

TOUR REPORT – BIRD & MAMMAL WATCHING IN WESTERN MONGOLIA



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Tour dates: 23 May – 31 May 2019

Participants: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav, Jargalsaikhan Lamjav



Background information: Birding in far western Mongolia is always interesting as there have been a few birding tours ever organized in ths part of Mongolia. I have been thinking to go on a birding trip to the west for many years and this dream has come true in 2019 as I am now working for myself. I teamed up with my long time birding friend Jargal Lamjav who is one of the best bird photographers in Mongolia. The trip went very successful as we observed and photographed some of the rarely documented species like European Bee-eater, Common Nightingale, European Roller and Redheaded Bunting which are only found in SW Mongolia, and of course best moment was to see the elusive Snow Leopard. It is better to organize a combination of birding and mammal watching tours in western Mongolia as there are some amazing birds and mammals in the region. This was also a pilot trip to explore the region for our future wildlife tours.



Trip route and main birding locations



Bird highlights for the tour:

- 1. European Bee-eater
- 2. Common Nightingale
- 3. Eastern Goldfinch
- 4. European Roller
- 5. Lesser Grey Shrike
- 6. Red-mantled Rosefinch
- 7. Great Rosefinch
- 8. Sulphur-bellied Warbler
- 9. White-headed Duck
- 10. Brandt's Mountain-finch
- 11. Bar-headed Goose
- 12. Chinese Spot-billed Duck
- 13. White-winged Redstart
- 14. Red-headed Bunting
- 15. Pallas's Gull
- 16. Mongolian Ground-jay
- 17. Pallas's Sandgrouse

Mammal highlights for the tour:

- 1. Snow Leopard
- 2. Corsac Fox
- 3. Siberian Ibex
- 4. Red Fox

DAY 1. Ulaanbaatar to Buuntsagaan lake

We left Ulaanbaatar (UB), capital of Mongolia, in the morning of 23rd May 2019 with a land cruiser. After 270 km driving, we stopped by Takhilt lake for about two hours as it not so distant from the main road. Highlights here were a pair of Chinese Spot-billed Duck, a flock of Bar-headed Geese, a pair of nesting Eastern Marsh Harrier and a pair of Arctic Loon. We continued our journey and stopped for lunch in Bayankhongor town which is 640 km from UB. After 2 hours of driving, we reached the Buuntsagaan lake which is one of the birding hotspots in Mongolia. On the way we came across hundreds of Pallas's Sandgrouses. We camped next to the delta of Baidrag River as there are always more birds. We walked along the lake shore for several hours before sunset.







A pair of Chinese Spot-billed Duck

DAY 2. Buuntsagaan lake to Bulgan River

We got up at around 5:30 in the morning and spent a few hours before we moved on. The highlights were Pallas's Gull, White-winged Tern, Spotted Redshank, Curlew



Sandpiper, Long-toed Stint and Temminck's Stint. There were a several hundreds of Great Cormorants and Black-headed Gulls hanging on the small islands.



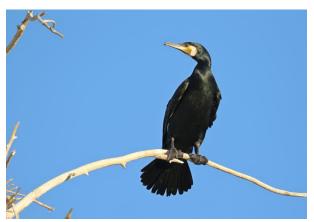


Temminck's Stint

Pallas's Gull

We continued our journey to the Bulgan River which is located in south western edge of the country. After almost full day of driving we finally arrived at Bulgan town. We camped in the plantation on the western side of the Bulgan River near Bulgan town. Before it got dark, we explored the plantation a little bit and saw a mixed nest colony of Grey Herons and Great Cormorants in large poplar trees. A bunch of Black Kites were flying around to catch the small chicks.





Grey Herons

Great Cormorant

DAY 3. Bulgan River

We got up at around 5:30 in the morning. Several Common Nightingales were singing and we tried to take some phots. The first one we went after was quite shy and it did not come out of the dense tree. We gave up on this and tried to find another one. After a minute, we found second one and used playback to make it come out of the tree. It did as we wanted and posed in the sun light for about 10 minutes. We were so happy for



the good photos and walked back to the camp site for breakfast. After breakfast, I went to the western part of the plantation to explore the area. Several Grey-necked Buntings were singing from the bushes and all the sudden I heard unfamiliar call of a bird. Several European Bee-eaters just came from somewhere and perched on the wire fence. I tried to get closer hiding among the bushes to take decent photos. After a few shots, all flew to the core zone of the plantation. I immediately gave a phone call to Jargal and we went to the same direction where bee-eaters have gone to. The bee-eaters were feeding on insects around large poplar trees and we were able to take more photos for next two hours. As the sun went higher, it was getting harder to get sharp images due to heatwaves. We were very excited with the bee-eaters as we did not have much expectation. Now, we need to find another target bird – Lesser Grey Shrike. We haven't seen any in the plantation where we camped. We decided to move on to the next destination as we satisfied with Common Nightingale and European Bee-eater.





Common Nightingale (ssp. golzii)

European Bee-eater

When we were packing at around noon, several Eastern Goldfinches popped up on the nearest tree. We grabbed our cameras and took some record shots before they flew away. We searched them for a while in the area where they went to and unfortunately we could not locate them again. Several European Greenfinches were calling from the large poplar trees and it was impossible to see them in the dense crown of the trees. We said goodbye to an owner of the plantation and stopped for petrol in the town center before we left. I decided to walk along the line of trees growing on either side of the paved road to the Khovd town. Just before end of the tree line, I spotted a pair of Lesser Grey Shrikes perching on the telephone wire near the patch of large poplar trees. I gave a call to Jargal to come over. After he came, we took some photos from the car for about



20 minutes and we headed to the Khovd town. On the way we drove along the beautiful Bodonch Canyon which stretches about 80 km.

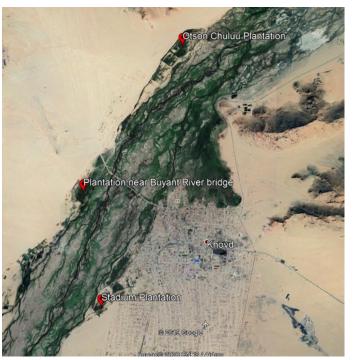




Eastern Goldfinch

Lesser Grey Shrike

DAY 4. Khovd town



There are a bunch of plantations mostly consisting of poplar and willow trees, but also see buckthorns in Khovd town. It is always good to visit these plantations because anything can show up during the migration. First, visited we plantation located in southwest of stadium. There were several Spotted Flycatchers, a single Oriental Turtledove and a Booted Warbler. After a while we moved to another plantation which is located in south west of the Buyant River bridge. We saw a flock of Rosy Starlings, nesting European

Starlings, a couple of presumed Common Snipes, Black Kites and Mongolian Gulls. Last plantation we visited is the Otson Chuluu Plantation, a best birding spot in Khovd town. Highlights were a single male Red-headed Bunting among a flock of Ortolan Buntings. What a bird! Other birds in the plantation were Olive-backed Pipit, Tree Pipit, Hill Pigeon, Spotted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch, Dusky Warbler, Hume's Warbler, a pair of Eurasian Hobby and a singing Great Reed-warbler.



Booted Warbler



Oriental Turtle-dove



A male Rosy Starling



European Starling



A male Red-headed Bunting



Olive-backed Pipit

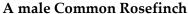




Eurasian Hobby

Great Reed-warbler







Hill Pigeon

DAY 5. Sair Mountain

It has rained all night and was still raining a little bit when we got up. Despite the rain, we headed to the Sair Mountain which is around 120 km from the Khovd town to the north-west. The peak of this mountain is 3,850 m a.s.l and we entered a valley from the east side. Out main target here was a Brandt's Mountain-finch. Driving in the valley was not easy as there is no track and large rocks. We drove up the valley as far as we could. We walked around the area (2,650 m a.s.l) and not long after we found several Brandt's Mountain-finches feeding on the ground. They were quite approachable and we could take some decent photos for about an hour or so. Altai Snowcocks were calling from the adjacent mountain slope. A single male White-winged Redstart posed for a minute. After we finished our business here, we headed back to the Khovd town.









A male White-winged Redstart

DAY 6. Khar Us Lake National Park

Our main target at Khar Us Lake was White-headed Duck. This species only breeds in several large lakes with rich reedbeds in NW Mongolia and the Khar Us lake is one of them. We went in an inflatable boat and cruised around the patches of reedbeds in most south western corner of the lake. After a while, we spotted several pairs of White-headed Ducks and we decided to wait for them to come to us hiding behind the reedbeds. Not long after, three pairs approached us and males were fighting and chasing one another. When we were about to finish, increasing wind speed gave us a signal to go back to the shore as it would get harder to row the boat. After we cleaned up our dirty legs, we drove along the shore. We enjoyed watching a pair of Greater Sandplovers, a single Little Stint in breeding plumage, and a couple of Common Gull-billed Terns. Other birds on the lake were Common Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Tufted Duck, Great Crested Grebe, Bearded Tit, Great White Egret etc. We headed back to the Khovd town via Khongilt Canyon (one of the 70 IBAs) and we saw several Greynecked Buntings, Desert Wheatears and a Red Fox at the entrance of a small cave.



A male White-headed Duck



A male Greater Sandplover







Little stint in breeding plumage

Common Gull-billed Tern

DAY 7. Mankhan Village

When we were on the way to Mankhan Village, we were told by Batmunkh Davaasuren, a coordinator of the Khovd Birding Ringing Station (KBRS), that there was a European Roller hanging around the tree plantation near Mankhan Village. When we got there, there were two European Rollers. There are less than 5 records of this species in Mongolia and it was another highlight for us. We took decent photos of them and went to the KBRS to see Batmunkh and other team members including the birders from Sweden, Petter Olsson and his father Peter Olsson.



Bird ringers at Khovd Bird Ringing Station



We spent some time in the plantation where they ring the birds. Highlight was a Song Thrush as there are a few documented records of this species in the country. Other birds in the plantation were Brown Shrike, European Greenfinch, Common Cuckoo, Barn Swallow, Grey-necked Bunting etc. I teamed up with Peter and Petter Olsson to find more birds in another plantation upstream of Tugrug River bridge. Birds in the plantation were Blyth's Reed-warbler, Black-crowned Night-heron, Pied Wheatear, Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart, Dusky Warbler, Siberian Chiffchaff and Black-faced Bunting. After having a great time in Mankhan Village area, we continued our journey towards majestic Baatarkhairkhan Mountain in search of some montane species.



European Roller



Brown Shrike



A male Black-faced Bunting



A male Pied Wheatear







A male Common Redstart

Blyth's Reed-warbler

DAY 8. Baatarkhairkhan Mountain

I have two uncles who live in one of the valleys of Baatarkhairkhan Mountain range. Baatarkhairkhan mountain range covers an area of 1,300 sq/km ad its highest peak is 3,980 m a.s.l. I have other relatives who lived in the mountain as herders and I have spent my two summer vacations in the mountain when I was a child. As the valley is not entirely accessible to drive, we used motorcycles to go farther up the valley. We stopped nearby rocky slope which looked good for elusive Snow Leopards. My cousin showed us a scrape marking of Snow Leopard which was a good sign. After got off the motorcycle, I started scanning the rocky slope with binoculars and there was something like a Grey Wolf. After a few seconds it has moved and turned out to be a Snow Leopard – what a stunner! It was walking on the slope and laid down on the rock with showing its head only. It was about 200-300 m away from us and altitude of sighting was 2,250 m a.s.l. Other highlights were Red-mantled Rosefinch, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Great Rosefinch, Grey-necked Bunting and Siberian Ibex.



A breeding male Red-mantled Rosefinch



Sulphur-bellied Warbler







Adult Bearded Vulture on the nest

Snow Leopard - Ghost of the mountains

DAY 9. Khovd to Ulaanbaatar

After a fantastic trip in western Mongolia, we headed back to home straightly. On the way between Altai and Bayankhongor towns, we encountered several Mongolian Ground-jays in the shrubby area with scattered boulders.

Full species list:

#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION	
BIR	BIRDS			
1	Altai Snowcock	Tetraogallus altaicus	Sair & Baatarkhairkhan Mountains	
2	Chukar	Alectoris chukar	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
3	White-headed Duck	Oxyura leucocephala	Khar Us lake	
4	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	Takhilt lake	
5	Bar-headed Goose	Anser indicus	Takhilt lake	
6	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	Takhilt lake	
7	Swan Goose	Anser cygnoid	Takhilt lake	
8	Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	Takhilt lake	
9	Common Merganser	Mergus merganser	Takhilt lake	
10	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	Takhilt lake	
11	Ruddy Shelduck	Tadorna ferruginea	Takhilt lake	
12	Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina	Khar Us lake	
13	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	Khar Us lake	
14	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	Khar Us lake	
15	Garganey	Spatula querquedula	Khar Us lake	
16	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata	Khar Us lake	
17	Gadwall	Mareca strepera	Khar Us lake	
18	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope	Khar Us lake	
19	Chinese Spot-billed Duck	Anas zonorhyncha	Takhilt lake	
20	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	Takhilt lake	
21	Northern Pintail	Anas acuta	Khar Us lake	



#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
22	Common Teal	Anas crecca	Khar Us lake
23	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	Khar Us lake
24	Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	Khovd town
25	Hill Pigeon	Columba rupestris	Khovd town
26	Oriental Turtle-dove	Streptopelia orientalis	Bulgan River, Khovd town
27	Eurasian Collared-dove	Streptopelia decaocto	Khovd town
28	Pallas's Sandgrouse	Syrrhaptes paradoxus	Buuntsagaan lake
29	Common Swift	Apus apus	Ulaanbaatar
30	Pacific Swift	Apus pacificus	Ulaanbaatar
31	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus	Bulgan River, Mankhan Village
32	Common Coot	Fulica atra	Takhilt lake
33	White-naped Crane	Antigone vipio	Takhilt lake
34	Demoiselle Crane	Anthropoides virgo	Takhilt lake
35	Common Crane	Grus grus	Takhilt lake
36	Arctic Loon	Gavia arctica	Takhilt lake
37	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	Takhilt lake, Buuntsagaan lake
38	Black-crowned Night-heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	Mankhan Village
39	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	Takhilt lake
40	Great White Egret	Ardea alba	Khar Us lake
41	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	Buuntsagaan lake
42	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	Buuntsagaan lake
43	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	Buuntsagaan lake
44	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	Buuntsagaan lake
45	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	Buuntsagaan lake
46	Greater Sandplover	Charadrius leschenaultii	Khar Us lake
47	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	Takhilt lake, Buuntsagaan lake
48	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	Takhilt lake
49	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	Buuntsagaan lake
50	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	Calidris acuminata	Buuntsagaan lake
51	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	Buuntsagaan lake
52	Temminck's Stint	Calidris temminckii	Buuntsagaan lake
53	Long-toed Stint	Calidris subminuta	Buuntsagaan lake
54	Little Stint	Calidris minuta	Khar Us lake
55	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	Khovd town
56	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	Buuntsagaan lake
57	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	Buuntsagaan lake
58	Spotted Redshank	Tringa erythropus	Buuntsagaan lake
59	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	Buuntsagaan lake
60	Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola	Buuntsagaan lake
61	Marsh Sandpiper	Tringa stagnatilis	Buuntsagaan lake
62	Black-headed Gull	Larus ridibundus	Buuntsagaan lake
63	Pallas's Gull	Larus ichthyaetus	Buuntsagaan lake
64	Common Gull	Larus canus	Buuntsagaan lake
65	Mongolian Gull	Larus mongolicus	Buuntsagaan lake, Khovd town



#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
66	Common Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica	Khar Us lake
67	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia	Buuntsagaan lake
68	White-winged Tern	Chlidonias leucopterus	Buuntsagaan lake
69	Common Tern	Sterna hirundo	Buuntsagaan lake
70	Little Owl	Athene noctua	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
71	Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
72	Himalayan Griffon	Gyps himalayensis	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
73	Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
74	Steppe Eagle	Aquila nipalensis	Takhilt lake
75	Golden eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
76	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	Bulgan River
77	Western Marsh-harrier	Circus aeruginosus	Khar Us lake
78	Eastern Marsh-harrier	Circus spilonotus	Takhilt lake
79	Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis	Khovd town
80	Pallas's Fish-eagle	Haliaeetus leucoryphus	Buuntsagaan lake
81	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	Khovd town
82	Upland Buzzard	Buteo hemilasius	Takhilt lake
83	Common Hoopoe	Upupa epops	Mankhan Village
84	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	Bulgan River
85	European Roller	Coracias garrulus	Mankhan Village
86	Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla	Bulgan River
87	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	Bulgan River
88	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	Buuntsagaan lake
89	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	Buuntsagaan lake
90	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	Khovd town
91	Saker Falcon	Falco cherrug	Buuntsagaan lake
92	Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus	Mankhan Village
93	Isabelline Shrike	Lanius isabellinus	Buuntsagaan lake
94	Lesser Grey Shrike	Lanius minor	Bulgan River
95	Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor	Buuntsagaan lake
96	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	Takhilt lake
97	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	Khovd town
98	Common Raven	Corvus corax	Buuntsagaan lake
99	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	Khovd town
100	Azure Tit	Cyanistes cyanus	Bulgan River
101	Great Tit	Parus major	Bulgan River
102	White-crowned Penduline-tit	Remiz coronatus	Bulgan River
103	Asian Short-toed Lark	Alaudala cheleensis	Takhilt lake
104	Mongolian Lark	Melanocorypha mongolica	Takhilt lake
105	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla	Buuntsagaan lake
106	Horned lark	Eremophila alpestris	Buuntsagaan lake
107	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	Takhilt lake
108	Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus	Khar Us lake
109	Booted Warbler	Iduna caligata	Khovd town



#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION
110	Blyth's Reed-warbler	Acrocephalus dumetorum	Mankhan village
111	Paddyfield Warbler	Acrocephalus agricola	Khar Us lake
112	Great Reed-warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	Khar Us lake, Khovd town
113	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides	Khar Us lake
114	Northern House Martin	Delichon urbicum	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
115	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	Mankhan Village
116	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
117	Collared Sand Martin	Riparia riparia	Mankhan Village
118	Hume's Leaf-warbler	Phylloscopus humei	Khovd town, Mankhan Village
119	Dusky Warbler	Phylloscopus fuscatus	Khovd town, Mankhan Village
120	Siberian Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus tristis	Mankhan Village
121	Sulphur-bellied Warbler	Phylloscopus griseolus	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
122	Lesser Whitethroat	Sylvia curruca	Bulgan River, Khovd town
123	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	Bulgan River, Khovd town
124	Rosy Starling	Pastor roseus	Khovd town
125	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	Mankhan Village
126	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	Mankhan Village, Khovd town
127	Bluethroat	Cyanecula svecica	Khar Us lake
128	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	Bulgan River
129	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
130	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	Mankhan Village
131	White-winged Redstart	Phoenicurus erythrogastrus	Sair Mountain
132	White-throated Rock-thrush	Monticola gularis	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
133	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
134	Isabelline Wheatear	Oenanthe isabellina	Mankhan Village
135	Desert Wheatear	Oenanthe deserti	Khar Us lake
136	Pied Wheatear	Oenanthe pleschanka	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
137	Brown Accentor	Prunella fulvescens	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
138	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	Khovd town
139	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	Khovd town
140	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
141	White-winged Snowfinch	Montifringilla nivalis	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
142	Small Snowfinch	Pyrgilauda davidiana	Takhilt lake
143	Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis	Khovd town
144	Olive-backed Pipit	Anthus hodgsoni	Khovd town
145	Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
146	Richard's Pipit	Anthus richardi	Takhilt lake
147	Blyth's Pipit	Anthus godlewskii	Takhilt lake
148	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava leucocephala	Khar Us lake
149	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain
150	Citrine Wagtail	Motacilla citreola	Takhilt lake
151	Eastern Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla tschutschensis	Takhilt lake
152	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	Khovd town
153	Common Rosefinch	Carpodacus erythrinus	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain



#	COMMON NAME	LATIN NAME	SIGHTING LOCATION	
154	Red-mantled Rosefinch	Carpodacus rhodochlamys	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
155	Great Rosefinch	Carpodacus rubicilla	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
156	Brandt's Mountain-finch	Leucosticte brandti	Sair Mountain	
157	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	Mankhan Village, Bulgan River	
158	Eurasian Twite	Linaria flavirostris	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
159	Eastern Goldfinch	Carduelis caniceps	Bulgan River	
160	Red-headed Bunting	Emberiza bruniceps	Khovd town	
161	Grey-necked Bunting	Emberiza buchanani	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
162	Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana	Khovd town	
163	Black-faced Bunting	Emberiza spodocephala	Mankhan Village	
MAI	MAMMALS			
1	Brandt's Vole	Lasiopodomys brandtii	Takhilt lake	
2	Long-tailed Ground Squirrel	Urocitellus undulatus	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
3	Tarbagan Marmot	Marmota sibirica	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
4	Pallas's Pika	Ochotona pallasi	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
5	Tolai Hare	Lepus tolai	Bulgan River	
6	Siberian Ibex	Capra sibirica	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	
7	Corsac Fox	Vulpes corsac	Takhilt lake	
8	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Khar Us lake	
9	Snow Leopard	Panthera uncia	Baatarkhairkhan Mountain	