

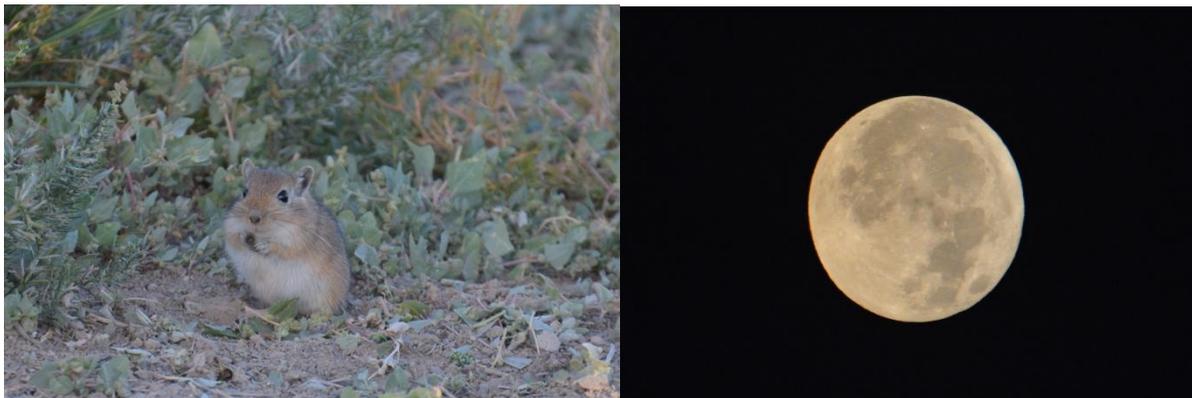
Mongolia, 6 - 20 september 2017

In search of the snow leopard(s), organized by Tum-eco tour

After an exciting flight (an aborted landing) from Amsterdam to Moscou and a delayed flight from Moscou flight we arrived early morning on the 6th in Ulaan Batar where Tumen and Oyunaa awaited us. They picked us up and took us for a 8 hour drive (600 km) through the Gobi desert to their hometown Dalanzadgad . En route we spotted a vulture near a roadkill. After closer inspection the roadkill turned out to be a young Pallas's cat, one of our target animals. Even in Mongolia beautiful animals fall victim to traffic. Further down the road however, a Corsac fox was alive and kicking.



Spotting the many raptors and vultures kept us awake during the monotone drive (Tumen drove very safe). We asked ourselves where the sheep, goats, horses and domestic camels could find water and enough food in this desolate landscape. We arrived late afternoon in Dalanzadgad and after dinner we made a short walk to the water behind their house and saw some Mongolian gerbils



and a close spoonbill. Flying over were two black storks, much to Tumens surprise. A good start. After a refreshing shower we took to bed under a full moon.



The second morning, after breakfast, we left with the toyota landcruiser to our campingsite. I remember asking Tumen if he could hear it. When he asked, somewhat surprised, what I heard, I said I could hear the snow leopard calling us. After 3,5 hours heading south on dirtroads or no roads whatsoever, we arrived at the campsite. The team had put up a “ger” or “yurt” for us, wich proved to be very comfortable and spacious with a bed, table and chairs, washing basin and even a stove (which we used once on a chilly evening). In the afternoon we drove to a mountain range were a snow leopard was seen before and I remember saying to myself: why can’t we be lucky for once and see this snow leopard on the first day. And sure enough in our first half hour of searching, we did see what we came for: a magnificent snow leopard. Tumen suggested we could go a little closer which ment climbing up the mountain. This was the first of many climbs up mountains. We had prolonged views of the snow leopard which layed on a high, steep, rocky mountain. He did notice us but seemed undisturbed and he displayed typical cat behavior which ment sleeping a lot, yawning from time to time and turning until he laid comfortably to sleep a bit more. We would have stayed there until the cat decided to go but, as it was getting darker, Tumen wanted to go back, telling us we would have more opportunities to see the snow leopard.

A perfect camouflage:





Back at the camp we saw the first of many red foxes.



The next day we planned to go to the same spot but our guide had other plans, something we got used to after a couple of days. Mongolian people are very good in changing their minds, not once but all the time. There was some kind of festivity the place of horseman Boldoo and Tumen wanted to say hallo. It was not going to take long but in the end we stayed there all day (it has to be said that there is another sense of time in Mongolia). Not that we got bored: the festivities were branding the young horses after first catching them with a lasso, milking the mares and even riding a semi wild horse! We were invited into their ger and were offered the, for us not so tasty, fermented horsemilk, mongolian vodka and russian vodka, a sniff of I do not know what and Mongolian barbecue of goat meat. All the neighbours showed up, dressed up for the occasion in traditional clothing and helping with the catching and branding. We felt like we were catapulted into an episode of national geographic. We had a close view of a Pallid ground squirrel but no snow leopard this day, nore for the

next 9 days as a matter of fact. Despite testimonies of the locals about leopard attacks on their goats and sheep every where we came.



The next days we scanned in different areas. One day we came across a half eaten goat. Apparently it was killed 2 nights earlier by a snow leopard. It became very clear to me that these nomadic people are at present keeping this snow leopard population alive with their livestock. Everywhere we heard the same stories of snow leopards attacking their sheep and goats (in fact we witnessed this first hand on one of our last nights). One owner had lost 24 animals in the last winter to the snow leopard. We did see ibex, but I think that their numbers are not high enough to maintain a healthy snow leopard population. Tumen is positive about this however, because there is now a ban on hunting imposed, so numbers of these pray animals should go up.



The first evenings we were put to sleep by the screeching of an eagle owl, which we found surprisingly common in this area and . We had some great views of this giant owl.

The next days and evenings, Tumen was really trying very hard to show us a Pallas's cat, which proved more difficult than I had anticipated. We drove to different hotspots for Pallas's cat, even took al local herdsman with us who told us that he had seen a Pallass's cat with 3 cubs allmost every day last summer in a certain area. But this also did not yield any sightings, although we found some footprints. We finally saw one on the 13 th. It took a long drive to this area so we took along a packed dinner. After eating this at the a campfire that Tumen provided, we started spotlighting and we found the eyeshine we had hoped for: a Pallas's cat. We were told that these cats very often lay down when spotted and that they can be approached very closely (in the trip before ours they had seen one 3 meters away in daylight: Ganaa showed me amazing pictures). But this cat kept on moving higher and higher up the mountain, and we kept following it to the best of our abilities on

the steep slope and in the pitch dark. Still we were very happy seeing this odd looking cat alive this time.



On the same night we had our second (we had seen one a few nights earlier) very close sighting of a Beech marten (2 different animals because very far apart). And for the second time a very nice encounter : we could observe very good the playfull nature of these animals and we admired how agile and quickly these animals negotiate the steep rocks. The sightings were both very close to water and on a steep rocks : maybe a coincidence but Tumen said they like to be near water.



On the way back to the campsite on the plains we spotted two pairs of eyeshine: at first we thought it were 2 red foxes (we have seen 8 in total this night) but closer inspection revealed a strange cooperation between a red fox and a Steppe pole cat: it looked as if they were hunting together. The pole cat went in hiding very quickly, but it kept looking at us through the grasses: I could take a somewhat funny picture.

For the next days, during the daytime we scanned the hills and the plains seeing hundreds of very skittish Mongolian gazelles and a few, even more skittish Black tailed gazelles, many many raptors , golden eagle, steppe eagle, saker falcon, buzzard and other birds like cinerous vulture, lammergeier, snow cock, hill pigeon, even a wallcreeper (first sighting in this area). After dinner we spotlighted and came across many jerboa's , 2 times a tolai hare, many red foxes and one time 2 pares of eyes that ran of very quickly: Tumen and Ganaa suggested it could have been wolves, but I cannot confirm this.



In between all of that we were “subjected” to views like this.



One of my best nature walks ever was on the 16th. Ganaa and I left at 7 in the morning to go to the area where the leopard was seen before. A 5-10 minute drive by car and then a rather strenuous walk up hill: it really is physical challenging if you want to do it in half an hour: nothing better to warm up in the chilly morning mountain air and to start the blood pumping. So my heart was already beating like crazy when very soon we came across very fresh tracks of a snow leopard. Very fresh because they weren't there the day before. The idea that a snow leopard had walked here not more than a few hours before us and the possibility that it could still be on this path was exhilarating. We followed the track and saw pugmarks, scratch marks on the ground, even some, still wet, urine marking of the snow leopard, all along the way for 20 minutes. We finally lost the trail where the track splits up and we decided to follow the usual path. We didn't see the snow leopard that morning, but the feeling of anticipation and excitement I felt that morning, will stay with me forever. We did see a Pallas's cat on the way back: it appeared on a rock into the sunlight, but was gone before I could take any pictures. Later that day, after dinner (Oyunaa managed to prepare almost restaurant level dishes in primitive conditions), my wife and I decided to do some spotlighting on our own in the area behind our gers. We soon came across a Pallas's cat that showed the same behaviour as the first one: retreating up the hill and disappearing behind the hilltop. All these days we had gone searching all over the place, finally to find a Pallas's cat, no more than 100 metres from the campsite. We continued our walk when suddenly we heard people running towards us: it was Ganaa and Badgal totally out of breath. They had received a call from Tselmaa and Chuka, that a snow leopard was spotted near their ger. The evening before we had received a similar call of these people: apparently they had seen 2 snow leopards, but upon arriving at their ger, the only prove of snow leopards ever being present, although we waited there until midnight, were their dogs barking like crazy. Again Ganaa drove like a rally pilot to the scene. At the ger, the locals were not sure where the leopard was, and everybody was finding eyeshine everywhere. Goats and sheep and even foxes were mistaken for the snow leopard which contributed to a chaotic scene. Me and Ganaa turned a corner and found the snow leopard a few meters higher up the hill, hiding behind a rock. It soon turned away and sneaked off in a stealthy manner like a true ghost of the mountains. What an amazing evening: a close Pallas's cat and a very close snow leopard only 2 hours apart.



The next day we made the same morning walk and that time we did find the snow leopard , again. But even better things were to come in the afternoon. After we endured the ascent for a second time that day, we were wellcomed once more by the leopard, who was on the appointment for the 4th time. After watching its blood stained face and paws (prove of a kill the night before) for a few hours through my windswept scope in the very windy conditions and in crouched down positions to avoid spooking the snow leopard , suddenly another snowleopard appeared in my scope. Two snow leopards in one view !!! I couldn't believe my eyes. How amazing was that. The local people were right, there had been two snow leopards hunting for their goats.



On our last day, we did an ultimate morning scan of the same area and unbelievably, we found the two leopards again. When I saw them ,they were panting heavily. Ganaa showed me pictures he took minutes before, of them walking the slopes. I dearly would have wanted to see this for myself, but I missed it because I hadn't been able to keep up with Ganaa on the way up. Nevertheless it was a beautyfull way to end our trip to Mongolia.



By the time I got back to the camp my wife had packed our things and we were ready to go: everything was loaded in the jeeps, the gers were dismantled, stowed on Gaanas old russian truck and nothing was left, as if we had never been there.

This amazing trip was organized by:

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Left to right : Boldoo, Badgal, Oyunaa, Tumen, Arne, Edith, Bujmaa, Ganaa

To everyone who helped showing us 2 snow leopards:

баярлалаа

Mammal list:

Snow leopard: 5 sightings (probably of the same animal); 2 times two animals together (probably mother with a male subadult cub from last year)

Pallas's cat : 3 sightings (+ 1 dead)

Long-eared hedgehog: 1

Tolai hare : 2

Daurian pika : many

Pallas's pika : many

Pallid ground squirrel: several

Grey hamster: 1

Mongolian gerbil: a few

Balikun jerboa: several

Corsac fox: 1

Red fox: > 10

Steppe polecat: 1

Beech marten: 2

Goitered or black tailed gazelle: a few times small groups (max 4 animals)

Mongolian gazelle: many

Siberian or Asiatic ibex: several

We did see more small rodents , but couldn't really identify them for sure.

Bird List (many more but I listed the ones we identified)

Black stork

Eurasian spoonbill

Common snipe

Saker falcon

Lammergeier

Cineros vulture

Steppe eagle
Long legged buzzard
Euresian eagleowl
Red-billed chough
Common raven
Rook
Black redstart
White wagtail
Yellow wagtail
Rock bunting
Red throated thrush
Himalyan griffon
Hill pigeon
Common magpie
Snowcock
Golden eagle
Little owl
Woodcock
Whites thrush
Godlewskis bunting
Wallcreeper
Eurasian sparrowhawk
Chukar partridge