

Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 28 August 2019



Eagle Hunter



Snow Leopard



Pallas's Sandgrouse



Group Lunch

Report and images by Gerald Broddez



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Tour participants: Gerald Broddelez (leader), Terbish and Sovd (local guides) with 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 17th August

The group was in flight via Moscow to Ulaanbaatar (known as UB).

Day 2

Sunday 18th August

We all arrived on time in UB and, after doing the paperwork for two missing bags, we were on our way to breakfast in a hotel downtown. We then drove to Hustai National Park, stopping en route for our first birds: a nice group of Demoiselle Cranes, Cinereous Vultures, a large group of Eastern Rooks with two Daurian Jackdaws mixed in, and several Upland Buzzards, both perched and in flight. A stop to look at some cute Brandt's Voles turned up a surprise Steppe Polecat hunting in the long grass. A great start!!

We arrived before lunchtime at the park and quickly found our first quarry: a nice group of Przewalski's Horses with foals gave great views, so we decided to have our packed lunch here. Overhead, both Golden and Steppe Eagle, plus more vultures, were seen.

We then drove through the hills to the more open steppe area, picking up a covey of Daurian Partridges (with 14 chicks) and several smart Amur Falcons. Once in the steppes, loads of Tarbagan Marmots and Brandt's Voles were seen and photographed, but it was a large group of about 500 Mongolian Gazelle that was most impressive. A smart Corsac Fox on the way back to camp rounded off a great first day in the field.

Day 3

Monday 19th August

After breakfast we explored the western side of the park that consists of rolling grasslands and low hills. It was drizzling at first and then overcast for the rest of the morning. We had to work hard for the wildlife but had great views of Lesser Kestrel, Cinereous Vulture and several Golden Eagles low overhead. A group of Red Deer was spotted as well as Marmots and more Brandt's Voles. Another covey of Daurian Partridges was seen, and a male Pallid Harrier flew by.

The Przewalski's Horses were still in the same area as yesterday, so we decided to give them a closer look after lunch in hopefully sunnier conditions.

Back at our camp we found a Hoopoe and a smart Daurian Ground Squirrel.

Mid-afternoon was spent observing and photographing the horses; we counted 36, in different groups. A Mongolian Lark was flushed as well as a pair of rare Japanese Quail!

On our way back we stopped to photograph the Amur Falcons and a single Little Owl, more Marmots and finally, a Brown Shrike on the fence of our camp.

Day 4

Tuesday 20th August

This morning we headed back to Ulaanbaatar. After checking in to our hotel we went for a bird walk along the river and added our first target bird, a very smart Azure Tit very quickly! Booted Eagle, both the dark and light forms, Hawfinch, Chiffchaff of the *tristis* form, Green Sandpiper, Grey Wagtail and a nice flock of Azure-winged Magpie were all additions to the list.

After lunch we drove into the city centre and visited the museum, the Square and some local shops before attending a Mongolian show in the local theatre. The performance was superb and consisted of throat singing, a contortionist, Mongolian folk dance and song, ending with the symphonic orchestra playing some Mongolian and international Music. We ended the day with a great dinner at a local barbecue restaurant.

Day 5

Wednesday 21st August

After breakfast we transferred to the airport for our flight to Khovd. We drove to the local hotel to pick up two extra participants and our packed lunch. A short stop at the local supermarket was made before heading for the big lake nearby. Here we spotted many Ruddy Shelduck, Great Egret, a Bittern, White-winged and Whiskered Tern, Caspian Tern, Pallas Gull and Citrine Wagtail.

We also stopped to look at some old rock carvings and then it was on to our local ger camp which was going to be our home for the next week or so.

We quickly settled into our nice accommodation, had dinner and were briefed on tomorrow's plans!

Day 6

Thursday 22nd August

A great breakfast was followed by a drive into the high Mountains to one of the observation viewpoints. A couple of Tolai Hares, some Mongolian Finches and a Rock Thrush were a nice distraction on our way up. Once arrived, we spent the next hours scoping the opposite slopes and the sky above us. Several Raven, Black-eared Kite (a subspecies of Black Kite) and Cinereous Vultures drifted overhead, and a few marmots, sheep, goats, camels and horses kept us entertained.

After lunch in the field and more spotting we received a call from one of the local spotters, so we quickly got into our 4x4's. A very scenic drive followed by an interesting walk took us to the place where we all saw the ghost of the mountains laying in the shade of a large rock: a beautiful male Snow Leopard!

At first it was sleeping but then started yawning and waking up, before finally standing up and slowly walking off behind the rock in a gully. What a sighting! In the scope we could clearly see all details, the beautiful spots, its nice elegant head, broad shoulders and long fluffy tail are imprinted into our memories forever!

We made it back to the cars just in time to admire a beautiful sunset and some Siberian Ibex feeding below us.

Back at camp wine and beer, followed by a nice meal and lots of stories ended a fantastic first day in our luxurious ger camp in the middle of nowhere!

Day 7

Friday 23rd August

We spent most of today in another canyon scanning from a viewpoint, overlooking a canyon on one side and a broad open valley on the other side. On the way we spotted our first Black-tailed or Goitered Gazelles. It was quite windy and that made wildlife spotting not easy; still, we did find some nice birds and mammals. Mongolian Finches were common, a Little Owl showed well to some and kites were common. On the mammal front, Pallas's Pikas were all over the place.

Then Keith spotted a Stoat. We followed it for the next hour as it was hunting the Pikas. It put on a great show and finally managed to kill a Pika, stashing it away before going out hunting for more! What a smart and agile mammal it was. In the meantime, the others at the viewpoint watched two distant Wolves found by our drivers!

A Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) drifted by closely and a Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel was a nice addition to the mammal list.

On our way back we found lots of Isabelline and Desert Wheatears, and more Goitered Gazelles. It had been another exciting day!

Day 8

Saturday 24th August

A Siberian Jerboa caught during the night gave all of us great photos as it posed nicely after breakfast. We then drove to another side canyon; unfortunately, the road was washed away at the far end, so we had to retrace our steps. We stopped at a local town to fill up with petrol and/or visit the local supermarket. Hill Pigeon, a Cuckoo, and an Upland Buzzard having a quarrel with the local Kites were among the bird highlights.

We ate our lunch at the viewpoint and started scanning the valley below and across. It was very hot today and activity was low. Lammergeier and Saker Falcon gave great views as they drifted by, while an Eastern (also known as Japanese) Buzzard and a flock of Altai Snowcock flying down the slope were new for the list. Among the mammal highlights were several Marmots, loads of Pikas, and a small group of Ibex.

Day 9

Sunday 25th August

Today we visited the steppe areas to the east of the mountains, in search of one of Mongolia's rarest and endangered animals, the Saiga Antelope. At our first stop we found a nice group of Pallas's Sandgrouse, closely watched by a Saker Falcon overhead, and some very well-camouflaged Toad-headed Agama Lizards.

Then, suddenly, we found a small group of Saiga Antelopes running in the distance and careful scanning produced a total of 11 animals including some young ones. Great!

After finding a suitable spot we took our packed lunch in the endless steppe surrounded by mountains in all directions - very impressive! A few Midday Jirds (also known as Midday Gerbils) were calling and were seen by some, while Bush Crickets and several kinds of Grasshoppers were displaying.

After this we drove to the nearby village to fill up with petrol, water and ice creams!

On the way to camp we finally stopped at some bird-filled lakes. We had a great time working our way through the thousands of ducks and other waterbirds, and highlights included Spoonbill, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Spotted Redshank, Red-crested Pochard, Wigeon, Ruddy Shelduck, Red-necked Phalarope, White-winged and Black Terns and Citrine Wagtail.

We took the scenic route to camp, admiring the local people going on about their business of milking goats, horse riding, preparing food or just socialising in the warm evening light.

Day 10

Monday 26th August

A Mongolian Jird was duly photographed after breakfast. We then left for our last day in the mountains. It was again after lunch until things really picked up. Birds of prey were enjoying the sunny weather and at one time we had Golden and Steppe Eagle, Black-eared Kite, Cinereous Vulture, Saker, Raven and, best of all, an adult White-tailed Eagle that was harassed by an adult Lammergeier in the air, in the same binocular view! What a show – just amazing!

Isabelline Wheatears were constant company, a flock of Altai Snowcock sailed down, a Rock Thrush and Gldenstdt's Redstart were the other birding highlights! On the mammal front Marmots and a few Ibex were spotted on the steep cliffs.

Dinner tonight was Mongolia style, with loads of barbecued food and a few drops of Genghis Vodka....

Day 11

Tuesday 27th August

After saying goodbye to the camp staff, drivers, spotters and cooks, we were on our way to Khovd. On our way we received news that our flight to UB was delayed, so we drove to a nice spot outside town by the river where we had our packed lunch in the company of Mongolian Gull, loads of Kites, and Hill Pigeon. As a surprise, an Eagle hunter turned up, completely dressed and with a Golden Eagle, giving everyone good photo opportunities. Some of the group even held the eagle on their arm for a while.

We then went to a hotel in town for coffee/drinks/bathroom/internet and pre-ordered our evening meal.

We arrived in Ulaanbaatar after midnight and quickly drove to our hotel, checked in and had a rather short night's sleep.

Day 12

Wednesday 28th August

Departure for home...

Баяртай Goodbye!

Species Lists

Mammals (23 species)

Tarbagan Marmot, *Marmota sibirica*
 Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel, *Spermophilus erythrogegens*
 Siberian Jerboa, *Allactaga sibirica*
 Midday Jird, *Meriones meridianus*
 Pallas's Pika, *Ochotona pallasi*
 Snow Leopard, *Uncia uncia*
 Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*
 Przewalski's Horse, *Equus ferus przewalskii*
 Goitered Gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa*
 Saiga Antelope, *Saiga tatarica*
 Steppe Polecat, *Mustela eversmanii*
 Stoat, *Mustela erminea*

Daurian Ground Squirrel, *Spermophilus dauricus*
 Long-tailed Ground Squirrel, *Spermophilus undulatus*
 Brandt's Vole, *Lasiopodomys brandtii*
 Mongolian Jird, *Meriones unguiculatus*
 Tolai Hare, *Lepus tolai*
 Corsac Fox, *Vulpes corsac*
 Grey Wolf, *Canis lupus*
 Red Deer, *Cervus elaphus*
 Mongolian Gazelle, *Procapra gutturosa*
 Siberian Ibex, *Capra sibirica*
 Silver Vole, *Alticola tuvinicus*

Birds (117 species)

Altai Snowcock, *Tetraogallus altaicus*
 Japanese Quail, *Coturnix japonica*
 Whooper Swan, *Cygnus cygnus*
 Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*
 Northern Shoveler, *Spatula clypeata*
 Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope*
 Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*
 Red-crested Pochard, *Netta rufina*
 Common Swift, *Apus apus*
 Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*
 Rock Dove, *Columba livia*
 Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*
 Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*
 Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*
 Pied Avocet, *Recurvirostra avosetta*
 Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus*
 Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*
 Temminck's Stint, *Calidris temminckii*
 Red-necked Phalarope, *Phalaropus lobatus*
 Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*
 Spotted Redshank, *Tringa erythropus*
 Pallas's Gull, *Ichthyaelus ichthyaelus*
 Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*
 Whiskered Tern, *Chlidonias hybrida*
 Black Tern, *Chlidonias niger*
 Eurasian Spoonbill, *Platalea leucorodia*
 Great Egret, *Ardea alba*
 Cinereous Vulture, *Aegypius monachus*
 Steppe Eagle, *Aquila nipalensis*
 Western Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*
 Black (Black-eared) Kite, *Milvus migrans lineatus*
 Upland Buzzard, *Buteo hemilasius*
 Eurasian Eagle-Owl, *Bubo bubo*

Daurian Partridge, *Perdix dauurica*
 Greylag Goose, *Anser anser*
 Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*
 Garganey, *Spatula querquedula*
 Gadwall, *Mareca strepera*
 Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*
 Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*
 Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*
 Pacific Swift, *Apus pacificus*
 Pallas's Sandgrouse, *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*
 Hill Pigeon, *Columba rupestris*
 Baillon's Crane, *Porzana pusilla*
 Demoiselle Crane, *Grus virgo*
 Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*
 Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*
 Lesser Sand Plover, *Charadrius mongolus*
 Ruff, *Calidris pugnax*
 Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*
 Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
 Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*
 Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
 Vega Gull, *Larus vegae mongolicus*
 Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*
 White-winged Tern, *Chlidonias leucopterus*
 Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*
 Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*
 Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), *Gypaetus barbatus*
 Booted Eagle, *Hieraaetus pennatus*
 Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*
 Pallid Harrier, *Circus macrourus*
 White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*
 Eastern Buzzard, *Buteo japonicus*
 Little Owl, *Athene noctua*

Eurasian Hoopoe, <i>Upupa epops</i>	Lesser Kestrel, <i>Falco naumanni</i>
Common Kestrel, <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Amur Falcon, <i>Falco amurensis</i>
Eurasian Hobby, <i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Saker Falcon, <i>Falco cherrug</i>
Brown Shrike, <i>Lanius cristatus</i>	Azure-winged Magpie, <i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
Eurasian Magpie, <i>Pica pica</i>	Red-billed Chough, <i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Daurian Jackdaw, <i>Coloeus dauuricus</i>	Rook, <i>Corvus frugilegus pastinator</i>
Carrion Crow, <i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	Northern Raven, <i>Corvus corax</i>
Azure Tit, <i>Cyanistes cyanus</i>	Great Tit, <i>Parus major</i>
Horned Lark, <i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Greater Short-toed Lark, <i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Mongolian Lark, <i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>	Asian Short-toed Lark, <i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>
Sand Martin, <i>Riparia riparia</i>	Pale Martin, <i>Riparia diluta</i>
Barn Swallow, <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Eurasian Crag Martin, <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Common House Martin, <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Common Chiffchaff, <i>Phylloscopus collybita tristis</i>
Common Whitethroat, <i>Sylvia communis</i>	White-cheeked Starling, <i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>
Common Starling, <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Taiga Flycatcher, <i>Ficedula albicilla</i>
Black Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>	Güldenstädt's Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>
Common Rock Thrush, <i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	Northern Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Isabelline Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>	Desert Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
Pied Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>	House Sparrow, <i>Passer domesticus</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow, <i>Passer montanus</i>	Rock Sparrow, <i>Petronia petronia</i>
Western Yellow Wagtail, <i>Motacilla flava</i>	Citrine Wagtail, <i>Motacilla citreola</i>
Grey Wagtail, <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	White Wagtail, <i>Motacilla alba baicalensis</i>
Blyth's Pipit, <i>Anthus godlewskii</i>	Water Pipit, <i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Hawfinch, <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	Mongolian Finch, <i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>
Brandt's Mountain Finch, <i>Leucosticte brandti</i>	Common Rosefinch, <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
Common Reed Bunting, <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	

Other Taxa

Toad-headed Agama, <i>Phrynocephalus helioscopus</i>	Multi-ocelated Racerunner, <i>Eremias multiocellata</i>
Dione Snake, <i>Elaphe dione</i>	Bush Cricket
Grasshopper sp.	Hummingbird Hawk-moth, <i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>
Painted Lady, <i>Vanessa cardui</i>	Small Tortoiseshell, <i>Aglais urticae</i>
Large White, <i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Small White, <i>Pieris rapae</i>
Bath White, <i>Pontia daplidice</i>	Brown Argus, <i>Aricia agestis</i>
Copper butterfly sp.	Blue butterfly sp.
Clouded Yellow sp.	

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