

# SAIGAS AT STEPNOI NATURE SANCTUARY, RUSSIA

**Mogens Trolle, May 2019**

From 22-28 May 2019 I spent a great week watching and photographing saigas from a hide by a small lake at Stepnoi Nature Sanctuary on the steppe of the Astrakhan region in SW Russia. Saigas are usually very shy and flee as soon as they see or otherwise detect you, but they were accustomed to the hide that has been in place for a couple of years and it was possible to observe them from a distance of 15-70 meters, sometimes even closer.

We saw saigas by the lake all six days we spent in the hide. They come to drink and sometimes also eat soil (mineral licking, surely). Four days were relatively quiet with a low number of saigas. But two days were out of this world. On the first morning there were saigas around non-stop for eight hours; they would arrive in groups of 50-100 or larger. On the third morning, the migration arrived at the lake. We had saigas for ten consecutive hours and counted more than 3,000 saigas pouring in from the steppe. That was a substantial part of the Russian subpopulation of saiga that in 2018 was estimated at 5,000-6,000 individuals.

The saigas had had their young about a week prior to our arrival, so there were lots of calves around which was good to see. Interestingly, females of two years or older almost always have twins or even triplets; I don't know any other antelope where twins are common. A highlight was seeing an albino calf. The saigas were mostly around in the morning. After lunchtime only a few would arrive, so if you wanted to look for other animals in the sanctuary, this might be a time to do so.

The unique opportunity to spend time in the Stepnoi hide was thanks to the Russian zoologists/mammalogists Karina Karenina and Andrey Giljov from St. Petersburg State University who are studying saigas at Stepnoi. They organized everything and obtained the necessary permits for us to stay at the sanctuary. I can highly recommend them. In addition to being very pleasant company, they were well-organized, quick to reply during the planning phase, helpful, considerable, flexible, and worked hard to ensure that we got the most out of the trip. And they have a vast knowledge of Russian mammals. They can be contacted at [zoology.gilev@gmail.com](mailto:zoology.gilev@gmail.com). A detailed description of the program they offer (incl. logistics and accommodation) and a selection of other wildlife species occurring at Stepnoi can be found on Mammalwatching ([https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/Saiga-trip\\_2019.pdf](https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/Saiga-trip_2019.pdf)).

The only other mammal that we saw during the daytime was red fox (and possibly a ground squirrel). In order to make it to the hide while it was still dark, we had to get up at 3:30 in the morning, so nights were short, and we didn't get to do serious night spotting. Andrey and Karina would set up live traps for rodents in the evening and caught midday gerbil a couple of times. Camera traps in the reserve regularly photograph grey wolf, wild cat and steppe polecat. Also, Corsac fox is known to breed in the reserve. Andrey and Karina have access to another hide in the sanctuary where chances of seeing wolves is higher, although you still need luck to see them.

Here a selection of photos from the trip.



Steppe habitat at Stepnoi.



Andrey and Karina sitting on top of the hide that is mostly underground.



The hide from behind and the lake.



The Stepnoi ranger station. The left house is where you stay.



From inside the hide at sunrise. You get to the hide before 4 AM while it's still dark to not disturb the saigas.





Top: Adult male. Bottom left: Female. Bottom right: 1-year-old male recognized by the short horns with dark bases.