

Mongolia – Birding in the Steppes of Genghis Khan

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Ulaanbaatar
Day 3	Gun-Galuut Nature Reserve
Day 4/5	Gorkhi-Terelj National Park
Day 6	Khukh Lake
Day 7/8	Otgontenger
Day 9	Uliastai
Day 10/11	Bayan Lake & Margats Mountains
Day 12/13	Kharkhiraa Mountains
Day 14	Khovd
Day 15	Ulaanbaatar
Day 16	Fly London

Departs

May / June - See website for dates & prices (MON01)

Grading

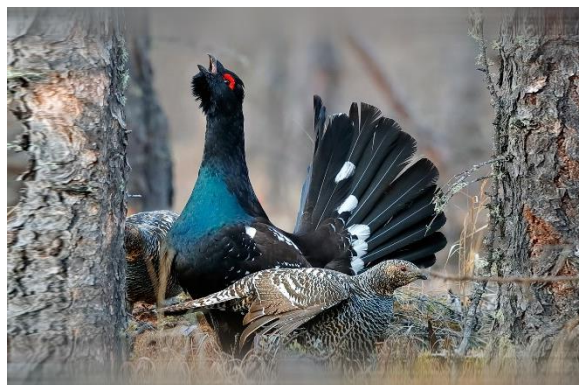
Grade A/B – See Page 6 for more information.

Focus

Birds, some mammals & spectacular landscapes.

Highlights

- Journey through the breathtaking landscapes of Mongolia from Ulaanbaatar to the Altai Mountains
- Pallas's Sandgrouse, Asian Dowitcher, Oriental Plover, Black-billed Capercaillie, Altai Snowcock & many more
- Explore steppe, taiga forests, mountains & desert-fringed lakes
- Mammals may include Saiga Antelope, Corsac Fox, Wolf &, if fortunate, Pallas's Cat
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Mongolian (Henderson's) Ground-jay, Black-billed Capercaillie & Oriental Plover. Photos under licence from Shutterstock Images



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Introduction

The very mention of 'Mongolia' conjures up images of Genghis Khan and hordes of fearless horsemen charging across the open steppe! Thankfully the marauding hordes have long since vanished and in their place remain peaceful nomadic families dotted over this seemingly timeless landscape of distant horizons, blue skies and exotic wildlife! On this pioneering tour we will take you on a journey across some of Mongolia's most dramatic landscapes, to the remote Altai Mountains in the far west of the country (realm of the elusive Snow Leopard), through endless steppe – dotted with graceful Demoiselle Cranes – past desert-encircled lakes and into rugged forest-clad hills. We will journey from Mongolia's historic capital of Ulaanbaatar to the Altai Mountains close to the border with China, enjoying the scenery and looking for some of central Asia's most iconic birdlife en route, including Altai Snowcock, Black-billed Capercaillie, White-naped Crane, Oriental Plover, Mongolian Ground-jay, Pallas's Sandgrouse and many more. We will be hoping for a few exciting mammals too, such as Saiga Antelope and Pallas's Cat, probably the most grumpy-looking feline in the world!

This is a unique and pioneering holiday following a birding route that few have trodden, but one that is sure to yield many unforgettable experiences and wildlife encounters. It will take us through Mongolia's vast and unspoilt landscapes, a country three times the size of France but home to only 3.3 million people (nearly half of which live in the capital!). There are no hotels whatsoever over most of the route we will be covering and so we will be staying in simple, but comfortable, ger camps (in two person yurts - there is no camping in tents on this tour!) and looked after by a friendly team of local staff.



Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Depart London

We depart London's Heathrow Airport this morning on an overnight Turkish Airlines scheduled flight to Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, changing aircraft in Istanbul.

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar

We should arrive into Ulaanbaatar (known locally as 'UB'), Mongolia's historic and bustling capital, by mid-morning. Here we will be greeted by our friendly local guide and transfer to a comfortable hotel on the outskirts of the city, close to the Tuul River, for one night. Lying at an elevation of 1,300 metres, Ulaanbaatar is the biggest city in the country, with a population of over 1.3 million, almost half of Mongolia's entire population!

After settling in, we will enjoy some gentle birdwatching in the riparian forests in which our hotel is set and along the nearby Tuul River. Here, we will encounter our first Mongolian birds which may include Falcated and Mandarin Ducks, Cinereous Vulture, Pacific Swift, Brandt's Horned Lark, and the ubiquitous Red-billed Chough. Daurian Jackdaw may be found too along with the delightful Azure Tit and White-crowned Penduline Tit. White-cheeked Starling, Isabelline Wheatear, Pallas's Warbler, Long-tailed Rosefinch and possibly even Amur Falcon mean it is sure to be an exciting start to our holiday. Daurian Pika and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel may be our first mammals of the tour.



Day 3

Gun-Galuut Nature Reserve

Leaving the capital, we begin our exploration of Mongolia with a night in Gun-Galuut Nature Reserve which sits on the fringes of the Gobi Desert and is located only two and a half to three hours from Ulaanbaatar. We will then explore the reserve's boulder-strewn hillsides, sand dunes, steppe and wetlands, which together cover around 200 square kilometres. The extensive Tsengiin Burd



Marshlands are particularly rich in birds. Species to look out here for include Bar-headed and Swan Geese, Whooper Swan, Cinereous Vulture, Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, Red-necked and Temminck's Stint, Terek Sandpiper, Isabelline Shrike, Mongolian Lark and Pallas's Bunting, plus White-necked, Hooded and Demoiselle Cranes. We will explore the reserve by both vehicle and on foot.

After an exciting and rewarding day in the field, we will return to our simple, but comfortable, ger camp for dinner. As the sun sets, we may spot some of the region's nocturnal mammals such as the Long-eared Hedgehog, Corsac Fox or a Mongolian Three-toed Jerboa!

Day 4 & 5

Gorkhi-Terelj National Park

Next, we move to Terelj National Park for a 2-night stay. Gorkhi-Terelj National Park (to give the reserve its full name) covers nearly 3,000 square kilometres and is located only 70 kilometres northeast of Ulaanbaatar in the

Khentii Mountains. The park is clothed in a mix of pine and larch forests, dotted with rocky outcrops and meadows. It is home to a wonderful variety of birdlife including an exciting suite of 'Sibes' such as Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Yellow-browed, Arctic and Pallas's Warblers, Pine and Pallas's Reed Buntings, Blyth's Pipit and Red-throated Thrush. Resident birds include Three-toed Woodpecker, Hazel Grouse and Lammergeier.

Our main target species here, however, is the impressive Black-billed Capercaillie. This is a close relative of the 'Western' Capercaillie that still retains a toehold in Scotland, but is slightly smaller, has a black beak (as the name would suggest) and is only found in the taiga larch forests of northern China, Mongolia and Russia. Although, this is elusive bird and there are no guarantees, our guides know where to look and we stand a very good chance of seeing this iconic central Asian species.



Day 6

Khukh Lake

Moving on, we next fly west to the town of Bayankhongor in central Mongolia from where we transfer to Khukh Lake for one night. Here, amongst the dramatic landscape of mountains, steppe and forest that surround the lake, we will search for a variety of high-altitude species such as Güldenstädt's Redstart, Alpine, Altai and Brown Accentors, Pere David's Snowfinch, Plain and Brandt's Mountain-finches and Altai Snowcock. One of our main targets here, however, will be the rare White-throated (Hodgson's) Bushchat, a bird that very few people have seen on its breeding grounds! Mammals to keep an eye open for include Siberian Chipmunk, Tarbagan Marmot, Corsac Fox, Wolf, Saiga Antelope and Asian Wapiti.

Day 7 & 8

Otgontenger

From Khukh Lake it is only two to three hour drive to Otontenger where we will be based for the next two nights in a comfortable ger camp. Otontenger Mountain rises to over 4,000 metres and is clothed in a wonderful mix of habitats from high alpine meadows, mountain lakes and rocky scree, down to boreal and riparian forests on its lower slopes. Birds to look out for include Altai Snowcock, Himalayan and Cinereous Vultures, White-backed Woodpecker, Brown Shrike, Azure Tit, Sulphur-bellied and Dusky Warblers, Evermann's Redstart, Asian Rosy-finch, Long-tailed and Pallas's Rosefinches and Black-faced Bunting. Mammals include Alpine and Pallas's Pika, Tarbagan Marmot, Corsac Fox and, as always, a chance of something rarer such as Wolf!

Day 9

Uliastai

Today we drive for five hours or so to the Uliastai, the capital of Zakhan Province with a population of around 24,000 people. We will then overnight in a comfortable hotel.

Day 10 & 11

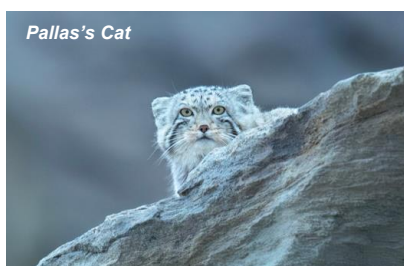
Bayan Lake & Margats Mountains

We will travel eastward on Day 10 to our next ger camp located between Bayan Lake and the Margats Mountains. The journey will take us around four to five hours and crosses a dynamic and beautiful landscape of sand dunes, steppe, bird-rich lakes and rugged mountains.

Bayan Lake is one of the most important bird habitats in western Mongolia, supporting a wealth of exciting species due to its nutrient rich waters. Bar-headed Goose, Swan Goose and Eastern Spot-billed Duck can be found bobbing on the lake, whilst Red-necked and Long-toed Stints, Brown-cheeked Rail and large aggregations of Demoiselle Crane can be seen feeding along the water's edge, along with Pallas's Gull and flocks of migrant White-winged Terns ... all sporting their breeding finery. Three specialities of the region are Asian Dowitcher, Pallas's Fish Eagle and Pallas's Sandgrouse, all of which we will make a special effort to find. Paddyfield Warbler and Great Reed Warbler sing from the patches of reedbed, accompanied by the twittering notes of Mongolian Lark and Mongolian Short-toed Lark from surrounding grassland and steppe. Meadow Bunting, Richard's and Blyth's Pipit, Saker Falcon, Long-legged Buzzard, Isabelline Shrike, Desert Wheatear, Asian Desert Warbler, Mongolian Accentor, Mongolian Finch and Pere David's Snowfinch and may also be seen as we explore the surroundings.



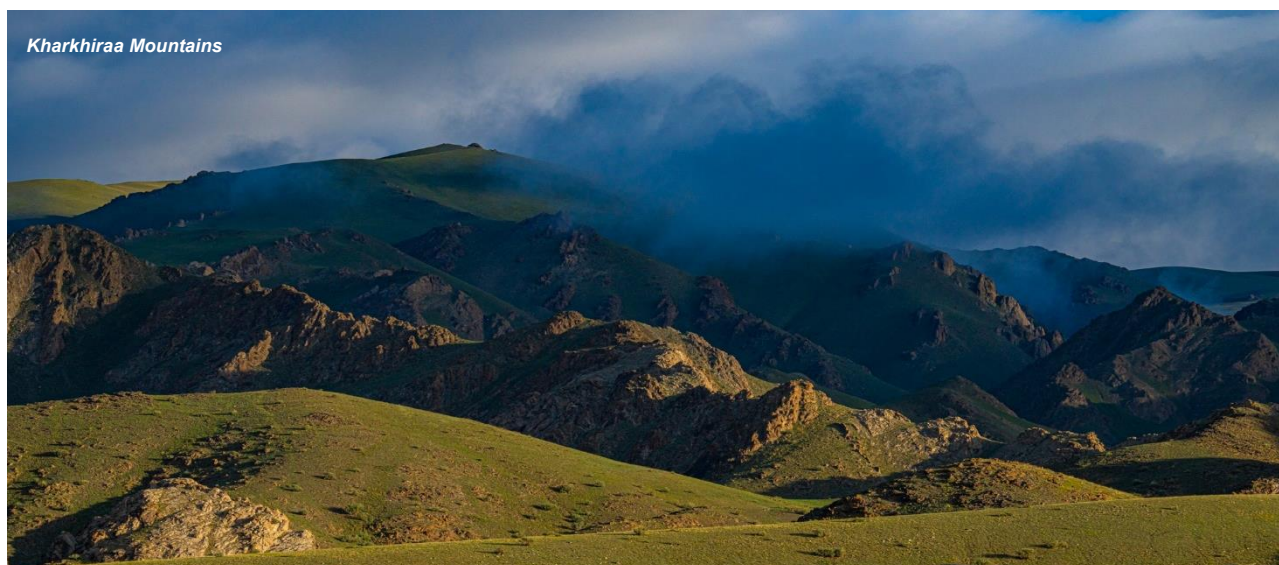
We will also take the time to visit the impressive scenery and landscapes of the Margats Mountains. Here impressive rocky outcrops of granite protrude through the rolling plains and offer cover for the enigmatic Pallas's Cat. This area offers our best chance of finding this grumpy-looking feline and, although elusive and difficult to see, we hope to strike lucky! Other mammals to look out for include Grey Wolf, Steppe Polecat, Daurian Pika, Long-tailed Ground Squirrel and various nocturnal jerboas.



Day 12 & 13

Kharkhiraa Mountains

Our next two days will be spent exploring the dramatic scenery of the Kharkhiraa Mountains, which lie around five to six hours from the Margats Mountains. This spectacular mountain ranges – part of the Altai Mountains – is the epitome of Mongolian wilderness: high alpine meadows, vast open steppe, rugged valleys, fast-flowing glacial rivers, coniferous forests and, most striking of all, few (if any) signs of people! Our time will be spent between the altitudes of 2,000 and 3,200 metres, exploring a range of different upland habitats. Among the rocky slopes and outcrops our targets will be the breeding high-altitude birds such as Güldenstädt's Redstart, Evermann's Redstart, Wallcreeper, Altai Snowcock, White-winged Snowfinch and Brandt's Mountain-finch, as well as Alpine, Brown and Alati Accentors. In early June, summer is starting to reach the steppes and mountains of north-west Mongolia. The midday sun should be warm and birds, hopefully, plentiful! The whistling of Mongolian Marmot will create a delightful background chorus, whilst overhead we will look for Golden and Steppe Eagles, as well as Lammergeier and both Cinereous and Himalayan Griffon Vultures. As we make our way into alpine forests and meadows we will be looking out for Pallas's and Hume's Leaf Warbler, alongside Pine, Godlewski's, Meadow and Grey-necked Buntings, Black-throated and Red-throated Thrushes, Great, Beautiful and Red-mantled Rosefinches. Mammals may include Siberian Ibex, Argali, Pallid Ground Squirrel, Alpine Pika, Tolai Hare, Goitered Gazelle, Asian Wapiti and Mongolian Saiga Antelope.



Kharkhiraa Mountains

Whilst the birds and other wildlife will undoubtedly be the highlight for many, we will also ensure that the scenery is not ignored with visits to the Goonjur Waterfall, Otor Canyon and Gurvan Khoroo Gorges – undoubtedly some of the most striking landscapes found in the region. As night falls, and if we are very fortunate, we might perhaps spot a Grey Wolf or a Pallas's Cat. Snow Leopards roam these mountains too, but are rare, very elusive and unlikely to be seen on this tour (although our 2024 group did strike lucky!).



Lammergeier



Wallcreeper



Meadow Bunting

Day 14

Ulaangon & Uvs Lake

Our final stop on this holiday will be Ulaangon, a journey of around three to four hours. Here we will be based in a comfortable hotel for one night whilst we explore the nearby Uvs Lake. This huge saline lake – Mongolia's largest – covers over 3,500 square kilometres and was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2003 (and a Ramsar Wetland in 2004). It lies at 759 metres above sea level in a tectonic depression within the Uvs Lake Basin and is



Mongolian Ground-jay

surrounded by mountains,

desert and steppe. The lake's brackish waters support a wonderful variety of birds, both breeding and migrant, including the rare Relict Gull. Others that occur on the lake and in its immediate surroundings include Stejneger Scoter, White-headed Duck, Pallas's Gull, Whiskered, Black and White-winged Terns, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Isabelline Shrike, White-crowned Penduline Tit and many more including a variety of migrant waders, duck and other waterbirds. The enigmatic Mongolian (Henderson's) Ground-jay can also be seen here too.



Pallas's Gull

Day 15

Ulaanbaatar

Today we will fly from Khovd, in the far west of the country, to Ulaanbaatar. If time permits, we will make another visit to Uvs Lake before heading to the airport for the flight back to the capital. On arrival we will transfer back to our comfortable hotel on the edge of the city close to the Tuul River.

Day 16

Fly London

We fly back to London's Heathrow Airport this morning on a scheduled Turkish Airlines flight, via Istanbul, arriving mid-evening.

Grading

Grade A/B – Although this is a straightforward birdwatching and wildlife tour, with no long treks or arduous walks included, we have graded it 'A/B' to reflect the long overland journeys that are necessary to explore this vast country and the lack of suitable hotels on our route. This unique and exciting tour will take you into areas of Mongolia that are little visited by tourists and offers the opportunity to traverse through some of our planet's most spectacular – and peopleless – landscapes. The lack of traditional tourist facilities means that, with the exception of the occasional hotel night, we will need to stay in traditional 'ger camps' for the majority of our stay. Those joining us should be prepared for some long travel days too, although stops will be made en route and the dramatic landscapes of Mongolia mean that the 'road trip' element of this holiday is one of its highlights!

We will make the ger camps as comfortable as possible and you can be assured a warm welcome, and first rate care, by our friendly team of local camp staff. Furthermore, all group members will have a window seat in the

comfortable 4-wheel drive vehicles. So, if you have a love of birds, wildlife and the wilderness and come equipped with a spirit of adventure and a sense of fun then you are assured an unforgettable holiday full of breathtaking vistas and exciting wildlife.

Walks are mostly easy and usually cover no more than a couple of kilometres. The terrain underfoot can be rough, however, and the forest walks in search of the Black-billed Capercaillie can be strenuous at times.

N.B. – Please remember that our group will be travelling in remote areas without easy access to sophisticated medical facilities. We would, therefore, ask you not to join the tour if you have a condition that requires regular medical treatment or have difficulty walking.

Weather

Mongolia lies in the northern hemisphere and therefore shares our seasons. Its location in the middle of the continent, however, leads to long hot summers and long bitterly cold winters! Our tours are scheduled to run during the late spring/early summer – the best time for birding – and you can reasonably expect mainly clear and sunny weather (Mongolia is known as the 'Land of the Blue Sky'). However, anything is possible here and so you must be prepared for all eventualities! Daytime temperatures are likely to be in the high teens to low 20s°C in the steppes and deserts, but it will be colder in the hills and mountains, with snow patches still on the ground at higher altitudes. At night it will be around 10 – 15°C in the lowlands, but dropping to around 5°C, or less, in the mountains. Rain, if it is going to fall, is most likely in the mountains.

Accommodation

When staying in Ulaanbaatar we will use a modern tourist hotel, each room with private facilities. Hotels in Uliastai and Ulaangom are little simpler in nature, but are clean and comfortable and also have private toilet and shower.

For the majority of the holiday we will be staying in simple, but comfortable, ger camps. There will be no camping in tents on this tour! The gers / yurts are twin-bedded and well insulated with a stove for heating and shared outside washing/bathroom facilities set up a short distance away. A generator is available for charging batteries etc. during the evenings, but we would recommend bringing a powerpack in case of shortages.



There is no running water, but there are flushing toilets a short distance from the gers, with 'hot' showers available on request at the end of the day. These are also powered by a generator so please note that they are not available 24/7. Gers at some of the sites have washbasins inside, at other sites washing facilities are separate. In the 'dining ger', tea, coffee and flasks of hot water are available. For more information, please call 01962 733051 or email info@naturetrek.co.uk



Vehicles

We will be travelling in Toyota Landcruisers or Lexus 470 SUVs on this tour. Both vehicle types are 4-wheel drive and comfortable and all passengers will have a window seat.



Extra expenses

The cost of drinks, Visas, tips (please allow around £150 for tips), laundry and all items of a personal nature are not included in the price of this holiday.

Your safety & security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the FCDO website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mongolia or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.