



The Birds and Mammals of Mongolia August 2024

KEN LOGAN

Recently returned from our latest wildlife adventure. They get a little tougher the older you get! Mongolia is wild. Wide open landscapes, magnificent scenery, and views across kilometers of mountain and arid or grassy Steppes with only the odd herdsman's family for company.



We arrived in Ulaanbaatar a day early with the intention of looking around before the tour started. Should not have bothered. Ulaanbaatar is a typical old soviet like city with ugly concrete structures and massive high-rise apartment blocks (just as dense as the Chinese cities).

Mongolia is bigger than Alaska and has a population of just 3 million people ,70% of whom live in Ulaanbaatar. The pollution and the traffic congestion were just horrendous. But I did get two new birds at our hotel out near the airport – Azure Tit and Siberian Long-tailed Finch.

On our trip we visited just three locations- Gun Galuut Reserve, and Hustai NP – both were just a couple of hours drive from Ulaanbaatar and consisted of low range hills, with grassy valleys and a range of different sized lakes and pans (reminded me a bit of the hills and landscapes around Wakkerstroom here in SA) and the Altai mountain range- home to the “grey Ghost”- the magnificent Snow Leopard. Here we camped at 2000 meters in our Ger camp sometimes known as a Jird camp and travelled for 2 hours to reach the top of the mountain at 3000m above sea level.

While there were in theory 50 possible new birds for me here, most were either vagrants or passage migrants in different parts of the country and a realistic list was just 10 birds of which I saw nine. This was really a mammal trip and I had more mammal lifers than birds (every mammal we saw was a lifer). Bet that never happens again.

So, our first stop was the Gun Galuut Reserve where we had 2 nights. At this point I should explain just how difficult the bird and mammal viewing actually was. Because of the huge, never ending vistas all the mammal species (with the exception of the marmots and hares) were seen (and hopefully photographed with an effective 800mm lens) at great distances between 500 meters and a kilometer away. The birds were not much better. With the exception of some of ground birds (larks and ground jays etc) where we sometimes got within 50 meters most sightings around the pans (wildfowl and waders) were at great distances – just dots in the distance through your binos, so we spent hours watching our 2 guides look through their scopes trying to identify whatever was out there. After 10 minutes scoping you would get 20 seconds looking through the scope at a wader you could barely identify and which thankfully you knew you had seen before. Not my favorite way of spending several mornings with no real chance to get a photograph.

On the way to Gun Galuut we passed the statue of Ghengis Khan on his horse- a huge statue over 30 meters tall, made from stainless steel. The people on the observation deck above the horses head were just mere specks from 100 metres away.



The mammals we saw there were Argali- a big horned sheep- a juvenile way off on a far hill side too far to photograph. It was lying down and actually looked sick to me. Some Argali hunters arrived at the camp later that day. We were surprised hunting was allowed in the reserve. We also saw Goitered Gazelle and Corsac fox, both again too far off for a photograph.

Around the pans we spotted our only Mongolian Gulls (now a full species IOC 14.2) and several Demoiselle Cranes and Whooper Swans. Wildfowl were distant but plentiful- Ruddy and Common Shelduck, Garganey, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Falcated Duck, Eurasian Teal, Common Pochard and several others. A couple of White-naped Cranes and Black Storks were also seen- way out in the wide yonder. Waders were plentiful too, with all too far to photograph- Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Common, Green, Curlew, Wood, Broad-billed and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, and Temminck's and red-necked Stints.



There were some interesting raptors around as well. Black Kites were numerous- we saw hundreds every day. Cinereous Vultures and Upland Buzzards were also common with several seen each day and around the pans we had both Eastern and Western Marsh Harriers. Gun Galuut also gave us Booted and Steppe Eagles and one Golden and one White-tailed Eagle.

Ravens, Rooks, Carrion Crows and Red-billed Choughs were also common, and we also spotted some Daurian Jackdaws amongst the rooks on our way to Gun Galuut. Among the ground birds we had Eurasian Skylark. Horned Lark (a new subspecies for me and a new Lifer Mongolian Lark. We also the red-breasted sub species of Barn Swallow here. Lesser Whitethroats were reasonably common and we had one Daurian Redstart. Wheatears were also common, with Northern Wheatear plentiful alongside Isabelline and in places both Pied and desert Wheatears as well.

We returned to Ulaanbaatar after a two- night stop- we had our own chalet at Gun Galuut, with its own bathroom- a real luxury we soon realized. Next day we had a 2000 kilometer flight to Ulgii in Western Mongolia followed by a five hour drive to Altai Camp, high in the Altai mountains. We had a fleet of 5 Landcruisers with 3 people in each plus the driver. Our party consisted of 7 single American woman, an American couple and a single Brit lady making 8 women and two couples including Stephanie and me. With two Rockjumper guides Nigel Redman from the UK and Attila Steiner from Hungary. You can guess his nickname!

The first American lady I saw was wearing a gold lame visor so you can guess my immediate thoughts. They were mainly botanists and the American guy was a keen Bumble Bee observer. None of them were what I would call real birders and their eyes were glued mainly on plants on the ground rather than birds in the air, but they proved to be an interesting, eclectic bunch.

Our search for the Snow Leopard was not what I expected. The camp had four scouts, two on horseback and two on motorcycles plus 8 assorted herdsmen who were also keeping their eyes open for our target. They radioed in as we landed that they had found a Snow Leopard but as we did not arrive until dusk, it was too late to go looking that night. We left camp at 6.00am the following morning for our two hour drive up Jargalant Mountain but our scouts had lost the Leopard overnight. We settled down to await further news, had our lunch cooked for us by the camp cook



and birded in the same spot until 5.00pm. We had our first and only group of Altai Snowcocks plus all the usual raptors, a couple of juvenile Bearded Vultures and a Saker Falcon. At 5.00 pm the scouts reported they had found the Leopard again and we drove for about one kilometer across the stony arid mountain side to the edge of a valley and walked the last one hundred meters and set up our scopes looking down the valley. And there she was, about 600 meters away lying in the grass and looking straight back up at us. We had great scope views and she was even just



in range of my 800 mm lens, although I was never going to get a great shot at that distance. We watched for 2 hours and watched her, watching some Siberian Ibex her main food prey along with the many Marmots who also watched on from the side of their burrows. She then walked across to the stony scree on the far side of the valley and called out her two one-year old cubs (and I thought I saw a third) but only two were listed. We returned for supper delighted- successful on our very first day with 5 more nights on the mountain to come.

This was however to be our one and only sighting of the grey Ghost- you must not think seeing her was simple. We all appreciated how well the search was organized and were pleased that our scouts would be well rewarded for their efforts.

The following day we birded the plains and a lake. Same wildfowl and waders- same distances away. We did pick up a relatively close flock of Mongolian Finches drinking in a small stream and watched a Steppe Polecat digging out an Isabelline Wheatear's nest in a disused burrow while the distressed parents watched on. We visited a small village where we found our first Hill Pigeons and bought our one and only ice cream of the trip. We also found some Saiga, a fleet-footed Antelope some distance away beside Durgan lake.

The next day we tried a different valley called Bumbat Valley leading up into the mountains. Did not see much- more Wheatears, Whitethroats and a flock of Grey-necked Buntings and a Barred Warbler. The last car saw a small flock of Grey Wolves but unfortunately they were gone by the time we returned. A long day, which improved 100 fold when crossing the plains again, we came across two Mongolian Ground Jays- the best bird on the trip for me and I got some decent shots as well. We had now found all the birds I was looking for!!

Our Ger Hut was quite spacious and we had a small hand basin inside but the communal showers and toilets were 150 meters away hidden down the hillside- a real mission for me to reach at night. To make it worse I came down with a violent attack of diarrhoea which lasted 2 days which kept me glued to my bed. There are no loos in the mountains and it was a battle to find a rock big enough to hide behind when the girls needed to go. So, I fortunately missed nothing the last two days in the Altai mountains. They returned to our first spot where we saw the leopard but saw nothing new, and our final day was spent out on the plains getting one Landcruiser stuck in the mud but again saw nothing new except for some Pallas's Sandgrouse which I had seen before.

The flight, the next day, with me starting to recover, took us back to Ulaanbaatar and we drove straight down to the Hustai NP for a one-night stay. The following morning we were out looking for Przevalski's Horse the only truly wild horse left in the world and for Mongolian Gazelle seen yet again at a great distance from the vehicles. To make it worse they start moving even further afield as soon as they see the vehicles stop. A pleasant stop in a nice grassy Park, a complete change from the arid Steppe lands of the Altai mountains. We saw several herds of horse up on the hillsides and even some Wapiti, a red deer look alike.

Back to Ulaanbaatar that afternoon for our early morning flight to Istanbul, along 12 hour layover and our final 9 hour flight back to Joburg. Mongolia a real adventure and I can't tell you how good it felt to find that Snow leopard

