

## Mongolia 22nd September to 6th October 2018

**Steve Firth**  
**Catherine Griffiths**

This trip followed a few years of reading reports on mammalwatching.com of various trips to Ladakh and latterly Mongolia in search of the elusive Snow Leopard. Thank you so much to everyone who sends in trip reports. They are often inspiring, often lead to one's bank balance being reduced significantly and above all cheer you up on drab Welsh rainy days.

We cope with excessive heat quite well, but struggle at very cold temperatures, which is why we have not tried to see Snow Leopards in Ladakh. The September 2017 Mongolia trip report by Arne Secelle & Edith Vershorre tipped the scales (thanks to Arne for answering our questions prior to leaving for Mongolia) and we contacted Khumbaa Tumendelger (Tumen) and his wife Oyunaa Bavuu (Oyunaa) of:

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They replied to emailed questions quickly, unless they were somewhere remote and on such occasions their son Tselmeg would reply for them and this did not hinder the agreeing of an itinerary or arrangements. Oyunaa's and Tselmeg's command of English is exemplary and Tumen knows a lot more than he let on.

They have been acting as guides since 2012 when it seems that Tumen had posted photographs of Altai Snowcock online. The photograph interested Jon Hornbuckle who then arranged a birding trip using Tumen as a guide in September of that year. The subsequent trip report containing their contact details led to a steady flow of trips both for bird and mammal watching.

Their operation has now become very well organised and we can whole-heartedly recommend their services.

Due to work commitments for Catherine and with many dates already pre-booked for other tours, our trip was a few weeks later than we would have preferred. We were aware that it would be starting to get cold in late September and that it wouldn't be a good time to see many birds. A few trip reports had suggested that September would be a reasonable time of year to search for Snow Leopards, our primary target, so we confirmed our booking and accepted that some small mammals may have gone into hibernation before we arrived.

With seeing a Snow Leopard being our overriding objective, we decided to focus all of our time in the "right area". This meant spending 9 nights in Tumen's "Base Camp" in the Eastern Beauty mountain range, west of Dalanzadgad. We did not regret this decision as we only had two weeks and did not want to spend most of our time travelling between destinations.

### TRAVEL

Flights from the UK to Ulaan Baatar via Moscow were with Aeroflot. Not 5 star, but on time.

All land travel was undertaken in Tumen's Lexus 4x4, which was in very good condition. It coped admirably with being off road in the Eastern Beauty mountains.

## FOOD & DRINK

Oyunaa is an excellent cook and we ate well. She has adapted to cooking for western palates and we looked forward to every meal.

The fermented mare's milk proffered to guests when visiting the local herders Gers proved more palatable than expected. When followed by vodka distilled from mare's milk, you begin to wonder how you will be able to focus while scanning the mountain tops later in the day.

We stopped at a supermarket in Dalanzadgad and stocked up on beer to take to Base Camp. Various local brews were tried and they were all pretty good.

## BOOKS & OTHER GEAR

*A Field Guide to the Mammals of Mongolia* by N. Batsaikhan couldn't be sourced in the UK. However, Tumen had two copies and we were always able to use one of them.

We probably didn't spotlight as often as we should have, but it was COLD and we did quite well. Tumen has two very good spotlights and we were ready to call it a night way before Tumen was.

They have camera traps set up on different parts of the mountains and the local herder's change the memory cards and bring the used ones back to Base Camp to check for sightings. Tselmeg advised us that they are looking into getting new camera traps with the images being sent via satellite to their laptop, which would provide more recent intel.

They have an excellent relationship with the local herders and the herders are advised a week or so prior to a trip to start looking for signs of Snow Leopards. During our trip the herders were constantly searching for Snow Leopards, either with us or at different locations.

## THE TRIP

The day that we left the UK the weather forecasts in Mongolia started to look grim with Ulaan Baatar forecast to be -10° C upon our arrival, a lot colder than we'd planned for. Tumen had also emailed to warn us that the weather was due to deteriorate. A swift rethink had us supplementing our numerous layers of clothing with the "arctic" coat and trousers used in Iceland for Aurora watching. Catherine's Jewel Pants are shocking pink so had to be worn underneath more suitable leggings. Regrettably she refused to use for this purpose her Snow Leopard print Pyjama bottoms, a poor decision!

After being picked up at the airport (yep it was cold) at 7.00am we headed south for the 600km drive to Dalanzadgad. Numerous stops were made for birds and also for a Brandt's Vole peering out of his burrow with frost all around.

Not far from Dalanzadgad we stopped for a colony of Great Gerbils. We approached slowly and carefully and by our hunkering down, they eventually seemed to accept our presence and gave some great views.



### Great Gerbil

After dutifully stocking up on beer we stayed the night at Tumen and Oyunaa's house in Dalanzadgad.

A brief late afternoon birding foray close to the house by the two of us yielded nothing new, but allowed us walk out the kinks following the plane journeys and the road trip.

The second morning, following an early breakfast we headed to Base Camp, around a 3 hour drive. Our Ger was spacious, clean and with the all important dung fuelled stove.

Tumen's brother, Ganaa, has a great reputation for spotting Snow Leopards. Unfortunately, Tumen and Ganaa's elderly mother was recovering from a hip operation and Ganna stayed with her in Dalanzadgad to "encourage" in her rehabilitation. Tumen's son Tselmeg joined us for the whole of the trip and was relentless in his pursuit of mammals, great company and with a great sense of humour.

Tselmeg had warned us that bird and mammal activity was low. Earlier in the year the Gobi had received an unprecedented 30 days of constant rain (he could only remember having 2 days of constant rain 20 years ago). These rains led to very bad flooding in Dalanzadgad and he felt that a large number of small mammals had been drowned.

Therefore we had low expectations as we headed out for our first afternoon of looking for the "Ghost of the Mountains". A short delay due to the 4x4 getting stuck in some mud further dampened our eagerness. The rest of the afternoon was spent high on a ridge which we believe Tumen calls "South Point" scanning an area that they have regularly seen Snow Leopard, but not today.

Some quite close Argali were the only tick. As the sun was setting and we were thinking about calling it a day, we had a nice surprise. Walking over a ridge in decent light came a Grey Wolf. Distant but great 'scope views for around 5 minutes really lifted the mood. The herders had said that two Wolves had been seen over the last days, but we hadn't really known what to make of this. Don't doubt a Mongolian herder!



Three days later and despite many long and cold hours at the top of mountains in the blustery freezing cold wind, scanning adjacent mountain tops, the only other mammal sightings were of Red Foxes. The weather was getting progressively colder day by day and it's a long way to come to see Red Foxes that we can see in our garden at home.....

On the night drive that night (which was cold, with snow drifting into the 4X4's open windows), Catherine spotted eye-shine which "had" to be a Snow Leopard. It ducked behind a ridge without Steve even seeing the eye-shine. There followed a mad scramble up what seemed like a sheer rock face covered in scree to try to get a view behind the ridge in case the Snow Leopard was still around. No such luck. Catherine needed Tumen & Tsalmeg to help her down the rock face. Steve still isn't quite sure how he managed to get down on his own. Tumen and Tsalmeg had each briefly seen the ears and neck, respectively, of a Snow Leopard. Hmmphhh!

The next day and we woke to the sight of snow falling into the Ger through the gap in the roof for the stove pipe. The forecast bad weather had arrived with a vengeance. Tumen decided that it would be wise to retreat to Dalanzadgad for the night, which we reluctantly agreed to. On the way there we stopped at the main Pallas's Cat scanning site. It was so cold and way too windy. The 'scopes were shaking too much to see anything so we admitted defeat and headed to DZ as they call Dalanzadgad.

We returned to the mountain early the next day as the weather was a lot better. After a long morning looking for, without seeing, Pallas's Cat, we had just sat down to have dinner at 2.30pm when one of the herders came onto the Ger. He had some food for 5 minutes and then mentioned that he'd left another herder watching a sleeping Snow Leopard.....

No doubt he enjoyed the dramatic effect! Food left untouched, we ran to the 4X4 and drove at warp speed (we weren't complaining) and 50 minutes later we were panting our way up the "South Point" mountain side.

Thankfully the Snow Leopard was still there.



Steve is sure that it was a female as she faced directly away from him and lifted her tail high enough to allow a gender judgement. We had about 80 minutes of telescope views of typical cat grooming



behaviour and it was great to see her prowl around in a sinuous, stealthily almost seductive manner. What a beautiful creature. We were amazed at how white her under sides were and such a LONG tail.



When the light failed at last we reluctantly had to leave her and return to Base Camp. We were elated and so glad that our persistence had been worthwhile. We have long loved Jon Hall's



assertion that "warm beer tastes pretty good if the alternative is no beer". Well, the advantage of a trip in late September is that you can toast a Snow Leopard sighting with ice cold beer.....

Our luck had changed for the better!

During our remaining 5 days we subsequently watched a hunting Pallas's Cat for over an hour, distant but great.

On a trip down onto the steppe we managed views of Black-tailed Gazelle (distant) and Mongolian Gazelle (very distant) as they were extremely wary. This was unsurprising as Badcal, one of the herders heard shots fired in the direction of the Gazelles. This led to Tumen having to give a report in person to the police at the nearest town/village.

A night drive at lower altitude wasn't very successful, but did give the only Dwarf Grey Hamster of the trip.



Dwarf Grey Hamster

On our last night in the mountains our spotlighting finally gave us Eurasian Eagle Owl. We had an excellent sighting of a Beech Marten and best of all had a Marbled Polecat appear on the track in front of the car, in the headlights, running directly away from us for about 5-10 seconds before veering off at 90 degrees, giving great views before it disappeared. What a great looking mammal!

We were sorry to leave Base Camp, but very happy with what we had seen. The only real dip being Steppe Polecat. We'd have settled for Grey Wolf, Snow Leopard, Pallas's Cat and Marbled Polecat before we'd left home.....

The following morning was spent at Yolyn Am. Tumen told us that the best "side" valley in Yolyn Am for spotlighting was blocked by a rock fall. Catherine managed to slip and get a boot full of ice cold stream water. She didn't seem to be able to look on the bright side - she all but fell completely into the stream and saved herself at the last moment. Now that would have made her REALLY cold!



There were some Mongolian Gerbils at the entrance to Yolyn Am



Mongolian Gerbils at Yolyn Am

Unfortunately an extended search failed to turn up Henderson's Ground Jay (Mongolian Jay) and Pallas's Sandgrouse wasn't playing ball either. We had a picnic dinner on the Steppe and then a long session of spotlighting. The highlight being that we at long last saw our one and only Corsac Fox.



Corsac Fox

We only briefly interrupted him and he quickly resumed hunting. To our delight we were then treated to the Corsac Fox chasing a Siberian Jerboa right in front of the 4X4's headlights, chasing from side to side for ages, before the Jerboa ran under the vehicle (we heard and felt the bump under the car) only for the Corsac Fox to skid into the vehicle right under Catherine's open window. We were all laughing out loud like little kids.....

To access the Ink to the Corsac Fox & Siberian Jerboa Video hover over the link then press CTRL + Click [Corsac Fox chasing Siberian Jerboa](#)

Our last day was taken up by the drive back to Ulaan Baatar, with an icy last hour of the day birding near the Tuul River.

We didn't get much sleep in the Mongolica Hotel that night. It appears that Korean foreign language teachers based in Mongolia celebrate the end of term by holding a Karaoke competition at the Mongolica Hotel that stretches into the wee hours.

To access the Ink to the Snow Leopard Video hover over the link then press CTRL + Click [Snow Leopard Video](#)



Lammergeier





Pallas's Pika



Tumen, Catherine & Tselmeg





'Scoping a Snow Leopard

#### Mammal list

Brandt's Vole  
Mongolian Gerbil/Jird  
Great Gerbil  
Argali  
Grey Wolf  
Pallas's Pika  
Alashan Ground Squirrel  
Siberian Ibex  
Red Fox  
Grey Dwarf Hamster  
Black-tailed (Goitered) Gazelle  
Mongolian Gazelle  
Snow Leopard  
Pallas's Cat  
Siberian Jerboa/Mongolian Five-toed Jerboa  
Tolai Hare  
Corsac Fox  
Beech Marten  
Marbled Polecat

#### Reptile List

Toad-headed Agama  
Mongolian Racerunner



## Bird List

Ruddy Shelduck  
Gadwall  
Common Teal  
Grey Heron  
Lammergeier/Bearded Vulture  
Cinereous Vulture  
Himalayan Griffon  
Steppe Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
Hen Harrier  
Japanese Sparrowhawk  
Northern Goshawk  
Common Buzzard  
Upland Buzzard  
Eurasian Coot  
Northern Lapwing  
Black-headed Gull  
Pallas's Sandgrouse  
Rock Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared-Dove  
Eurasian Eagle-Owl  
White-backed Woodpecker  
Eurasian Kestrel  
Merlin  
Saker Falcon  
Azure-winged Magpie  
Eurasian Magpie  
Red-billed Chough  
Daurian Jackdaw  
Rook  
Common Raven  
Horned Lark  
Mongolian Lark  
Azure Tit  
Wallcreeper  
Pallas's Leaf Warbler  
Yellow-browed Warbler  
Red-flanked Bluetail  
Daurian Redstart  
Desert Wheatear  
Red-throated Thrush  
Naumann's Thrush  
White-cheeked Starling  
Brown Accentor  
Mongolian Accentor  
Eastern Yellow Wagtail  
White Wagtail  
Richard's Pipit  
Tree Pipit  
Water Pipit  
Godlewski's Bunting  
Meadow Bunting  
Common Chaffinch

Mongolian Finch  
Eurasian Tree Sparrow  
White-winged Snowfinch  
Pere David's Snowfinch



Siberian Jerboa AKA Mongolian Five-toed Jerboa



Tumen, Steve, Catherine, Oyunaa & Tselmeg