

Sandwich Bird Tours



Investing in your memories

Participants: Sandie C, Jackie D, Lawrence and Val P, Kim R, Kathryn S

Guides Sasha from Rubythroat Birding Tours and our local guide/tour operator
Oggie from Mongolian Wildlife Tours

By John van der Dol Sandwich Bird Tours

Mongolia August 20-September 6

Left home at just before 5am by taxi to Heathrow. Met up with Jackie, Kim and Sandie. Two uneventful flights to Moscow and on to Ulaanbataar arriving finally at 05.30 the next morning only to find out that Jackie's bag had not arrived. Did the paperwork and met with our driver/guide Oggie who took us to our accommodation, the Grand Hill Hotel. A very comfortable 4 stars hotel in the city.

Morning rest and afternoon visit to Gandantegchinlen Monastery where the giant golden Buddha is housed. An interesting afternoon.

Val and Lawrence arrived on the evening flight from Beijing.

A nice meal in the Chinese restaurant in the hotel and met up with Sasha whose name is really Alexander.

August 21

The group visited the Winter Palace this morning while Sasha and I did some birding along the river in the city. Some lovely birds were seen including an adult Amur Falcon, several Daurian Redstarts, Long-tailed Rosefinches, a family of Daurian Partridges, Chinese Penduline Tits, a couple of Azure Tits, as well as Common Redstarts, Barn Swallow and Great Tits. A very obliging Lesser Spotted Woodpecker showed up and a couple of Nuthatches were noted too.

Kathryn had arrived by now on the early morning flight and the complement was complete. We had a nice "Mongolian" pizza in the Irish Pub on the 15th floor of the hotel.

August 22

An early breakfast and by 7am three Landcruisers had arrived with the main guy Oggie and two further drivers and a cook. We set off half an hour later on our marathon twelve hour drive to the Far East. Our first stop was at the Chenghis Khan monument which a huge construction about 35 km out of town. Very impressive in a shiny metal coating. A couple of trees attracted a Yellow-browed Warbler and a possible Dusky Warbler was seen too. A large flock Tree Sparrows were nice to see.

We continued east and had lunch in a restaurant where most dishes appeared to be either short or completely off the menu. Anyway we had lunch before continuing on and by now many more birds were being seen. Daurian Jackdaws, Red-billed Choughs amongst the Ravens and literally dozens of the beautiful Upland Buzzards. Steppe Eagles and Black Vultures put in appearances too.

A river area sported some Mongolian Gulls and a single Common Tern was noted fishing.

A stop for a Steppe Eagle on the side of the road gave some the opportunity to photograph a Brandt's Vole which kept popping out of its hole.

We finally arrived at the camp which consisted of seven gers and some ancillary shacks. We had dinner and were given the program for tomorrow before retiring.

August 23

Our first attempt this morning at trying to find the elusive cat. We spent the morning scanning the hillsides and checking rocky outcrops for holes in which we hoped to find a cat. No luck so far. It was quite fun to take the vehicles up and down dale on tracks or just the through meadows. Lots of birds put up were mostly larks which were left unidentified, but I did have a brief view of a Red-flanked Bluetail. A Camberwell Beauty was a nice surprise also.

It was getting towards mid day when Lawrence and I set off along two rows of rocky outcrops and just as I was about to return to the vehicle I saw a Pallas's Cat running along the rocks which had clearly been disturbed by Lawrence. It briefly sat on top of a rock before disappearing.

We searched the immediate area and suddenly Lawrence saw it running across the meadows. We pinpointed the rocks it disappeared in and called the other cars.

Eventually a scout found it or possibly another hiding in a hole where it stayed for some time before running out. The guy on the motorcycle followed it and eventually it sat down in the grass thinking it could not be seen. We had another photo opportunity for a minute or two before it shot off again. We decided to leave it in peace.

Back for lunch and we had only just finished it when the call came that another one was found in a den. We went up there and could just see it. We retreated 300 meters and waited for several hours in the hope it would come out to hunt. No luck this time and we returned to camp for dinner. It had been a fantastic day.



August 24

Another early breakfast and off again on to the steppes. We spent the morning searching for cats without success but did find a hole in which apparently there was such a beast. However we did find a female with foal Mongolian Gazelle which was yet another new mammal for all of us.

Quite a number of nice birds were noted this morning including Golden Eagle, Japanese Quail, Pied Wheatear, Dark-breasted Flycatcher, Hoopoe and a Swallowtail butterfly flew past the car.

This afternoon we went out again and it wasn't long before we got the call that another cat was found in a crack in a rocky outcrop. We watched it for a while. Eventually it came out and as they do they hide in grass and can stay still for some time. We got some amazing photographs and as it eventually shot off it started to rain. That was the end of our tour of the eastern steppes.

We stopped at the local mini market to buy a beer to celebrate on our last night here.

August 25

Today was going to be a travelling day again, back to Ulaan Bataar. It seemed to go much quicker this time but I guess we made fewer stops. Another female and young Mongolian Gazelle were seen again, this time much closer to the road enabling better views.



A few birds of interest included possibly as many as 50 or more Upland Buzzards, a few Black Vultures and at one stage we stopped as a Saker Falcon appeared to have difficulty getting off the ground. Oggie realised what had happened as it was ensnared by a trap attached to a pigeon. He managed to catch it by throwing his jacket over it. They managed to unsnarl it and took the trap off the pigeon. The Saker was much bigger than I had realised and an incredible bird it was too.

After a few photographs we released both birds and kept the snare. Not long after the perpetrators of the obscene act came racing over in their car and re-captured the pigeon with a butterfly net while still on the move. The pigeon was very thin and clearly had not eaten for days. They were not happy and no doubt they will re-capture the falcon at some stage. They are worth thousands on the Arabian market and all is perfectly legal even though Saker is considered to be an endangered species and to be facing a high risk of extinction in the wild.

We continued and other interesting birds were noted such as Mongolian Gulls, Common Terns, a Whooper Swan on a lake and the Ruddy Shelducks we had seen on the way out. An Eastern Marsh Harrier was a nice surprise too. As we approached habitation Black-eared Kites were becoming more obvious again. They were virtually absent in the rural east proving what their main foodstuffs consist of.

A picnic coffee stop was very welcome and it was here we managed to photograph some Long-tailed Sulus (Ground Squirrels) which made a nice addition to the mammal list.

We eventually arrived back in the city and the World Mongolian Hotel. A nice hotel but somewhat lacking in staff and those that were employed were rather young and inexperienced or perhaps untrained. However we all had a nice meal and a drink or two.

The rooms were great and a good night's sleep was had by all.

Observations of the Eastern steppes:

Our journey east from the capital was 530 km which took us about 12 hours. Apart from the last sixty kms on dirt tracks the paved road was excellent. We passed a number of small villages and even a new "Barratt" like estate totally incongruous with its surroundings. The further east we travelled the human habitation decreased although gers were seen throughout where nomadic herders would set up camp for a few months as they allowed their cattle, sheep and goats to graze. Huge herds of livestock could be seen and many herds of horses pointed to the lifestyle and culture of the local Mongolian people.

The landscape was vast and continued beyond where our eyes could see and consisted mostly of low ranging hills covered in green vegetation and virtually tree- less. The valleys were shallow suggesting riverine landscapes of days gone by which presumably dried up with general uplift. Odd rocky outcrops adorned the tops of many hills and it was here that the Pallas's Cats make their homes.

We were all impressed by the simple beauty and vastness of the place and it was indeed an experience to spend three nights amongst it.-

August 26

A lie in this morning with a 9 am start for the airport. The traffic, as expected, was somewhat heavy but then the plane was late anyway. Our 12.40 flight eventually took off at 13.40. A lovely sunny morning with a little cloud but still allowing occasional wonderful views of the landscape below.

We eventually landed at 15.30 but it was actually only a two hour flight having transversed another time zone.

We stopped at a supermarket for some supplies after which we started our way to the second ger camp of the trip. A very different habitat being basically stony dry desert surrounded by mountainous ridges. On our way we saw some very distant Saiga Antelopes and a single Black-tailed Gazelle also known as

Goitered Gazelle. The former are extremely nervous and we probably got no closer than a kilometer. There was a group of seven which were intent on running away as fast as possible.

We eventually arrived at the camp which was situated just below the escarpment and at the entrance of a valley which we were due to investigate in the morning.

We had a nice dinner before retiring at about 20.30. Early but we were very tired after travelling all day

August 27

Six o'clock breakfast and out before 7.00 in search of the legendary Snow Leopard. En route we saw a Tolai Hare and a splendid pair of Lammergeiers as well as a Black Restart and a gorgeous Gldenstdt's Redstart. Pallas's Pikas are common here and provide much entertainment as they scuttle about round the vehicles.

We drove along the sometime quite rough track until we arrived at a bit of a plateau at 2600 meters where we stopped, set up the telescopes and scanned the mountain sides. Unbelievably at 0900 Oggie spotted an adult female SNOW LEOPARD which was accompanied by two cubs. Less than two hours and we had seen our target which some groups fail to see after several days of observation. Our views were not particularly prolonged so we decided to sit it out and try to get longer views. The cubs were seen a couple of times during the day and by late afternoon we realized there were actually four of them.

By nearly 8 pm we still had not seen the mother again and we had to leave as it was getting dark.

However we were treated well to the little ones albeit they were distant and photography was not really on.

A Mongolian Three-toed Jerboa was briefly seen on the way back.

What a day that was, and one that will live forever in our minds.

Same plans for tomorrow.

August 28

We arrived early again at the same place as yesterday but seeing the cubs was much harder today seeing just two at the time on a couple of occasions. Three were out in the late afternoon then suddenly at about 7pm the mother turned up. She had likely not been around for a couple of days. The now four cubs immediately joined her and they all set off across the hills playing with mother's tail, climbing all over her until they eventually disappeared over a ridge. The cubs were clearly very excited and possibly hungry.

It then appeared as if mother hid a couple of them and carried on presumably to a kill with the remaining two only to return for the first two at a later time.

It had been a long and somewhat quiet day but culminating in an incredible experience, the likes of which Oggie had not seen before in terms of numbers. The maximum number of cubs he had ever noted was three.

We had decent views although somewhat distant and photography was not really possible. However Lawrence who had walked up the hill and heard the commotion from the gang suddenly realised what was happening and took a beautiful video of the proceedings.

We returned after dark and a lovely meal of vegetable or chicken soup and retired in anticipation of more great experiences tomorrow.

August 29

The group split up today. Jackie, Sandie and Kathryn went back into the mountains to try and find another Snow Leopard. The rest of us took a couple of vehicles and drove to a bird ringing station. En route our other targets for today were Saiga Antelope and Goitered Gazelle. We managed a decent view of a male of the former and two distance groups of the latter totaling six animals. After about an hour we arrived at the ringing station where we met the guy who runs it and a couple of Western guests who were out there to ring.

Some great birds were netted and Arctic, Humes, Greenish, Dusky and Blyth's Reed Warblers were photographed in the hand as were Brambling, Greenfinch,

Common Rosefinch and Isabelline Shrike. A short walk produced a number of Pied Wheatears, more shrikes, lots of Black-eared Kites, a surprising Pied Flycatcher which is probably only about the 10th record for Mongolia and there was a Wood Warbler around which we did not actually connect with but which may well be even rarer as it is not even in the fieldguide.

Coffee was supplied and all in all it was a very pleasant morning.

On the return journey for lunch there was a flock of 15-20 Black Vultures by a stream and a Richards Pipit was photographed.

We had lunch and a rest for an hour or two before setting off into the mountains again. We did the same route looking for the sheep and ibex but without success. Suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly we arrived back at the Snow Leopard look-out. Unfortunately the three who had spent all day there were without success. We stayed a couple of hours before it got cold and we all set off back to camp. Oggie had gone for a long trek and had relocated the cats but they were a long way from where we last saw them. Photo below.



August 30

Being full of head cold I decided to stay back today while the group set off for the day to a different valley to try and find some more Snow Leopards.

I did have a walk to the start of the valley first thing but apart from a family party of Isabelline Shrikes nothing was noted at all so I spent the day relaxing back at camp.

No Snow Leopards were recorded today but a few interesting birds such as Snow Finch, Lammergeier were noted as well as a group of Ibex.

On the way back they saw a party of Pallas's Sandgrouse and a Henderson's Ground Jay was seen flying across the car.

August 31

I went looking for the Ground Jay first thing but no luck. We set off for another valley this morning and a very short walk along a tiny stream.

We found a couple of nasty snares designed to catch the Leopards supposedly for the WWF so they could collar them for research. I am quite sure if they saw the contraptions used by the herders who would get paid for catching one they would not approve. I am not at all convinced that this story is true and so they were duly destroyed and removed.

Some interesting birds such as Brown Accentor and three Black-throated Thrushes were seen as was a Dusky Warbler.

Eventually we drove up to the top of a couple of mountains and looked for Leopards but to no avail. However it was good to see a couple of Mongolian Marmots.

A couple of hunters on a motorbike were sent on their way by the older driver with the help of Oggie and his walkie talkies and threats of police.

We eventually returned to the mountain top where had seen the cats over the last week.

Oggie had been there all day but had not seen any. Eventually as the light started to fade the four cubs appeared in the same place as before but mother

was clearly out hunting somewhere no doubt to return later or perhaps tomorrow.

We returned home, had a nice meal and as usual retired early.

September 1

This morning was spent at the nearby lake by way of a change.

As we arrived we were immediately attacked by hordes of mosquitoes which forced us to leave but not before a juvenile Mongolian Gull was noted, a pair of Pallas's Reed Buntings put in an appearance and Whiskered and Common Terns were present, Pochard and White-headed Ducks were noted in good numbers but perhaps the Pallas's Sandgrouse were the best species of the day and were seen in good numbers.

We decided to try a hide some 20 km up the road and despite it having no sides, because it was high enough there appeared to be virtually no mosquitoes.

Good numbers of Duck included Pintail, Teal, Mallard and a couple of Wigeon. Three Eurasian Spoonbill were added to by two more flying by and Grey Lags were common. A single Slender-billed Gull was good to see as it joined a number of Common Terns in both juvenile and adult plumages. Marsh Sandpiper and Northern Lapwing and some Temminck's Stints were also recorded.

We returned back to base by 1 pm for lunch, had a short rest and about 4 pm we returned to the mountain top for another go at the Snow Leopards. The adult and two cubs were seen this morning by Oggie in the usual area. We were hopeful that the adult was still around.

Eventually two of the cubs came out to play from their usual cave and after maybe an hour or so the mother turned up from the right. Mother and cubs spent quite a while playing and she gave us great views as she sat on top of the rock we called "the platform".

After maybe half an hour she literally put the cubs to bed and wandered off coming closer all the time and it was then we realised she was making for the two cubs who immediately came out to play. Great views again through the scopes. Eventually the three of them disappeared behind a rock and we did not see them again. She clearly is a very experienced twelve year old mother who knows how to keep her young safe.

It had got quite cold by now so we returned to camp for dinner.

A *Güldenstädt's Redstart* and a *Tolai Hare* were seen en route.

September 2

Our last full day in the mountains today although we only spent the morning at the *Leopard* site. We did not find them today but a group of five *Ibex* were nice to see.

A large party of birders/ naturalists from the UK turned up with quite a big back - up team. They had still not seen a *Snow Leopard* but may be they had some luck in the afternoon.

We returned for lunch and rested for the afternoon before our BBQ in the evening

Packing was done in order to get a quick get-away tomorrow morning back to *Khovd* and our flight back to *Ulaan Bataar*.

A few birds such as *Güldenstädt's Redstart* and a party of juvenile *Chukars* were noted. A *Lammergeier* flew over the valley too.

A bit of an uneventful day really. We had some rain during the night which was the first time we had seen that since the *Pallas's* site but it caused us no problems.

September 3

A slightly later breakfast and getting ready to leave about 9.30 for the airport. We arrived somewhat early, had a coffee and waited for our plane.

We were expecting a delay as *Mr Putin* was visiting *UB* today and the city centre was shut down from 8 to 8. However we experienced no problems and got away just about on time. A couple hours later we landed in *UB*, got our luggage, met up with at least one of our previous drivers, *Toggie*, and set off for *Hustai National Park*. A couple of parties of *Demoiselle Cranes* were seen on the way.

On arrival we were assigned our gers and immediately went for dinner.

In the park a party of thrushes might have been Black-Throated, a Common Buzzard and some White Wagtails were seen. Marmots were everywhere.

September 4

Our last full day in the field. Breakfast at 6 and immediately out.

We started seeing lots of Tarbagan Marmots and photographing them was quite fun as they have a habit of disappearing down their holes just as you are about to press the shutter.

It was not long before we saw our first Przewalskii's Horses which of course were our target species. Great views and lots of photos were taken.

But Oggie was looking for something else and sure enough he found a very distant Wolf. Not the best view in the world but a Wolf it was. He also found some Red Deer, again quite distant.

Brandt's Voles reappeared too as did a Long-tailed Suslik.

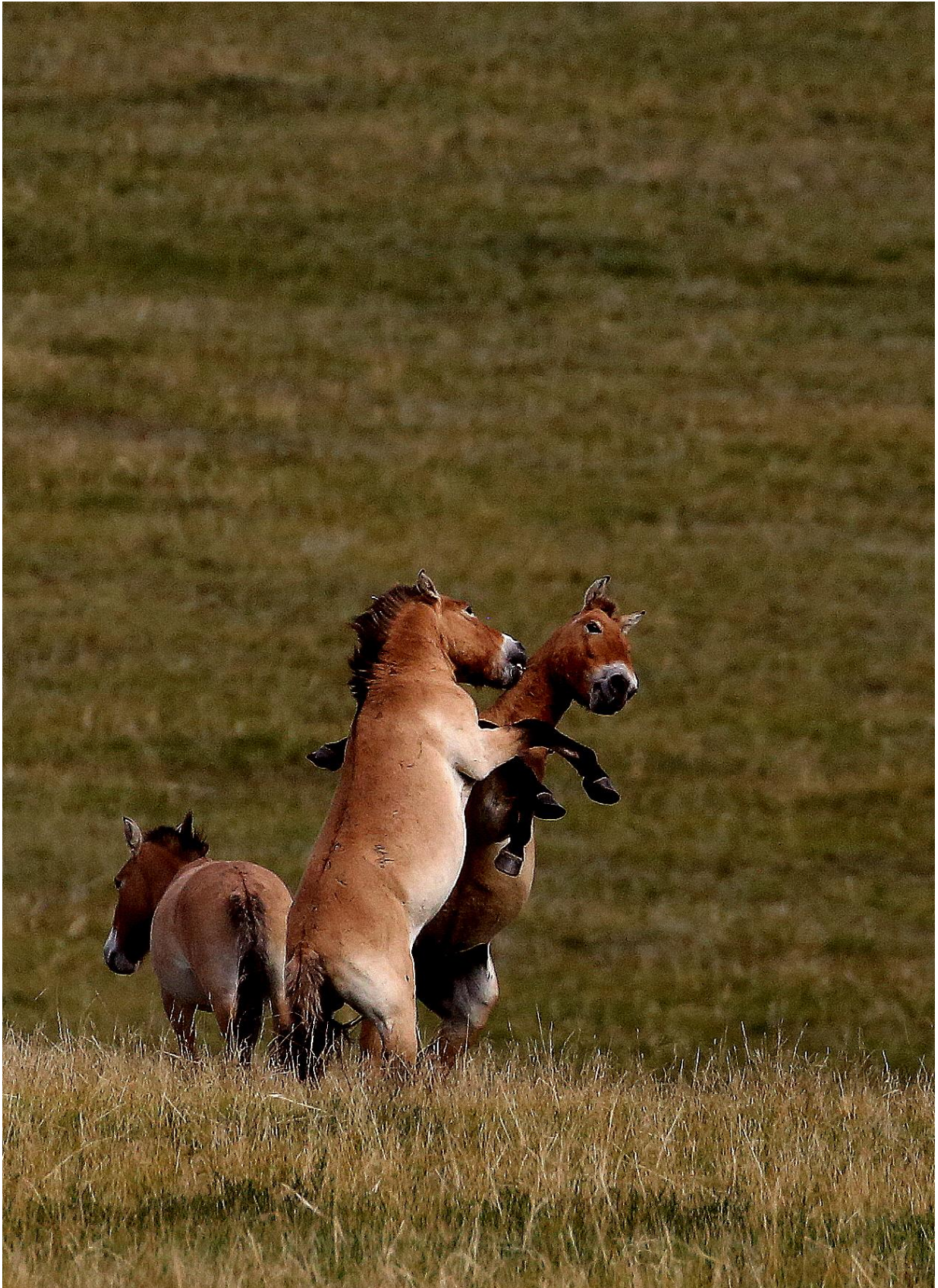
We spent the morning in the park enjoying the wildlife and the birds which included such beauties as a couple of male Amur Falcons on their way to Southern Africa, splendid Golden and Steppe Eagles, Kites, Kestrels and lots of species of crow including Red-billed Choughs.

We returned for lunch and a siesta and at 4 o'clock we returned to the park. It was much the same as this morning but some close views of Black Vultures was nice coupled with Steppe Eagles on a kill of some sort.

Another Common And a single Upland Buzzard were noted too.

Towards the end of the afternoon Oggie Spotted a large herd of Mongolian Gazelles totaling perhaps 100-150 animals and although somewhat distant the low light picked out their features nicely.

It had been a lovely day with full sunshine.



September 5

We spent our last few hours in the Hustai NP seeing more or less the same things but it was a lovely sunny and serene morning. Female Amur Falcon was nice to see and Marmots were all out sunning themselves. We spent quite a bit of time looking at the horses and towards the end we found a herd of about 110 Mongolian Gazelles but again too far to get decent pictures. I did manage to get some nice Brandt's Voles pictures though.

Hunting clearly has had a big impact of the ability to get close to wildlife and although here it is protected, I fear for the wildlife in this country.

Hunting and trapping is still very much part of their culture and the insatiable demand by China and South East Asia for animal parts is likely to further scarcity of many species if not extinction. There appears little international will to hold China and its neighbours to account.

We returned for lunch and set off back to Ulaan Bataar thereafter. We again checked in to the Grand Hill Hotel , had a rest and a decent shower before having our last dinner with Sahsa and Oggie. Lovely food and a few drinks and we said our farewells to our new found friends.

Eventually we said goodbye to Val and a Lawrence who were on a different flight and retired for a short night.

September 6

Four o'clock alarm, bags down by 04.30 and off to the airport for our 07.10 flight to Moscow. A 5 1/2 hour flight, a 5 hour wait followed by a 3 1/2 hour flight to London.

Fairly uneventful again and we got through immigration really quickly, collected our bags and said our goodbyes.

Another trip done and very successful and enjoyable it was too.

This trip organized by Sandwich Bird Tours, Rubythroat Birding Tours, Kazakhstan and Mongolian Wildlife Tour/wildlife researcher Otgonbayar Baatargal was advertised as being a Snow Leopard tour. Indeed that was the

main target of the trip but late on the planning Pallas's Cat was added to the itinerary and the finale were the Przewalskii horses. And so it turned out to be and superb views, if perhaps somewhat distant in relation to the Leopards, were achieved.

From a birding point of view it was perhaps a little frustrating but we will have to leave that for a specialized birding trip.

It was a fantastic tour in a landscape totally unfamiliar to most of the group in terms of its unpopulated vastness which could not help but impress. It was an adventure which those used to 5 star hotels may have found a little taxing. Our accommodation outside of Ulaan Bataur consisted of Ger Camps which are very comfortable apart from perhaps sanitary arrangements. However we were literally in the middle of nowhere and people very quickly got used to the conditions.

The local staff and guides, drivers, cook and scouts on horseback were all superb and totally accommodating and fun to be with.

It was a holiday which will stay in our memories for a long time to come.

I would like to thank all concerned, including the guests, for a fabulous holiday.

John

September 2019



Steppe Eagle

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Whooper Swan
Grey Lag Goose
Ruddy Shelduck
Common Shelduck
Common Pochard
White-headed Duck
Eurasian Wigeon
Northern Shoveler
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Common Teal
Chukar
Daurian Partridge
Japanese Quail
Altai Snowcock
Great Cormorant
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Eurasian Spoonbill
Great Crested Grebe
Black-eared Kite
Lammergeier
Eurasian Black Vulture
Western Marsh Harrier
Eastern Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Upland Buzzard
Steppe Buzzard
Booted Eagle
Golden Eagle

Common Kestrel
Merlin
Amur Falcon
Saker Falcon
Eurasian Coot
Demoiselle Crane
Northern Lapwing
Little Stint
Temminck's Stint
Pintail Snipe
Ruff
Marsh Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Common Redshank
Slender-billed Gull
Black-headed Gull
Mongolian Gull
Whiskered Tern
Common Tern
Pallas's Sandgrouse
Rock Dove
Hill Pigeon
Little Owl
Common Swift
Eurasian Hoopoe
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
Mongolian Lark
Greater Short-toed Lark
Eurasian Skylark

MAMMAL LIST

Long-eared Hedgehog *Hemiechinus dauuricus*

Pallas's Pika *Ochotona pallasi*

Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*

Tarbagan Marmot *Marmota sibirica*

Mongolian Three-toed Jerboa *Stylodipus sungorus*

Corsac Fox *Vulpes corsac*

Wolf *Canis lupus*

Pallas's Cat *Felis manul Pallas*

Snow Leopard *Panthera uncial*

Przewalskii Horse *Equus przewalskii*

Siberian Ibex *Capra sibirica*

Mongolian Gazelle *Procapra gutturosa*

Goitered (Black-tailed) Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*

Saiga Antelope *Saiga tatarica*

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Long-tailed Squirrel *Spermophilus undulates*

Brandt's Vole *Lasiopodomys brandtii*



Horned Lark
Sand Martin
Eurasian Crag Martin
Barn Swallow
Common House Martin
Richard's Pipit
Olive-backed Pipit
Tree Pipit
Blyth's Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
Citrine Wagtail
White Wagtail
Brown Accentor
Red-flanked Bluetail
Black Redstart
Common Redstart
Daurian Redstart
Güldenstädt's Redstart
Siberian Stonechat
Isabelline Wheatear
Northern Wheatear
Pied Wheatear
Black-throated Thrush
Blyth's Reed Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Greenish Warbler
Arctic Warbler
Yellow-browed Warbler
Hume's Warbler

Dark-sided Flycatcher
Taiga Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Azure Tit
Great Tit
Eurasian Nuthatch
Chinese Penduline Tit
Brown Shrike
Isabelline Shrike
Eurasian Magpie
Red-billed Chough
Daurian Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Common Raven
House Sparrow
Eurasian Tree Sparrow
White-winged Snowfinch
Brambling
European Greenfinch
Mongolian Finch
Common Rosefinch
Long-tailed Rosefinch
Ortolan Bunting
Grey-necked Bunting
Pallas's Reed Bunting