

# Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 23 August 2017



Long-eared Hedgehog by Dave Pons



Midday Jird by Dave Pons



Przewalski's Horse by Dave Pons



Distant Snow Leopard by Dave Pons

Report compiled by Nick Acheson  
Images courtesy of Dave Pons and Charles Jones



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Tour participants: Nick Acheson (leader), Uugan & István (Local Leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Friday 11th August

This morning we met at Heathrow and took our first flight to Sheremetyevo, Moscow and our second from there (technically from a crammed, steamy dungeon attached to Sheremetyevo) to Ulaan Baatar.

## Day 2

Saturday 12th August

Early today, as the dawn broke on a beautiful morning, we landed at Ulaan Baatar where we were met by Uugan, our Mongolian host, and István, our Hungarian co-leader. They whisked us to the UB City Hotel where, after breakfast, we took a rest while Uugan and István changed money on our behalf and came back with bewildering piles of notes.

We had lunch at a family-owned Ukrainian restaurant and from there visited a wetland in the industrial outskirts of UB. Dirty and industrial it may have been but we saw plenty of birds including hordes of Gadwall and Tufted Ducks with very young chicks (far too young, we felt, to cope with the oncoming Mongolian winter and the urgent need to migrate), a family of four Demoiselle Cranes and clouds of Red-billed Chough. A Long-toed Stint hunkering in the wet grass was a highlight for the birders among you.

A little further on, we walked along an abandoned railway line, under a rocky hill. Here there were Pied Wheatears, two Brown Shrikes and a handful of Booted Eagles among hundreds of Black-eared Kites.

We had dinner at Cozy Nomads, a Mongolian restaurant serving delicious food in downtown UB.

## Day 3

Sunday 13th August

Our flight to Khovd was not until early afternoon so we took advantage of extra time in UB to visit the Tuul River. Here we immediately encountered a small group of delightful juvenile Azure Tits and, after a little searching, met a gorgeous male Long-tailed Rosefinch and a number of Amur Falcons. Along the river were both White and Grey Wagtails and everywhere were the yellow blooms of *Clematis tangutica*.

After a picnic lunch at UB airport we flew to Khovd and from there drove a couple of hours through stony semi-desert, and past the immense Khar Us Lake, to our spectacular ger camp at the foot of the Jargalant mountains. As well-appointed as the camp was, we didn't allow you to dally in it for long as, during the day, our Snow Leopard scouts up in the hills had found a cat which, we hoped, it might be possible to see from not far above camp.

So we headed a short distance up the first valley and sat in wait in the gorgeous light of late afternoon. It was not possible to see the Snow Leopard at such huge distance but we were delighted to see our first Asiatic (Siberian) Ibex here.

## Day 4

Monday 14th August

Far be it from me to interrupt your sleep... but this morning I did. Yesterday's Snow Leopard had again been found by our scouts in the mountain so I gave you five minutes to jump out of your pyjamas, don your binoculars and cameras, and get to the waiting vehicles. You were impressive in your efficiency and in no time we were driving to the spot where we had sat the previous evening (some of you still in your pyjamas, but the less said about that the better). From here, again, it proved impossible to see anything of the extremely distant cat so our local team decided we should drive further up the mountain road (much further, it transpired), through dramatic valleys and a rocky gorge, to the saddle at the road's end.

Here we stopped and, setting up our telescopes, spent a tense few minutes as the immensely well-camouflaged cat revealed itself, at least partially, to each of you in turn. Much more obvious was the dead domestic goat, which it had killed the previous night, lying a short distance away. We spent the following two hours with the Snow Leopard, during which it moved little, but, as the light improved, everyone became convinced they had definitely seen a Snow Leopard and not merely a set of grey squiggles against a grey, squiggly, rocky background. Also here were a few very confiding Pallas's Pikas and lots of Mongolian Finches.

Once we were satisfied you had all seen a Snow Leopard, and we had drunk tea and coffee with our local team and with the beaming young scouts who had appeared from the mountain in triumph on their horses, we decided to let you have a late breakfast back at camp. Some were even lucky enough to see their first Tolai Hare on the drive back down the mountain.

We stayed at camp for lunch (following hot on the heels of breakfast) and took a short walk in the desert nearby, seeing Variegated Toad-headed Agamas, a Goitred Gazelle and extremely obliging Black-eared Kites. In the afternoon we went back to the top of the road. The Snow Leopard had moved and was now in a more obliging position. We watched for a while before deciding, with our local team's agreement, to walk a couple of hundred metres closer over a stony slope. Having negotiated this challenge (all part of the excitement), we settled down to watch the Snow Leopard for the rest of the afternoon. And were we ever glad we did!

For a long while it stretched and rolled and moved only short distances. Later however it strolled up onto a bare slope and - before our very eyes - killed a Siberian (Tarbagan) Marmot (a staggeringly dumb Siberian Marmot, it must be said), causing the listers among you to fret over whether you could reasonably count a new species freshly dead in the jaws of a Snow Leopard. The cat then went back to the rocky outcrop where it had spent the afternoon, at one point deftly football-dribbling the marmot's corpse down a steep slope. As the sun began to set and the evening wind turned cold we headed back to camp, elated at having spent the day in the company of one of nature's most beautiful and elusive large mammals.

## Day 5

Tuesday 15th August

This morning, having decided to allow our long-watched Snow Leopard to go about its business in peace, we went downhill to explore the beautiful dunes and plains beneath camp. Here there were plenty of Isabelline Wheatears and we saw our first Henderson's Ground Jays. Also here were several Cinereous Vultures which had yet to leave their roosts in the dunes. Small groups of Goitred Gazelles dotted the plain far beneath us and, once we had reached the plain ourselves, we saw a couple of distant Saiga scampering away.

This afternoon we drove to a nearby village to explore strikingly green willow and poplar woods weaving along a desert river. Arriving at the meadows and woods by the river we quickly saw a number of Eastern (Siberian) Stonechats and Daurian Shrikes and lots of migrant Spotted Flycatchers. The river crossing proved a little more adventurous than we had hoped and some chose to stay on the near side; as a result, they had the privilege of seeing a family of White-crowned Penduline Tits.

Driving home to camp we stopped to photograph and admire a large herd of domestic Bactrian Camels.

## Day 6

Wednesday 16th August

This morning we decided to visit the enormous Khar Us Lake close to Khovd. On our way we encountered two groups of Saiga, the second, of six animals, allowing us far better views than we had had the previous day. We stopped first at an area of reed and pools where the birders among us were amazed by the number of White-headed Ducks. Also here were many Eurasian Coot and Common Pochard, plus a sprinkling of Great Cormorants, Great Crested Grebes, White-winged Terns, Great Egrets and Red-crested Pochard. Along the lake's shore there were Richard's Pipits and Asian Short-toed Larks and overhead we saw Western Marsh Harriers and a flock of Avocets.

At our second stop there was a large roost of Black-headed Gulls, with a few Caspian Terns and Pallas's Gulls among them. Also here were Eurasian Spoonbills, a Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed, Kentish and Pacific Golden Plovers and plenty of Northern Lapwings and Ruddy Shelduck.

In the late afternoon we went back up to our first observation point in the valley above camp to see what we could find in the hills. Chukars trotted through the dust and both Golden Eagles and Lammergeiers passed overhead, but there was no sign of large mammals.

## Day 7

Thursday 17th August

We spent most of today scanning for our lives (every rock, nook and boulder) in the magnificent valley an hour's drive to the south of camp. All day we were surrounded by charming Pallas's Pikas and overhead we saw several Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles. A distant Saker called from a peak, but the valley was amazingly lacking in large mammals. It took until mid afternoon for us to find a single (very handsome) male Asiatic Ibex.

We did, however, spend a very entertaining hour by the little spring opposite our watchpoint. Being the only water source in a large area of dry valley, it was alive with birds including Mongolian Finches, Twite, White-winged Snowfinches, Brown Accentor and Blyth's Pipit.

In the evening we took our third short night walk of the week, in the hope of seeing the Hairy-footed Jerboas which István assured us had been common the week before. Once again they proved impossible to track down. Harumph.

## Day 8

Friday 18th August

This morning was all about Long-eared Hedgehogs. Since our second night in camp our wonderful local team had been complaining about nightly visitations in their ger by a Long-eared Hedgehog. None of us had seen hide nor prickle of said Hedgehogs and we were disinclined to believe them. So this morning they briefly detained not one but two Long-eared Hedgehogs to release at breakfast, proving that their sleep had indeed been hoggily hampered. But never mind about their sleep, Long-eared Hedgehog is unquestionably the most adorable animal in the world. Once we had seen these delightful creatures I carried one of them carefully to the stony riverbed near camp, where it could find a safe place to hide for the day under one of the many spiny Caragana bushes here. The other hedgehog, however, had other ideas and took refuge under the skirts of the dining ger before I could get to it. We decided to leave it to make its own way home under cover of darkness.

After this excitement we spent a cold morning (our only really cold morning in camp) high in the valley where we had seen the Snow Leopard. Despite cold and drizzle, we saw two distant Siberian Ibex, plus plenty of Pallas's Pikas and Siberian Marmots. The latter were the focus of two charming Stoats which we saw (literally) ferreting around among rocks. On our drive down to camp we stopped at a family's winter camp (where they would soon again be erecting their gers) and were happy to see a Bluethroat, a species which Ugan told us has been little recorded in Mongolia.

In the afternoon we were visited by skilled singers and dancers from the local village in their first ever performance for foreigners. It was delightful and was much enjoyed by all. My enjoyment was dampened only slightly by the lost Long-eared Hedgehog, apparently less impressed by the music, emerging and biting my foot. To the obvious bemusement of the performers, the Hedgehog was swiftly cornered and I carried it too to the safety of the boulders and bushes in the riverbed. Never a dull moment.

The evening ended with the presentation of a bottle of vodka to the group by our wonderful local hosts. The less said about the rest of the night the better.

## Day 9

Saturday 19th August

This morning we left camp, drove to Khovd, took a flight to UB and drove on to our camp in Hustai National Park. Unfortunately it rained heavily all the way from the capital to Hustai so we were unable to watch any wildlife; indeed for a while it looked as if the sand road to camp might be bad enough for us not to be able to get there. Nonetheless, we got there and there were Hoopoes and Red-billed Chough around camp, and Tree Sparrows everywhere you looked.

## Day 10

Sunday 20th August

Despite the wet, cold weather and the state of the roads after five days of relentless rain, this was our day for visiting the beautiful grassland of Hustai National Park. On account of the mud, Ugan had to negotiate park vehicles to take us around. This slightly hampered our wildlife-viewing but we saw all all of our main targets with ease and greatly admired them too: Red Deer, reintroduced Przewalski's Horses and Mongolian Gazelles, the latter at great distance but in large numbers. The Horses, of course, were a particular highlight, especially a family

group with a magnificent stallion and some foals, but we were also delighted to see many Siberian Marmots and a number of Long-tailed Susliks (Ground Squirrels).

In the afternoon we made sterling attempts to find Argali or even Wolves on rocky hillsides where Uugan has often seen them, but they were not to be seen. We consoled ourselves with lovely Mongolian Larks, a splendid rainbow, and with the glorious late summer grassland flora of this lovely park.

## Day 11

**Monday 21st August**

This morning we took an early walk in the dunes behind camp, where we saw plenty of migrant birds including Pintail Snipe, Brown Flycatcher and Lesser Whitethroat. From here we drove back to UB where we had lunch, visited a flash cashmere outlet (where a great deal of shopping was done), and took a well-earned afternoon off ahead of a truncated night. The food in the restaurant at the Corporate Hotel was delicious. The service, shall we say, was less impressive.

## Day 12

**Tuesday 22nd August**

As I was staying in Mongolia to meet another group, very early this morning we said our farewells and you headed home courtesy of Aeroflot, arriving back in London later in the day.

Thank you all for your commitment to a wonderful trip, your enthusiasm, even during long days in the field, and your love for the wildlife we shared. It was a privilege to travel with you and with you to experience so much of a very beautiful country. Our thanks go to our local team, to the local community which welcomed us in Jargalant, and, most of all, to our young Snow Leopard trackers thanks to whose dedication and skill we saw Mongolia's magnificent mountain cat.

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## Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	August										
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1	Tarbagan Marmot	<i>Marmota sibirica</i>			✓					✓		✓	
2	Long-tailed Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus undulatus</i>			✓							✓	
3	Northern Three-toed Jerboa	<i>Dipus sagitta</i>									✓		
4	Brandt's Vole	<i>Lasiopodomys brandtii</i>										✓	
5	Midday Jird	<i>Meriones meridianus</i>											✓
6	Pallas's Pika	<i>Ochotona pallasi</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓				
7	Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>		✓	✓			✓					
8	Long-eared Hedgehog	<i>Hemiechinus auritus</i>						✓					
9	Snow Leopard	<i>Uncia uncia</i>			✓								
10	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>								✓			
11	Przewalski's Horse	<i>Equus ferus przewalskii</i>										✓	
12	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>										✓	
13	Goitred Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>			✓	✓		✓					
14	Mongolian Gazelle	<i>Procapra gutturosa</i>										✓	
15	Saiga Antelope	<i>Saiga tatarica</i>		✓		✓	✓						
16	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>		✓						✓			

## Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					✓						
2	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>					✓						
3	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓										
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					✓						
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓										
6	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					✓						
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>					✓						
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓										
9	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓										
10	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓									
11	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>					✓						
12	Chukar Partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓				✓						
14	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					✓						
15	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓				✓						
16	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					✓						
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓						
18	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>					✓	✓					
19	Himalayan Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>								✓		✓	
20	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	✓										
22	Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>						✓	✓			✓	✓
23	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					✓						
25	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>						✓				✓	✓
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓				✓						
28	Demoiselle Crane	<i>Grus virgo</i>	✓	✓								✓	
29	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓						

	Common name	Scientific name	August											
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21		
30	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					✓							
31	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					✓							
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					✓							
33	Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>					✓							
34	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					✓							
35	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>					✓							
36	Pin-tailed Snipe	<i>Gallinago stenura</i>											✓	
37	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					h							
38	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	✓											
39	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓			✓							✓	
40	Long-toed Stint	<i>Calidris subminuta</i>	✓											
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>						✓						
42	Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus</i>						✓						
43	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae mongolicus</i>						✓						
44	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						✓						
45	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓					✓						
46	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>						✓						
47	Pallas's Sandgrouse	<i>Syrrhaptes paradoxus</i>				✓								
48	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		h	✓				✓					
49	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				✓			✓					
50	Pacific Swift	<i>Apus pacificus</i>	✓											
51	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>									✓	✓		
53	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>						✓	✓				✓	✓
54	Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>		✓									✓	
55	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>											✓	
56	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	
57	Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	✓											
58	Daurian (Isabelline) Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>					✓	✓		✓				
59	Turkestan Shrike	<i>Lanius phoenicuroides</i>						✓					✓	✓
60	Steppe Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius pallidirostris</i>						✓						
61	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓					✓	✓
62	Henderson's Ground Jay	<i>Podoces hendersoni</i>					✓	✓		✓				
63	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax</i>	✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	
64	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	✓	✓			✓							
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
66	Azure Tit	<i>Cyanistes cyanus</i>		✓										
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓										
68	White-crowned Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz coronatus</i>		h			✓							
69	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>						h						
70	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
71	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>											✓	✓
72	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>						✓	✓					
73	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					✓	✓						
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>						✓	✓					
76	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						✓						
77	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>												✓
78	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>		✓	✓						✓			✓
79	Asian Desert Warbler	<i>Sylvia nana</i>								h				
80	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>							✓					

	Common name	Scientific name	August											
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21		
81	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea asiatica</i>		✓										
82	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					✓							
83	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				✓		✓	✓					
84	Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa dauurica</i>												✓
85	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			✓			✓	✓					
86	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>		✓										
87	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>								✓				
88	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>			✓									
89	Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola maurus</i>					✓	✓	✓					✓
90	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓				✓							
91	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
92	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓					
93	Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>	✓			✓				✓				
94	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓										
95	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓					✓	✓	
96	White-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>			✓			✓						
97	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>						✓						
98	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	a											✓
99	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓										
100	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba baicalensis</i>	✓	✓				✓						
101	Richard's Pipit	<i>Anthus richardi</i>					✓							
102	Blyth's Pipit	<i>Anthus godlewskii</i>						✓						
103	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>						✓						
104	Mongolian Finch	<i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>			✓			✓	✓					
105	Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus sibiricus</i>		✓										
106	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>						✓	✓					
107	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>											✓	
108	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>												

## Reptiles

1	Variegated Toad-headed Agama	<i>Phrynocephalus versicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓								
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Ger Camp by Charles Jone