

# Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



## MONGOLIA WINTER CAT QUEST:

### Snow Leopard & Pallas's Cat

Sunday 29th January - Wednesday 8th February 2023

**3 Wise Birding Clients**

**Wise Birding Leader:** Chris Townend

**Local Guides:** The Tumendelger Family

#### HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP:

**Snow Leopard:** The undoubted tour highlight was watching a male Snow Leopard on two separate days with incredible views at distances of less than 200 metres.

**Pallas's Cat:** Great sightings of animal for over 1.5hrs in the Yol Valley.

**Przewalski's Horse:** At least 20 animals seen in Hustai NP.

**Mongolian Gazelle:** Herds of over 300 animals seen on the snow covered Steppe.

**Goitered Gazelle:** A single animal near the Flaming Cliffs in Ömnögovi Province.

**Siberian Ibex:** Daily sightings of up to 50 animals whilst scanning for cats!

**Pallas's Sandgrouse, Mongolian Ground-Jay, Mongolian Lark & Azure Tit:**

Just a few of the bird highlights on this mostly mammal focused tour.



**This male Snow Leopard seen on two days was the undoubted tour highlight!**

**You can see the video highlights from this tour [HERE](#)**

## **Tour Summary**

This was Wise Birding's fifth tour to Mongolia but the first during the winter months. In fact, we believe this tour was the first dedicated mid winter Snow Leopard tour to Mongolia by a UK wildlife watching company, therefore we were determined to make it a success! The focus of the tour was to see both Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat during the mating season when Snow Leopards in particular, become more visible and vocal and easier to track in snow. Similarly Pallas's Cat are also active at this time.

A winter visit to Mongolia for wildlife is of course very much about quality over quantity! Many of the smaller mammals are hibernating or simply less active in the colder temperatures and many of the birds have left the country until Spring. However, if both cats are on your wish list then this is a great time of year to visit. Temperatures in winter can vary but on this tour the average day temperatures were around -10C and dropped to -20C at night and this is typical for early February. Despite sleeping in traditional Gers for much of the tour, one important factor was that we were never cold due to the ever glowing wood-burning stoves in each Ger! The food in Mongolia was, as always, very good and despite our remote location we were incredibly well looked after with a variety of meals and we were never hungry.

### **Was the tour a success?**

Both target species seen incredibly well and hopefully the photos and video speak for themselves. In addition, we also saw a good selection of other mammals and birds. So we very much look forward to our return in 2024.....

## **Ulaanbaatar (UB) to Dalanzadgad (DZ)**

The distance between the new Chinghis Khaan airport (50Km from UB) and DZ is around 540Km and the journey takes around 6.5 hours on a good tarmac road. Travelling across the vast open Steppe to DZ produced some impressive herds of Mongolian Gazelle and a small group of active Mongolian Jirds. In addition to mammals we enjoyed good views of a number of birds including Cinereous Vulture, Upland Buzzard and small flocks of Mongolian Larks over the snow dusted landscape. A halfway lunch stop at Mandalgovi broke the journey and we arrived by 6pm.

## **The Gurvan Saikhan (Beautiful) Mountains & Yol Valley**

After a very comfortable night at our hotel in DZ, we met for breakfast and then headed straight out to the Gurvan Saikhan Mountains ready for our cat quest! Our local guides have been studying the Snow Leopards in these mountains in the Ömnögovi Province of southern Mongolia for many years and as a result they have a great network of local herders that help monitor and keep them updated on the latest Snow Leopard sightings. Many tour companies offering Snow Leopard tours tend to travel much further west into the Khovd region and the Altai Mountains, but this is really not necessary if you wish to see both Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat.

Our plan was to stay in Gers with a local herding family, a drive of around 2hrs from our hotel. We decided to head straight to the nearby Snow Leopard hotspot close to our camp and literally within five minutes of us arriving, our local guide found a sleeping Snow Leopard! We all knew this could be our only sighting, so we simply made ourselves comfortable at a suitable vantage point and spent the next 8 hours simply immersing ourselves in the moment, surrounded by spectacular mountains watching an amazing animal that we had all travelled specifically to see.

Needless to say, it was a very memorable day as we watched a very relaxed male Snow Leopard at an amazingly close distance of under 200 metres. The weather was calm and sunny and the temperature between -8C and -3C throughout the day as we simply enjoyed observing the cat washing, yawning, sleeping, changing position and of course more sleeping! Our hot lunch brought to us by our amazing hosts and we had time to take in the amazing landscape whilst we waited until early evening when we hoped the cat would become more active. At around 5.45pm it sat up, had a good wash and strolled across the amazing landscape in full view. It showed off that exquisite long tail with striking white underside and then proceeded to mark its territory and then melted out of view. We simply could not have asked for more on our first full day! **You can see the video by tour participant Steve Blain [HERE](#)**

We always had a flexible itinerary dependent on our success with the leopard, but in the end we spent a total of three nights at our base camp. We were staying with a local herding family and were exceptionally well looked after with warmth and food! The beauty of the camp was that we were just a few minutes from our Snow Leopard valley and more importantly, we were supporting the local herders and promoting Snow Leopard tourism in order to help reduce Snow Leopard conflicts with herders.

Things were hard to beat after the success of our first day and despite checking the valley the next day we had no further leopard sightings. We did of course enjoy more sightings of Siberian Ibex and Bearded Vultures. However on our third day we found the same male Snow Leopard in almost the same spot and had another full day of observation and of course to try and improve on photos and video! It remained overcast all day and was colder at around -11C for most of the day, but yet again we had fabulous views as we watched the animal from 09.30am - 6.30pm and enjoyed the luxury of another hot lunch in the field.

Following our early success with Snow Leopard we decided to change base camp so we could focus on searching for Pallas's Cat. Our focus was the nearby Yol Valley. We spent a couple of days and a number of hours scanning and had success on our third attempt. Whilst sat at our vantage point at around 2,450M and surrounded by ever impressive snow covered mountains, we watched this funny cat for around 1.5 hours. The distance was far greater than the Snow Leopard but the views were prolonged and excellent in the scope. It literally looked like a large round ball of fluff as it busily scuttled around the mountain slopes investigating numerous boulders and gulleys.

Aside from cats, our time in these two amazing sites allowed us to enjoy many other sightings of birds and mammals that distracted us while searching for our key target species. Highlights included daily sightings of Siberian Ibex, some great views of Argali, a single Goitered Gazelle, Tolai Hare and some fabulous views of Bearded Vulture, Saker Falcon and Golden Eagle. Plus speciality birds such as Mongolian Ground-Jay, Pallas's Sandgrouse and Brown Accentor.

After an early departure from our base camp in Yol Valley, we made the return journey to UB where more very large groups of Mongolian Gazelle were seen and an all too brief view of a Corsac Fox! We spent the late afternoon birding around our hotel by the Tuul river. It was very productive with many quality species including Black-throated and Red-throated Thrushes, Azure Tit, Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch and Daurian Partridge.

## **Hustai National Park**

After a very welcome shower and comfortable night in our hotel we headed out early for a final day in Hustai National Park, around 1.5 hours drive west of UB. Here, our main target species was the Przewalski's Horse. Also called the Takhi this horse, originally native to the steppes of Central Asia and named after the Russian geographer and explorer Nikolay Przhevalsky, was re-introduced to Hustai in 1992.

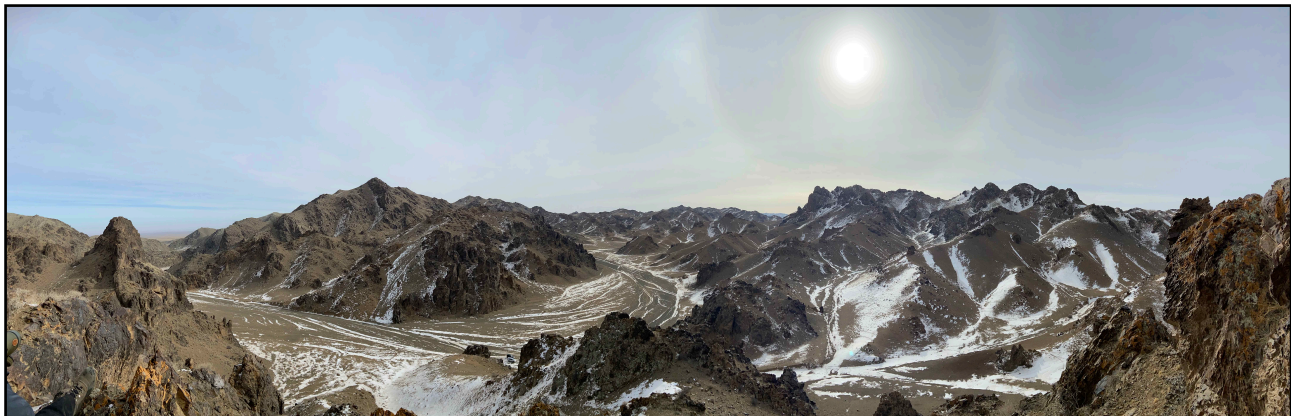
A very enjoyable day was spent exploring the park where we enjoyed views of the horses as well as the recently split Wapiti, plus more views Argali and Mongolian Gazelle. We had hoped to see Wolves and we came very close as a number of animals were heard howling at sunset, but we simply ran out of light! Regardless, it was an exciting end to the tour and we cannot wait to return!

DAY	DATE	Short itinerary, temperatures & highlights
1	Sun 29 Jan	<b>Arrival UB airport - Travel to DZ - Lunch Mandalgovi.</b> Weather: -18c to +1c sunny & calm <b>Highlights:</b> Mongolian Gazelle herds, Mongolian Jirds & Mongolian Larks <b>Overnight Dalanzadgad Hotel</b>
2	Mon 30 Jan	<b>DZ to Beautiful Mts Base Camp</b> Weather: -8c to -3c sunny breezy later <b>Highlights:</b> Snow Leopard watched 10.15hrs - 18.30hrs <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
3	Tue 31 Jan	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -14c to -8c sunny but breezy all day <b>Highlights:</b> Siberian Ibex, Bearded Vultures & Golden Eagles <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
4	Wed 01 Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -11c most of day overcast <b>Highlights:</b> Snow Leopard watched 09.30hrs - 18.30hrs <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
5	Thur 02 Feb	<b>Base Camp - Flaming Cliffs - Yol Valley</b> Weather: -3c to -15c <b>Highlights:</b> Tolai Hare, Goitered Gazelle & Ground-Jay & Sandgrouse. -20c Night drive! <b>Overnight Yolyn Am Ger Camp</b>
6	Fri 03 Feb	<b>Full day Yol Valley</b> Weather: -20c to -8c <b>Highlights:</b> Pallas's Cat watched for min. of 1.5hrs late afternoon. Argali <b>Overnight Yolyn Am Ger Camp</b>
7	Sat 04 Feb	<b>Check new Snow Leopard site and Yol Valley late PM</b> Weather: 0c to -12c very windy late afternoon <b>Highlights:</b> Siberian Ibex and White-winged Snowfinch <b>Overnight Yolyn Am Ger Camp</b>
8	Sun 05 Feb	<b>Return to original SL Valley - Baraduuz Plantation</b> Weather: +3c to -11c and breezy <b>Highlights:</b> Large flock of Sandgrouse & Merlins <b>Overnight Yolyn Am Ger Camp</b>
9	Mon 06 Feb	<b>DZ to UB - Tuul River Birding</b> Weather: -11c most of day <b>Highlights:</b> Corsac Fox, Azure Tit, LT Rosefinch, RT and BT Thrushes <b>Overnight Mongolica Hotel, UB</b>
10	Tue 07 Feb	<b>Full day Hustai NP</b> Weather: -20c to -12c calm and sunny spells <b>Highlights:</b> Przewalski's Horses and hearing Wolves! <b>Overnight Mongolica Hotel, UB</b>
11	Tue 08 Feb	<b>Breakfast and transfer to airport</b>

**We recorded a total of 14 species of mammal and 43 birds on this tour.**  
The photos & Video grabs that follow were taken by Chris Townend unless otherwise stated.



Our first views of Snow Leopard!



Our first views of Snow Leopard!





Bearded Vulture



Golden Eagle



Red Fox



Argali





Cinereous Vultures



Pallas's Sandgrouse videograb by Steve Blain





Exploring the Beautiful Mountains



Saxaul Trees in the Gobi



Mountains of the Yol Valley



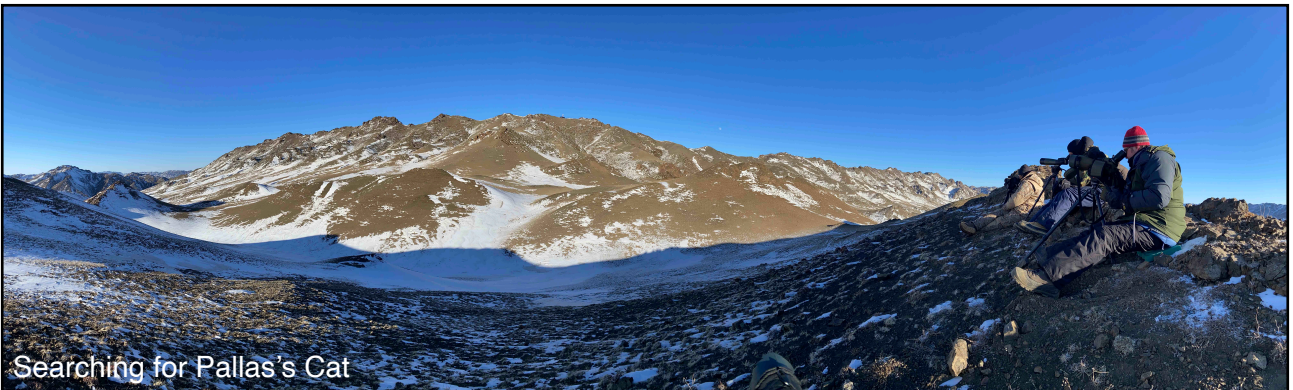
Pallas's Cat



Exploring the Yol Valley



Pallas's Cat



Searching for Pallas's Cat



Cinereous Vulture flying over Pallas's Cat!



Mongolian Lark in the Steppe



Male Merlin



Mongolian Lark



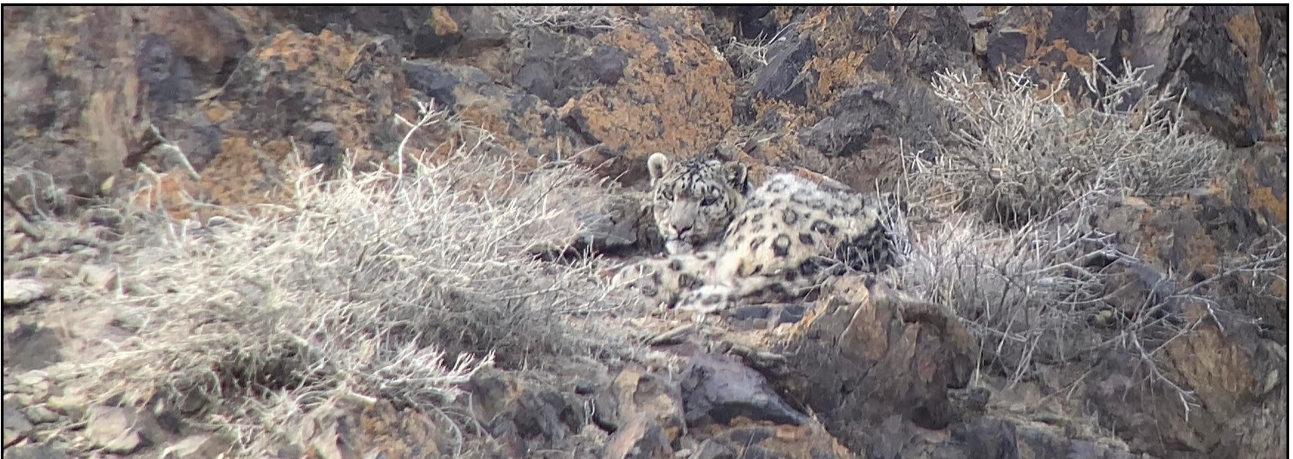
Beautiful Mountains Ger Base Camp



Herder's Goats



Watching Snow Leopard!









Mongolian Gazelles



The Beautiful Mountains and Steppe



Mongolian Ground-Jay





The Tuul River, UB



Ruddy Shelducks



Red-throated Thrush



Azure Tit



Black-throated Thrush



Female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker



Male Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch



Hustai National Park



Wild Horse Herdsmen



Przewalski's Horses



Wapiti





Daurian Partridges





Sunset in Hustai National Park



Team Snow Leopard

**The following bird checklist** follows the nomenclature and classification from Gill F, D Donsker & P Rasmussen (Eds). 2022. **IOC World Bird List** (v13.1). <https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/>  
**The mammal checklist** mostly follows [the IUCN framework](#) (Red List) but also the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) [www.gbif.org](http://www.gbif.org) and Handbook of The Mammals of the World.

The IOC World Bird List complements three other primary world bird lists that differ slightly in their primary goals and taxonomic philosophy, i.e. [The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), [The Howard & Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), 4th Edition and [HBW Alive/Bird Life](#)

**Total number of mammals recorded: 14 species** (Wolf heard only)

**Pallas's Cat**

***Otocolobus manul***

A number of hours spent scanning from our viewpoint at 2,450M in the Yol Valley finally paid off as we enjoyed fabulous scope views of a single animal for over an hour. We watched it explore the mountain slopes and snow covered rocks during the late afternoon/early evening of the 3rd.

**Snow Leopard**

***Panthera uncia***

The undoubted tour highlight was watching a male Snow Leopard on two separate days with over 17 hours viewing time! The distance of the sightings varied from 200 - 600M and allowed ample time for us to absorb the moment and appreciate the full beauty of this amazing looking cat.



**Grey Wolf**

***Canis lupus***

Frustratingly animals were only heard at dusk whilst exploring Hustai NP. We came very close to finding them, but we ran out of light! Regardless, it was an exciting end to the tour.

**Corsac Fox**

***Vulpes corsac***

All sightings were in darkness except for one animal sat outside its hole whilst we travelled to Ulaanbaatar on the 6th. The sightings in darkness were on the 1st near the Beautiful Mountains, the 6th near our camp by Yol Valley & the 7th by the Tuul river near our hotel.

**Red Fox**

***Vulpes vulpes***

Regularly encountered both by day and night with sightings of 1 - 2 animals over six days.

**Przewalski's Horse*****Equus ferus przewalskii***

Small groups totalling around 20 animals seen well in Hustai NP on the 7th.

**Wapiti*****Cervus canadensis sibiricus***

A minimum of 40 animals were seen whilst we explored Hustai NP.

**Siberian Ibex*****Capra sibirica***

Many good views over five days whilst scanning for Snow Leopards in the Beautiful Mountains. Counts varied from 4 - 26 individuals.

**Goitered Gazelle*****Gazella subgutturosa yarkendensis***

A single animal at the "Flaming Cliffs" was flushed from cover giving some good views initially before it ran out of our view.

**Argali*****Ovis ammon***

Recorded on three days. Up to 10 animals recorded on the 3rd whilst scanning for Pallas's Cat and a count of 3 animals the next day. Two animals also seen in Hustai NP on the 7th.

**Mongolian Gazelle*****Procapra gutturosa***

Great to see the impressive herds whilst exploring the Steppe. Animals were recorded at various sites over seven days with counts of 300+ animals.

**Tolai Hare*****Lepus tolai***

At least one animal seen at the "Flaming Cliffs" disturbed during the day on the 2nd and then another at night whilst spotlighting in the Yol Valley on the same day.

**Pallas's Pika*****Ochotona pallasii***

A limited number of sightings due to the cold weather with animals recorded on three days with just 1-2 animals being seen. The best views were in the Yol Valley.

**Mongolian Jird*****Meriones unguiculatus***

During the winter months most small mammals in Mongolia are either hibernating or active only during warmer temperatures and sunny days. Therefore we were pleased to find 10+ active animals outside their burrows on a sunny day when travelling to Dalanzadgad on the 29th.



## Total number of birds recorded: 43 species



Red-throated Thrush

### **Ruddy Shelduck**

Two birds at the Tuul river on the afternoon of the 6th.

### **Common Merganser**

Five birds on the Tuul river on the afternoon of the 6th.

### **Daurian Partridge**

Very easy to see in winter. A group of 11 birds beside the Mongolica Hotel on the afternoon of the 6th and a total of 16 birds (a group of 9 and 7 birds) in Hustai NP on the 7th.

### **Chukar Partridge**

A total of 8 birds on the 31st whilst in the Beautiful Mountains.

### **Pallas's Sandgrouse**

Two birds on 2nd whilst exploring the Steppe near the Yol Valley were superseded by a flock of 70+ birds on the 5th, plus smaller flocks of 3 - 10 birds later the same day.

### **Rock Dove**

Small groups recorded on eight days including many pure looking birds in the mountains.

### **Hill Pigeon**

Recorded on four days with day counts of between 20 - 40 birds.

### **Bearded Vulture**

Recorded on seven days with counts of 1 - 3 birds and many superb views.

### **Cinereous Vulture**

Recorded daily with some very close views. Daily counts of between 1 - 12 birds.

### **Golden Eagle**

Many great views with birds recorded on five days whilst scanning for cats! Day counts of 1 - 2 birds and nearly all sightings appeared to be adult birds.

*Tadorna ferruginea*

*Mergus merganser*

*Perdix dauurica*

*Alectoris chukar*

*Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

*Columba livia*

*Columba rupestris*

*Gypaetus barbatus*

*Aegypius monachus*

*Aquila chrysaetos*

**Upland Buzzard*****Buteo hemilasius***

Small numbers recorded on just four days with a high count of 6 birds on the 6th while travelling from Dalanzadgad to Ulaanbaatar.

**Little Owl*****Athene noctua***

Heard calling from our camp in the Beautiful Mountains on 31st and then seen on the 1st.

**Lesser Spotted Woodpecker*****Dryobates minor***

Male and female birds seen very well along the Tuul river on the afternoon of the 6th. The subspecies is *kamtschatkensis*.

**Common Kestrel*****Falco tinnunculus***

Two birds seen well at a random stop between Ulaanbaatar and Dalanzadgad on the 29th.

**Merlin*****Falco columbarius***

Two adult males and a female/imm bird were seen hunting passerines at the Baraduuz Plantation on the afternoon of the 5th. Another bird, thought to be this species was seen hunting larks on the 3rd but only seen briefly whilst travelling.

**Saker Falcon*****Falco cherrug***

A single bird on the 1st and then 2 birds on the 3rd. The species is considered rare during the winter but it would seem this is not the case.

**Peregrine Falcon*****Falco peregrinus***

A single bird on the 29th was seen well whilst travelling from Ulaanbaatar to Dalanzadgad.

**Northern Shrike*****Lanius borealis***

Single birds on the 30th and the 5th whilst in the Beautiful Mountains. Maybe a little further south than expected for the time of year.

**Eurasian Magpie*****Pica pica***

Recorded near the Tuul river on the 6th and in Hustai NP on the 7th.

**Mongolian Ground-jay*****Podoces hendersoni***

Three birds were a nice surprise whilst birding the "Flaming Cliffs" on the 2nd.

**Red-billed Chough*****Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax***

Recorded by the Tuul river on the 6th and in Hustai NP on the 7th with counts of 20+ birds.

**Asian Azure-winged Magpie*****Cyanopica cyanus***

A minimum of 5 birds along the Tuul river on the afternoon of the 6th.

**Western Jackdaw*****Corvus monedula***

Recorded on the 29th travelling to Dalanzadgad and near the Mongolica hotel on the 5th.

**Daurian Jackdaw*****Corvus dauuricus***

Small numbers seen with Western Jackdaws by the Tuul river on the 5th.

**Northern Raven*****Corvus corax***

A common species recorded daily.

**Bohemian Waxwing*****Bombycilla garrulus***

One bird in the Baraduuz Plantation on the 5th and 30+ birds by the Tuul river on the 6th.

**Azure Tit*****Cyanistes cyanus***

Great views of at least 5 birds by the Tuul river on the afternoon of the 6th.

**Great Tit*****Parus major***

Counts of 1 - 2 birds along the Tuul river on the 6th.

**“Steppe” Horned Lark*****Eremophila alpestris***

Recorded daily with some very large flocks of hundreds of birds whilst travelling through the Steppe. The subspecies is *brandti* and sometimes referred to as Steppe Horned Lark.

**Mongolian Lark*****Melanocorypha mongolica***

Great views of this unmistakable and very attractive species with numerous flocks seen whilst travelling to and from Dalanzadgad on the 29th and the return on the 6th.

**Asian Short-toed Lark*****Alaudala cheleensis***

A surprise winter flock of 50+ birds was seen on the 2nd whilst birding the “Flaming Cliffs.”

**Black-throated Thrush*****Turdus atrogularis***

A total of 4 birds were seen well beside the Tuul river on the 6th.

**Red-throated Thrush*****Turdus ruficollis***

Single birds in the Beautiful Mountains on the 2nd and 3rd were followed by much closer views by the Tuul river where at least 2 birds showed very well.

**Rock Sparrow*****Petronia petronia***

A minimum of 10 birds at a random stop while travelling to Dalanzadgad on the 29th and smaller numbers whilst in Hustai NP on the 7th.

**White-winged Snowfinch*****Montifringilla nivalis***

Seen very well in the Beautiful Mountains on three days with small flocks of 20 - 40 birds.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow*****Passer montanus***

Recorded on at least five days with flocks of up to 200 birds around our camp in the Beautiful Mountains.

**House Sparrow*****Passer domesticus***

Seen on our first day and again on the 6th near our hotel near Ulaanbaatar.

**Brown Accentor*****Prunella fulvescens***

Some excellent views whilst in the Beautiful Mountains with a high count of 15+ birds on the 30th and even seen in the same scope when watching Snow Leopard!

**Common Chaffinch*****Fringilla coelebs***

Counts of around 10 birds by the Tuul river on the 6th were notable winter records.

**Brambling*****Fringilla montifringilla***

A total of 5 birds seen by the Tuul river on the 6th were notable winter records..

**Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch*****Carpodacus sibiricus***

Great views of at least 8 birds in and around the Tuul river on the 6th.

**Common Redpoll*****Acanthis flammea***

A single bird at the Baraduuz Plantation on the 5th.

**Snow Bunting*****Plectrophenax nivalis***

Two birds at a random stop in the Steppe while travelling to Dalanzadgad on the 29th was a notable record.



**Conservation Donation** – Following this tour to Mongolia, £150 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund.

In previous years Wise Birding Holidays has supported a number of small conservation projects. To try and make a bigger difference to conservation we now pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will be used to support a single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. Currently this amounts to almost £10,000. On occasions, we still donate money to help smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from smaller donations. Please visit [www.wisebirding.co.uk](http://www.wisebirding.co.uk) to find out more about the projects we support.

## Wise Birding Holidays Ltd

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