

• **WILD SAIGA RESEARCH VOLUNTEERING PROJECT** •



Wild Saiga Research Volunteering Project

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

The aim of the project is to provide an opportunity for international visitors to participate in saiga population monitoring program in Stepnoi Nature Sanctuary, Russia. The project was conceived to support the sanctuary which is a truly unique place where one of the last pieces of untouched steppe wilderness is protected by a small team of enthusiasts.

Location

The sanctuary is situated in Astrakhan region of Russia bordering with Kalmykia. The nearest city is Astrakhan which can be reached from Moscow by plane (about two and a half hours flight). Astrakhan has many hotels to rest after the flight, and big supermarkets to buy food for the stay in the sanctuary (self-catering). From Astrakhan, a private transfer will bring you to Liman town (about three hours drive, highway). In Liman, rangers will pick you up and bring to the rangers' station in the middle of the steppe (two hours drive, bumpy road). There is no mobile coverage or internet access there. It should be noted that in case of emergency the nearest fully-equipped hospital will be a five-hours drive away.

Wildlife

Saiga antelopes (*Saiga tatarica tatarica*) inhabit the sanctuary throughout the year with only occasional mass movements to the nearby Kalmykia. The whole population is only about 6,000 individuals. From May to October, saigas are regularly seen near the artesian well situated 1.5 km away from the rangers' station. This well is used by saigas as a waterhole, mineral lick, resting place, and social arena. From the middle of May, females come there with their calves. Males often fight on open areas around the waterhole. In September male calves born this spring already have tiny horns and female calves born this spring are still smaller than adult females. Therefore, it is easy to



distinguish all four main sex-age categories (adult males, adult females, juvenile males, and juvenile females).

Since saiga is a nomadic species, we cannot guarantee you will be able to see it during your stay. However, the chances are high, and we suggest Stepnoi NS is the best place in the world to see wild saiga at close range.

(All photos have been taken in Stepnoi NS)





Other mammals. Steppe wolves (*Canis lupus campestris*) can be seen at the waterhole. Sometimes a couple of adult wolves come to drink with their cubs. Wolves are even shyer than the saigas and the chances to see them are higher if you are very quiet in the hide. Red (*Vulpes vulpes*) and corsac foxes (*Vulpes corsac*) can sometimes visit the waterhole. Small mammals such as long-eared hedgehog (*Hemiechinus auritus*), steppe polecat (*Mustela eversmanii*), midday gerbil (*Meriones meridianus*), great jerboa (*Allactaga major*), northern three-toed jerboa (*Dipus sagitta*), thick-tailed three-toed jerboa (*Stylodipus telum*), social vole (*Microtus socialis*) and little ground squirrel (*Spermophilus pygmaeus*) can be seen when walking, spotlighting or using live traps. African wildcats (*Felis lybica*) are often captured on camera traps but rarely seen when spotlighting.







Birds. While in autumn mammals are more visible (low dry grass) and more often show up during the day (not that hot), spring and the beginning of summer is a great time to see birds. Artesian well attracts many bird species which come to drink, feed and rest. Some of the regular visitors are, among others, pallid (*Circus macrourus*) and western marsh harriers (*C. aeruginosus*), long-legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), demoiselle crane (*Anthropoides virgo*), pied avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) and various ducks and terns. More rare but possible are cinereous vulture (*Aegypius monachus*),



griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), red-throated pipit (*Anthus cervinus*), black-winged pratincole (*Glareola nordmanni*), Kentish plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), black-bellied sandgrouse (*Pterocles orientalis*), calandra lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*), black-headed bunting (*Emberiza melanocephala*) and many more others.







Weather

From spring to the middle of autumn there is desert-like contrast weather with chilly nights and hot sunny days. The middle of the day is often very hot with temperatures rising up to +40° C. Strong wind blows almost constantly during the daytime, and nights are usually quieter. It can be really cold early in the morning when



you sit almost motionless in the hide. On the other hand, it is very hot when you walk back to the rangers' station from the hide in the middle of the day.

What volunteers are doing there?

Observations from a hide in front of an artesian well provide the best opportunity to see elusive saiga antelopes. The hide is approximately 2.4 metres long and 1.5 metres wide and can fit up to three people. While the hide is only 50 cm higher than the ground level, one can freely stay upright inside it because the main part of the hide is underground. Such construction minimizes the disturbance of saigas. Volunteers usually walk to the hide from the rangers' station (about 1.5 km) very early in the morning before the first light. From the hide, you can observe and photograph saiga. The main task they complete for saiga monitoring program is recording the sex and age of saiga antelopes visiting the artesian well and the type of their activity. All necessary information about how to record sex-age classes and activity types will be provided before the first session in the hide. In addition, volunteers record bird species seen near the well. In the middle of the day guests can go back to the accommodation to have rest and lunch, but to go out of the hide you should wait for a moment when there are no saigas around. In the late afternoon, the second session in the hide is possible. It is usually less successful for saiga observations, but other mammals and birds can be seen.





The data collected by volunteer groups throughout the year will be summarized and published in Saiga News Magazine - the Saiga Conservation Alliance's newsletter providing up-to-date information about saiga conservation and ecology. See saiga-conservation.org and saigaresourcecentre.com for more information.

Other activities. Right near the rangers' station, there is a watching tower which provides great steppe views and can be used to see distant saiga aggregations. Morning and late afternoon walks through the steppe is a pleasurable experience. Guided walks can be organized to see birds and birds' nests, mammals' tracks and burrows and unique steppe vegetation. Sometimes it is possible to see saigas distantly. It is allowed to walk without a guide, but guests should inform the guide every time you go for a walk. Spotlighting can sometimes result in exciting encounters with rare species, but many night walks are unsuccessful. The visibility is mainly poor owing to high grass. Guided spotlighting walks can be organized. Right near the rangers' station, the visibility is better and some animals (gerbils, hedgehogs, polecats, foxes) are sometimes attracted by the organic waste pile. Here, very short spotlighting walks can be done several times every night. Live trapping of small mammals can be carried out (the success is very variable between the years). In addition, a camera trap will be installed



near the artesian well to see who is visiting it at night) or near promising mammal burrows found during the walks.



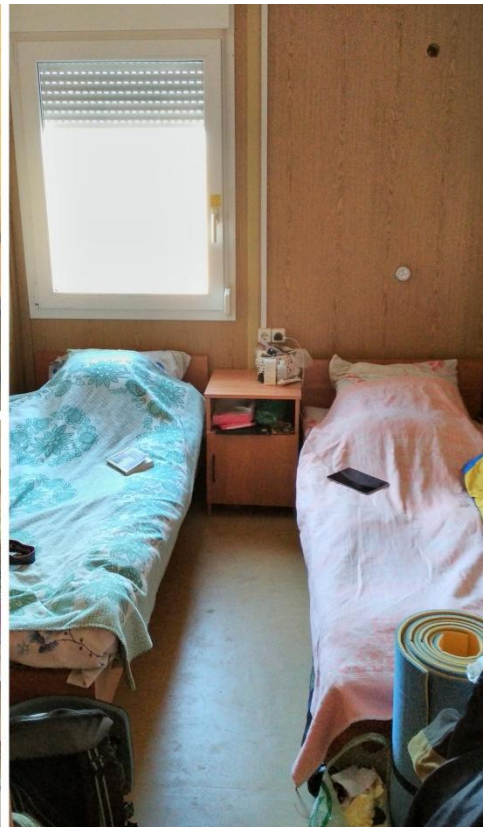


Accommodation

The rangers' station has two main buildings. One building is used by rangers who patrol the territory against poaching. The second building is a small cottage providing basic accommodation for guests. There are two outdoor toilets and a shower with a sun-heated water tank. There is no water source there and all water is delivered from the nearest town that makes the stay in the sanctuary more expensive. The cottage has one small room for three persons with three beds with pillows and blankets, a dining room with a couch for one more guest and a small basically equipped kitchen with a gas stove. Solar powered batteries provide electricity which is sometimes unstable.

In contrast to the grassy vegetation of the surrounding steppe, the area near the buildings has some small trees. The birds are often attracted by these trees and some lazy birding can be done right at the rangers' station.





What to bring?

Prepare to be self-sufficient. You will have time to buy food for yourself in Astrakhan. You will need to buy plenty of food which you can take with you in the hide. You can pack some of your preferable snacks in your luggage because they may be not available in Russia. However, the variety is quite wide nowadays. Bring thermos if you want to enjoy coffee or tea when in the hide. Bring your own dishes and all you need for cooking.

Bring your own sleeping bag and linen. It is also recommended to bring a lightweight tent and sleeping matt in case we will need to move to another part of the sanctuary in search of saigas. It is unlikely that you will need it, but it is better to have it with you just in case. You may bring one tent for several persons or small tent for each person.

Headlamps and torches with spare batteries are needed. Spare batteries for a camera would be useful. There are solar powered batteries at the rangers' station but there may be not enough power to charge your camera batteries every time you may need it.

Take a first aid kit and all the medications you may need with you. Antihistamine may help if you get many mosquito bites and allergy symptoms appear. Repellent and a strong sunscreen are highly recommended. Sunglasses are necessary because the sun shines directly in the hide in the late morning.

Take both warm clothes for cold nights and light clothes for hot days. Shorts are definitely not recommended for walking in the steppe because of sharp grasses and ticks. Long-sleeved shirts are better than t-shirts since they protect your skin from UV-radiation. Hat, trekking shoes and long socks are necessary. Natural fabrics are more comfortable than synthetics for hot weather. Note that heat strokes are not unusual in this region.



Bring your binoculars and camera. Drones are not allowed since saigas are very afraid of any aircrafts.

Travel tips and safety

Please check your visa requirements well in advance. It may be impossible to change the dates of the trip once confirmed.

Generally, Russia is safe and easy to travel but the language barrier is a big problem for foreigner travellers. Keep your valuables such as cameras safely packed (or leave them in the hotel) when walking in the cities. We would not recommend you to walk alone in Astrakhan after dark. We strongly recommend you to avoid street food and small cheap restaurants in Astrakhan (in Moscow it should be fine in most cases). Bring a photocopy of your passport with you and keep it separately from your passport. Stepnoi Nature Sanctuary is a very safe but remote place.

Only the ruble is accepted throughout Russia. There are ATMs and banks in Astrakhan. Make sure you have cash if you want to use a taxi or buy something in small grocery shops.

Russian power outlets function on 220 volts and comply with European standards.

Astrakhan and its region are one hour ahead of Moscow (UTC +4).

Emergency number in Russia: **112**.

Contacts

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