

Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Arrive Ulaanbaatar, afternoon excursion
Day 3	Fly Khovd, transfer to Altai Mountains
Day 4/9	Altai Mountains
Day 10/12	Fly Ulaanbaatar, transfer Hustai National Park
Day 13	Ulaanbaatar
Day 14	Depart Ulaanbaatar, arrive London

Departs

July - August

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code MON02)

Grading

A/B. Slow paced walks, but sometimes over rough ground. Max altitude ~ 3000m

Focus

Snow Leopards and other wildlife

Highlights

- Search for Snow Leopards in stunning wilderness landscape. A 7-night stay in the Altai Mountains.
- Other rare mammals including Pallas's Cat, bizarre looking Saiga Antelope, Przewalski's Horse and Siberian Ibex.
- Altai Snowcock, Guldenstadt's Redstart, Pallas's Sandgrouse amongst many birding highlights.
- Stay in wonderfully scenic 'ger' camps.



From top: Snow Leopard, Mongolian Ground Jay and Saiga Antelope



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Introduction

In the far west of Mongolia, the Altai Mountains represent one of very few true wildernesses left on Earth. In these remote foothills, rarely visited by tourists, we can find a remarkable assemblage of birds and mammals. Spending our days amidst the stunning scenery of the deep valleys and higher mountainous areas of the Altai Mountains and the nearby semi-desert, as well as the gently rolling hills and open grasslands of Hustai National Park, we hope to find many of the region's notable mammals, including Saiga Antelope, Przewalski's Horse and Mongolian Gazelle, not to mention a fabulous cast of Asian bird specialties including Mongolian Ground Jay, Altai Snowcock, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Pallas's Sandgrouse. Our primary target in the mountains, however, is a near-mythical species, able to move silently and with near-perfect camouflage in its native terrain, seeking out its prey with ghost-like stealth. The most highly prized target for many mammal enthusiasts, our top priority during our stay in the Altai will be to try and observe a Snow Leopard. Though exceedingly rare and difficult to find, with a 100% record to date, we do have a very realistic chance of seeing this beautiful cat on this Naturetrek tour, without having to brave the harsh physical and climatic conditions so often associated with viewing this secretive and much sought-after species.

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

In flight

We fly from London to Ulaanbaatar, with a change of plane en route likely in Istanbul depending on flight schedules.

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar

Upon arrival in Ulaanbaatar (known invariably as 'UB') we will be greeted by our friendly local ground team and Black Kites swirling over the airport terminal. 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! We will transfer to a hotel on the outskirts of the city for our first night, close to the Tuul River, with its associated wetlands and surrounding stunted willow habitat. Here



Azure Tit

we can recover from the long journey by enjoying some gentle birding in the hotel garden and along the river, hoping to encounter our first exotic avian delights such as Falcated and Mandarin Duck, Demoiselle Crane and Azure-winged Magpie. Daurian Jackdaw may be found and the wonderful Azure Tit and White-crowned Penduline Tit. Asian Short-toed Lark, White-cheeked Starling, Red-throated Thrush, Isabelline Wheatear, Long-tailed Rosefinch and possibly even Amur Falcon mean it is sure to be a very exciting start to the holiday. Long-tailed Ground Squirrel may be the first mammals we enjoy.

Day 3

Fly Khovd and transfer Altai Mountains

Today is largely a transfer day. This morning we take a domestic flight west to the city of Khovd, from where we travel overland to the Altai Mountains for a 7-night stay in a beautifully located ger camp. We feel it is important to have 7-nights here to really maximize our chances of Snow Leopards and there is a huge amount more to see too. With the mountains to the west and a vast lake surrounded by semi-desert steppe to the east, we will be staying in a remote and wildlife rich area. The facilities here are shared and basic, but the local team will be keen to provide everything that we need to make our stay in this remote part of Mongolia as comfortable as possible. The team here are experienced with cooking for western guests and vegetarians are well catered for too. As we explore the area, the cook will often come with us into the field and cook for us there to maximise our time. We shall be very well looked after. The temperature can vary and be hot even at high altitudes so expect to have everything from a light jacket through to t-shirts/long-sleeved shirts.

Days 4 – 9

Altai Mountains

With an estimated 30 to 35 Snow Leopards in the area, we shall ultimately hope that over the course of the week we will have the opportunity to observe the elusive Snow Leopard in the magnificent landscape of the Altai Mountains. These masters of disguise inhabit the rocky valleys and higher elevations and we reach a maximum of around 3,000 metres above sea level. The majority of the observation points can be accessed with a 4-wheel drive vehicle, followed by a short walk of up to around two kilometres. However, on occasion it may be necessary to take a slightly longer walk at higher altitude that will demand a basic fitness and the ability to walk on rocky, uneven or steep terrain. With plenty of time in the area, we will be able to proceed at a leisurely pace that is comfortable for everyone and will allow us time to admire the breath-taking scenery, alpine flora and the birding highlights without haste. There are at least 4 spotters who stay in the high mountains permanently, tracking the Snow Leopards and hoping to find an animal that we can observe. We shall typically wait for their call to



Snow Leopard

drive up into the high mountains and in the meantime, we will enjoy the fabulous valleys, open steppe and great lakes of this area. Seeking of course a fantastic array of mammals and birds. Depending on the success of the trackers and situation we may also of course head up to the high mountains ourselves to scan an area too. It is likely that 2 or 3 days would be spent up in the high mountains seeking Snow Leopard.

Most days will be early starts to enable us to be at the sites for when the wildlife and lighting is at its best, so please be prepared for being up early, potentially at twilight on occasion.

Although varying from one year to the next, our tour is timed to coincide with the period when the season's Snow Leopard cubs are beginning to venture out from their den sites to play and practice their hunting skills. With the cubs growing fast, the adult females will be hard-pushed to provide them with food and will be spending a large amount of their time hunting on the open slopes.

Through many years of observing and protecting these cats, the local trackers have built up an understanding of the cats' movements. Although far from guaranteed, this local knowledge gives us an excellent chance of seeing our target mammal and we will spend a time scanning from specific observation sites, giving us the greatest chance of success without intruding on the cats, or compromising their welfare.

Finding a Snow Leopard requires enormous patience and a slice of luck, but this is one of the main reasons why it is regarded so highly by mammal enthusiasts, and an appreciation of the task before us will be a very important aspect of the holiday. As sightings on previous tours have typically been at a distance of one to two kilometres across the valley, we strongly recommend that you bring a telescope with you on this holiday.



Snow Leopard and its camouflage! (Tom Mabbett from 2023 tour)

During our time in the mountains there will always be something to entertain us, whether it be the soaring raptors overhead, the playful Siberian Marmots with their constant whistling, the remarkable Siberian Ibex with their incredible ability to climb almost vertical cliffs, or perhaps even one of the very rare Argali Sheep. We are likely to find ourselves amongst small flocks of White-winged Snowfinches and individuals of the local race of Shore Lark, plus Altai Snowcock which are present in the area. Those with sharp eyes may be able to spot the beautiful Golden Plover that inhabit the highest peaks, whilst Lammergeier, Steppe and Golden Eagle, Black-eared Kite, Saker Falcon and Black Vulture can often be seen flying past as they scan the pastures and valleys for prey or carcasses, the latter most probably left by Snow Leopards. Exploring the beautiful alpine

meadows, we may find such delights as Brown and Altai Accentor, Pied Wheatear and Godlewski's Bunting. Raptors overhead may include Himalayan Vulture and Upland Buzzard.

We will also make time to visit the nearby steppes where we hope to see the critically endangered Saiga Antelope, alongside the more delicately built Goitered Gazelle. Probably one of the oddest-looking animals of its kind, the Saiga Antelope is characterized by a very large nose and bloated downward facing nostrils. Highly nomadic and able to cover enormous distances, during summer migrations the saiga's nose helps to filter out the dust kicked up by the herd and helps to cool the blood. In the winter, the role is reversed, and the nostrils are used as chambers to warm the cold air before it reaches the lungs.



Saiga Antelope

On one day, we will also take time to visit a huge lake and the adjacent wetland nearby in the "Great Lakes Depression". This area has an enormous amount to offer the birdwatchers in the group. Pallas's Sandgrouse can be found drinking along the shoreline, whilst Whooper Swan and Dalmatian Pelican breed amongst the vast expanse of reed beds, and Pallas's Gulls, Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns glide over the water. During our tours, enormous concentrations of hundreds of White-headed Ducks have been recorded and Red-crested Pochards have also been found along



Pallas's Sandgrouse

with Bar-headed Goose and possibly Demoiselle Crane and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler. The nearby grasslands offer perfect habitat for Asian Short-toed Lark, migrating Richard's and Red-throated Pipits, along with Citrine Wagtail and Steppe Grey Shrike. The Mongolian Ground-Jay, another avian highlight of Mongolia, is also possible, along with Desert Wheatear.

At some point during our stay, we will also take a drive out to Bumbat Mountain and the Yolt Valley. This area is not only home to Snow Leopards but is also an excellent site for the fantastic Pallas's Cat which we will try to see. Pallas's cat can also be found very close to base camp as our group in 2023 found out. Of course, luck is required to find this elusive species, but the team know of the best areas and we shall hope for success both in the Altai Mountains and Hustai NP. This small, stocky cat with thick woolly fur has its largest population in Mongolia but the populations are scattered and individual territories are vast. They are most likely to be found where pikas, their main prey, are found. They hunt by either waiting for long periods to take rodents emerging from their burrows, stalking carefully around cover or moving fast and pushing animals out from hiding places. Also in this area we may encounter Pallas's Pika, Tolai Hare, Long-tailed Ground Squirrel, Pallid Ground Squirrel, Gobi Altai Mountain Vole, Eastern Middy Jird, Mongolian Gerbil, Corsac and Red Fox, Goitered Gazelle and Siberian Ibex. Special birds may include Steppe Eagle, Saker Falcon, Mongolian Finch and Grey-necked Bunting among many others.



Pallas's Cat (taken in the area we shall visit)

Another possible highlight during our time at the camp is strictly limited to after dinner, when we will take to the steppes with a spotlight and scan the area for small 'jumping eyeshine'. The tiny kangaroo-looking rodents are likely Northern Three-toed Jerboas, which with luck and with some skill can be approached and observed as they feed on insects just a few metres away, sometimes even jumping between our shoes. Their huge ears and long tails that end in a fluffy ball of fur make them very endearing and a joy to watch. Other species may include Mongolian and Hairy-footed Jerboa, Gobi Altai Mountain Vole, Mongolian Gerbil, Long-eared Hedgehog and possibly Steppe Polecat.

Days 10 – 12

Fly Ulaanbaatar, transfer Hustai NP

Leaving this magical place behind, we will return back to Khovd Airport and fly to Ulaanbaatar, from where we transfer approximately 3 hours to Hustai National Park (also known as Khustain Nuruu National Park) for a 3-night stay. Home to the successfully reintroduced Przewalski's Horse (once extinct in the wild), Hustai covers an area of over 50,000 hectares and was designated as a Special Protection Area in 1993.

Comprised of gently rolling hills, open grasslands and areas of scrub, we have an excellent chance of encountering the world's only true wild horse species alongside a range of other mammals, birds and invertebrates. As we explore the area in vehicles and on foot, we are likely to encounter Long-tailed Sousliks scurrying amongst the vegetation, and in the lowlands, away from the central part of the national park, we have the chance to find Mongolian Gazelle. The valleys are full



Przewalski's Horse

of wildflowers and butterflies, and the rocky areas are home to Pied Wheatear, Meadow Bunting and Siberian Lesser Whitethroat. The elm trees along the valleys hold a small population of the elegant Amur Falcon, whilst Lesser Kestrels hunt on the hillsides and Golden Eagles patrol the skies. Some spots are particularly productive for Daurian Partridge. We can reach the meandering Tuul River, where we will hopefully find Azure Tit in the riparian woods. On our way towards the river, we will also stop to search for the large Mongolian Lark. Hustai also offers us our best chance of encountering a Wolf on this tour with two resident packs in the area, although they are very tricky to find and a lot of luck is required as well as a great deal of scanning. We will also visit nearby wetland areas in the hope of White-naped Crane, Swan Goose and Eastern Spot-billed Duck as well as Eastern Marsh Harrier. We shall also take a night drive from here and focus our early morning attentions on Pallas's Cat which is another key target species here. Hustai has a huge amount to offer, and we have ample time to explore the area. We shall explore this area all together in a minibus to get to the different sites.

Day 13

Transfer Ulaanbaatar

After three nights in Hustai we enjoy a final morning in the park before returning to the capital, stopping for any wildlife along the way. We will overnight in a comfortable city hotel before our flight the following morning. Time permitting, this afternoon we may take a brief tour of the city including a visit to Sukhbaatar Square.

Day 14

Fly London

We have an early transfer back to the airport this morning ahead of our flight back to London, via Istanbul, arriving later that afternoon.

Tour focus

One of the main objectives of this holiday will be to observe Snow Leopard in the wild, but it must be stated that these mammals can be exceedingly hard to find and success cannot be guaranteed. With the aid of local expertise, every effort will be made to locate a Snow Leopard, but even on the most favourable of days it is unlikely that the animals will be viewable for more than a fraction of the time spent in the field and often at long range. Snow Leopards, and many of the other special mammals in this area, will be best viewed through a telescope, and so we strongly recommend that you bring a telescope with you on this tour. Whilst your tour leader will have a telescope available for group members to share at all times, it is strongly preferable to have your own telescope and to be confident in using it.

At all times, including during the searches for Snow Leopards, due attention will be paid to the wider natural history of the country, and as the most conspicuous and widespread members of the fauna, we can expect to spend a significant amount of time enjoying the region's birds. The typical tactic during the seven nights in the Altai Mountains will be to wait for the trackers high in the mountains to report to us that there is a Snow Leopard sighting and that we should head up the mountain in our 4x4s (this takes around 1 hour) to try to view the animal from the position they suggest. On days when there is no news from the trackers, we shall explore other areas from the camp, visiting lakes, the open steppe and surrounding valleys to seek other birds and mammals. It is likely that 2 or maybe 3 days will be spent in the high mountains for Snow Leopard. We may also head up and scan ourselves depending on the news from the trackers. If you are at all unsure of the tactics and plan for seeing Snow Leopard and the focus of the tour, please do call and speak to us. This tour will be led solely by an expert local naturalist with a group size of 4-8. With a group size of 9-12 a leader from the UK will also join the local leader.

Tour grading

In terms of physicality, this is a relatively straightforward wildlife holiday with no serious trekking or demanding walks involved. However, it is likely that over the course of each day, we will cover 2-3 miles in total with lots of stops and this being a combined distance and rarely in one go. Walking can sometimes be over rough ground. A reasonable level of fitness is therefore required. We will travel into the mountains each day using 4 x 4 vehicles and are likely to have some bumpy journeys to get to our target destination. In the Altai, we will be sleeping at an altitude of 2000m, and the peaks where we shall reach to search for Snow Leopard are at 3000 metres. Though we do not reach elevations where altitude sickness is a problem, we recommend drinking lots of water and taking time and care when walking at the higher elevations as it can feel more difficult.

Accommodation and food

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour. When staying in Ulaanbaatar we will use comfortable 3- or 4-star tourist hotels, where all rooms have private facilities. For the rest of the tour, we will stay in simple but comfortable tourist ger camps.

These are usually twin bedded with shared outdoor washing/bathroom facilities. 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 loos, with "hot" showers available at the end of the day, on returning to the camp. These are also powered by a generator so please note that they are not available 24/7. In the "restaurant ger" there is tea and coffee and flasks of hot water.

Information to note:

Altai mountains ger camp: The toilets are short walk away from the ger tents (around 40 meters). Each ger has its own small sink and tap system that uses bottled water.

Hustai ger camp: There are no washing facilities in the gers themselves, so a short walk is required for cleaning teeth etc. The shower and bathroom block is a larger building than in the Altai with multiple sinks and western toilets. The camp relies on solar power so electricity coverage can vary.

Mosquitos can be very common in these locations so please make sure you are prepared with mosquito repellent and long trousers/long sleeved tops. There is no Wi-Fi in the camps although 4G is possible if data roaming or with a local sim card.



Ger camp in the Altai Mountains

Additional Expenses and Currency

On this tour you will need to budget extra for:

- Drinks other than bottled water (which is provided throughout). Soft drinks, beer and wine can be purchased at the ger camps
- Personal expenses – souvenirs, postcards, etc.
- Discretionary tips to local guides and local staff

Some local currency will be needed for drinks in the evenings (a beer averaging around 2-3 USD) but tips are possible to provide in USD. At the airport before the tour starts you can change some money into local Mongolian Tugrik or MNT as it is known. We would recommend changing about \$50 into local currency and keeping around \$150 per person for tips.

Climate

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 summer, and you can reasonably expect the temperatures in the mountains to be between 20-25 degrees, but rain is possible at any time and you should be prepared for sudden changes in the weather. If we are an observation site and the wind blowing it can feel very chilly indeed.

The nights will be spent at much lower elevation than the daily programs and should be relatively mild, but at times it can feel cold. Whilst the gers will protect against the wind and rain, they will not be heated, though blankets and sheets are provided and these are usually sufficient! At lower elevation, daytime temperatures can easily reach 30 degrees.



Ger camp in Altai Mountains

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.

Snow Leopard Video From 2023

[Snow Leopards in Mongolia - YouTube](#)

This video was taken on our 2023 tour by tour participant Brain Clasper. The video was taken with an 800mm Canon f11 on r7. To give an idea of the range of the sighting. We achieved superb scoped views and is why we highly recommend bringing a telescope on this tour!

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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