



My Big Cat Year – Visit to Mongolia for **the Quest of the Snow Leopard** – 30/04/26 to 12/05/26

As part of **The Big Cat Year** we made a visit to **Mongolia**, booked through Birding Breaks, a dutch eco-tourism operator, but locally organized in Mongolia by Soaring Expeditions. It was a 14-day trip and focused originally mainly at the **Altai Mountains for the Snow Leopard**. It also included a visit to **UVS lake** near Ulaangom, close to the Russian border, mainly for Birds. We arrived the 30th at Ulaanbatar, spend one night at the hotel. Next morning a domestic flight to Hovd, in the Northwest of the country. Then by car around 5 to 6 hours to our camp in the Altai Mountains. Especially many thanks to Yumchin from Soaring Expeditions who led the trip.

All in all, we managed to see close **12 mammal species** and **115 bird species**. With regard to the mammals, we managed to observe **Snow Leopard, Corsac Fox, Siberian Ibex, Mongolian Gazelle, Asian Wapiti, Mongolian Jird, Silver Mountain Vole, Mongolian Mountain Vole, Long-tailed Ground Squirrel, Pallid Ground Squirrel, Pallas's Pika and Tarbagan Marmot. Obviously, many domestic Bactrian Camels and Yaks were seen.** Bird highlights for me were **Demoiselle Crane, Pallas Sandgrouse, Pallas Fish Eagle, Saker Falcon, White-headed Duck, Stejneger's Scooter, Altai Snowcock and Daurian Redstart.**

Please find below the journals and pictures as shown in the Blogs in chronological order on the website www.mybigcatyear.com .

Mongolia and the Quest for the Snow Leopard!!

Ghost of the Mountain, that is the expression given to the elusive Snow Leopard. Up to 20 years ago seldom seen by any Westerner. For me, this has always been a magical cat and a dream to see this creature in the wild. So we went for a 14-day expedition into some very remote mountain areas in Mongolia in search of the Snow Leopard!

After having a rest day in Delhi, I flew to Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia for a 14-day trip in search of the elusive **Snow Leopard**. The trip was organized by **Birding Breaks**, a Dutch organization, but locally led by **Soaring Expeditions**. The Snow Leopard was called the **Ghost of the Mountain**. It is an elusive and previously very threatened predator that, up to 20 years ago, was seldom seen by any Westerner. For me, this has always been a magical cat and a dream to see this creature in the wild. Additionally, other targets would be the Pallas's Cat and if we are very, very lucky the Eurasian Lynx. Also, some other interesting mammals, birds and especially some stunning landscapes in a very remote country. Mongolia is generally recognized as the least densely populated independent country, with about 2 people per square kilometer.





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In Ulaanbaatar, I met my **two fellow Dutch travelers Olav and Rinus** in the hotel. Both as passionate as I am about wildlife and remote places. Rinus is a retired forestry officer, has worked his whole life in nature-related jobs and is a specialist in wolves in Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands. Olav is a professional Welder, a keen photographer and has travelled all over the world (just as Rinus) in very remote places. This is shown in some very nice artwork, i.e. his tattoos. The next morning we were picked up at 4 AM and brought to the airport for a domestic flight to Hovd. A remote location in the western part of Mongolia. Upon arrival at the airport of Ulaanbaatar, the flight was delayed for 5 hours ... so we could have had a bit more rest. But no problem, we stayed at the lounge and it was nice to get acquainted with one another. Finally, we could board the flight and arrived at Hovd around 1 PM. Bino, one of the founders of Soaring Expeditions picked us up and after a lunch in Hovd, we had a great 5-hour drive through impressive landscapes to our location in the Altai Mountains.



The Altai Mountains are very remote, wild and form a rugged part of Mongolia.

Empty with no villages, only herdsmen and their livestock. We stayed in a **traditional Mongolian Ger**. It was a temporary camp, only set up for us, and consisted of 6 Gers. I shared one with Olav, Rinus had a separate one, one was used for breakfast and dinner, one for the kitchen and two for the guides and

trackers. All in all, there were just the three of us and another 7 to 8 local people. Food was good, toilet was a hole in the ground with a shed over it and obviously no shower. Electricity only when the generator was put on, so normally a few hours a day. Due to Starlink, we did have connection, once the generator was on. What a great place to spend 8 nights searching for the Snow Leopard!

Looking for **Snow Leopards** basically means scanning, scanning and scanning. Binoculars are of limited use, a telescope is needed. The strategy laid out by **Yumchin, the other founder of Soaring Expeditions**, and our Guide, was to put the 5 spotters at different points at a specific mountain range where it was good Snow Leopard habitat and when there were signals that one was active in the area, i.e., tracks, leftovers of kills, etc. We were basically the 6th spotting team out there.





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We started at sunrise, around 5:30 AM until 11 AM, head back for lunch (or we had a packed lunch in the field) and go back again to the same area from around 3:30 PM until 7:30 PM. As the wildlife is very limited in the area, it is a tedious process with little excitement of other animals, birds or reptiles. The

landscapes are stunning but when you have stood in the same position for two days looking at the same mountain range, it gets tough. Especially, when it's not rewarded with sightings.

All in all, we spent 6 days in the Altai Mountains with no signs of Snow Leopard. We did see **Siberian Ibex, Tarbagan Marmot, Pallid Ground Squirrel, Long-tailed Ground Squirrel and Pallas Pika**. With regard to the birds, the **Altai Snowcock was a highlight** and we had some good sightings of **Bearded Vulture, Black Vulture, Golden Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Saker Falcon, Eurasian Wryneck, Chukar and a nice Daurian Redstart**. But again, no Snow Leopard!



So the evening of the 6th day, Yumchin, who was worried himself about the lack of activity in the area, discussed with us two options. Just before sundown, one of the spotters spotted a **killed Siberian Ibex**, very likely the kill of a Snow Leopard. In the morning, the spotter would go back to the place at 5 AM, and see if the Snow Leopard would return. We would

wait until 9 AM and in case no good news, we would pack our stuff and move to the **Margaz Mountain range**, a 7-hour drive. **Margaz is very good for Pallas's Cat but recently also Snow Leopards have entered the area**. He told us that one of their people there had eyes on a Snow Leopard. We were extremely happy with these options. Yumchin was great in orchestrating these options. So we had a good dinner and went to sleep with a lot of excitement!





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Next morning we had breakfast and waited for good news from the tracker. Already at 7 or 8 AM it became clear that the **Snow Leopard** seemed to be very secretive, not returning to the kill during daylight. Their thoughts were that it maybe involved a female with young cubs. So the second option was put into motion and at 9 AM we left for the Margaz Mountains.



We arrived around 5 PM in the Margaz Mountains and went directly to the location of the spotter/tracker and where the **Snow Leopard** had been seen. The female and its three cubs had retracted into a cave, and we went up to a ledge from where we had a view on the cave and the whole

mountain range. Yumchin explained the procedure to us again, i.e. no noise, talking, moving around, stay down and be patient as we had to stay there until sundown, at around 9 PM. So, we went up to the ledge and hid behind some rocks where we could sit down and had a good view on the cave. And then the waiting started ...

We waited for four hours, and nothing happened. Only exciting moment was an **Asian Wapiti** down in the valley at some 500 meters. The sun began to go down and the light was fading ... suddenly Yumchin said softly but firm, 'there it is, at the slope of a big



mountain/boulders in front of us to the left'. We could not immediately see it, but through the telescope we had good views, so we knew where to look. **And there it was, a mature Snow Leopard, what a sight!! And suddenly we noticed another one, one of the half mature cubs.** We managed to get some photos and videos in the fading light. Not easy, but hey, we saw it!!! After 15 minutes, the light was gone

and we moved back to the car. High-fives followed and I embraced Yumchin and thanked him warmly. The picture shown below shows me just after the sighting, happy!!!





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Next morning we went back again to the same location, and we found them on the other side of the mountain, a female with three 1-year-old cubs. Only visible with a scope and we managed to take some far away pictures.



All in all, the Margaz Mountains treated us well with these great sightings of the Snow Leopard. Additionally, we saw quite a few new mammals; **Mongolian Gazelles, Asian Wapiti, Corsac Fox, Mongolian Jird, Silver Mountain Vole.**



As there were some good small lakes near the desert (a bizarre contrast), we managed to see some nice birds; **Pallas Sandgrouse, Pallas's Fish-Eagle, Demoiselle Crane, Common Crane, Stejneger's Scoter, Red-throated Thrush, Ortolan Bunting, Mongolian Lark.**

The last two days, we spent at the UVS Lake, a heaven for birds and we managed to see quite some new species.

All in all we had a great trip with some **12 mammal species and 115 bird species**. For more photos and videos, please see the [Gallery section on the website](#).

In my view, this trip was a good example of **low impact, high income eco-tourism**. Very low impact to the environment as there are a limited number of people interested in undertaking these kind of adventures. But high income, as it generates good revenue, income and employment for the local community. As such it protects the habitat and its wildlife.

Many thanks to [Soaring Expeditions](#), the trackers, cooks and especially Yumchin for a great trip. Also, thanks to Olav and Rinus for being great travel comrades!

Next destination Home!!! And then I am off to Borneo with [1stopBorneo](#).





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The Big Cat Year is not just about spotting wild cats. It is also about **habitat and wildlife conservation**. The aim is to support a project/organization in every country visited. After speaking with Yumchin and Bino, the founders of Soaring Expeditions, I decided to make a donation on behalf of The Big Cat Year to Soaring Expeditions of 1000 USD for 6 Camera traps for important conservation work. Read more on their MUR (Footprint in English) Wildlife Awareness Project funded by Soaring Expeditions on the website; <https://expeditions.mn/what-makes-us-different/>

Would you like to contribute to supporting these important projects and/or organizations in the world with regard to conservation and protection of nature and wildlife, please have a look at the [funding page](#). All help is appreciated! Big and small, it all counts. You can already help by buying the projects a coffee, <https://buymeacoffee.com/mybigcatyear>

PS. Parallel to my trip to Mongolia was the drama that had taken place on the **Hondius**, the ship from Oceanwide Expeditions, where the **Hanta Virus** had caused several deaths. As published in the news, the ship arrived at Cape Verde and is moving now to the Canary Islands. I stayed on that specific ship last year for 3 months. I was on the Antarctica, the Atlantic Odyssey (that's the trip where the drama happened), the North Atlantic Odyssey and the Spitsbergen trip. Rinus and Olav had also stayed on that ship in the past, so we talked a lot about it. It was weird talking about it in the remote mountains of Mongolia but comforting at the same time. What a drama for the deceased and their families, I wish them lots of strength. Also, I empathize strongly with the passengers, the guides and the crew. Hopefully, they all will be safe soon.

