

Mongolia's Snow Leopards in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Arrive Ulaanbaatar, afternoon excursion
Day 3	Fly to Khovd, transfer to Altai Mountains
Day 4/7	Altai Mountains
Day 8	Transfer and overnight at Khomyn Tal
Day 9	Transfer to Margaz Mountains
Day 10/11	Margaz Mountains
Day 12	Transfer to Ulaangom and Uvs Lake
Day 13	Fly to Ulaanbaatar
Day 14	Depart Ulaanbaatar, arrive in London

Departs

November – March

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code MON02)

Grading

A/B. Slow paced walks, but sometimes over rough ground. Max altitude ~ 3300m

Focus

Snow Leopards, Pallas's Cat and other wildlife

Highlights

- Search for Snow Leopards in stunning wilderness landscapes. A 5-night stay in the Altai Mountains and a 3-night stay in the Margaz Mountains
- Other rare mammals may include Pallas's Cat, Grey Wolf, Saiga Antelope, Przewalski's Horse and Siberian Ibex



Snow Leopard, Bearded Vulture and Pallas's Cat



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Introduction

In the far west of Mongolia, the Altai and Margaz Mountains represent some of the 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 characteristic deep valleys and higher mountainous peaks and the nearby semi-desert, we hope to find many of the region's notable mammals, including Pallas's Cat, Saiga Antelope, Przewalski's Horse, Mongolian Gazelle, and Siberian Ibex, not to mention a fabulous cast of Asian bird specialities including Mongolian Ground-jay, Altai Snowcock, Güldenstädt'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, seeking out its prey with ghost-like stealth. The most highly prized target for many mammal enthusiasts – the Snow Leopard. Though exceedingly rare and difficult to find, with a 100% record to date, we do have a very good chance of seeing this beautiful cat on this Naturetrek tour.

It is important to note that temperatures in November through to March are typically around -18 °C, with little precipitation. With wind chills, the temperatures can feel more like -25 °C so layers and high-quality warm clothing will be vital to remain comfortable and to make the most of the trip. Once adequately prepared, the big advantage of a winter visit to this region is that we have a higher chance of closer views of Snow Leopard.



An adult Snow Leopard and her adolescent cub

This itinerary allows us to explore Mongolia's most remote and breathtaking corners, from Ulaanbaatar to the towering Altai Mountains, the bird-rich Great Lakes Depression, including Bayan Lake and Uvs Lake, the sweeping steppes and sand dunes of Khomyn Tal, and the dramatic granite outcrops of the Margaz Mountains. Each destination offers a unique blend of wildlife, landscapes, and cultural richness, making this a truly unforgettable journey across the wild heart of Central Asia.

This itinerary runs in the same way as our very popular summer itinerary and is designed for those who wish to attempt to have closer views of Snow Leopard in the winter months. Although nothing is guaranteed, these elusive cats do come lower down the mountains in winter and closer to the camps. It is an itinerary a little more dedicated to the key target mammals and achieving closer views of them. Our summer tour has never missed seeing Snow Leopards, on good scope views - but the views are typically more distant than in winter.

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 in Istanbul or Frankfurt,

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar

Upon arrival in Ulaanbaatar (known invariably as 'UB'), we will be greeted by our friendly local ground team. 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 1.6 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 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 Azure-winged Magpie, Azure Tit Red-throated Thrush, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Hawfinch and Meadow Bunting and possibly any wintering passerines mean it is sure to be a very exciting start to the holiday. Daurian Pika and Altai Wapiti may be the first mammals we enjoy.



Azure Tit



Our hotel, located just outside the capital, Ulaanbaatar

Day 3

Fly Khovd and transfer Altai Mountains

Today is largely a transfer day. This morning, we take a domestic flight (roughly 2 hours) west to the city of Khovd, from where we travel overland (around 2 hours' drive) to the Altai Mountains for a 5-night stay in a beautifully located ger camp. We feel it is important to have five nights here to really maximise our chances of Snow Leopards. With the mountains to the west and vast lakes 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 so expect to have everything from a warm jacket through to thick, high-quality warm clothing.



Our camp in the Altai Mountains, please note in the winter this camp will likely have snow on the ground.



Domestic Bactrian Camels

Days 4 – 7

Altai Mountains

With an estimated 30 to 35 Snow Leopards in the area, we shall ultimately hope that over the course of our stay 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 3,300 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 basic fitness and the ability to walk on rocky, uneven, steep or slippery snowy 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 breathtaking scenery. There are at least four spotters who stay in the high mountains permanently, tracking the Snow Leopards and hoping to find an animal that we can observe.

Most days will be early starts to enable us to be at the sites for when the wildlife and lighting are at their best, so please be prepared for being up early, potentially at twilight on occasion. We will then scan the very best areas for Snow Leopard and enjoy all the other wildlife we are lucky to find.

Although varying from one year to the next, our tour is timed to coincide with the period when the Snow Leopards are following their main prey, the Siberian Ibex, down to lower elevations to escape the harsh winter on the mountain peaks. This should allow us to enjoy sightings without travelling as high up into the mountains as we do during the summer months. It also gives us a better opportunity for a closer view, though we still must always be prepared for views at range and through a scope. We therefore strongly recommend that you bring a telescope with you on this holiday.

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 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.

During our time in the mountains there will always be something to entertain us, whether it be the soaring raptors overhead, the playful Tarbagan 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 Altai Snowcocks that inhabits the highest peaks, whilst Lammergeier, Steppe and Golden Eagles, Saker Falcons and Black Vultures 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 slopes, we may find such delights as Brown and Altai Accentors, Mongolian Finch and Godlewski's Bunting. Overhead raptors 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 characterised 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. This amazing creature is now confined to just a small remnant of its former range in western Mongolia. We may also find flocks of Pallas's Sandgrouse while Long-tailed Rosefinch, Steppe Grey Shrike Asian Short-toed Lark and the near endemic Mongolian Ground-jay may be found.



Saiga Antelope



Pallas's Sandgrouse

During our time here we will also be keeping a lookout for Pallas's Cat which can 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 and Margaz Mountains. 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 located. 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. If it has been a good year for small rodents, then the Pallas's Cat will not be far away. Additionally, we may encounter Pallas's Pika, Tolai Hare, Altai Mountain Vole, Eastern Midday Jird, Mongolian Gerbil, and Corsac and Red Foxes.



Siberian Ibex



Saker Falcon

Day 8

Transfer to Khomyn Tal National Park



Przewalski's Horse (Takhi)



Daurian Partridge

Leaving this magical place behind, we will first set out for an early morning game drive across the vast desert-steppe, keeping a keen eye out again for the Saiga Antelope. We will then travel onwards towards the Khomyn Tal National Park, with an incredibly scenic drive (of roughly 4-5 hours) where we will enjoy Mongolia's breathtaking open country. Khomyn National Park is a remote protected area renowned as one of the most successful reintroduction sites for the Przewalski's Horse (Takhi) – the last truly wild horse living in its native habitat. Thanks to careful management, around 150 wild horses now roam freely across this sweeping landscape of panoramic steppes and undulating dunes. The Zavkhan River, flowing through the region, provides a vital water source for wildlife and adds to the scenic beauty of the journey. A range of birds may be seen including Daurian Partridge, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Eurasian Eagle-owl and Saker Falcon and we will always be on the lookout for mammals. We will again overnight in a cosy Mongolian ger camp.

Day 9

Transfer to Margaz Mountains

After a night in Khomyn Tal National Park, we enjoy a final morning in the park before heading to our next camp in the Margaz Mountains. We will travel across the frozen desert-steppe before reaching the Margaz Mountains (around 5-6 hours' drive). They are an isolated range of dramatic granite and sandstone outcrops rising abruptly from the surrounding plains. Due to their isolated nature, it can make finding wildlife very productive here and an excellent place for the trackers to locate the special species that we seek. Once again, we will stay in a wonderfully situated Mongolian ger camp.

Days 10 – 11

Margaz Mountains



Our camp in the Margaz Mountains. Please note, in the winter months, the camp will likely be covered in snow

This area is a truly unique landscape that combines the serene Bayan Lake with the rugged Margaz Mountains, forming a mosaic of freshwater, desert-steppe, and rocky outcrops. A range of special species can be found here, and we will spend our time exploring the area and again having the help of trackers to locate wildlife. Bayan Lake, which we shall visit, will be almost completely frozen over, while the Margaz cliffs and rocky slopes provide habitat for Siberian Ibex, Bearded Vulture, and Tarbagan Marmot. The open valleys and frosty plains may also reveal Oriental Plover, Pere David's Snowfinch and Mongolian and Horned Lark. Together, they offer some of the most scenic and wildlife-rich experiences in western Mongolia, with excellent opportunities for wildlife observation in a remote, little-visited region. Whilst in the Margaz Mountains, one of our main aims will be to find the charismatic Pallas's Cat, or Manul as it is known in Mongolia. This site is known for its fairly reliable sightings of this very distinctive and unusual cat. Whilst scanning the rocky outcrops and open valleys of Margaz, we will again have the chance to see Snow Leopards. These mountains are also home to Grey Wolves and Eurasian Lynx, though the latter must be thought of as a huge bonus. Long-eared Hedgehog, Mongolian Mountain Vole, Corsac Fox and Steppe Polecat are just some of the other mammals that may be found here, and we will be appreciating all forms of wildlife as we explore the area. Whilst in the Margaz Mountains, we will follow a similar plan to when in the Altai Mountains. Spotters will be out scanning the landscape, whilst we explore other areas until we are notified of a sighting. We will also spend time scanning ourselves.

During these winter months, we will hopefully spend time tracking the different fauna, searching for Snow Leopard 'pugmarks' (tracks) or other signs left in the snow. This is one of the benefits of a winter visit, as it will allow us to further dive into the movements and behaviour of these cats, without even seeing them.



Snow Leopard Pugmarks (Tracks)



The Margaz Mountains in Winter

Day 12

Transfer to Ulaangom

Leaving the Margaz Mountains, we will travel north-west towards Ulaangom. We will stop along our way to try and see any wintering flocks of buntings and thrushes that gather in the local croplands. In the evening, we will arrive in Ulaangom, where we will unwind at a comfortable local hotel after a full day of scenic travel and wildlife observation.

Day 13

Fly to Ulaanbaatar

It is time to return to the capital, stopping for any wildlife along the way. We will have a short flight to UB (around 2 hours). Here, we will stay 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 and the Chinggis Khan Museum. On our last evening, we will have a traditional Mongolian dinner in a local restaurant.

Day 14

Depart Ulaanbaatar, arrive in London

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

Tour Focus

One of the main objectives of this holiday will be to observe Snow Leopards 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 a 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 our 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 five nights in the Altai Mountains will be to wait for the trackers to report to us that there is a Snow Leopard sighting and that we should join them to try to view the animal from the position they suggest. We will also scan areas ourselves and also explore other areas from the camp, the open steppe and surrounding valleys to seek other birds and mammals.

It is likely that 2 or possibly 3 days will be spent in the high mountains, scanning for Snow Leopards ourselves. We are occasionally asked why we can't go up to the mountain tops every day to scan and search for Snow Leopards. The tactics that we have described above not only give us the very best chance of seeing Snow Leopards, but they also allow us to see the other habitats and wildlife of the area. Having a group going up to the high tops every day would put unnecessary pressure on the cats and their environment and, in fact, reduce our chances with more people being there.

This itinerary operates with the same route and accommodations as our very popular summer itinerary and is designed for those who wish to attempt to have closer views of Snow Leopard in the winter months. Although nothing is guaranteed, these elusive cats do come lower down the mountains in winter and closer to the camps. It is an itinerary a little more dedicated to the key target mammals and achieving closer views of them. Our summer tour has never missed seeing Snow Leopards, with good scope views, but the views are typically more distant than in winter. We also spend a little more time on the birdlife in summer as there is more in the area at the time.

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. It is possible that other tours may be staying at the camps at the same time as us.

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 many stops (this being a combined distance and rarely in one go). Walking can sometimes be through snow and over rough, uneven and slippery ground; therefore, a reasonable level of fitness is required. Every day we will travel using 4x4 vehicles and are likely to have some bumpy journeys to get to our target destinations. In the Altai, we will be sleeping at an altitude of 2,000m, and the peaks where we will search for Snow Leopards are just over 3,000 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 & Food

All food and accommodation are 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 toilets, 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 'Dining Building' tea, coffee and flasks of hot water are available.



All ger tents have a similar interior. Protected floor, beds and a window roof

Information to note:

Altai Mountains Ger Camp: The toilets are a short walk away from the ger tents (around 50 metres). En-suite toilets are available upon request at a supplementary charge. Each ger has its own small sink and tap system that uses bottled water.

Khomyn Tal Ger Camp: The toilets are a short walk away from the ger tents (around 40 metres). There is no sink inside these tents.

Margaz Mountains Ger Camp: The tents are all en suite, with port-a-loo-style flushing toilets and a pump-action shower.

There is no Wi-Fi in the camps, although 4G is possible if data roaming or with a local SIM card.

Additional Expenses & Currency

Currency

Please note that Mongolia's local currency, the Mongolian Tugrik (MNT), can only be obtained in Mongolia itself. Sterling or US dollars – preferably new/crisp notes – are fine to change at the currency exchange desk at the airport. When you move into the arrival hall, your local leader will be waiting to meet you. You will then gather together, and they will help you exchange some money (there are multiple exchange booths in Chinggis Khaan Airport, Ulaanbaatar).

Extra Expenses

The following items are not included in the cost of your holiday: drinks (other than daily bottled water), any food or meals that you require during travel to and from Mongolia, souvenirs, tips (for ground crew and local guide), and all items of a personal nature. Once in Mongolia, all meals are included in the cost of the holiday.

There is not a lot to spend money on. £1 is around 4,800 Tugriks. A beer at camp is around 8,000 Tugrik and a can of soft drink (Coke) is around 6,000 Tugrik. Changing around £80 should be plenty for a couple of drinks at the end of each day and tips.

Tipping

It is customary, but by no means compulsory, to tip the various local guides, drivers and camp staff who will look after you during your stay in Mongolia. Tipping should always be done at your discretion and based on the service received. As a guideline for tipping the local leader, around £15 per person for the tour (resulting in a £180 tip with a group of 12) is about right. There are also the drivers and spotters and camp staff and around £30 per person for the tour is what we have been advised if you feel you are happy with the services. Tips are preferred in local currency. Your Naturetrek tour leader will be happy to offer advice and to distribute the funds to the relevant parties.

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. The average temperatures at this time of year are around -18 °C but with wind chills, it can feel more like -25 °C. The camp is kept very cosy with stoves in each ger which are tended to by staff and with the correct warm, winter clothing, exploration of this area is comfortable and very enjoyable.

Community and Coexistence



Snow Leopard Spotters – The Altai Mountains

Mongolia holds roughly a third of the world's wild Snow Leopard population, with key historical hotspots in the rugged mountains of western Mongolia. For centuries, Snow Leopards have held a key position in both the ecological and cultural identity of this region, although as of 2025, the IUCN Red list of Threatened Species reports of their decreasing populations globally. On our 'Mongolia's Snow Leopards' tour, we have the chance to support a special community-based initiative, where the coexistence between people and leopards is in the forefront.

For the duration of our tours, we will stay at two family-run ger camps. These hardy camps are run and owned by families with a background in herding livestock such as goats, sheep, and camels. With herding becoming an increasingly more difficult lifestyle, this herding community has decided to open their camps to our guests, where they will cater for us, as we look to find Snow Leopards, and the other charismatic species of western Mongolia.

This has created a special relationship between the herders and the Snow Leopard, where traditionally, the cats may have been targeted and killed as potential livestock predators. With sustainable models such as this one, which incentivise the presence of Snow Leopards, herding communities are encouraged to tolerate their presence – which is especially important in Mongolia, where there is currently no government-run compensation scheme for herders who lose livestock to wildlife.

This approach has brought about further employment opportunities too, and many young herders are now choosing to become 'Snow Leopard Spotters'. From being raised in the local area and with an understanding of the Snow Leopards they share the land with, they will spend the duration of our tour high up in the mountains, patiently scanning for wildlife. They are truly vital in the success of our tours here.

Our Naturetrek tour leaders, Bina Dashnyam and Yumchin Batkhuu, have collaborated with the local herding community, and have worked closely to help maintain these camps and train future spotters. We are incredibly proud to help support this initiative, where local herding communities and Snow Leopards can be supported.

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 Videos From 2023 & 2025

[Snow Leopards in Mongolia – YouTube](#) – this video was taken on our 2023 summer tour by tour participant Brian Clasper.

[Snow Leopard, Mongolia, August 2025 by Kevin Fowler](#) – this video was taken on our 2025 summer tour by tour participant Kevin Fowler.

To give an idea of the range of these sightings, we achieved superb, scoped views which 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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