

Mongolia
May 1st-16th

Mongolia is a land of spectacular scenery, terrific mammal-watching, few people, relentless wind, long drives, and the Toyota Prius (seriously, it's everywhere). There are many Mongolia trip reports at the moment, but almost all of those trips were targeting snow leopards and Pallas's cats, both of which my girlfriend and I had seen on previous trips. The main targets for our Mongolia trip were saiga antelope, wild camels, wild ass, and polecats, and given that these species and their locations haven't been covered nearly as much, I thought I'd provide a few observations. First off, we contacted Tumen of Tum-Eco Tour (tumen106@yahoo.com) for our trip, as he had organized several successful camel trips in the past and has great reviews among mammal-watchers. He and his son guided us. His son (whose name is Tselmeg) has been taking on a bigger role in the company and will ultimately be Tumen's successor, and he shares his father's legendary passion for nature and wildlife; he also speaks English very well. They're both very nice people, and have a genuine enthusiasm for finding the animals that their guests want to see. Tumen seems to know every single person living in the Gobi (I don't think I've ever met anyone who gets more phone calls than he does) and is always checking with locals about recent animal activity. He tries very, very hard to maximize wildlife-viewing opportunities for his guests, whether that means driving to an alternative site based on new information, staying out extra late on night drives, recruiting locals to help with the search, or doing whatever else is needed; he definitely goes the extra mile. I think he enjoyed looking for and seeing the animals as much as we did, and that passion is what really sets him apart as such a great guide. Our two drivers and cook were terrific as well: great at their jobs and always smiling and having fun.

We visited four main sites on the trip:

Sharga Nature Reserve: a small area in western Mongolia that aims to protect the remaining population of **saiga antelope**. We flew from Ulaanbaatar to Khovd,

where we met Tumen, Tselmeg, and the rest of the team, because a flight to Altai, which would have been a more convenient starting point, never materialized. Domestic flights in Mongolia are unpredictable and unreliable. The saiga share the reserve with tons of domesticated animals, and this cohabitation is what caused the outbreak of goat plague among the saiga in 2016; it killed thousands. In addition to disease, the saiga have suffered through several harsh winters in recent years, further reducing the total population in Mongolia to a few thousand, perhaps. Over the course of two days, we saw 70-80 individuals, usually in groups of four but sometimes as many as eight or nine together. As they are known to do, they would immediately start running upon first sight of the vehicle. And they are fast! They do a little jump to start their engines, and then lower their heads and absolutely bomb across the landscape. Watching them run is incredible. We were able to get relatively close to a few of them; one in particular was lying down about 25 meters away as we approached on foot by way of a valley below the animal. Overall, I wouldn't say that the saiga are difficult to find, but don't expect to see big herds, and don't expect to get close views.

Great Gobi A Strictly Protected Area: located in a very remote region of southwestern Mongolia and created chiefly to protect **wild camels and Gobi bears**, of which only about 20 are thought to survive. A retired ranger accompanied us to a bear feeding site that Tumen had never visited. We drove all day to get there (well over 200 kilometers from Bayantooroi, the nearest town), and had a fantastic camel sighting along the way. A group of eight or nine, including two calves, was hanging around the road about two and a half kilometers in front of us. Fortunately, we stopped our vehicles and turned off the engines before the camels noticed us, and then just waited to see where they were headed. While we were waiting, Tselmeg set up the scope and we had some decent views, but we thought we could somehow get closer. The camels eventually moved out of sight on the other side of a bunch of small hills of rock. Tumen had the idea that we could use the hills as cover and approach the camels on foot, getting as close as possible. His plan worked perfectly! We crouched behind hill after hill, dashing between them as low to the ground as possible, and made our way to where the camels were presumably passing by. We arrived to

that final hill and could hear the camels vocalizing just on the other side! After a few minutes of peering around the hill and watching the camels eating, one of them began walking right towards the hill, and we could see its humps cresting the top. It came around the side and looked directly at us, less than ten meters away. It then froze in a state of utter confusion before galloping off to join the other camels (you can see my video [here](#)). We moved to the top of the hill as it left, knowing that our cover was fully blown at this point, and expected to see all of the camels fleeing very quickly. To our surprise, however, they trotted for a bit and then turned around and simply looked at us. I don't think they were afraid; rather, they just seemed baffled and curious. We stood there on top of the hill, making no attempt whatsoever to conceal our presence, and had a staring contest with the camels. They were still very close. They then bunched together in a tighter formation and started walking away, periodically pausing and glancing back at us. Tumen had never experienced wild camels in this way. Typically, he said, they run and run and run when they are startled. Perhaps they didn't run because of the two calves, or perhaps the trick to getting close is to approach on foot, as they seem to associate vehicles with danger. Whatever the case, we were thrilled with this sighting and continued on to the bear feeding site. The ranger, despite having gone to the site countless times, wasn't sure about how to get there, and we wasted an hour or two trying to find the right track. His indecision illustrates how easy a wrong turn is, as there are old tracks everywhere and few landmarks by which to navigate. Having someone who knows the terrain is critical. We finally found the track with which the ranger was familiar and shortly thereafter had our first sighting of **wild asses**. They sized us up for a few seconds, and then were off and running. Being one of the primary targets of the trip, seeing them was very cool. We didn't arrive to the bear site until about 5:00 pm, after starting the journey at 7:00 am! It was a long, long day of driving, but we were certainly rewarded for our perseverance. After dinner, we hiked to the overlook for the bear site and saw a **wolf** sniffing around. It was actually our second wolf of the day, as we had seen one that morning as well. In Mongolia, wolves are considered to be harbingers of good luck, and we hoped facetiously that this sighting would bring us such luck. We made a plan to return to the overlook at first light the following morning. We thought we'd have a decent

chance to see some camels or wild asses because the site has a natural spring, and conditions had been particularly dry. Our hopes for a bear were extremely low, especially after the ranger said that the food boxes are filled only twice per year, and had been empty for quite some time. We got up at 5:30 and hiked to the overlook. Upon reaching the edge, we eagerly looked down at the site and there, lumbering around, was a Gobi bear! You can see my video [here](#). It walked in clear view for several minutes and then started rooting around for its favorite plants on the other side of the site. We watched it for almost 20 minutes before it disappeared into the hills. The wolf omen was true; we were very lucky indeed! After breakfast, we drove back to Bayantooroi and saw one lone camel and another group of wild asses along the way. The camel was quite close when we happened upon it, and it ran alongside the vehicles before we overtook it. I think it's important to point out that wild camels aren't easy to find. We drove hundreds and hundreds of kilometers within the protected area and only had two sightings. The area is vast, and the camels are few. I was surprised, too, by the dearth of wild asses. I expected them to be much more common than they were.

Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park: the biggest national park in Mongolia, at the northern limit of the Gobi, with mountain valleys that are good for **polecats**. Tumen has a preferred area for seeing marbled polecats in particular, and the plan was to spend five nights there searching. During the first two nights, we didn't really see much: the only highlight was a **beech marten**. It was lightning-quick! It was initially on a big boulder, and then it was on the ground; then it was back on the boulder, and then it was back on the ground; it jumped on the boulder one more time, and then jumped down; it scampered halfway up the mountain behind the boulder, paused briefly, and then scampered to the top. This whole sequence took place in the span of a minute. On the third day, a freak snowstorm, carried by hellacious winds of 100 kilometers per hour, filled the mountain valleys with so much snow that we were unable to drive through them. We lost two full days because of the storm. Moreover, we had to abandon the search for marbled polecats entirely. For our last day and night in that part of the country, Tumen thought that we should check out a badger site that he had heard about a while ago. On the way there, we had an awesome daytime sighting of a

juvenile **red fox**. The badger site had lots of fresh prints and diggings, and an active burrow, but we didn't see one.

Hustai National Park: less than two hours from Ulaanbaatar and known for its population of **Przewalski's horses**. We were supposed to fly from Dalanzadgad (close to Gobi Gurvansaikhan) to Ulaanbaatar, but again the weather didn't cooperate, as there was a snowstorm in Ulaanbaatar. We had to drive for seven hours instead. As has been noted in other reports, the horses are very easy to see. The main thing I want to mention is that Tumen, through his phone hustle, got permission for us to go spotlighting, even though doing so is not allowed in Hustai. I'm so glad he was able to work his magic because we saw two **steppe polecats**, one of which was very obliging for videos!

Other mammals seen: **black-tailed gazelle, Mongolian gazelle, Asiatic ibex, argali, corsac fox, long-eared hedgehog, tolai hare, elk, and Siberian roe deer.**

Mongolia is great for observing rodents without having to trap them, which I don't like to do. Here's the list of rodents that we encountered: Mongolian gerbil, midday gerbil, great gerbil, Mongolian hamster, desert hamster, grey dwarf hamster, Campbell's dwarf hamster, Gobi jerboa, Siberian jerboa, thick-tailed pygmy jerboa, Kozlov's pygmy jerboa, northern three-toed jerboa, Brandt's vole, silver mountain vole, red-cheeked ground squirrel, long-tailed ground squirrel, Pallas's pika, and Siberian marmot. All of these were observed in the course of searching for other animals; we weren't targeting rodents at all.