

Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 August - 3 September 2018



Brandt's Vole



Demoiselle Crane



Przewalski's Horses



Siberian Jerboa

Report compiled by Andy Smith
Images courtesy of Tony Laws



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Andy Smith (Naturetrek leader), Uugan and Milan (local leaders)
With 12 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Thursday 23rd August

The group met up at Heathrow and flew via Moscow to Ulaan Baatar.

Day 2

Friday 24th August

We arrived at Ulaan Baatar at dawn and after clearing the airport and meeting up with our local guides Uugan and Milan we transferred to a comfortable city centre hotel. Here we settled in, ate some breakfast and had a bit of a rest whilst Uugan went off to change money for us.

We reassembled at noon and after lunch at a local restaurant we headed off to the outskirts of the city for a first taste of the Mongolian countryside. We explored an area of pools, grassland and riparian thickets in the lee of some rocky hills and encountered an interesting range of birds. These included four Demoiselle Cranes, an Upland Buzzard, dozens of Black Kites, hundreds of Rose-coloured Starlings, a Brown Shrike, a brief Long-tailed Rosefinch and five dazzling Azure Tits.

From here we returned to the hotel through the heavy city traffic and ate dinner in a nearby restaurant before retiring for the night full of anticipation for the days to come.

Day 3

Saturday 25th August

We awoke to a grey wet morning. After a leisurely breakfast we transferred back to Genghis Khan International Airport for our lunchtime flight west to Khovd. Two Asian Brown Flycatchers in the few trees outside the airport provided some diversion as did an ordered -in pizza lunch enlivened by an elderly local gentleman who, seeing us tucking in, calmly queued up for his piece and then helped himself to a cup of Pepsi – that's the way to do it!

We eventually got airborne around 2pm for what turned out to be a spectacular flight. At first the landscape was a rolling patchwork of grassland and forest, but this graded into more open grassland with occasional lakes and braided river systems and finally into desert as the landscape became progressively more arid. 1000 kilometres with barely a settlement or a road – amazing! Finally, we flew over the huge lakes that lie to the east of Khovd and made our descent.

We landed at 4.30pm (one hour behind the capital), transferred to a team of 4x4's and headed away from the town into a rolling desert landscape. We skirted the immense Khar Us Lake and after an hour and a half turned off the tar road onto rough dirt tracks. We saw sheep, goats and Bactrian camels but little visible wildlife beyond Black Kites and Ravens, the occasional Upland Buzzard and a few Isabelline and Desert Wheatears.

We arrived at our wonderfully remote yurt camp in the barren foothills of the Jargalant mountains at 7pm. After settling in we enjoyed a traditional dinner in the dining yurt whilst a Midday Jird potted around our feet searching for scraps.

Day 4

Sunday 26th August

After breakfast we set off in the 4x4's up into an increasingly wild and spectacular world of sparsely vegetated rocky valleys and escarpments. After a time, we emerged onto a dry alpine plateau with utterly stunning views of the desert landscape far below – this was some place!

Towards the end of the morning we arrived at a precipitous and spectacular viewpoint and spent the rest of the day scanning the slopes and valleys around, soaking up the welcome sunshine and watching the world go by. There was no news of Snow Leopards from the local scouts and unsurprisingly we didn't spot any ourselves but we did see several Siberian Ibex, lots of Pallas's Pikas, a few Siberian Marmots and an impressive range of birds. Raptors were much in evidence and we enjoyed excellent views of Steppe and Golden Eagles, Bearded and Cinereous Vultures and at least four Sakers including one which clearly showed all the features of "Altai Falcon", a little-known and incompletely understood taxon. Smaller birds were exciting too and included Red-billed Chough, Guldenstadt's Redstart, Brown Accentor, Mongolian Finch and White-winged Snowfinch.

After dinner back at camp we did a short night walk and saw a couple of Siberian Jerboas hurtling around at break-neck speed and enjoyed lovely views of Mars, Saturn, Jupiter and the nearly full moon.

Day 5

Monday 27th August

A pre-breakfast walk for some to the scrubby valley just to the north of the camp proved rewarding with excellent views of two Tolai Hares and a range of small birds including Greenish and Dusky Warblers, Lesser Whitethroat, Rock Sparrow, Horned Lark and Wryneck.

After breakfast we were away to the mountains again and with no news from the scouts and no kill found we returned to yesterday's viewpoint and set about some serious scanning in the hope of picking up some kind of sighting of a Leopard. We worked hard but in truth we were relying on some positive news from the scouts and fortunately, in the mid-afternoon a radio message came through that a Leopard had been sighted on a ridge some two kilometres from us. Two kilometres is a serious distance to be observing any wildlife from but amazingly, after some searching, we found the animal right on the skyline. It was essentially dozing but moved around a little in a small area and over the next hour or so most of the group got some kind of view of this very distant and very well camouflaged cat. Then abruptly it started to move fairly rapidly across and down slope through an open area and those who were able to stick with it in their telescopes enjoyed some pretty good views of this amazing and extraordinary animal.

Unfortunately we lost it behind some dead ground, which, in our adrenaline charged mood and altitudinally rarefied situation prompted a wonderfully pythonesque exchange between two male members of the group as to whether the leopard could emerge from its gully without us seeing it. Needless to say it could and we had no further sighting so, as the shadows lengthened and the temperature dropped, we returned to the vehicles and began the drive back down and out of the mountains. Few of us felt that we had seen a Snow Leopard really well and so, whilst it had all been very exciting, we returned to camp hoping for a better encounter over the next few days.

Day 6

Tuesday 28th August

We awoke to a cool, grey dawn after a very windy night and with the day threatening rain we decided against going back up into the mountains. Instead we headed off towards the large lake to our east known as Dorgon Noor. Our first stop was at the village of Urdgol where we refuelled the vehicles and found a nice selection of birds including Hill Pigeon, Hoopoe, Yellow-browed Warbler and Common Rosefinch. From here we headed out across a vast expanse of billiard-table flat steppe covered in a type of wild garlic or chive. It was all in flower and made for an aromatic drive! Here we came across several flocks of Pallas's Sandgrouse, four Saiga Antelope, (which, typically wary, allowed only distant views before hunkering down and belting away at very high speed) and a number of quaint-looking Toad-headed Agamas.

As we proceeded on towards the now visible lake the garlic plains gave way to a broad shore zone covered in Salicornia. It was raining persistently by this stage, so the lake shore, when we eventually reached it, was less appealing than we had hoped. Nevertheless we stopped for lunch and a short stroll and saw some good birds including Ruddy Shelduck, Eurasian Spoonbill, Pallas's Gull, Kentish Plover, Temminck's Stint and Citrine Wagtail. Cutting our losses we headed back across the garlic plains and as the rain finally dried up we found some more groups of Saiga Antelopes (they were all in groups of four or five) and took time to enjoy the landscape and photograph the camels and other livestock that dotted the flower studded vastness.

From the plains we followed a different route back to camp and this took us through an attractive patchwork of low, rocky hills and scrubby valleys. A stop at a likely looking spot turned up the hoped for Henderson's Ground Jay and with a bit of stalking we enjoyed some great views of this stunning and elusive bird – a satisfying end to an interesting day!

Day 7

Wednesday 29th August

Better weather at dawn today. An early walk down to the valley to the north of camp produced some good views of a couple of Tolai Hares and three Brown Accentors.

After breakfast we headed back up into the mountains again and out beyond our previous viewpoint to another spot where our scouts were watching a trio of Snow Leopards! We arranged ourselves, in the sunshine, amongst the rocks, in this area of remarkable 3,000 metre high tundra looking across a craggy, precipitous valley to where three Snow Leopards were visible about a kilometre away – how amazing! These we learned were more-or-less full-grown and nearly independent cubs that had been seen recently as a quartet with their mother. We presumed that she was away hunting and these fellows were just lying around waiting for her to return.

We stayed for the rest of the day, seven hours in all, and at least one and generally two of the trio were visible throughout! They were distant for sure and they mostly slept but they also sat up occasionally, stretched, groomed themselves, yawned, scent marked and walked around a bit, adjusting their position so as to stay out of the sun. The more you watched, the better you got your eye in and by the end of this wonderful, marathon session you could feel that you had really seen these beautiful and elusive animals relaxed and at ease in their own environment.

Various other bits and pieces vied for our attention too and during the course of the day we saw Marmots and Pikas, Cinerous Vultures, Lammergeyers, Golden and Steppe Eagles, Upland Buzzards, Guldenstadt's Redstarts and lots of Isabelline Wheatears. We even heard an Altai Snowcock cackling away amongst the distant rocks.

Day 8

Thursday 30th August

Another pre-breakfast walk this morning produced Yellow-browed, Dusky and Greenish Warblers, Common Redstart, Pied Wheatear and several Tolai Hares – not bad!

Post breakfast we set off across the stony slopes below the camp, encountering some Black-tailed Gazelles and a Steppe Grey Shrike en-route and then spent several relatively unproductive hours down on the flat valley bottom amongst open grassland and sand dunes. Wildlife pickings were slim but did include Toad-headed Agamas, Cinerous Vultures, Upland Buzzards, lots of Asian Short-toed Larks, a small flock of Richard's Pipits, a few Ortolan Buntings, a Wryneck and notably, a group of eight Pallas's Reed Buntings (including a couple of very smart adult males). A lively, dusty round-up of sheep and goats by a group of horsemen provided a colourful distraction. As we got closer, we realised that all the herdsmen were children, which served to remind us, should we have needed it, of what a different and unfamiliar land we were in.

Day 9

Friday 31st August

The day dawned still, clear and beautiful and after breakfast we left our yurts for the last time and began the journey back to Khovd. We stopped for some close Black-tailed Gazelles as we traversed the stony slopes below the camp and then we drove on directly to the vast Khar Us Noor Lake. Here we enjoyed a very pleasant stroll along the lakeshore in lovely sunshine and saw a satisfying range of birds including over 70 White-headed Ducks, various waders, a White-winged Tern, a pair of Whooper Swans, a few Citrine Wagtails, another Pallas's Reed Bunting and a flock of nine Bearded Tits.

We ate lunch in a restaurant in Khovd and then proceeded out to the airport. After a short delay our aeroplane departed and we enjoyed another superbly scenic flight, which this time included a short stop at the delightfully named town of Moron. We made it safely back to Ulaan Baatar in the early evening, transferred to our trusty bus and drove south-west out of the urban sprawl into rural darkness. We arrived at our camp near Hustai National Park shortly before 10pm and after a late dinner retired to our yurts.

Day 10

Saturday 1st September

Today it was cool, overcast and drizzly at dawn but it brightened up by breakfast time and it was sunny and warm by lunchtime. An early exploration around our camp in the damp murk turned up a Blyth's Pipit, a Hoopoe and our first Mongolian Lark. After breakfast we set off down the track towards Hustai itself and spent a satisfying morning exploring the rolling grassland and low hills of this beautiful park. We soon found a sizeable herd of Przewalski's Horses and during the course of the morning we also had excellent views of Siberian Marmots, Long-tailed Ground Squirrels and a superb flock of over 40 Demoiselle Cranes. Dainty Amur Falcons and Lesser Kestrels dotted the trackside wires and we saw more Sakers and Upland Buzzards and a variety of other bits and pieces including some huge Bush Crickets.

After lunch back at the camp we drove to an area of marshy grassland and lakes some little distance to the west. Here we saw four impressive White-naped Cranes, some Pacific Golden Plovers, a flock of over 50 White-cheeked Starlings, several Citrine and Eastern Yellow Wagtails, lots of tiny Siberian Toads and a colony of very engaging Brandt's Voles.

The journey back was punctuated by a few roadside Long-legged Buzzards, several flocks of close Demoiselle Cranes and a brief Corsac Fox. Around the camp itself a last little exploration turned up a flock of 10 Mongolian Larks.

Day 11

Sunday 2nd September

It was overcast and cool first thing and a pre-breakfast walk out into the scrub-covered dunes to the east of our camp was fairly quiet save for the groups of Demoiselle Cranes bugling their way overhead and a couple of neat little Taiga Flycatchers in the low bushes.

After breakfast we set off for Ulaan Baatar. We had some excellent views of Steppe Eagle and Upland Buzzard along the entrance track before we hit the main road and headed fast east. We arrived in the city and the rain at the end of the morning and after a visit to the central square and the national museum we checked in to our hotel before heading off to a nearby restaurant for lunch.

The afternoon was set aside as free time to rest at the hotel or explore more of the city. Some walked down to the Tuul River about a kilometre distant and explored an area of riparian thickets and scrubland. A pleasantly exciting range of birds was found including Taiga Flycatcher, Arctic Warbler, Daurian Redstart, Willow Tit and Long-tailed Rosefinch.

Day 12

Monday 3rd September

An early start saw us at Genghis Khan Airport by 5am. Everything went smoothly and we were airborne by 7.30 and arrived in Moscow pretty much on schedule. A quick transit here saw us Heathrow bound and we all arrived back safely a few hours later.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Uugan, Milan and all the members of the group for the many and varied contributions which served to make this a particularly memorable trip!

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Species Lists

Mammals

The numbers after the species entry refer to the number of days the species was seen followed by the actual or estimated total of individuals seen over those days.

Red Squirrel 1/1	Siberian Marmot 3/45
Long-tailed Ground-Squirrel 3/4	Siberian Jerboa 5/7
Brandt's Vole 1/20	Midday Jird 4/5
Pallas's Pika 6/70	Tolai Hare 5/18
Snow Leopard 2/4	Corsac Fox 1/1
Przewalski's Horse 1/50	Red Deer 1/3
Black-tailed (Goitered) Gazelle 2/30	Saiga Antelope 1/12
Siberian Ibex 2/17	

Birds

Greylag Goose 1/3	Whooper Swan 2/3
Ruddy Shelduck 3/7	Gadwall 3/45
Eurasian Wigeon 1/10	Mallard 3/60
Northern Pintail 2/6	Garganey 1/7
Red-crested Pochard 2/100's	Common Pochard 2/100's
Tufted Duck 2/100's	Common Merganser 1/3
White-headed Duck 1/70	Altai Snowcock 1/1h
Chukar Partridge 5/30	Great Crested Grebe 3/35
Slavonian Grebe 1/1	Eurasian Spoonbill 1/10
Grey Heron 2/50	Great Egret 2/3
Great Cormorant 3/55	Bearded Vulture (Lammergeyer) 3/8
Himalayan Griffon Vulture 3/5	Eurasian Griffon Vulture 2/2
Cinereous Vulture 8/50	Steppe Eagle 8/25
Golden Eagle 5/11	Eurasian Sparrowhawk 1/1
Western Marsh Harrier 3/5	Pallid Harrier 1/1
Black-eared Kite 10/500	Upland Buzzard 8/25
Long-legged Buzzard 2/8	Eurasian Coot 3/100's
White-naped Crane 1/4	Demoiselle Crane 4/850
Common Crane 1/4	Black-winged Stilt 4/11
Northern Lapwing 5/70	Pacific Golden Plover 1/20
Little Ringed Plover 1/1	Kentish Plover 1/20
Snipe spp. (presumed Pin-tailed) 1/2	Black-tailed Godwit 2/20
Common Redshank 1/1	Common Greenshank 2/8
Green Sandpiper 3/11	Wood Sandpiper 1/1
Common Sandpiper 2/4	Ruddy Turnstone 1/1
Ruff 1/2	Temminck's Stint 2/6
Little Stint 1/8	Black-headed Gull 2/6
Pallas's Gull 1/1	Vega Gull 1/15
Caspian Tern 1/8	Common Tern 3/15
White-winged Tern 1/1	Pallas's Sandgrouse 1/150
Rock Dove 2/13	Hill Pigeon 1/50

Eurasian Collared Dove 1/1	Little Owl 3/4
Eagle Owl 4/4h	Common Swift 2/6
Eurasian Hoopoe 4/10	Wryneck 2/2
Middle Spotted Woodpecker 1/1	Lesser Kestrel 1/15
Common Kestrel 8/20	Amur Falcon 1/50
Saker Falcon 6/10	“Altai” Falcon 1/1
Brown Shrike 4/5	Isabelline Shrike 6/8
Steppe Grey Shrike 2/2	Eastern Magpie 5/50
Henderson’s Ground Jay 1/1	Red-billed Chough 7/120
Daurian Jackdaw 1/4	Western Jackdaw 2/4
Carrion Crow 6/75	Northern Raven 10/90
Willow Tit 1/1	Azure Tit 1/5
Great Tit 3/7	Bearded Reedling 1/9
Horned Lark 6/75	Greater Short-toed Lark 2/12
Asian Short-toed Lark 6/250	Mongolian Lark 2/21
Oriental Skylark 1/1	Sand Martin 4/300
Barn Swallow 5/175	Eurasian Crag Martin 4/20
Common House Martin 4/15	Siberian Chiffchaff 1/1
Dusky Warbler 7/15	Yellow-browed Warbler 4/25
Hume’s Leaf Warbler 1/1	Arctic Warbler 2/4
Greenish Warbler 3/7	Two-barred Greenish Warbler 1/1
Oriental Reed Warbler 2/2h	Lesser Whitethroat 6/20
Common Whitethroat 3/4	Eurasian Nuthatch 1/1
Common Starling 2/40	Rose-coloured Starling 1/200
White-cheeked Starling 1/5	Asian Brown Flycatcher 3/5
Spotted Flycatcher 3/4	Taiga Flycatcher 1/10
Black Redstart 3/5	Common Redstart 7/13
Daurian Redstart 1/4	Guldenstadt’s Redstart 3/6
Siberian Stonechat 7/10	Northern Wheatear 8/30
Isabelline Wheatear 9/115	Desert Wheatear 7/20
Pied Wheatear 6/20	House Sparrow 3/65
Eurasian Tree Sparrow 5/400	Rock Sparrow 8/250
White-winged Snowfinch 1/20	Brown Accentor 3/5
Altai Accentor 1/3	Eastern Yellow Wagtail 3/30
Citrine Wagtail 4/12	Grey Wagtail 5/5
White Wagtail 7/50	Richard’s Pipit 4/17
Blyth’s Pipit 2/2	Red-throated Pipit 1/1
Mongolian Finch 2/2	Common Rosefinch 2/3
Long-tailed Rosefinch 2/6	Ortolan Bunting 3/11
Rock Bunting 1/1	Pallas’s Reed Bunting 2/9

Other notables

Toad-headed Agama,
Giant Bush Cricket (*Derocantibella verrucosa*)

Siberian Toad

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Little Owl



Toad-headed Agama



Pallas's Sandgrouse