

Mongolia's Dinosaurs, Past & Present!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London.
Day 2	Arrive Ulaanbaatar & overnight.
Day 3	Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park.
Day 4	Hongoryn Sand Dunes.
Day 5/6	Fossil-hunting Tugrigiin Shiree.
Day 7/11	Birding & fossil-hunting Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park.
Day 12/14	Hustai National Park & Bayan Lake.
Day 15	Ulaanbaatar.
Day 16	Fly London.

Departs

May.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code MON03).

Grading

Grade B. Slow-paced walks, but sometimes over rough terrain. Some long travel days.

Focus

Fossils, birds & other natural history.

Highlights:

- Explore Mongolia's Gobi Desert
- Walk in the footsteps of Palaeontologist Roy Chapman Andrews
- Look for dinosaur fossils at Tugrigiin Shiree & the Flaming Cliffs
- Przewalski's Horse in Hustai National Park
- Birds including Henderson's Ground-jay. Pallas's Sandgrouse & Saxaul Sparrow
- Look for the elusive Pallas's Cat
- Led by expert naturalist & palaeontology guides



Henderson's Ground-jay, dinosaur foot bones & fossil hunting in the Gobi.



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Introduction

This exciting tour follows in the footsteps of legendary explorer and paleontologist Roy Chapman Andrews, who led the first fossil-hunting expeditions to Mongolia's Gobi Desert in the 1920s. Andrews's expeditions not only discovered the very first dinosaur eggs, but also opened the world's eyes to the wonderful variety and abundance of fossils exposed in the deserts of central Asia. We now know that Andrews stumbled across one of the richest deposits of dinosaur remains in the world and a breathtaking range of specimens have been gathered from the Gobi since then, including *Tarbosaurus* (a relative of 'T. Rex') and the prehistoric villain of the big screen, *Velociraptor*. Dinosaurs, of course, survive to the present day in the form of birds, and Mongolia is also home to an equally rich assemblage of living species. On this tour we aim to search out both the surviving and extinct members of the dinosaur lineage by combining visits to two key fossil localities (Tugrigin Shiree and the Flaming Cliffs) with birdwatching in the region's deserts and mountains in search of such species as Saxaul Sparrow, Altai Snowcock, Pallas's Sandgrouse and the enigmatic Henderson's Ground-jay. There will also be the chance to look for the rare and elusive Pallas's Cat.

Itinerary

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.

Day 1

Depart London

We depart London Heathrow's Airport on a Turkish Airways flight to the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, via a change of aircraft in Istanbul.

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar

We are due to arrive into Ulaanbaatar's Chinggis Khaan International Airport mid-morning, where we will be met by our local guide and transferred to a centrally located hotel. In the afternoon, we will visit the temporary display of dinosaur skeletons and other fossils in the rather incongruous setting of the Hunnu Mall. We will then visit the Paleontological Laboratory of Mongolia where we will learn more about the palaeontological treasures of Mongolia and about how the institution carries out its research. In the evening, we will enjoy a welcome dinner at a fine local restaurant. Ulaanbaatar offers a contrast between ancient traditions and the dawning of Mongolia's 21st century democracy, which is evident here in the traditional gers and Buddhist monasteries lying side-by-side with modern office blocks and high-rises.

Day 3

Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park

This morning we will head south into the vast stony plains, mountains and sand dunes of the Gobi Desert. Our mode of transport will depend on whether there is a flight available at the time of our visit to the town of Dalanzadgad, which lies around 550 kilometres from the capital. Flights between these two venues typically start later in the year, but if one is available we will take it! If not we will head south by road in comfortable landcruisers, stopping for lunch en route in Mandalgobi. Although long, it is a beautiful and scenic journey through a vast,

stark and unforgiving landscape unchanged for millennia. We are also sure to see our first steppe and desert birds including Long-legged Buzzard, Desert Wheatear, Mongolian Lark and the beautiful Demoiselle Crane. On reaching Dalanzadgad we will head west to a comfortable ger camp near the Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park. We are likely to arrive in the early evening and will overnight in twin-bedded gers with shared facilities.

Day 4

Khongoryn Els Sand Dunes

Our journey today is much shorter, a total of between three and a half to four hours. As we drive it is worth keeping an eye out for birds such Southern Grey Shrike and our first Pallas's Sandgrouse, whilst possible mammals might include shy 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 surrounding desert steppe. These are the impressive 'singing sand dunes' of Khongoryn Els which will form a stunning backdrop for our one-night stay. The scenery of the Khongoryn Els region is breathtaking with rugged mountains to the south, sand dunes in the center (the largest in the Gobi) and a river oasis with extensive Saxaul Forest to the north.

One of the highlights of our stay in this southern Gobi region will be the opportunity to explore the Saxaul Forests, a globally-threatened habitat only found in or on the boundaries of the sandy and steppe deserts of mid and central Asia. Amongst these patches of drought-resistant 'forest', clothed in gnarled and stunted Saxaul trees, we will 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 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 Great Gerbil which can often be heard as it calls before scurrying into a desert bolt hole. At this time of year there can be 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 deep in the dry desert.

We will spend the night in a comfortable ger camp with shared facilities. Once the sun has set 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 for our visit to our first fossil locality tomorrow!

Day 5 – 6

Tugregiin Shiree

This morning, we will travel to the Tugregiin Shiree for a two-night stay in a private campsite. The white sandstone escarpments and other sedimentary rocks of Tugregiin Shiree date back to the Late Cretaceous period – at the end of the dinosaur's long reign – around 80 to 65 million years ago. The site was discovered by Mongolian and Polish palaeontologists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is perhaps most well-known, however, for the fabulous 'Fighting Dinosaurs' specimen found here in 1971, a *protoceratops* and a *velociraptor* locked in combat for 80 million years having been covered and suffocated in a sudden sandstorm or collapsing dune. Although we are unlikely to find anything quite as spectacular, Tugregiin Shiree is a remote site that receives few visitors and as we search the escarpment and the nearby sand dunes for fossils we do stand a good chance of finding our own bone fragments

or pieces of egg shell from such dinosaurs *Protoceratops andrewsi* (named after Roy Chapman Andrews), *oviraptor*, *velociraptor* or others. Fossilised footprint casts are also be found at a nearby site from time to time.

N.B. The 'Fighting Dinosaurs' fossil is currently in storage at the Paleontological Laboratory of Mongolia. If it is still at the facility at the time of our visit we will try to arrange a private viewing (it is not on public display).

Day 7 – 11

Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park

Following breakfast, we will begin our drive into the dramatic Gobi Gurvan Saikhan Mountains (translated as the 'Three Beauties of the Gobi'). Our time here will be split between three nights of camping whilst we search for the birds and other wildlife of the region and two nights in a ger camp from where we explore Mongolia's most famous fossil site, the Flaming Cliffs.

We will stop en route to visit the Havtsgait petroglyphs, where numerous Bronze Age drawings dating back up to 5,000 years can be seen, illustrating a range of subjects from animals such as gazelles and goats to horses pulling carts. In the afternoon, we will arrive at our camp and then head out to explore the magnificent Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park which lies on the northern edge of the Gobi Desert. Noteworthy species that can be found in the vicinity of our camp include Saker Falcon, Chukar, Chinese Beautiful and Common Rosefinches, Brown Accentor and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, plus a variety of migrants such as Thick-billed Warbler, Barred Warbler, Isabelline Wheatear, Brown Shrike, Black-faced and Pallas's Reed Buntings.

We will also visit the Yolyn-Am Valley in the Zuun Saikhan Mountain Range. Birding these beautiful slopes is a real pleasure and while exploring the area we will be on the lookout for a wide range of mountain species, including the impressive Lammergeier, a couple of pairs of which nest here. Another key target is the localised Altai Snowcock, which often give their characteristic whistling calls in the early morning just after dawn. Other exciting birds to look out for include Daurian Partridge, Himalayan Griffon, Cinereous Vulture, Booted and Golden Eagles, Alpine, Brown and the near endemic Kozlov's (Mongolian) Accentors, Wallcreeper, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Mongolian Finch, Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch, Godlewski's Bunting and with a bit of luck, perhaps Grey-necked Bunting and the rare Red-mantled Rosefinch and Spotted Great Rosefinch. Flocks of White-winged Snowfinches are a common sight and can be very confiding while feeding along the trail. In the spring, we may also see migrating raptors such as Oriental Honey Buzzard, Amur Falcon and Steppe Eagle, while mammals could include the regal Siberian Ibex, the strange and extremely impressive Argali (a species of wild sheep), several species of rodents including Pallas's and Alpine Pikas, and Midday Gerbils that scurry in and out of the stunted alpine vegetation. Even Snow Leopards live in the mountains here and are seen from time to time. Although we would need to be very fortunate to see one of these elusive felines we must be forever vigilant and keep scanning the numerous rocky crags.

We do, however, stand a good chance of finding the other elusive cat of these rugged mountains, Pallas's Cat. This stocky, but beautiful, feline is about the size of a large domestic cat. It wears a permanently grumpy expression due to its unusually flat-topped head and lives on the steppes and in the mountains of Central Asia. Until recently, it was a mythical beast that was very rarely seen. Mongolia is one of the best countries in which to search for Pallas's Cat, however, and with our expert local knowledge close to hand we hope to strike lucky!

After a further early morning looking for birds and other wildlife we will leave camp on Day 10 and travel to the legendary Flaming Cliffs, a red sandstone formation dating back to the Late Cretaceous period that stretches for over three kilometres, where hundreds of dinosaur fossils have been discovered over the course of the last century. It was here that Roy Chapman Andrews – a real-life Indiana Jones – made his most spectacular fossil discovery. At the foot of the cliff he found hundreds of specimens, the richest haul of dinosaur fossils that had ever been found. He loaded the specimens into a fleet of rickety old Dodges and dozens of camels for the long journey back to the capital and from there back to the US. His haul included the first dinosaur eggs ever discovered and lots of *protoceratops* bones, a species that was later named after him (*Protoceratops andrewsi*).

Although the mass finds of Andrews' time are a thing of the past, the constant weathering here by the elements continually reveals new fossils. The best of these are usually picked out by professional palaeontologists that regularly comb the site, but it is a large area and other visitors do turn up exciting finds from time to time. We will spend an afternoon and the following day at the Flaming Cliffs and stand a good chance of finding our own fossils, such as pieces of eggshell or bone, or if fortunate, perhaps something more substantial.

On the way to and from the Flaming Cliffs, we need to keep our eyes open for a variety of interesting birds and other wildlife such as Henderson's Ground-jay, Pallas's Sandgrouse, numerous Shore Larks (of the subspecies *brandtii*) and Goitered Gazelle. Greater Sandpipers are regularly seen and we must keep a special lookout for the beautiful Oriental Plover, surely one of the most elegant species in its family. The scenery throughout is simply spectacular!

For our second two nights in the Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park we will stay in a comfortable ger camp with shared facilities.

Day 12 – 14

Hustai National Park & Bayan Lake

After an early breakfast on Day 12 we must journey back to Ulaanbaatar either by air from Dalanzadgad, if a flight is operating, or by road if not. We now have three nights to explore Hustai National Park and its surroundings split between two in a ger camp in the national park and one night of camping at Bayan Lake to the west.

Hustai National Park is comprised of gently rolling hills, open grasslands and areas of scrub, home to a wonderful variety of wildlife including the rare Przewalski's Horse, the last surviving subspecies of wild horse which were re-introduced into the reserve. As we explore the area in vehicles and on foot, we are likely to encounter Long-tailed Sowsliks and Tarbagan Marmots scurrying amongst the vegetation, plus Pied Wheatear, Meadow Bunting and Daurian Partridge on the rocky slopes. The valleys are full of wild flowers and butterflies, whilst the elm trees on their edges hold a small population of the elegant Amur Falcon. Golden Eagles patrol overhead and Cinereous Vultures are commonly seen too. Hustai also offers us our best chance of encountering a Wolf on this tour with two resident packs in the area, although they are secretive and very tricky to find!

From Hustai National Park it is only a two hour drive to Bayan Lake (Bayan Nuur) which lies to the west. Here we will set up camp near the wetlands and use our time to explore the lakeshore in search of the numerous birds that stop here on their way further north to breed, along with an interesting variety of nesting species. Waders can be especially numerous and include Asian Dowitcher, Terek and Marsh Sandpipers and Long-toed Stint amongst more familiar species. In the fringing vegetation we will look for Pallas's Reed Bunting, Paddyfield Warbler,

Siberian Rubythroat, Oriental Reed Warbler and the skulking Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, whilst other birds to look out for in the area include Swan Goose, Eastern Marsh Harrier, White-naped and Demoiselle Cranes, White-winged Tern, Citrine Wagtail and Asian Short-toed Lark. There is even the chance of the rare Relict Gull which sporadically breeds here.

Day 15

Ulaanbaatar

After a final morning exploring Bayan Lake we will begin our journey back to the Ulaanbaatar in the early to mid-afternoon (a journey of around three hours or so) for a final night in a comfortable city hotel.

Day 16

Arrive London

Our return Turkish Airlines flight is due to leave Ulaanbaatar mid-morning and after a change of aircraft in Istanbul we are due back into London's Heathrow Airport mid to late evening.

Tour Focus & Grading

Grade B – The main focus of this tour will be the birdlife and dinosaur fossils of Mongolia which we will enjoy on foot and from our vehicles. Although walks will be conducted at a slow pace, they will often be over rough and undulating terrain especially when prospecting for fossils in the Gobi Desert. The tour is therefore suitable for those with an average, or higher, level of fitness who enjoy walking. It is not suitable for those who may have difficulty crossing rough ground.

It should also be noted that Mongolia is a huge country and that its key wildlife and fossil sites are far apart. The holiday will, therefore, need to cover large distances – often on unpaved roads – and so those joining our group need to be prepared for a few long journeys (especially if there are no flights between Ulaanbaatar and the Gobi Desert over the tour dates). Accommodation is also of a simple nature, a mix of comfortable gers and tents (there are no hotels or lodges in these remote areas!). That aside, Mongolia is a breathtakingly beautiful and fascinating country and if you come with a sense of adventure and acceptance of the infrastructure on offer you are assured an unforgettable and enjoyable time!

Fossil Hunting

Please be aware that it is illegal to take fossils out of Mongolia and so any fossils that are found cannot be brought home.

During the fossil hunting sessions we will be accompanied by a Mongolian palaeontologist who will help us in our search for specimens and the offer advice on the correct way of handling any we find. Any necessary tools, such as brushes and hammers will be provided. If any noteworthy fossils are discovered, the palaeontologist might decide to remove them for further study. Group members will be encouraged to help in the extraction process.

Accommodation & Food

All food is included in the cost of the tour from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 16. In Ulaanbaatar we will be staying in a comfortable city hotel with private facilities. For the rest of the holiday we will stay in a mix of simple, but comfortable, ger camps and private camp sites.

The ger camps we use on this tour are public 'tourist-class' camps set up for the spring and summer period and accommodate a maximum of around 80 people (although they are typically not fully booked). A ger is a traditional Mongolian, round-shaped dwelling that has been used for centuries. The twin-bedded gers include comfortable beds with pillows and bedding, a table and chair. Western-style toilet and shower facilities are shared. Meals are either set menus or buffet-style or served in a dining ger or wooden cabin. The ger camps provide an authentic and memorable taste of Mongolian culture and allow us to visit the remote wilderness in relative comfort.

Where ger camps are not available, or not in a convenient spot, we will stay in tented camps which are set up specifically for our group. The camps feature roomy two person bell-shaped tents, inflatable sleeping mats, sleeping bags and a communal mess tent where hearty and traditional meals are provided. Toilet tents and shower tents are set up nearby. The mess tent often doubles as a lecture hall for talks and presentations, such as on Mongolian dinosaurs.

N.B. Some of the ger camps offer a few gers with private facilities. These can be secured for an additional charge of £50 per ger per night. There are not enough of these gers for the whole group but, if available, they can be secured on a first come first served basis. Please contact the Naturetrek office for availability.

Guiding

The group will be led by a Naturetrek naturalist and a local naturalist guide. For your time at the fossil localities in the Gobi Desert the tour will also be accompanied by a field palaeontologist.

Extra expenses

The cost of the holiday does not include drinks, tips, Mongolian Visa, locally paid airport taxes and all items of a personal nature.

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°C and 30°C in the steppes and deserts, and between 10°C 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.

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: www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mongolia or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.
