



TOUR REPORT – SNOW LEOPARD TOUR IN WESTERN MONGOLIA



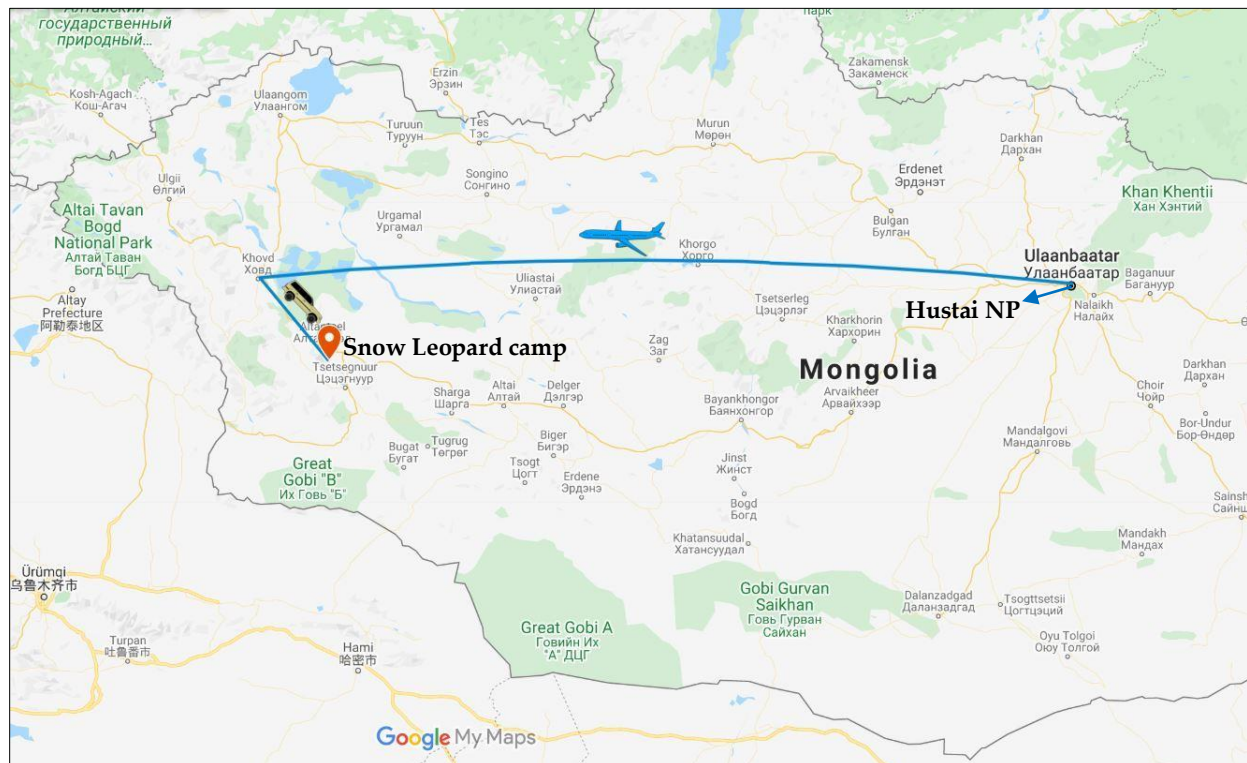
Compiled by: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav

Tour dates: 28 February -14 March 2023

Participants: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav (leader),
Gehan Rajapakse, Namal Kamalgoda and Jackie
Kamalgoda (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 in March 2023

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Day 1. Ulaanbaatar

Our second Snow Leopard tour of the year took place between February 28th and March 14th, 2023. Our group consisted of three guests - Mr. Gehan Rajapakse, Mr. Namal Kamalgoda and Mrs. Jackie Kamalgoda from Sri Lanka. Our guests arrived at 23:40 on February 27th, 2023. The next day, we went around the Mongolica Hotel and saw various birds such as Ruddy Shelduck, Carrion Crow, Common Magpie, Azure-winged Magpie, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Azure Tit, Great Tit, Red-throated Thrush, Black-throated Thrush, Fieldfare, Common Starling and White-cheeked Starling.

Day 2-12. Altai Mountains

We met at the hotel at around 11:00 and had lunch before we went to the airport. Our flight from Ulaanbaatar to Khovd was at 14:30 and it took about 2 hours. We landed at the airport in Khovd at around 15:30. We were picked up by our Toyota land cruiser and headed to our Snow Leopard camp directly. After one and a half hours of driving on the paved and dirt roads, we reached our Snow Leopard camp. We had a few stops on the way for landscape photography. We were welcomed by our camp staff and had a delicious dinner made by our professional cook Bogi.



Our Snow Leopard valley (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)



Our Snow Leopard camp in the Altai Mountain (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)

We walked up the valley on March 2nd (Day 1 in Snow Leopard valley) and our guest Gehan took some photos of Bearded Vultures on the nest. We spotters walked farther up and scanned the slopes with binoculars and spotting scope. But, no sign of the Snow Leopards.

The following day, three of us (me and two local spotters) split up. At around noon, one of our spotters found the Snow Leopard resting in a small cave at an altitude of 2,280m. We called our camp staff and our guests came to the site after a while. The leopard was still resting in the cave and finally it walked away before it got dark which allowed us to take some decent photos.

We decided to rest on the following day as we have seen the Snow Leopard on the second day in the valley. In the afternoon, one of our spotters went farther up and stayed overnight with one of the local families. On Day 3, he walked up the higher slope and found a young Snow Leopard (presumed to be 3 years old) at an altitude of 2,500m. It was too long (4 km) to walk for our guests, so I decided to go with our other spotter to confirm the sighting. When we got there, the leopard was sleeping on the rock and it went into the cave not long after we showed up.



Snow Leopard #1 seen in March 2023 (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)



Snow Leopard #2 seen in March 2023 (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)

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On the way back to camp, we heard a Snow Leopard calling to mate from the opposite slope. A few seconds after, we spotted the leopard walking on the rock at an altitude of 2,220m and it went behind some rocks soon after. It got too dark to find this leopard again and we went back to the camp.

On Day 4, three of us went up to find the leopard seen at dusk yesterday evening. After scanning the slope for 20-30 minutes, we spotted the leopard sleeping on a flat area under the big rock face at an altitude of 2,200m. It turned out to be not just one leopard, there were at least two other little leopards sleeping as well. I ran to the car to pick up our guests from the camp and our two spotters stayed at the location watching the leopards. It took about 40 minutes to come back with our guests. We went closer to the leopards, but we kept the safe distance not to disturb them and there were three healthy cubs with their mother.



A female Snow Leopard with 3 cubs in March 2023 (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)

This female Snow Leopard with three cubs was seen again in another valley in the south after two days at an altitude of 2,450m.

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On Day 7, one of our spotters has seen a Snow Leopard at an altitude of 2,280m with the spotting scope from outside of the camp at around 6:00 pm. It was too late to go after this leopard. On Day 8, three of us went up again to find the leopard seen yesterday evening. We found the leopard sleeping in a small cave at an altitude of 2,420m a bit farther up from the location where we saw the leopard last evening. It was too high for our guests to walk up, so I approached the leopard with two spotters to take some decent photos. We were about 80 meters from the leopard. After a few minutes, the leopard knew our presence and walked away super slowly.



Snow Leopard #8 seen in March 2023 (Photo by Purevsuren Tsolmonjav)

At the end of the tour, we have seen a total of 8 different Snow Leopards, including a female with 3 cubs. We are pretty sure that no one has ever seen 8 Snow Leopards before during a single tour.

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Day 13. Hustai National Park

We visited the Hustai National Park for a day. We saw numerous Przewalski's Horses and Siberian Wapiti Deer in the park. When we went into the main valley, we saw several Mongolian Marmots which just came out of the hibernation. We also went to the southern part of the park and saw several herds of Mongolian Gazelles. We looked for Daurian Partridges as well and finally we found a flock of over 10 birds and took some decent photos.

Day 14. City tour in Ulaanbaatar

I picked up our guests from the hotel and we went to the central square. After that we visited a National History Museum.

Our Snow Leopard tour ended here with many successes and lots of good memories. We would like to thank our wonderful clients Gehan Rajapakse, Namal Kamalgoda and Jackie Kamalgoda from Sri Lanka for travelling with us. Indeed, it was our best Snow Leopard tour ever in terms of number of sightings.



Our Snow Leopard team in March 2023

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Full species list:

#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
MAMMALS			
1.	Pallas's Pika	<i>Ochotona pallasi</i>	Altai Mountain
2.	Mongolian Gerbil	<i>Meriones unguiculatus</i>	Hustai NP
3.	Mongolian Marmot	<i>Marmota sibirica</i>	Hustai NP
4.	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Altai Mountain
5.	Mongolian Gazelle	<i>Procapra gutturosa</i>	Hustai NP
6.	Saiga Antelope	<i>Saiga tatarica mongolica</i>	Altai Mountain
7.	Siberian Wapiti Deer	<i>Cervus canadensis sibiricus</i>	Hustai NP
8.	Przewalski's Horse	<i>Equus przewalskii</i>	Hustai NP
9.	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Altai Mountain
10.	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Altai Mountain
BIRDS			
1.	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Altai Mountain
2.	Daurian Partridge	<i>Perdix dauurica</i>	Hustai NP
3.	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	UB
4.	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	UB
5.	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	UB
6.	Pallas's Sandgrouse	<i>Syrrhaptes paradoxus</i>	Altai Mountain
7.	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Altai Mountain
8.	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>	Altai Mountain
9.	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Altai Mountain
10.	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Altai Mountain & UB
11.	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Altai Mountain
12.	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>	Altai Mountain
13.	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Altai Mountain
14.	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Altai Mountain
15.	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Hustai NP
16.	Saker Falcon	<i>Falcon cherrug</i>	Altai Mountain
17.	Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus dauuricus</i>	UB
18.	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Altai Mountain
19.	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Altai Mountain
20.	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	UB
21.	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Altai Mountain
22.	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	UB
23.	Azure Tit	<i>Cyanistes cyanus</i>	UB
24.	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	UB
25.	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>	Altai Mountain
26.	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>	Hustai NP
27.	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Everywhere
28.	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	UB
29.	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	Altai Mountain & UB
30.	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	UB

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#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
31.	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	UB
32.	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	UB
33.	Black-throated Thrush	<i>Turdus atrogularis</i>	UB
34.	Rufous-throated Thrush	<i>Turdus ruficollis</i>	UB
35.	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	UB
36.	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>	Altai Mountain
37.	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Khovd town
38.	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Altai Mountain
39.	White-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	Altai Mountain
40.	Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus sibiricus</i>	Altai Mountain