

• 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 comfy hotels to rest after the flight, and big supermarkets to buy food for the stay in the sanctuary (self-catering). The trip guide will meet visitors at Astrakhan airport and bring to the hotel and then to the supermarket. From Astrakhan, a private transfer will bring guests to Liman town (about three hours drive, highway). In Liman, rangers will pick the guests 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. The guides will be in the sanctuary during the whole trip.

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 the beginning of May to the middle of October, saigas are regularly seen near the artesian well situated 1.2 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. On request, it is possible to stay in the wolf hide often providing better chance to see these carnivores than the saiga 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 eversmani*), midday gerbil (*Meriones meridianus*), great jerboa (*Allactaga major*), 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 are 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. Occasional rainy periods lasting up to a week are possible.

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 1.3 km) very early in the morning before the first light. From the hide, they can observe and photograph saiga. The main task volunteers complete for saiga monitoring program is recording the sex and age of saiga antelopes visiting the artesian well and the type of their activity. This task doesn't take much time and volunteers have plenty of time for photography and observations. 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 can 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 one 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 they go for a walk. At night, spotlighting walks are possible but are often uneventful. The visibility is mainly poor owing to high grass. 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, 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 can be installed near the artesian well to see who is visiting it at night) or near promising mammal burrows found during the walks.



On request it is possible to drive to another part of the sanctuary and stay in the wolf hide. This hide is situated at the waterhole regularly visited by a pack of wolf. Saigas are rarely seen here, however. To improve the chances to see wolves it is recommended to stay in the hide for a few days. This hide can fit up to two persons and sleeping is possible only on the ground in hide. Sleeping mats and sleeping bags are essential for the stay in this hide.



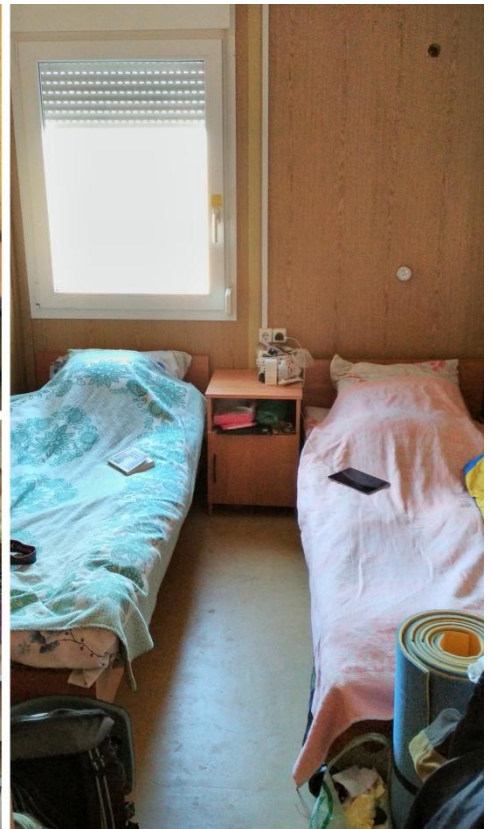


Accommodation

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 and fridge. Solar powered batteries provide electricity which can be unstable in cloudy days.

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 enjoyed right at the rangers' station.





The hide

The hide has big windows in three directions without a glass. It is possible to use a tripod for photography. It should be noted that the hide is small (2.4 metres long and 1.5 metres wide) and has no separate toilet compartment. The toilet is a bucket with a lid. There is a curtain to provide some intimacy for toilet but you still will be very close to other people in the hide. The morning sessions in the hide usually last at least seven hours.

What to bring?

There will be time to buy food in Astrakhan. We will need to buy plenty of food which can be taken in the hide. Guests can pack some of their preferable snacks in their luggage because not everything may be available in Russia. However, variety is quite wide nowadays. Bringing thermos one can enjoy coffee or tea when in the hide.

It is recommended to bring sleeping bag and sleeping matt in case we will need to move to another part of the sanctuary in search of saigas. 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 the camera batteries every time one may need it.

Every guest should bring a first aid kit and all the medications he/she may need. Antihistamine pills may help if one 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.

Guests will need 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.

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. Note that heat strokes are not unusual in this region.

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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