

**Mongolia:
Hustai National Park and Toson Nature Reserve:
4-9 July, 2018**



Mongolian white-tailed gazelles on the move

I have visited Mongolia several times in the past but mainly in the mountainous western part of the country. This time, I made a day trip to Hustai National Park (only 2 hours drive from the capital Ulan Bator) and then to the vast grassland steppes of Eastern Mongolia.

Hustai National Park is one of the sites for the reintroduced Przewalski's horse and today there are over 300 animals in the park and is a conservation success story. Although it's easy to find the horses, these animals shatter any preconceptions, (forget passive grazers in paddocks), as these animals are potential prey for wolves. I first went to Hustai 4 years ago, and at that time, large herds could be seen close to the park road. On this occasion, the herds were small (3-4 animals) and high up on the mountain and this is apparently attributed to the re-wilding of the animals. We also had a bonus daytime viewing of Corsac fox on two occasions on route to Hustai. So if you find yourself in Ulan Bator, even for a short time, visiting Hustai is definitely worth a trip.

The second leg of my trip was to Eastern Mongolia which is characterized by the largest remaining intact temperate grasslands on Earth. This vast area is one of the last great unfenced

grassland ecosystems in the world, a home to over a million Mongolian white-tailed gazelles – the last large population of migrating ungulates in Eurasia. To witness this spectacle is both awe inspiring and tragic. The awe is innate, witnessing nature dominating a landscape on a set that is, without doubt, Asia's best kept secret. The tragedy is the miniscule resources allocated to conserve this unique biome and the 50,000 to 100,000 animals illegally killed each year for the wild meat trade to China. The killing has to stop, and that's why I was there with potential funders for conservation work, but that's another story.



Mongolian white-tailed gazelle calf (approximately 3-4 weeks old)

The best place to see the gazelles is the Toson Khulstai Natural Reserve reachable by a short flight (1.5 hrs) from Ulan Bator to the frontier town of Choibalsan. After a drive of 2 hours, the short turf of the pasture lands is replaced by swaying grasses, a sure sign that the boundary of the park has been crossed. The gazelles are everywhere. July is the calving season and both mothers and calves are in abundance. But, unfortunately, there is a but. On every occasion, the animals fled like their lives depended on it. The sight and sound of the car always had the same outcome. With a top speed of up to 50 km/h the gazelles would run in the opposite direction and would attempt to disappear over the nearest hill. Hunting by vehicles is clearly the preferred method of poachers and it's sad to see animals reacting this way inside a protected area.

The good news, is that one of the guests, generously agreed to fund the start-up costs of community rangers, and this we hope will deal with one of the more immediate threats to this unique Paleolithic spectacle.

Just as a footnote, and although I didn't try for Pallas cat on this occasion, if this species is burning a hole in your bucket list, one of Mongolia's lead researcher, Mr Gantulga, can arrange a trip in an area 2-3 hours north of Ulan Bator. This place is Pallas cat central. I hired his services over a weekend a couple of years ago and he guided me to his research site. We picked up eye-shine of several animals on one very cold November night and finally managed to get close enough to both spot it (its harder than you imagine) and film it....

<https://youtu.be/EPWS7Raz61A>

Mr Gantulga +976-91162228

Itinerary for Mongolia trip

4 July Two hour drive from Ulan Bator to Hustai National Park. Although we departed late (9.30 am) and left the park at 4pm, we managed to see 6 mammal species. Gir (Mongolian tents) can be hired at the park entrance and if you stayed the night, would surely add to the chance of adding to the mammal tally.

5 July Flight to Choibalsan (1.5 hrs). Two hour drive to Toson Khulstai Natural Reserve (approximately 100 kms). Camped the night in Mongolian Ger.

6 July Drive through "Toson Khulstai" Nature Reserve. Returned to camp

7 -8 July Drive to Onon-Balj National Park (approx. 150km) and camped outside the park. Walked and drove around the park

9 July Drive back to Choibalsan and flew back to Ulan Bator

MAMMALS SEEN

1	Mongolian white-tailed gazelle <i>Procapra gutturosa</i>	Thousands of animals in herds of several hundred to several thousand. On a couple of occasions, herds were visible on the skyline in a 360 degree vista
2	Red deer <i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Two animals seen on a distant ridge in Hustai and also in Onon-Balj National Park.
3	Siberian roe deer <i>Capreolus pygargus</i>	Two animals seen in Onon-Balj National Park. Both ran away as if their lives depended on it, which, on any other day, may have been the right reaction due to uncontrolled hunting
4	Przewalski's horse <i>Equus ferus przewalskii</i>	Several groups of 4-6 animals seen on the hillsides inside Hustai between 2-4pm
5	Mongolian marmot <i>Marmota sibirica</i>	Many seen inside Hustai N.P. and Toson Hulstai Nature Reserve but conspicuously absent outside

6	Tolai hare <i>Lepus tolai</i>	One animal seen at night at Toson Hulstai Nature reserve
7	Corsac fox <i>Vulpes corsac</i>	Two animals seen at 10 am on the drive to Hustai National park within 50 m of the main highway. Also seen on a night drive in Toson Hulstai Nature Reserve.
8	Brandt's vole <i>Lasiopodomys brandtii</i>	Hundreds seen on the verges of the track leading to the entrance of Hustai and in Toson Hulstai Nature Reserve.
9	Long-tailed ground squirrel <i>Spermophilus undulatus</i>	Multiple seen on the verges inside Hustai.
10	Striped dwarf hamster <i>Cricetulus barabensis</i>	One animal seen in a rocky outcrop in Onon-Bajl National Park
11	Daurian ground squirrel <i>Spermophilus dauricus</i>	Multiple seen in the roadside verges in Toson Hulstai Nature reserve

Corsac fox in Hustai National Park

