

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 4/8	Altai Mountains
Day 9/10	Fly Ulaanbaatar, transfer Hustai National Park
Day 11	Ulaanbaatar
Day 12	Depart Ulaanbaatar, arrive London

Departs

August – September

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
- Other rare mammals including 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, Scanning for Snow Leopards (by Nick Acheson) and Henderson's Ground Jay



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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 specialities including Henderson's 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. **Some tours will begin with the flight to Khovd and 6 night stay in the Altai Mountains followed by 2 nights in Hustai National Park as detailed below, whereas others will begin with 2 nights in Hustai before returning to Ulaanbaatar and flying to the Khovd for the latter part of the tour. The order of the itinerary will not affect the tour content, or the possible wildlife sightings during the tour.***

Day 1

In flight

We fly from London to Ulaanbaatar, with a change of plane en route, either in Istanbul or Moscow 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 no doubt Pacific Swifts as they whizz above 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



Azure Tit

for our first night, close to the airport and the Tuul River, with its associated wetlands and surrounding stunted willow habitat. Here 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 White-crowned Penduline Tit, Azure Tit, White-cheeked Starling and Long-tailed Rose-finch, as well as a host of water birds.

Day 3 Fly Khovd and transfer Altai Mountains

This morning we take a domestic flight west to the city of Khovd, from where we travel overland to the Altai Mountains for a 6 night stay in a beautifully located ger camp. 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.

Days 4 – 8 Altai Mountains

With an estimated 30 to 35 Snow Leopards in the area, much of our time over the next five days will be dedicated to exploring the rocky valleys and higher elevations (maximum 3,000 metres) in search of the elusive Snow Leopard in the magnificent landscape of the Altai Mountains. 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 over largely flat terrain. However, on occasion it may be necessary to take a slightly longer walk 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.



Scanning for Snow Leopards (N. Acheson)

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 great deal of 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 big slice of luck, but this is one of 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.

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 Guldenstadt's Redstart that inhabit the highest peaks, whilst Lammergeyer, 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. 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.



On one day, we will also take time to visit a huge lake and the adjacent wetland nearby which 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 soar above the water. During our tours, enormous concentrations of hundreds of White-

headed Ducks have been recorded and Red-crested Pochards have also been found. 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 Henderson's Ground-Jay, another avian highlight of Mongolia, is also possible, along with Desert Wheatear, and a short drive should produce one if not more of these wonderful birds.

Whilst the majority of our time in the mountains will be dedicated to searching for and enjoying the region's wildlife, during our stay we will also take the time to visit a local nomadic family, to

learn about their lifestyle and gain an insight into the region's ancient and rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

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.



Pallas's Sandgrouse

Days 9 – 10

Fly Ulaanbaatar, transfer Hustai

Leaving this magical place behind, we will return back to Khovd Airport and fly to Ulaanbaatar, from where we transfer approximately 2 hours to Hustai National Park (also known as Khustain Nuruu National Park) for a 2 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 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



Przewalski's Horses (J. Lover)

Mongolian Gazelle. The valleys are full of wild flowers 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. Should time permit, 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.

Day 11

Transfer Ulaanbaatar

After two nights in Hustai we enjoy a final morning in the park before returning to the capital where we will overnight in a comfortable city hotel. This afternoon we'll take a brief tour of the city including a visit to Sukhbaatar Square and the National History Museum. Then, this evening, we will enjoy a folklore concert followed by a farewell dinner at a local Mongolian restaurant.

Day 12

Fly London

We have an early transfer back to the airport this morning ahead of our flight back to London, via Istanbul or Moscow, 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.

Tour grading

In terms of physicality, this is a relatively straightforward wildlife holiday with no trekking or demanding walks involved. However, it is likely that over the course of each day, we will cover several miles in total and sometimes over rough ground. A reasonable level of fitness is therefore required and it should be noted that whilst we will be sleeping at lower altitude, much of our time in the field will be spent at an altitude of 2000 – 3000 metres.

Accommodation and food

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour. When staying in Ulaanbaatar we will use comfortable 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. Whilst a generator is available for charging batteries etc. during the evenings, it is best to assume that the camps will be without electricity and to pack accordingly! There is no running water, but a small amount of hot water will be provided for washing

in the mornings, with bucket showers encouraged to be taken at the end of the day on returning to the camp.



Typical ger camp in the Altai Mountains

Additional Expenses

On this tour you will need to budget extra for:

- Your visa, which must be applied for prior to departure. The current cost is £40 if applying in person at the Mongolian Embassy; higher fees apply if you obtain your visa through a visa service provider.
- 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

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.

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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