

Mongolia

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2/4	Terelj National Park
Day 5	Hustai National Park
Day 6/7	Ugii Lake
Day 8	Ulaanbaatar
Day 9/11	Yolyn Am
Day 12/13	Khongoryn Els
Day 14	Dalanzadgad
Day 15	Ulaanbaatar
Day 16	Depart Ulaanbaatar / Arrive London

Departs

June

Dates and prices

See website (tour code MON01)

Grading

B. Easy morning and afternoon walks, with more strenuous optional hikes to look for certain species. Some long road journeys often on unpaved roads.

Focus

Birds and some mammals.

Highlights

- Stunning scenery including open Steppe, the Gobi desert, scenic mountains and northern Boreal Forest
- Pallas's Sandgrouse, Asian Dowitcher, Oriental Plover, Henderson's Ground Jay, Saker Falcon & Altai Snowcock among the many birding highlights
- Stay in wonderfully scenic comfortable 'ger' camps
- Przewalski's Horse, Siberian Ibex & Argali Sheep among the mammal highlights



From top to bottom: Oriental Plover, Henderson's Ground Jay and Przewalski's Horse



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NB. 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.

Introduction

The very mention of ‘Mongolia’ conjures up images of Genghis Khan and hordes of fearless horsemen charging over 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!

Mongolia first opened her doors to foreign tourists in the early 1990's, following the collapse of the USSR. Tourism has developed slowly since, but in years past it was necessary to stay in basic ‘field camps’. This tour, however, has been designed to utilise simple yet comfortable ‘ger camps’ (yurts) for its duration. Despite this added comfort, travel here is still an adventure, with visitors rewarded with breath-taking scenery and varied and contrasting habitats which support a diverse range of flora and fauna, with birds being the most conspicuous form of wildlife. There will also be opportunities to meet nomadic families and, for the brave, the chance to try fermented mares milk – a local delicacy!

Day 1

Depart London

We fly from London to Ulaanbaatar, with a stop en route, either in Istanbul or Moscow depending on flight schedules.

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar –Terelj National Park

Upon arrival in Ulaanbaatar (known invariably as ‘UB’) we will be greeted by our friendly local ground team and no doubt Pacific Swifts as they whizz above the airport terminal. From here we’ll drive north eastwards for a few hours, to the Terelj National Park, where we spend the next three nights. We will be based in a comfortable tourist ger camp that borders the forest for 3 nights, allowing us to explore on foot. We’ll no doubt be a little fatigued today, but for those who wish there will be the opportunity for our first birding excursion this afternoon.

Day 3-4

Terelj National Park

The beautifully scenic Terelj National Park is dominated by Boreal or Taiga Forest, whose southern extremities consist predominantly of larch, pine and birch woodland. Black-billed Capercaillie are an exciting possibility here, although this species favours remote wooded valleys. A long day-hike is often required to stand a chance of seeing one of these impressive birds and for those of you ‘up for the challenge’ there will be a hiking excursion dedicated to this species today. However, there will be an alternative more relaxed option for those not wishing to make the hike. Other highlights might include such sought-after birds as Siberian Rubythroat, Chinese Bush Warbler, Oriental Cuckoo, Pine Bunting, Orange-flanked Bush Robin, Taiga Flycatcher, Long-tailed Rosefinch and Red-throated Thrush to name but

a few. Although mammals are tricky in this dense forest we might be rewarded with views of Siberian Chipmunk and Daurian Pika.

The activities of our final full day in Terelj will largely depend on the successes of the previous day. There might be the chance to try for Black-billed Capercaillie for those that wish, or we might concentrate on other species. As with yesterday, there will be a ‘softer’ option available for those not wanting to make the hike.

Day 5

Terelj National Park – Hustai National Park

Rising early we will bid farewell to the scenic Boreal Forests of Terelj National Park and start making our way westwards, towards Mongolia’s most iconic of habitats – the vast open grassy steppe! There will be many such journeys throughout the tour and we will keep a lookout for exciting raptors such as Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard and Saker Falcon. Frequent stops will also allow us to familiarise ourselves with various birds of the grassy steppe such as Asian Short-toed Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Mongolian Lark, and perhaps even Pere David's Snowfinch. We should reach in time for lunch, and we will have time to settle into our tourist ‘ger’ camp. Each ‘ger’ (or yurt) generally consists of twin beds with a central heating unit. Although simple, the gers are far more comfortable than the old alternative of field camping! Following lunch, we will start exploring the upland steppe habitat of Hustai National Park. One of the principal attractions of the reserve is a population of highly endangered Przewalski's Horse, and we will look to visit a small spring where they are known to drink in the late afternoon. At one time they were totally extinct in the wild, but thankfully a dedicated team were able to reintroduce them and Hustai is now one of the few strongholds for this impressive inhabitant of these beautiful upland slopes.

Day 6

Hustai National Park – Ugii Lake

An early pre-breakfast start will allow us to visit to a secluded valley, where possible mammals include Red Deer, Mongolian Gazelle, Mongolian Marmot, Wild Boar and both Red and Corsac Fox. Przewalski's Horse are also sometimes seen here, grazing on the high slopes and in amongst a small copse of silver birch. Other highly elusive inhabitants of the region include Grey Wolf, Lynx and Pallas's Cat, although we would need a great deal of luck to encounter any of these magnificent predators! Whilst mammal opportunities are as good as anywhere on the tour, our attention will no doubt be drawn to the superb and varied bird life to be found here which might include Daurian Partridge, Pied Wheatear, Meadow Bunting, Golden Eagle, Saker Falcon, Eurasian Hobby, Cinerous (Black) Vulture, Lesser Kestrel and Amur Falcon – the latter two species breeding in a known colony. Hunger will surely get the better of us as the morning wears on, and we will return to the camp for a well-earned breakfast. Having replenished our energy levels we will again head out into the field, this time making our way to the southern boundary of the national park. Here we will bird a beautiful section of the Tuul River where we will hope to see White-crowned Penduline Tit, Azure Tit, Bar-headed Geese, Demoiselle Crane and Daurian Jackdaw, amongst many others! Having enjoyed this picturesque location we will have to press on, driving across the open steppe towards Ugii Lake. However, at about half way we will make an extended lunchtime stop at another smaller steppe lake which attracts a wealth of exciting birdlife, as well as being an important watering hole for the local Mongolian cattle herders and their flocks. The eastern margin of the lake is characterised by fringing reed beds and marshes which we'll hope produce some highly sought-

after species such as the rare and elegant White-naped Crane, Demoiselle Crane, Falcated Duck, Spot-billed Duck, Oriental Reed Warbler, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Eastern Marsh Harrier and Pallas's Reed Bunting – the latter mainly associated with the scrubby habitat surrounding the lake. The western side of the lake has far less vegetation and here we hope to enjoy the sight and sound of hundreds of Bar-headed and Swan Goose, the latter sharing characteristics of both swans and geese resulting in a rather unique looking bird. Here too can sometimes be found White-winged Black Terns as they perform their dancing flight above the lake margins.

Having enjoyed our birding stop we will press on westwards towards Ugii Lake, most likely arriving late in the afternoon. Upon arrival we can settle into our scenically located ker camp where we will spend the next two nights.

Day 7

Ugii Lake

An early start is suggested today to ensure we make the most of the abundant birdlife to be found on and surrounding the lake. We shouldn't need to go far to find nesting Rock Sparrow, Small Snowfinch and Upland Buzzard in the direct vicinity of our camp – indeed a family of Red-billed Chough has been known to nest in one of the camp's out-buildings! We'll then make our way around the southern shore, stopping to scan the lake itself. We will expect to see many familiar species such as Ruddy Shelduck, Common Teal, Gadwell and Eurasian Widgeon. However, amongst these we hope to sift out some less familiar birds including the smart looking White-winged Scoter as well as the striking Dalmatian Pelican. As we move further round the lake we will likely come across various raptors including both Upland and Long-legged Buzzard, Steppe Eagle and overhead, the impressive Black (Cinereous) Vulture. However, we will be especially hoping to see Pallas's Fish Eagle and White-tailed Eagle – both of these impressive birds breeding in the vicinity of the lake. At the far western side of the lake is found a river delta with extensive grassy meadows and plentiful mudflats. Here we expect to see large numbers of honking Bar-headed and Swan Geese, and, amongst the more common wading species, we will again try for the elegant looking Asian Dowitcher – often to be found in pairs as they probe the muddy lake shore in search of invertebrates and other rich pickings. It is also worth keeping an eye out on the meadows that surround the lake. Corsac Foxes are common here and can be frequently seen dashing in amongst the geese in search of an easy meal. Other possible smaller mammals include Brandt's Vole and Mongolian Gerbil.

Following some great early morning birding around beautiful Ugii Lake, we will return to our ker camp for a well-earned breakfast. Following this, we will drive further west to a small marshy area to be found in the shallow valley of a gently meandering river. In the past this spot has produced some impressive species including White-naped Crane, Slovenian Grebe (in their smart breeding plumage), Bar-headed Goose, Citrine Wagtail, and Pallas's Fish Eagle. The extremely rare Siberian Crane has also been seen here in recent years and we will keep our fingers crossed that they might be present today as well! At a convenient time we shall break for another scenic picnic lunch that can be enjoyed on the lush grassy meadows in the area. The afternoon's birding will depend on how the morning has gone, allowing us to try for any species that might have eluded us. Having spent a good day out in the field enjoying the birdlife of this area, we shall make our way back to our ker camp for a restful night's sleep.

Day 8

Ugii Lake – Ulaanbaatar

There will be time for some early morning birding, to try for any species that we may have missed yesterday. We will then enjoy breakfast at our ger camp's restaurant before turning eastwards and making the long overland journey back to Ulaanbaatar. En route we will surely come across species such as Saker Falcon, Steppe Eagle, and Upland Buzzard, and perhaps a gathering of the Cinereous (Black) Vultures on a carcass. Smaller common steppe birds might include Mongolian Lark, Small Snowfinch and Asian Short-toed Lark. We'll have lunch en route, perhaps in a local restaurant or a picnic, depending on our progress. We will most likely reach UB in the early evening, and check-in to our local hotel where we can relax in anticipation of the following days birding and wildlife in the Gobi Desert!

Day 9

Ulaanbaatar - Yolyn Am

We set off early this morning to the Chinggis Khaan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar from where we take our flight to the Southern Gobi. We'll land at the Gurvan Saikhan Airport in Dalanzadgad town, which is the capital of Umnugobi province. However, there is little to keep us here and we will soon be on our way with a new ground crew, heading for the beautiful mountains of Yolyn Am. Lunch will most likely be at our ger camp, before we set off to explore the area this afternoon. We will enjoy some gentle hiking through steep-sided gorges and high altitude meadows. Birding these beautiful slopes is a real pleasure and we'll be on the lookout for exciting species such as Chukar, Daurian Partridge, Bearded and Himalayan Vulture and Saker Falcon. Another key target today will be the little known and near endemic Kozlov's (Mongolian) Accentor, which are only known to breed in these stunning mountains. Other possibilities here include Beautiful Rosefinch, Common Rosefinch, White-winged Snowfinch, Sulphur-bellied Warbler and Mongolian Finch, not to mention the incredible Wallcreeper! Having enjoyed our afternoon exploring these superb slopes we'll head back to our comfortable tourist ger camp where we will hope for a clear night sky in order to benefit from the lack of light pollution in this remote location which results in some quite extraordinary star gazing opportunities!

Day 10-11

Yolyn Am

The next two full days will be dedicated to exploring the beautiful mountainous region of Yolyn Am. One of the harder species to view in the region is the elusive Altai Snowcock. We'll make a concerted effort for this beautiful bird on our first morning, before they ascend to higher more inaccessible slopes as the day draws on. Possible mammals to be seen in these rugged mountain slopes include Siberian Ibex, Mongolian Pika and Red Fox. The Argali Wild Sheep, the biggest of all wild sheep are also to be found here, but we'll require a great deal of luck to encounter these most skittish of creatures. Past Naturetrek groups have also enjoyed views of Grey Wolf! Following another relaxed lunch we will visit another valley and then we will drive north of the ger camp to try for Oriental Plover on the wide steppe.

On our second full day here, we'll again bird the area. There are plenty of excellent locations to explore, and we'll be hoping for new bird species.

Day 12

Yolyn Am – Khongoryn Els

Descending onto the desert steppe below, we continue our journey westwards, stopping to try to locate the elegant Oriental Plover on the open desert steppe if our early efforts were fruitless. We have a long drive today, but there will be plenty of opportunities to stop for any interesting birds and wildlife, or indeed to simply step out of the vehicle to soak up the views and the silence of the open desert steppe. One such journey's halt will be a spring which can attract thousands of Pallas's Sandgrouse, and we'll be hoping our luck is in to witness this impressive gathering of one of the iconic birds of the region. We may also enjoy our picnic lunch here, but this will depend on our progress.

As we drive it is worth keeping an eye out for birds such as Long-legged Buzzard and Desert Wheatear, whilst possible mammals might include the magnificent Goitered Gazelle which is often seen hurtling over the open steppe. On the desert floor itself we will likely find a few reptiles of interest including the Tuva Toad-head Agama and Mongolian Racerunner. As we drive westwards a string of sand dunes will start to loom on the horizon, but it is only as we draw nearer that we can truly appreciate the scale of these natural wonders that rise high above the desert steppe. These are the impressive 'singing sand dunes' of Khongoryn Els which will form a stunning backdrop for our next few days. We'll have plenty of time to explore the dunes and their associated habitats over the coming days, particularly focussing excursions in the morning and late afternoons, to avoid the less active midday heat. However, after a long day's driving, we'll be glad to settle into our ger camp which faces these breath-taking natural wonders. Depending on our arrival there may be time for an afternoon excursion. Later on you might choose to relax with a cooling beer whilst enjoying the star-filled desert sky before a hearty evening meal and a relaxing night's sleep, in preparation to go in search of some of the star birds and other wildlife of the area tomorrow!

Day 13

Khongoryn Els

Today we will enjoy a full day of gentle birding and wildlife excursions. One of the highlights of our stay in this southern Gobi region will be the opportunity to explore the mysterious Saxaul Forests – a globally threatened habitat found in or on the boundaries of sandy and steppe deserts that range from mid to central Asia. Amongst these patches of drought-resistant 'forest', comprised of the gnarled and stunted Saxaul trees, we'll be hoping for views of the rare Saxaul Sparrow, as well as other star species of the region such as Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Wheatear, Steppe Grey Shrike and the striking Henderson's (Mongolian) Ground Jay; the latter often found in family feeding groups as they forage on the gravelly steppe, vocalising with their distinctive piping calls. Amongst the dunes, too, various mammals are also possible such as the Great Gerbil which can often be heard as it calls before scurrying into a desert bolt hole. At this time of year there is often a significant amount of snowmelt and water-run-off from the nearby Gobi Altai mountain range and this creates shallow pools and streams. It is here that that flocks of Pallas's Sandgrouse congregate as they use their specialised breast feathers to collect water, to be flown back to their expectant chicks. The sight of these elegant birds flying in front of the huge Khongoryn Els dunes will surely live long in the memory!

Day 14

Khongoryn Els – Dalanzadgad

We have the morning to try for anything we've missed over the last few days, before we make the long journey back to the small town of Dalanzadgad, where we'll spend one night.

Day 15

Dalanzadgad - Ulaanbaatar

Today we will take a short flight back to Ulaanbaatar. Depending on our flight time, there may be time for further exploring the Gobi Desert steppe, or if we fly in the morning we can spend time birding around UB. Lying at an elevation of 1,300 metres, the capital city of Ulaanbaatar is the biggest settlement in the country, with a population of over 1.3 million, almost half of Mongolia's entire population! Whilst there is little to keep us occupied on the busy and congested streets, we might well have time this afternoon to enjoy some birding on the outskirts of the city around the Tuul River, and its associated wetlands and surrounding stunted willow habitat. Here we will be hoping to encounter our first exotic avian delights such as White-crowned Penduline Tit, Azure Tit, White-cheeked Starling, Yellow-breasted Bunting, Long-tailed Rose-finch and Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler, as well as a host of water birds. We'll spend the night in a hotel in the capital, and we will enjoy a farewell meal this evening.

Day 16

Ulaanbaatar – London

This morning we will need to reluctantly to the airport for our return flight back to the UK (arriving the same day), having enjoyed the scenery, birds and wildlife of this incredible country!

Grading

This is a straightforward birdwatching and wildlife tour. No trekking or great hardship are involved, with the exception of an optional hike to go in search of Black-billed Capercaillie in the Terelj National Park. Unlike many Mongolian birding holidays, we DO NOT stay in any field camps on this tour, but are instead stationed in simple yet comfortable 'tourist ger camps' which are usually twin bedded with outside washing/bathroom facilities. The road journeys can be quite arduous however, with long distances covered across unpaved roads. These 'roads' are often across open steppe, with bumps and humps along the way. This is the only option in Mongolia, which has a very limited network of metalled roads. However, the holiday is quite suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness... provided a spirit of adventure travels with you! After all, this is Mongolia - a country with a great deal of development ahead of it!

Weather

Mongolia lies in the northern hemisphere and therefore shares our seasons. Its weather is best likened to that of such eastern European countries as Romania, Bulgaria or Turkey, i.e. long hot summers, and long cold winters! Our tours are scheduled to run during late spring/early summer - the best time for birding - and you can reasonably expect mainly clear and sunny weather. However, anything is possible in Mongolia and it has been known to snow in mid

summer, so we must be prepared! Daytime temperatures are likely to range between 20 and 30°C in the steppes and deserts, and between 10 and 20°C in the mountains. They are likely to fall by 10 to 20 degrees during the nights. 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. For the majority of the tour we will stay in simple but comfortable tourist ger camps. These are usually twin bedded with outside washing/bathroom facilities. The road journeys can be quite arduous however, with long distances covered across unpaved roads.

Bird and mammal lists

Where available these will be provided with your Final Joining Instructions.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Mongolia. 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 and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mongolia> regularly 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.

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