



TOUR REPORT – SNOW LEOPARD TOUR IN WESTERN MONGOLIA



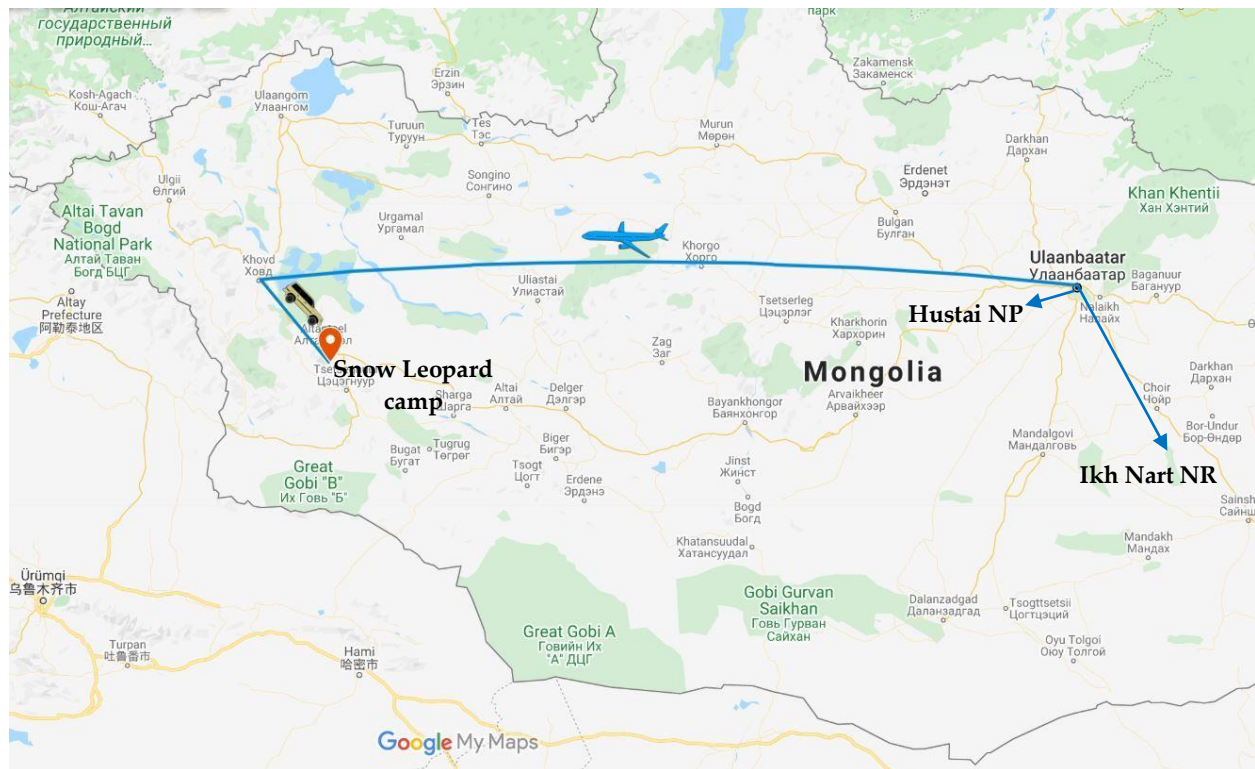
Compiled by: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav

Tour dates: 13-24th October 2022

Participants: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav (leader), André Pittet, Catherine Pittet and Jean-Marc Pinaud (clients)

Tour photo gallery: <http://www.wildlifetoursmongolia.com/photo-gallery>

Background information: Mongolia is home to the second largest population of Snow Leopard in the world. Snow Leopard watching and photography tours are becoming more and more popular in Mongolia because there are higher chances to see and photograph this elusive cat at much lower altitudes like 2,000-3,000 m. The winter months are better for the Snow Leopard tours as they come down to lower altitudes due to scarcity of their natural prey. The Siberian Ibex (*Capra sibirica*) and Mongolian Marmot (*Marmota sibirica*) are the main prey for the Snow Leopards throughout most of its range in Mongolia. Siberian Ibex and other large wild preys are not easy to catch, and the marmots hibernate in winter. Thus, they prefer to feed on domestic animals, predominantly goats in winter. The Snow Leopards take domestic animals while grazing as well as from the campsite at night. This winter diet probably increases the chances of seeing this majestic animal.



Snow Leopard Trip route

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Day 1-3. Ulaanbaatar to Hustai National Park

Our clients André and Catherine arrived in the morning of October 13th with the Turkish Airlines. Other tour participant Jean-Marc was supposed to arrive with the same flight, but he emailed me on a previous day that he has been refused boarding for the flight from France to Istanbul due to overbooking. So, he would try to catch the next flight so that he arrives in UB on the Sunday morning - October 16th and we would fly to Khovd in the afternoon on the same day.

After meeting with André and Catherine, we headed to the Hustai National Park. We arrived at the Hustai ger camp by noon and had lunch soon after check in. The weather was perfect today and we decided to drive around the park in the afternoon. We encountered a good number of Siberian Wapiti Deer and Przewalski's Horses along the road and stopped multiple times for photos when the animals were close to us. Near our first stop for a group of Przewalski's Horses, we saw a Corsac Fox which ran into its den immediately after seeing us.



A herd of Siberian Wapiti Deer in Hustai National Park (Photo by André Pittet)



Przewalski's Horses in Hustai National Park (Photo by André Pittet)

We continued driving to the south west and saw more deer and wild horses. The road took us to get the southern steppe of the park where we expected to see Mongolian Gazelles. After some time of driving, we saw a few herds of Mongolian Gazelles. It had been already three and a half hours and we headed back to the camp.



Mongolian Gazelles near Hustai National Park (Photo by André Pittet)

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The weather was not good as the first day for the next two days. However, we explored the different parts of Hustai National Park. We went for the Argali Sheep on the morning of Day 2. After scanning several mountains slopes, I spotted a small group of Argali Sheep. We had a good view with the spotting scope, but they were a bit too far for taking decent photos. We did the same trip as the first day on Day 3 and headed back to UB after lunch. I received an email from Jean-Marc that he would arrive in UB in the next morning.

Day 4-10. Altai Mountains

I got up at 6:00am and drove to the airport to pick up Jean-Marc. Not long after the plane landed, he came through the arrival gate and we finally met in person. We drove to the hotel where André and Catherine were staying as our flight to Khovd was at 16:30 in the afternoon.

We landed at the airport in Khovd at around 6:00 pm. We were picked up by our two Toyota land cruisers and headed to our Snow Leopard camp directly. After over an hour of driving on the paved and dirt roads, we reached our camp. Just before reaching the camp, we saw a small herd of Goitered Gazelles in the headlight of our cars. We were welcomed by camp staff and had a delicious dinner made by our professional cook Bogi.



Our Snow Leopard camp in the Altai Mountain (Photo by André Pittet)

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We explored the valley for the next few days. We have seen a horse carcass recently taken/eaten by a Snow Leopard and some fresh Snow Leopard tracks at the bottom of the valley. We scanned the mountain slopes with binoculars and spotting scope and did not see anything for the first two days.



Our Snow Leopard Valley in the Altai Mountain (Photo by André Pittet)

There was a large herd of horses grazing on the higher grassy slope since our arrival. On the second day, we noticed that those horses were scared of something about an hour before dusk. We grabbed our binoculars as our spotting scope went with one of the cars and saw something like a wolf or snow leopard walking nearby horses. But, we were not sure that was exactly a snow leopard as it was a bit too far to tell with the binoculars. On the next morning, we all walked up to check if a Snow Leopard made a kill. After scanning around the horses, we didn't find anything and returned to our camp for a bit late lunch. In the afternoon, I and the local guide went to another valley in one car. When we came back to the camp just before dusk, we were told that our driver Ganaa has seen something chasing the horses again at the same spot. On the next morning, our local guide went up on a horseback to check the areas around the horses again and he gave us a call that he found a fresh kill made by a Snow Leopard at an altitude of 2,600 m. After an hour of walking, we reached the hidden spot to watch the leopard safely. The

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magnificent Snow Leopard was sleeping right next to the kill and we watched it for many hours.



Snow Leopard on its fresh kill (Photo by André Pittet)

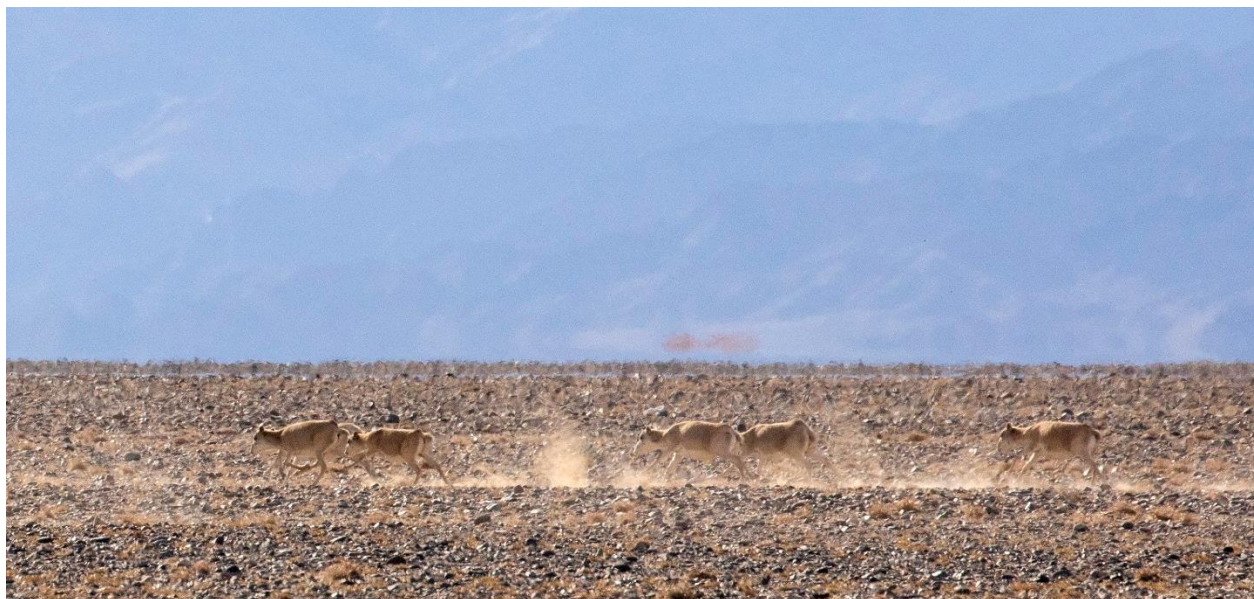


Snow Leopard on its fresh kill (Photo by Jean-Marc Pinaud)

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We were supposed to fly back to Ulaanbaatar a week after on the October 23rd, but we were informed by Aero Mongolia that our flight has been advanced by one due to switching to winter schedule. We have lost one day in the Altai Mountain, fortunately we have seen elusive Snow Leopard. We left our Snow Leopard camp after breakfast on the October 22nd and spent a few hours in search of Mongolian Saiga Antelopes. After some driving, we spotted several herds of this rare mammal. They were quite shy and did not allow us to get very close. The weather during our stay in the Altai Mountain was very nice and it was quite warm both during daytimes and at nights.

We flew back to Ulaanbaatar in the afternoon and arrived there at around 5:30 pm.



Saiga Antelopes in the Mankhan Steppe (Photo by André Pittet)

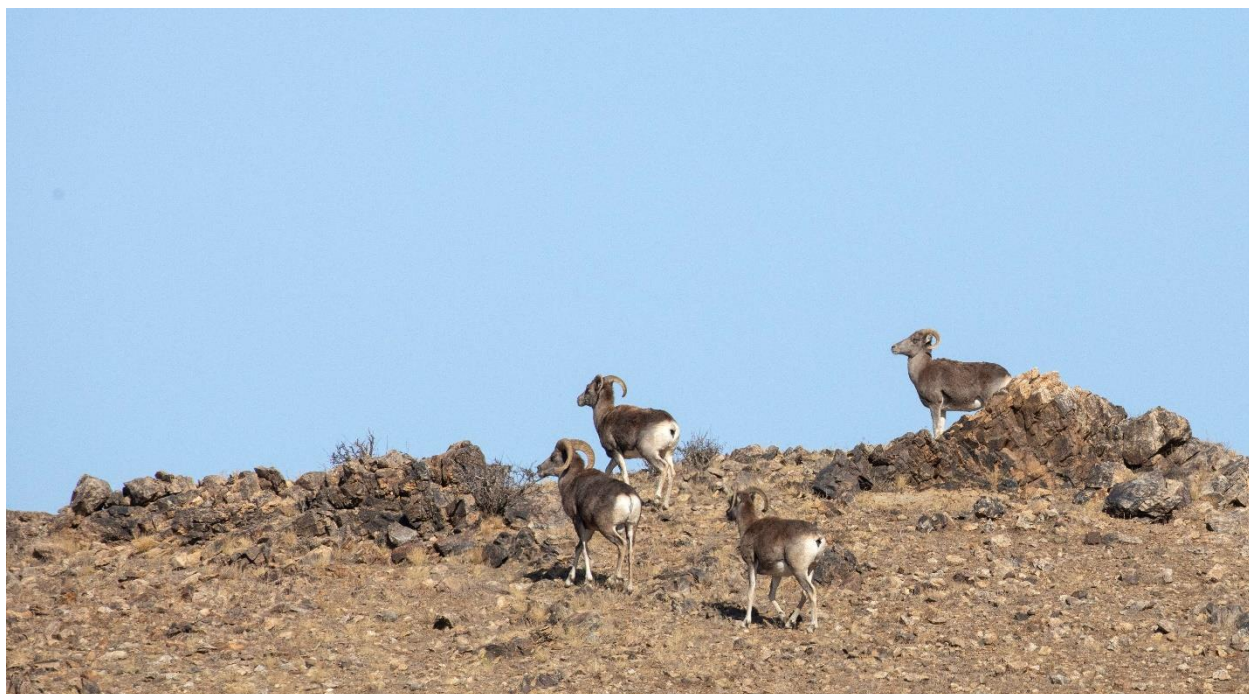
Day 11-12. Ikh Nart Nature Reserve

As we had one extra day from the Altai Mountain, I decided to take our clients to the Ikh Nart Nature Reserve which is located 300 km to the south from Ulaanbaatar. The reserve covers an area of about 66,000 hectares and was established in 1996 to protect the populations of Argali Sheep and other wildlife. It consists of rocky outcrops surrounded by dry grassland and semi-desert steppe. We left UB in the morning and stopped by a grocery store for food for two days. We reached the Ikh Nart Research Camp at around 1 pm and had lunch made by another cook Otgoo.

After lunch, we walked along the valley where the camp is located and saw a few herds of Siberian Ibex. On the next day, we drove around the park and have seen several herds

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of Argali Sheep, Siberian Ibex and Mongolian Gazelles. After lunch, it was time go back to Ulaanbaatar.



Argali Sheep in Ikh Nart Nature Reserve (Photo by André Pittet)



Siberian Ibex in Ikh Nart Nature Reserve (Photo by André Pittet)

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Our Snow Leopard tour ended here with many successes and lots of good memories. We would like to thank our wonderful clients Jean-Marc Pinaud from France, André Pittet and Catherine Pittet from Switzerland for travelling with us. Indeed, it was one of our best tours. I would like to also thank André and Catherine for donating a pair of Nikon binoculars to our local Snow Leopard guide.



Our Snow Leopard team

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Full species list:

#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
MAMMALS			
1.	Pallas's Pika	<i>Ochotona pallasii</i>	Altai Mountain
2.	Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>	Ikh Nart NR
3.	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	Altai Mountain
4.	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Altai Mountain & Ikh Nart NR
5.	Argali Sheep	<i>Ovis ammon</i>	Hustai NP & Ikh Nart NR
6.	Mongolian Gazelle	<i>Procapra gutturosa</i>	Hustai NP & Ikh Nart NR
7.	Goitered Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>	Altai Mountain
8.	Saiga Antelope	<i>Saiga tatarica mongolica</i>	Altai Mountain
9.	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Hustai NP
10.	Corsac Fox	<i>Vulpes corsac</i>	Hustai NP
11.	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Altai Mountain
BIRDS			
1.	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Altai Mountain, Ikh Nart NR
2.	Altai Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus altaicus</i>	Altai Mountain
3.	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Altai Mountain
4.	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Altai Mountain
5.	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Altai Mountain, Ikh Nart NR
6.	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Altai Mountain
7.	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>	Altai Mountain
8.	Saker Falcon	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Altai Mountain
9.	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	Hustai NP & Altai Mountain
10.	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Altai Mountain
11.	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Altai Mountain
12.	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Altai Mountain
13.	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>	Hustai NP
14.	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>	Ikh Nart NR
15.	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Everywhere
16.	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>	Altai Mountain
17.	Siberian Accentor	<i>Prunella montanella</i>	Altai Mountain
18.	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Khovd town
19.	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Altai Mountain
20.	White-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	Altai Mountain
21.	Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus sibiricus</i>	Altai Mountain
22.	Eurasian Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>	Altai Mountain
23.	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>	Altai Mountain
24.	Godlewski's Bunting	<i>Emberiza godlewskii</i>	Altai Mountain