

## **NATURE TRAVEL IN MONGOLIA**

**by Wildlife Tour in Mongolia [www.mongolianwildlifetour.com](http://www.mongolianwildlifetour.com)**

8 to 25 Februar 2019

Three people from western Europe participated in this trip to Mongolia : two french (Sylvain CORDIER the leader of the group, Christian DRONNEAU) and one belgian (Alain VERSTRAETE). Our two main targets was to see - and photograph - the two beautiful and fascinating cats of the country : the Pallas Cat and the incredible Snow Leopard !

We took our fly towards the international airport of Oulan Bator the 8th February and we arrived the 9th February in early morning. There, we met our guide : the efficient and friendly Otgonbayar BAATARGAL (Oogii). Outside the warm building, we realised immediately the weather conditions that we will have during our stay : blue sky with few wind, but ... very very cold temperatures, around  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  ! It was the mean temperature during our trip in the daytime, with minimum of  $-28^{\circ}\text{C}$  and maximum of  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  on some sunny protected slopes.

The car, a comfortable 4x4 driven by our guide, was ready to go for the long way to the Pallas Cat place, 500 km east from Oulan Bator. The road was good, only a little bit rough by places, in particular near Oulan Bator. Exceptionally, it was no snow this winter in eastern Mongolia !



The first surprise along the road through the steppe, some 50 km after leaving the capital was the very huge statue of Genghis Kan, impossible to be missed.



The traffic on the road was very fluid and there were few turns. Through the huge and wild landscapes of the steppe we were able to see many herds of Sheeps, goats, cows, horses and also some yacks and camels, all moving freely without fences.



They were also regularly some « stupa » visited by Crows and Choughs. In addition, the corpses of domestic animals attract the vultures. We saw particularly Black Vultures on the ground near the dead animals and unlikely to fly due to the absence of thermal columns. We saw several groups of 10 to 15 birds, some of them very close to the road.



Black Vulture

They were also some Golden Eagles spotted by our guide's sharp eyes. The main raptor after Öndörhaan was the Upland Buzzard, perched or laid on the side of the road, with a plumage as variable as that of our Common Buzzard.



Golden Eagle

The 20th last kilometers were a not tarred track and we arrived to our camp, a place prepared by the staff of Oogii our guide, near the native village of Oogii.



Our camp was a three gers place : one for us (« sleeping and resting room »), one for the lunch, joint talks and briefing and the last one for our 5 hosts (our guide, his two assistants and two women taking care of meals and warming).



In the steppe, many people are dressed with traditional clothes, taking care of their cattle.



The first day, guided by Oogii and his two assistants, we were able to see the Pallas Cat and to take many very good photos. The eyes of this very clever animal are an exception in the cat world : it is the only cat with round pupils !

The next day, thanks to the intimate knowledge of the places by Oogii, we were able to take more photos on this beautiful cat, in different places.











In the steppe, it was also possible to see big herds of Mongolian Gazelle (some hundreds), some Black-tailed Gazelle (6), Fox and Corsac Fox. The larks were also abundants : maily Horned Larks, but also flocks of Mongolian Larks an endemic bird of the country. Other very interesting birds were seen : Saker Falcon, Merlin, Little Owl, Rock Sparrow and so on.

At the 12th February, we came back to Oulan Bator to take our plane to Khovd near the Altaï mountain, in the western Mongolia. The fly was very early in the morning next day with a stopover at Ögil. In contrast with eastern Mongolia, the lanscape was completely snowy and we were blocked 1 ½ hour in Ögil by short snow falls on Khovd.



At the airport of Khovd, two 4x4 cars were at our disposition with two drivers. After lunch, we get immediatly towards our second camp at the foot of a small mountain range. Like at the previous camp, there was 3 gers and quite same number of staff (Oogii, 2 women for the logistic, 2 assistants and 2 local young shepherds knowing the mountain on their fingertips and abble to climb everywhere it is necessary to found the Snow Leopard).







We were impatient to go in the mountain, to immerse us in the habitat of the Snow Leopard, an animal that had filled all the dreams of our nights since our arrival in Mongolia. And extraordinary circumstances, considerably helped by the incredible knowledge of the places by our guide and its piercing eagle view, just a few dozen minutes after arriving in the valley that would serve as a place of observation during our stay, we saw one Snow Leopard in the upper part of a steep and rocky slope ! Some minutes later, a second animal was visible and the couple was walking the one behind the other. At one moment, there was even an attempt to mate !



And during the 4 next days, we had the opportunity to see them at some point during the day, often for a long time. At the 4th day, we saw a mating at 200 or 300 m in the rocks, at the

lower part of a steep slope. Their many strong cries and roars resonated on the slopes of the mountain !











After one week, a team of researchers from WWF came to work in the mountains, installing camera traps and ...all animals disappear during these period. So, it was the end for us  
The observation of the Snow Leopard was the highlight of the trip, but other interesting animals were daily observed : Siberian Ibex, dens and tracks of Pika, Lammergeir, Golden

Eagle, Hill Pigeon, Altai Snowcock, Chukar Partridge, Brandt's mountain finch, Twite and an incredible Gyrfalcon of the white morph soaring with a Golden Eagle.



During the week where the WWF was working, we have been able to go around and see some villages with camel races and some cave paintings and rock carvings.









Before leaving Mongolia, the 24th February, we spent a day in the Hustai National Park for the Przewalski Horse, around 100 km northly of Oulan Bator. It was also a great experience without loss of time thanks to Oogii who knew exactly where to find the horses. The spectacle of Red Deer close to the wild horses, in a landscape without forest, was also a great naturalist moment.









And at this park, the logistic conditions are very good (comfortable gers, good restaurant, touristic shops and small museum on the nature of the park).

For all of us, this trip was a striking experience : for nature, for the wilderness of Mongolia, for human relations, for the livestyle in gers, for the incredible observations on Pallas Cat and Snow Leopard and last but not least, for the high professionalism and knowledge of our guide and his staf.

CD, SC & AV – 2 avril 2019