



TOUR REPORT – SNOW LEOPARD PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR IN WESTERN MONGOLIA



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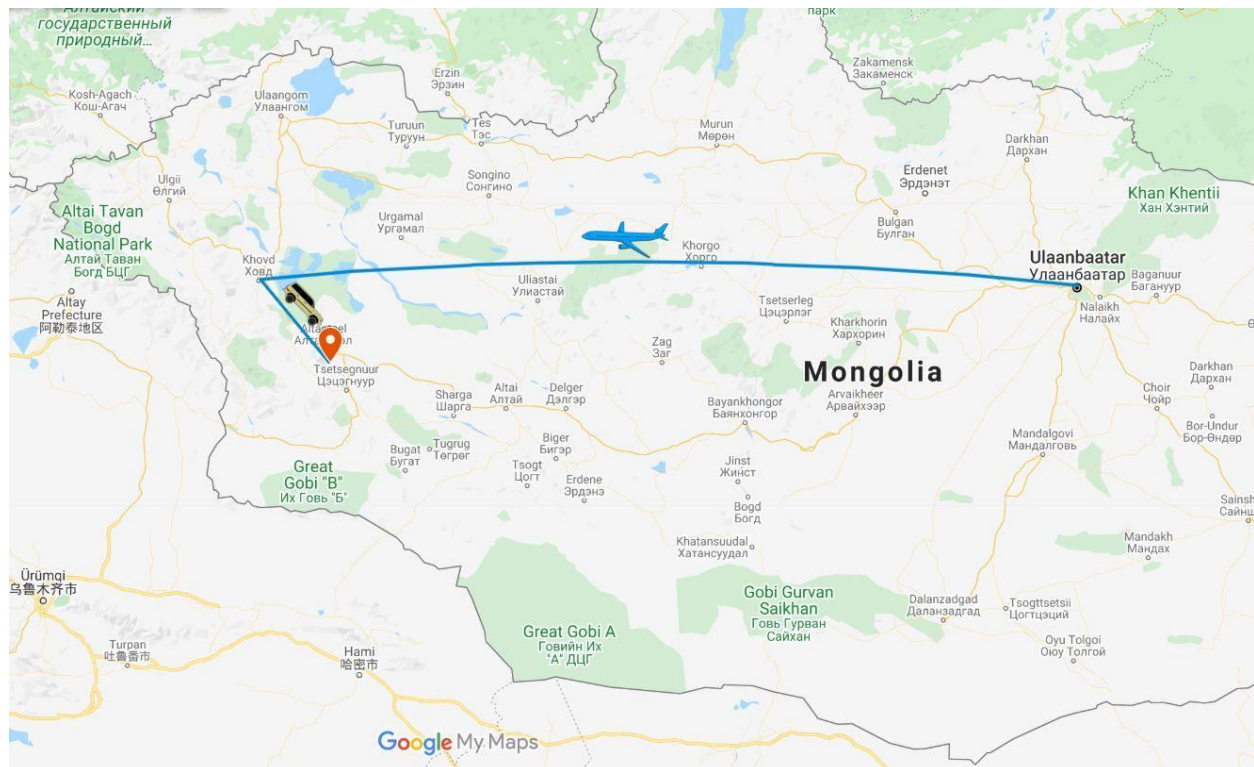
Tour dates: 08 – 15 February 2020

Participants: Purevsuren Tsolmonjav (leader) and 2 clients

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

Background information: Mongolia is home 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 2,000-3000 m. The winter months are better for photographic trips as they come down to lower altitudes due to scarcity of prey. The Siberian Ibex (*Capra sibirica*) and Tarbagan Marmot (*Marmota sibirica*) are thought to be the main preys of Snow Leopard 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 catch domestic animals, predominantly goats in winter. The herders lose their animals to the Snow Leopards while grazing as well as from the campsite at night. This winter diet probably increases the chances of seeing this majestic animal.

In addition to mammal watching tours which includes a Snow Leopard as one of the main target species, we offer Snow Leopard photography tours which require a maximum of four customers on every tour. We scheduled four tours a year at the dates when chances are the highest. Please refer to below link for details about our Snow Leopard photography tours. <http://www.wildlifetoursmongolia.com/product/15284>



Snow Leopard Photography Trip route

Day 1. Ulaanbaatar to Khovd

We flew to Khovd town and landed at the local airport in the afternoon. We continued our trip with a 4WD land cruiser towards our Snow Leopard site. On the way to the Altai Mountains, we stopped for a group of nine Saiga Antelopes foraging by the main road. Mongolian Saiga population has declined dramatically last few years due to harsh weather conditions and a deadly livestock virus known as PPR or Peste des Petits Ruminants. The recent Saiga population census conducted by WWF Mongolia revealed that there are increases in population size from 3,800 in December 2018 to 5,000 in January 2020. Hopefully, it will be good years for Saiga population to recover.



A male Saiga Antelope



A female Saiga Antelope

After two hours of driving mostly on the paved road, we arrived at our camp in the Snow Leopard valley.

Day 2-6. Altai Mountains

We got up at around 7:00 in the morning and went up the main valley. We scanned rocky slopes on either side and talked to the local herders about their recent Snow Leopard sightings and livestock killed by Snow Leopards. They all told us their own stories about Snow Leopard sightings and how many animals they have lost to this predator. Before we moved back to our camp, we met another herder who was pushing his horses to lower areas to avoid from the Snow Leopards and Grey Wolves. He told us that one of his goats has been stuck among the steep rocks for four days near his home.



Our Snow Leopard Valley in the Altai Mountain

Next morning we moved up the valley again towards the stuck goat. We stopped and scanned the slopes when we saw good habitats on the way. Our local guide, Ganaa, went to see a herder from last night to find out the exact location of stuck goat while we were taking our time exploring the valley. We encountered a couple of Red Foxes in the mountain slope, and Brown Accentor, Common Redpoll and Great Rosefinch among the thickets in the bottom of the valley.



Brown Accentor



A male Great Rosefinch



Alpine accentor



A young Bearded Vulture

Ganaa came back to us with news that the stuck goat disappeared from the spot where it has been last few days. We went to the place straightaway and it was a narrow valley with icy bottom. We scanned the area where the goat was and no sign of the goat. I decided to walk up the valley while others were scanning the rocks and saw a female Baikal Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula cineracea*), Common Redpolls and Twites drinking water from the unfrozen patch of the stream. After a while, I moved back to the rest and struggled to walk on the slippery ice a little bit. As usual, I was looking around and suddenly there was something watching me from the rock above me in about 30 meters. I immediately sat down and checked it with my binoculars. Indeed, it was a Snow Leopard. What an encounter! It was still watching me from the same spot and unfortunately I did not carry my camera. So, I had to call the others by shouting as they were not far from me. It made the Snow Leopard move a bit farther up and luckily it did not run away. Firstly, it was hiding behind the rocks showing only its head for a while in about 50 meters from us. We found a good spot and took our time to watch and photograph this magnificent animal for next several hours before it has gone to the other side of the mountain.

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



Snow Leopard photos taken during our trip

On the remaining days in the mountain, we explored other areas in the main valley for more Snow Leopards and other wildlife. But, we could not see Snow Leopard again.

Day 7. Altai Mountain to Khovd town

We went back to Khovd town in the morning and reached there by noon. After lunch, we visited the Otson Chuluu plantation for birds and saw Red-mantled Rosefinches, a couple of Meadow Buntings, Yellowhammer, Bohemian Waxwings and a flyby Eurasian Sparrowhawk.



A male Meadow Bunting



A female Meadow Bunting



A young male Long-tailed Rosefinch



A male Red-mantled Rosefinch

Day 8. Khovd town to Ulaanbaatar

We flew back to Ulaanbaatar and our tour ended here with successful observation of Snow Leopards, other wildlife and birds.

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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	Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>	Altai Mountain
3	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Altai Mountain
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Altai Mountain
5	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Altai Mountain
BIRDS			
1	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Altai Mountain
2	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Khovd town
3	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>	Khovd town
4	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Altai Mountain
5	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Altai Mountain
6	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Altai Mountain
7	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Khovd town
8	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Altai Mountain
9	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Khovd town
10	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Altai Mountain, Khovd town
11	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Khovd town
12	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	Altai Mountain
13	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>	On the way to Altai Mountain
14	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Everywhere
15	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>	Altai Mountain
16	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	Altai Mountain
17	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Khovd town
18	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Khovd town & Altai Mountain
19	White-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	Altai Mountain
20	Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus sibiricus</i>	Khovd town
21	Red-mantled Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rhodochlamys</i>	Khovd town
22	Great Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla</i>	Altai Mountain
23	Baikal Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula cineracea</i>	Altai Mountain
24	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	Khovd town
25	Eurasian Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>	Altai Mountain
26	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>	Khovd town & Altai Mountain
27	Godlewski's Bunting	<i>Emberiza godlewskii</i>	Altai Mountain
28	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Khovd town