

Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 August - 7 September 2019



Cossac Fox by Adam Dudley



Snow Leopard by Gerald Broddez



Dione Snake by Gerald Broddez



Przewalski's Horse by Jane Dixon

Report compiled by Gerald Broddez
Images courtesy of Jane Dixon, Adam Dudley & Gerald Broddez



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

Day 1

Tuesday 27th August

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

Day 2

Wednesday 28th August

The plane arrived with some delay, so our plans for the morning were rearranged accordingly. We drove to our hotel for the night and enjoyed some free time before an early lunch.

During the afternoon we did some birding in the river area and found a good selection of birds that included several groups of smart Azure Tits, a large group of Azure-winged Magpies, several *tristis* forms of Chifchaff, a single Dusky Warbler, Daurian Jackdaw, many Taiga Flycatchers, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and loads of raptors. Most were Kites but also Cinereous Vultures, a single Upland Buzzard, a female Goshawk, a close light-phase Booted Eagle and a Hobby! Several butterflies were flitting around in the warm air and included Small and Large White, Small Tortoiseshell and Painted Lady.

Day 3

Thursday 29th August

A Long-eared Owl was calling during the night and was seen by a few people in the spotlight. After breakfast we did a short walk and had great sightings of several Daurian Pika and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel collecting grass for their winter storage. Green Sandpiper, fly-by Red-throated Pipit and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker were new for the list.

After this we drove into UB for our city tour, as our flight to Khovd was delayed till the evening. We had lunch at the Irish pub and then visited the museum, main square and the Hun Mall to admire some Dinosaur skeletons.

We arrived in Khovd around 8.30pm and drove straight to our ger camp by the mountain. Under the starlit night and Milky Way with shooting stars, we all enjoyed the comfort of our ger.

Day 4

Friday 30th August

After breakfast we photographed a Mongolian Jird caught during the night, before going into the mountains to our viewpoint for the day. We quickly found a few Siberian Ibex in the distance and the first Black-eared (a subspecies of Black) Kites appeared overhead. A few Eastern Mole Voles were found digging the soft soil and we enjoyed watching them for the next hour or so digging and removing soil from their burrows; what big front teeth they have! A Saker and several Cinereous Vultures passed by.

After lunch we continued spotting and found our first Tarbagan Marmots, Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture), Steppe Eagle and several displaying Raven, some flying upside down!

The rest of the afternoon was hot and quiet. Best were sightings of Horned Lark and several species of butterfly. The night sky was again brilliant!

Day 5

Saturday 31st August

A Siberian Jerboa put on a great show this morning. After this we drove to another canyon in the mountain range. A single Saiga Antelope en route was a nice bonus. From our viewpoint a few Ibex were spotted and a perched Saker Falcon gave good views. A nearby spring attracted a constant stream of Mongolian Finches, a few Rock Sparrows, a Rock Thrush, Northern Wheatear and Twite.

We scanned the canyon for the rest of the day and had a few Lammergeier overhead, an Eastern Black Redstart and many butterflies. In the late afternoon, more Ibex were found on the steep slopes, but their main predator kept elusive.

Day 6

Sunday 1st September

A pre-breakfast Stoat giving good views was a great start of the day. High-speed winds in the Mountains meant that we had to change our plans for today. So, after photographing a Midday Jird, we were on our way to the steppes and plains below us. Our first stop was at a small village where we quickly found a Group of Hill Pigeons, a Yellow-browed Warbler, a Stejneger's Stonechat and a couple of Hoopoes.

We then drove into the steppes proper and after a bit of searching found a group of Saiga Antelope giving really good views. What a big nose! Closer inspection at our feet produced both the well-camouflaged Toad-headed Agama and the Multi-ocellated Racerunner, as well as a large Bush Cricket.

At our next stop we found another of today's targets: a small group of Pallas's Sandgrouse both on the ground and in the air. We then had lunch in the open steppe in the middle of nowhere. Our cooking crew had set up a tent and toilet and produced a delicious four-course lunch!

Continuing our journey we stopped in the next village for fuel, ice cream, facilities or cold drinks and then proceeded to some bird-rich lakes. We were not disappointed as the lakes held a great variety of species, as well as thousands of birds. Best were Whooper Swan, Spoonbill, Ruddy and Common Shelduck, Little and Temminck's Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Bar-headed Goose, White-winged Tern, and Red-necked Phalarope, among others.

On our way to camp we stopped to photograph some Camels and finally Goitered (also known as Black-tailed) Gazelle in the bright-orange evening light.

Venus, a few shooting stars and another bright Milky Way rounded off a fantastic day.

Day 7

Monday 2nd September

Today we headed to another canyon to the west and en route we found another small heard of Saiga Antelope and some more Goitered Gazelles. Once at our viewpoint we started scanning the surrounding valleys. Golden Eagle and loads of Pallas's Pikas gathering hay for the winter kept us entertained.

In the meantime the cooking crew had set up our lunch tent in a very scenic spot and we all enjoyed another great lunch with incredible vistas all around!

We then spent most of the afternoon scanning the slopes and valleys, but besides a few Marmots and three Ibex, all was quiet.

We stayed until it was getting dark and had our dinner under the stars, before driving slowly back to the camp, spotlighting en route. We found several Tolai Hares, a very confiding and cute Long-eared Hedgehog, several Bats, Red Fox, Gerbils and Jerboas, but the highlight was several Ibex being closely watched by a Pallas Cat! Wonderful!

Day 8

Tuesday 3rd September

Overnight the weather changed dramatically. Low clouds, rain and wind forced us to change plans for the morning, so we went to meet a local family in their ger to learn about their daily life and Mongolian culture in general. We had an interesting time and were welcomed with local camel milk and biscuits and loads of information. A Little Owl was seen en route and at the camp a few Short-toed Larks were seen.

After lunch at the camp, the weather had improved a lot so we decided to go back into the mountains with our last hopes of seeing the Ghost of the Altai! Just as we were about to leave camp, a call came in from our spotters. So as quickly as possible, we were on our way into the mountains to the designated spot. It was a very long hour's drive for some, and when we finally arrived at the spot the leopard had disappeared behind a rock ... to be found again just a couple of minutes later, sunbathing in a grassy spot between the rocks. Fantastic! Telescopes were set up in no time and for the next three hours we enjoyed prime Snow Leopard spotting.

At first the ghost was lying on its back, occasionally stretching a leg or raising its head, showing off its big claws and very long tail. It would then roll on to its back with legs in the air, taking all kinds of strange positions. Finally, it stood up and started walking. We could follow it for the next 30 minutes, as it occasionally stopped to mark and spray its territory or rub against the rocks. What an excellent finale to a splendid week in the Altai Mountains!

The evening was spent celebrating and looking at the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn, beer or vodka in the hand!

Day 9

Wednesday 4th September

After our last breakfast at the camp, we drove to Khovd, stopping en route to look at some rock carvings, before stopping for lunch. At the spot by the lake tower we found a good selection of birds, including some new ones for the list: White-tailed Eagle, Dalmatian Pelican, Pallas's Gull and Pallas's Reed Bunting, Demoiselle Crane and Rosy Starling in summer plumage. A good selection of pipits and wagtails and more waterbirds kept us busy until lunch was ready.

We then drove to Khovd where we pre-ordered our dinner for tonight, enjoyed the free wifi and clean bathrooms or just had a cold drink. A short city walk was offered with our guide, Sovd. After dinner we drove to the airport and checked in for our flight to Ulaanbaatar, arriving just before midnight.

Day 10

Thursday 5th September

We drove to Hustai this morning, stopping en route to look at about 300 Demoiselle Cranes taking off and rising in the thermals, calling loudly; what a great spectacle! A couple of Pallid Harriers and an Upland Buzzard were patrolling the fields below them. A brief stop by some sand dunes did not produce much other than a couple of blue butterflies and Coppers.

Just before arriving at our new camp we stopped to look at a 'big' Mongolian Lark. After lunch we went into the park and quickly spotted some distant Przewalski's Horses and Wapiti (Red Deer). Then a flock of Daurian Partridges was flushed and a smart Daurian Ground Squirrel made a brief appearance. Marmots were everywhere and gave fantastic views and photo opportunities.

Once at the plains we stopped at an archeological site, but astonishingly, we spent more time photographing the hundreds of Brandt's Voles, gathering food for the winter, right by our feet! Moving on, we spotted a group of Mongolian Gazelles, but before we could give them a closer look, we were distracted by several Corsac Foxes and three Saker Falcons sitting on the ground nearby! The foxes did not show well at first, but after a while, all got to see the very well through the scopes.

Pleased with these sightings we drove back towards camp, only to be halted again soon by another Corsac Fox! This time the animal was only 50 metres away, giving incredible views as it was hunting, then lying down and finally trotting along, coming even closer to our vehicles, allowing full-frame pictures. What a wonderful wildlife afternoon!

After dinner we did another spotlighting session and quickly found a Steppe Polecat giving exceptional views, followed by another and another and finally by a Asian Badger making a brief appearance by its den. A fitting end to a fantastic day.

Day 11

Friday 6th September

We were back in the park after breakfast. Marmots were again common all along the roadside and a few smart Amur Falcons were sitting on the wires, including some pretty males. A single Little Owl was watching them from a distance. A covey of Daurian Partidges crossed the road ahead of us and a snake was briefly spotted by one of the cars.

Next, we found a few closer horses to photograph, but we were quickly distracted by a Sparrowhawk eating its kill, harassed by the local Magpies. Golden Eagles were common and a single harrier flew by, and then another snake was found and quickly caught so we could all admire this harmless Dione Snake at close quarters.

Back at camp we checked out, ate lunch and drove to Ulaanbaatar for our last night. We visited the theatre and enjoyed the spectacle of dances, throat singing etc, before our last evening meal together.

Day 12

Saturday 7th September

Check in and flights home.....

Баяртай Goodbye!

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Pallas' Pika by Jane Dixon



Pallas's Sandgrouse by Adam Dudley



Mongolian Finch by Adam Dudley



Tarbagon Marmot by Jane Dixon

Species Lists

Mammals (28 species)

Tarbagan Marmot, *Marmota sibirica*
 Long-tailed Ground Squirrel, *Spermophilus undulatus*
 Siberian Jerboa, *Allactaga sibirica*
 Brandt's Vole, *Lasiopodomys brandtii*
 Mongolian Jird, *Meriones unguiculatus*
 Pallas's Pika, *Ochotona pallasii*
 Long-eared Hedgehog, *Hemiechinus auritus*
 Corsac Fox, *Vulpes corsac*
 Przewalski's Horse, *Equus ferus przewalskii*
 Goitered Gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa*
 Saiga Antelope, *Saiga tatarica*
 Zasian (Eastern) Mole Vole, *Ellobius tancrei*
 Stoat, *Mustela erminea*
 Asian Badger, *Meles leucurus*

Daurian Ground Squirrel, *Spermophilus dauricus*
 Siberian Chipmunk, *Tamias sibiricus*
 Mongolian Three-toed Jerboa, *Dipus sagitta*
 Midday Jird, *Meriones meridianus*
 Daurian Pika, *Ochotona dauurica*
 Tolai Hare, *Lepus tolai*
 Snow Leopard, *Uncia uncia*
 Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*
 Red Deer, *Cervus elaphus*
 Mongolian Gazelle, *Procapra gutturosa*
 Siberian Ibex, *Capra sibirica*
 Ussuri Whiskered Bat, *Myotis gracilis*
 Pallas Cat, *Otocolobus manul*
 Steppe Polecat, *Mustela eversmanii*

Birds (138 species)

Altai Snowcock, *Tetraogallus altaicus*
 Daurian Partridge, *Perdix dauurica*
 Greylag Goose, *Anser anser*
 Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*
 Mandarin Duck, *Aix galericulata*
 Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope*
 Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*
 Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*
 Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*
 European Nightjar, *Caprimulgus europaeus*
 Pallas's Sandgrouse, *Syrhaptes paradoxus*
 Hill Pigeon, *Columba rupestris*
 Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*
 Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*
 Pied Avocet, *Recurvirostra avosetta*
 Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus*
 Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*
 Curlew Sandpiper, *Calidris ferruginea*
 Little Stint, *Calidris minuta*
 Red-necked Phalarope, *Phalaropus lobatus*
 Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*
 Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*
 Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
 Vega Gull, *Larus vegae mongolicus*
 Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*
 Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*
 Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea*
 Dalmatian Pelican, *Pelecanus crispus*
 Cinereous Vulture, *Aegypius monachus*
 Steppe Eagle, *Aquila nipalensis*
 Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus*

Chukar Partridge, *Alectoris chukar*
 Bar-headed Goose, *Anser indicus*
 Whooper Swan, *Cygnus cygnus*
 Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*
 Gadwall, *Mareca strepera*
 Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*
 Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*
 Red-crested Pochard, *Netta rufina*
 Common Merganser (Goosander), *Mergus merganser*
 Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*
 Rock Dove, *Columba livia*
 Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*
 Demoiselle Crane, *Grus virgo*
 Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*
 Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*
 Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*
 Ruff, *Calidris pugnax*
 Temminck's Stint, *Calidris temminckii*
 Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*
 Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
 Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*
 Spotted Redshank, *Tringa erythropus*
 Pallas's Gull, *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus*
 Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*
 White-winged Tern, *Chlidonias leucopterus*
 Eurasian Spoonbill, *Platalea leucorodia*
 Great Egret, *Ardea alba*
 Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), *Gypaetus barbatus*
 Booted Eagle, *Hieraaetus pennatus*
 Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*
 Northern Goshawk, *Accipiter nisus*

Western Marsh Harrier, <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Pallid Harrier, <i>Circus macrourus</i>
Black (Black-eared) Kite, <i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	White-tailed Eagle, <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Upland Buzzard, <i>Buteo hemilasius</i>	Little Owl, <i>Athene noctua</i>
Long-eared Owl, <i>Asio otus</i>	Eurasian Hoopoe, <i>Upupa epops</i>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, <i>Dryobates minor</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>	Isabelline Shrike, <i>Lanius isabellinus</i>
Steppe (Great) Grey Shrike, <i>Lanius excubitor pallidirostris</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>	Red-rumped Swallow, <i>Cecropis daurica</i>
Yellow-browed Warbler, <i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>	Hume's Leaf Warbler, <i>Phylloscopus humei</i>
Common Chiffchaff, <i>Phylloscopus collybita tristis</i>	Dusky Warbler, <i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>
Asian Desert Warbler, <i>Sylvia nana</i>	Lesser Whitethroat, <i>Sylvia curruca</i>
White-cheeked Starling, <i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	Eurasian Nuthatch, <i>Sitta europaea asiatica</i>
Common Starling, <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Rosy Starling, <i>Pastor roseus</i>
Taiga Flycatcher, <i>Ficedula albicilla</i>	Eyebrowed Thrush, <i>Turdus obscurus</i>
Common Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Black Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Rock Thrush, <i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	Güldenstädt's Redstart, <i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>
Northern Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Stejneger's Stonechat, <i>Saxicola stejnegeri</i>
Desert Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe deserti</i>	Isabelline Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
House Sparrow, <i>Passer domesticus</i>	Pied Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>
Rock Sparrow, <i>Petronia petronia</i>	Eurasian Tree Sparrow, <i>Passer montanus</i>
Western Yellow Wagtail, <i>Motacilla flava</i>	White-winged Snowfinch, <i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>
Grey Wagtail, <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Citrine Wagtail, <i>Motacilla citreola</i>
Richard's Pipit, <i>Anthus richardi</i>	White Wagtail, <i>Motacilla alba baicalensis</i>
Water Pipit, <i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Blyth's Pipit, <i>Anthus godlewskii</i>
Common Rosefinch, <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	Mongolian Finch, <i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>
Pine Bunting, <i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	Twite, <i>Linaria flavirostris</i>
Little Bunting, <i>Emberiza pusilla</i>	Grey-necked Bunting, <i>Emberiza buchanani</i>
Pallas's Reed Bunting, <i>Emberiza pallasii</i>	Ortolan Bunting, <i>Emberiza hortulana</i>
Common Reed Bunting, <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	

Other Taxa

Toad-headed Agama, <i>Phrynocephalus helioscopus</i>	Multi-occelated 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>Arícia agestis</i>
Copper butterfly sp.	Blue butterfly sp.
Clouded Yellow sp.	