were Ruddy Shelduck, Arctic Tern, Black-winged Stilt, Terek Sandpiper and a distant possible Relict Gull.

28 July 2023

Today we visited two dry canyons. At the first one apart from the huge amount of Chukars with plenty of chicks and the “usual”, formerly seen birds we had Isabelline Shrike, Brown

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Accentor, Oriental Turtle Dove, Rock Bunting, Common Rosefinch, Greenish Warbler and very cooperative Arctic Warbler.



After lunch at a parallel, even drier canyon Brown Shrike was new, had Steppe Eagle, another 2 Arctic Warblers and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. This canyon was surprisingly infected by lot of mosquitoes and flies regardless it was a very dry environment.



On the way home we saw 2 Black-tailed or Goitered Gazelles, Asian Short-toed Lark, Common Swift, Rock Sparrow, Horned Lark, Eurasian Kestrel, Isabelline Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, Raven.

After dinner around 9pm we went out for an hour and a half for a night drive to search small mammals. We found plenty of really funny Jerboas, Siberian or Five-toed Jerboa and Pallas's Pikas. Also saw a Red Fox and a Tolai Hare.

29 July 2023

We decided not to travel today and spend most of the time at and around the camp. During last evening and night we experienced a tremendous weather change with strong winds and temperature drop. So instead of being in the open we decided to walk into a more sheltered canyon valley. We found first loads of Mongolian Finches and a mixed nesting colony of House Martins, Common Swifts and Pacific Swifts. We saw the usual Rock Sparrows, White-winged Snowfinches and Golden Eagles, but Gray Wagtail and a fantastic Solitary Snipe was new and definitely the best finding. It seems that this was the first sighting of this species in the whole region!



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After breakfast changed our tactics and asked our driver, Bimbah who entertained us during previous long drives with beautiful singing of local songs to do some American style birding in the area: short drives, stop when we see or hear something. This resulted quite a lot of birds with nice downhill walks and good photo opportunities of previously seen birds. But we also found some new ones such as Gray-necked Bunting, a singing male nicely photographed. We heard Godlewsky's Bunting a few times but could not locate it so we renamed it to God-knows-where Bunting! :-)



After lunch we had a walk nearby the camp which resulted a Brown Shrike and we also found Rock Sparrow nest among a rock pile full with hungry chicks. Pallas's Pika and Tolai Hare was around as well.

HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK & LAKES IN THE REGION - 30July-2Aug2023

30July 2023

Today we started with a very early breakfast because we had to leave 5 am to Khovd airport. We said goodbye to our kind host family. After a while we reached the super tarmac road but at the toll gate we realized one tire was flat. Bimbah changed it quickly and very professionally. We even had time to witness preparation for a local horse racing before we reached the Khovd airport. Flight was delayed so we had time to check emails after a week without internet. The flight was smooth, about 2 hours, plus 1 hour time zone difference made it lunch time upon arrival. Our local guides waited us and since all airport restaurants were super busy with groups we decided to drive further and stop at our previous hotel to have a great lunch. From here it was about 2 hours to reach our next accommodation at Hustai National Park.

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By that time we were pretty tired so after moving in our ger and packing out our stuff we had a few hours sleep to prepare for the night ride after dinner.

We went out at 8pm and still in good light we met the first dozens of Przewalsky horses coming down to a river to drink. After admiring these beautiful and rare wild horses we continued our mammal search with strong spotlights during driving across various landscapes. We found an incredibly large White-tailed or Mongolian Gazelle herds consisting thousands of individuals. We felt like we were on an African safari. We searched further for Pallas's Cat checking out any distant or closer shining pairs of eyes. We identified a dozen of Corsac Foxes and one Red Fox but no confirmed cat sightings. Kept finding more and more groups of Przewalsky horses and a few times we saw Asian Wapiti, equivalent of Red Deer in Europe. Once we encountered 3 huge stags up close with impressive antlers. Sighting of few Jerboas were always cheerful moments as they were hopping around like pygmy Mongolian kangaroos. We arrived back to camp way after midnight and were ready to crash for the night.



31 July

We started the day at 7 with breakfast and hit the road at 8. We saw first plenty of Marmots along the way and various butterflies in good numbers including Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Red Admiral, Lesser Bath White, Rock Grayling and several Blue species.

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Apart from the previously seen common species like Isabelline Wheatear, Tree Sparrow, Black Kite, Horned Lark we found a nice new one, Mongolian Lark. This was followed by 2 typical Mongolian cocktails, Cinereous vulture on Rock and Steppe Eagle on Rock. :-)



It was also interesting to witness a Black-eared Black Kite eating insects from the surface of a pond. Later visited a rocky area with up close Steppe Eagle, Cinereous Vulture, three species of Wheatears, - Northern, Isabelline and Pied - Rufous-tailed Rock- thrush, Raven.

We disturbed an Eagle Owl hiding among the rocks which was chased further by Magpies and Eurasian Kestrel. Found a surprisingly small Saker Falcon nest and a pair of Daurian Redstart nearby. As we left this area we saw a Common Cuckoo on the wings, Red-billed Chough and Barn Swallow. We drove towards the camp when on a roadside electric post a

Saker Falcon prompted us to stop. It was surprising for us how close this bird and many other raptors as well in Mongolia let us approach them and even aim them with cameras to take photos. It is surely not like in Europe or Americas.

We saw a group of tourist checking the Przewalsky horses with telescope, they were clearly interested in Horsescape, not Horoscope. :-)

After lunch we had time to have shower, check photos and some siesta or even sleep and we went out again for a night drive after dinner. This time we visited not the national park but



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another area, also habitat of Pallas's Cat but lacking large number of gazelles and horses. Still we found few Corsac Foxes and a Red Fox, couple of funny Jerboas and one cute Daurian Hedgehog which was new. This time we went back to base around 11.30pm to have a good rest.

1August



This morning we went out before breakfast to search Daurian Partridge. The rocky steppe was full with various flowering wildflowers including characteristic Burnet and Stipa species, similar to Hungarian steppes. Was not very frequent with birds but we had Daurian Redstart,



Common Kestrel, Cinereous Vulture, Magpie, Rook, Tree Sparrow and just before returning to our car Dorothy kicked off a pair of Daurian Partridges. We saw more or less where they landed so searched them again. They were so much camouflaged that we almost step on them again! This time we had a good view of one of them as it flew across in front of us.

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After breakfast we decided to visit Ljun Lake about an hour drive away. Alongside the connective road between Hustai Camp and the main tarmac road we saw Red-billed Chough, Tree Sparrow, Mongolian Lark, Hopooe and Mongolian Short-toed Lark. 4 Demoiselle Cranes were hiding in the shade alongside the main road.



At Ljun Lake it was really hot and humid, no wonder it was visited by loads of horses to cool down. Still we could find plenty of species including Ruddy Shelduck, Green Sandpiper, Gray Heron, Whooper Swan, Eurasian Lapwing, Coot with chicks, Common Sandpiper, Barn Swallow, Temminck Stint, Black-Winged Stilt, Demoiselle Crane, Cinereous Vulture. Some new species included Eastern Marsh Harrier, Citrine Wagtail, Black-tailed Godwit, several Eastern Yellow Wagtail and two lovely, though distant White-necked Cranes. We also heard Oriental Reed Warbler and Paddyfield Warbler. We worked really hard not just to see but also photograph at least one of the 13 found Pére David's Snowfinches as well.

Later we stopped at a roadside big mall with a good restaurant and had lunch. We decided to drive an hour further to Bayan or Tsaran Lake to have closer views of White-necked Cranes. We also had Pied Avocet, up close Eastern Marsh Harrier, Asian Short-toed Lark and more Eastern Yellow Wagtails. Red-Crested Pochards were new and we heard Japanese Quail but could not see it. A nice group of Bar-headed Geese were new, such as 3 Pallas's Reed Buntings as well. A huge storm was clearly approaching, soon we had no problem with burning sun and it was just perfect timing to walk back to our 4x4 not to get wet. We had a serious car wash on the way back. Before we reached Hustai at the agricultural fields we had first a Steppe Eagle on the ground very close to us. We realized that it was waiting for



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any rodents to emerge. So we decided to do the same and this way we managed to take some great daylight photos of Siberian Jerboa, Asian and Mongolian Short-toed Lark and Mongolian Lark offered good photo possibilities as well. A gathering of 8 Hoopoes was a nice surprise.



We finished our last full day at Hustai with a nice dinner and prepared for an early start next morning.

2 August 2023

At 5am we were already on the road to a beautiful rocky mountainous area. From a great lookout point we checked carefully every slope scanning with bins and scope for Pallas's Cat and Wolf. We found droppings of the cat at 2 locations but not the owner.



We watched for a while a huge heard of Mongolian Gazelles which clearly were very much alerted several times. A mom with a young gazelle could not keep up with the heard which was a typical conditions a hunting wolf pack wants. We witnessed them to run away from a potential danger a few times but for us the source of the danger was hidden unfortunately.

But from the same spot we could see two Argali among the rocks and a few Cinereous Vultures circling around.

On the way back on an electric wire we found several falcons which we checked out and Lesser Kestrel was new among them, plus Amur Falcons offered really great photo

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opportunities this time. We said goodbye to the many Przewalsky horses and the omnipresent Wheatears and returned to our last breakfast here.



During packing we were hit again by rain so around 10am we started our drive back to UlaanBaatar. Traffic was really crazy in this city where every second Mongolian lives. Our guides took us to a fancy Japanese restaurant for our final lunch from where it was easy to walk out to the main square. Here we wondered around a bit and took some photos of the Parliament building with statues of historical leaders like Dzingis Kan, Suhe Baator, Kublai Kan. All this was surrounded by modern Japanese, Chinese and Korean hotels, business buildings with floods of Toyotas, Lexuses, Nissans pouring through from all

directions. Another heavy rain stopped us to walk more so we traveled back to our hotel for the last night.



TRAVEL HOME - 3Aug2023

Our great local guides picked us up at our hotel early morning and took us to the airport. Not

much traffic but at the check-in there were quite chaotic scenes. No wonder we could depart just an hour later than scheduled. Still we had plenty of time in Istanbul to change planes what we could enjoy in a VIP Lounge thanks to Dorothy. By the end of the day we were safely at home full with amazing birding & wildlife experiences!



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