



Snow leopard crossing a ridgeline in the Altai Mountains

Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat winter mammal watching tour to Mongolia

05 – 20 Nov 2023

Places visited:

Hustai National Park
Altai mountain
Bayan Taiga Forest
Bogd Khan Uul Strictly Protected Area

Tour Participants:

Dr Heng Yirui
Heng Chia Hwa Dr
Hsu Chia Da
Wen Weizhen Cheryl

Tour Leader: Bolormunkh Erdenekhuu

Photos are credited to Dr. Heng Yirui and Dr. Hsu Chia Da

INTRODUCTION

In all the wildlife splendours Mongolia has to offer, two elusive animals stand out - the enigmatic snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) and the rarely-seen Pallas's cat (*Otocolobus manul*). These species were the focus of our expedition.

While most similar journeys take place in autumn when temperatures are milder, we chose to embark on our journey in November for the unique opportunity to observe these animals in their full winter plumage amidst the snow.



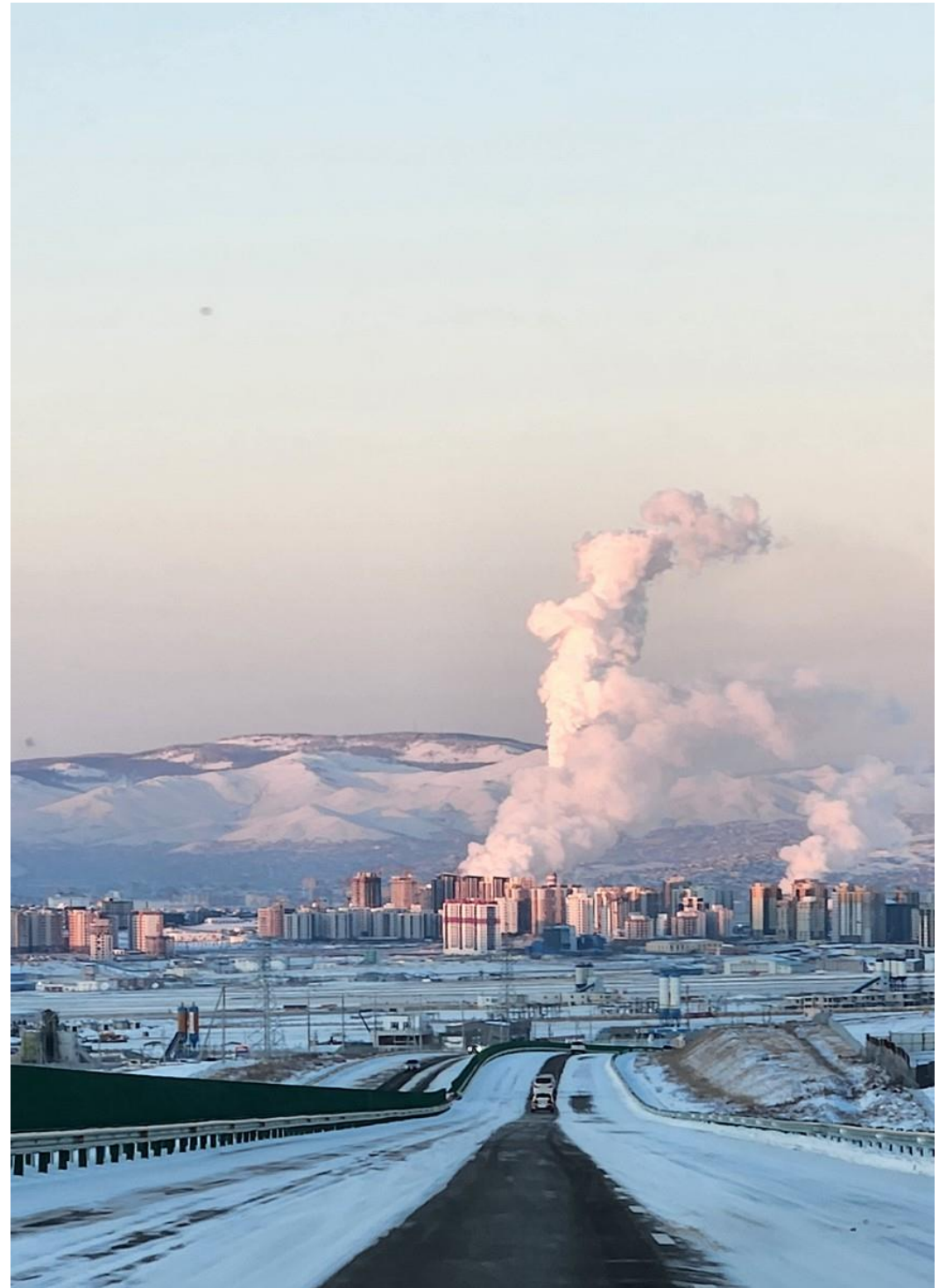
This trip was a great success with great sightings of our target species, and many other animals. The capricious weather, however, meant that we needed to remain flexible with our travel plans, and at times take a gamble with our decisions.

ULAANBAATAR

We arrived in Ulaanbaatar in the late afternoon, greeted by the aftermath of a recent blizzard that had blanketed the entire Mongolia, marking the beginning of winter. While we heard that flights were cancelled due to weather, our luck held as our Mongolian Airlines flight from Incheon, Seoul, remained unaffected.

Hailing from tropical Singapore, we had been sufficiently forewarned about the frigid conditions in November, allowing us to prepare ourselves accordingly. Our ability to endure the cold was a primary concern for our guide, **Bolormunkh**, who reached out multiple times before our journey to offer advice. This preparation proved essential as we were met with bone-chilling -23°C temperatures and an entire city dusted with heavy snow.

Ulaanbaatar is one of the world's coldest cities. Half of entire population in Mongolia lives in this city, which is kept warm by two towering coal burning factories. Despite challenges posed by the expanding urban populace, the current infrastructure suffices for the time being. The cityscape, characterised by Cyrillic script and stately buildings adorned with towering columns, serves as a poignant reminder of Ulaanbaatar's Soviet past.





Domestic horses on a far ridge amidst the snowstorm



Hustai National Park tourist base camp

HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK

A two-hour car ride took us to Hustai National Park. Along the way, illuminated by the vehicle's headlights, we managed to spot a Tolai hare (*Lepus tolai*) - the first mammal recorded on our trip. By the time we reached the tourist base camp, the winds had picked up and we were faced with a snowstorm.

The gusty winds and heavy snowfall persisted the next day and posed formidable challenges. The dense snow accumulation rendered our vehicle, as well as the tourist camp's elevated 4WD vehicle, incapable of navigating the roads in Hustai. This realisation dawned swiftly as our vehicle became stuck at the entrance, prompting an impromptu change of plans.

We opted to hike up a ridge, turning the misfortune into an opportunity to spot animals and put our gear to the test in preparation for the upcoming days.

After contending with the morning's tempestuous weather, we turned back for a regroup at the tourist camp. The short hike still proved productive as we spotted Przewalski's horses (*Equus przewalskii*) and Altai Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*), clearly handling the weather conditions better than we did!

ALTAI MOUNTAINS

The Altai Mountain range in West Mongolia was a highly anticipated part of the trip. Its rugged terrain is home to many snow leopards and other altitude-adapted wildlife. Our base was in a ger at the foothills of one of the mountains of Altai, where herds of endangered saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) and black-tailed gazelles (*Gazelle subgutturosa*) roamed. The accommodation was basic but comfortable, complete with warm duvets, power outlets and a sink in each ger. One of the gers was even modified with shower facilities. We felt welcomed as guests, and the hosts went all the way out to ensure that we were well taken care of.



Mongolian Saiga



As we traversed the many valleys in search of the elusive snow leopard over several days, we saw multiple herds of Siberian ibexes (*Capra sibirica*) and Altai Argali (*Ovis ammon*). The natural prey of the apex predator, their dwindling numbers in recent years are threatening the population of snow leopards.

But, these big cats are in luck. During the cold winters, local herders bring their livestock to the mountains. Herein lies a reliable source of vegetation that the grazing animals can rely on. Nature however charges a hefty price for this offering, with many of these domestic animals falling prey to snow leopards, which certainly will not turn down an easy meal, especially during trying times.



Accommodation in traditional gers with charcoal 'central heating'



While the past response to snow leopard predation was retaliation by herders, this has changed with the advent of ecotourism.

Herding families now derive substantial income from ecotourism, leading to a shift in behavior. The losses of livestock to predation are now viewed as a necessary contribution to maintaining healthy snow leopard populations in the mountains.

In our six days in Altai, we witnessed the landscape undergo dramatic transformations from barren rocky terrain and sunny skies to a frosty, snow-covered expanse shrouded in thick fog that limited visibility to just your next few steps. This wondrous metamorphosis was the magic of our time at Altai.



Mongolians wrestling at 3000m. We hauled out on the mountain ridges and were bemused at some of methods the herdsman used to keep themselves warm.



Siberian Ibexes

Almost all the action we observed in Altai occurred in a valley 30-minutes by vehicle away from our ger camps. Our sightings occurred only by stroke of luck on the fourth day of our search for the snow leopard. A local herdsman alerted us that a foal had been taken down by a snow leopard. The snow leopard must have been startled by our arrival and darted off when it saw us, abandoning its barely eaten kill. Later that evening we realised that another foal from the same herd had been taken out, high up on the ridgeline, and another snow leopard stood guard on this kill.



First snow leopard sighting, walking across fresh snow

The herdsman was distraught. It was however accepted that this would be the cost of having the herd graze at these pastures. Our spotters, who also had herds of their own, shared that three snow leopards are sighted on average every month, which meant that their vigilance around their herd was essential at protecting the animals from getting predated on.



Snow leopard guarding its kill



Mongolian wolves on a ridgeline

Whilst the snow leopard rested in the morning, a few other animals paid a visit. High up on a distant ridgeline, a pack of eight Mongolian wolves (*Canis lupus*) caught whiff of another kill and spent a good amount of time chasing scavengers, and quite possibly another snow leopard, away from the almost intact carcass. To the other side of the valley, we were treated to the sight of a flock of 15 Altai snowcocks (*Tetraogallus altaicus*) foraging for the last remaining morsels on the mountains. From our vantage point, we found ourselves in the delightful predicament of choosing which spectacle to follow.

The two carcasses were reasonably large and promised to be ample sustenance for days to come. The next day offered the same spectacle: a well-fed snow leopard guarding its carcass, the pack of eight Mongolian wolves protecting the next, and luck favoured us with yet another sighting of a snow leopard - this time climbing the rocky cliffs on the adjacent ridgeline. All this unfolded before us in the large, expansive amphitheatre of the Altai Mountains, as if Mother Nature had generously granted us a front-row seat to its captivating performance.



Altai Snowcocks





Altai Wapiti stags on a field

HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK (REVISITED)

Harsh weather warnings threatened our flight back to Ulaanbaatar from Khovd airport, but the flights went according to plan. The same weather warnings however prompted cautions against travel to East Mongolia after our Altai trip. Faced with the prospects of imminent road closures, we decided to hunker down in Ulaanbaatar for the day to reassess the feasibility and safety of our 600km journey to the next destination. The eventual decision afforded us some unexpected time in Ulaanbaatar, and led us to contemplate a revisit to Hustai, since our first trip was hampered by a blizzard. This impromptu choice worked out to be a marvellous manoeuvre.

Visibility was a little better than when we first arrived, although the road conditions remained challenging. Bachelor herds of wapiti stags made it to the fields bordering Hustai, displaying a calm and confident demeanour in the open terrain that allowed us to approach for closer photographs. From that viewpoint, we also spotted a large herd of Mongolian gazelle (*Procapra gutturosa*) in the distance, and Bolormunkh skillfully navigated us along a side road to approach the herd for a closer observation.



Mongolian gazelles on a mountain face

With an excited outburst, he alerted us to the presence of a Pallas's cat! The obscured skies and heavy snowfall created ideal conditions for this individual to hunt Mongolian gerbils (*Meriones unguiculatus*). The freshly cut shards of grass offered us a clear view of this shy creature, which was too engrossed with finding a meal to be bothered by our presence! We observed it for about 30 minutes while it was hunting.



A rare sight of Manul hunting Mongolian gerbils

Despite the snow-covered roads, we were able to advance deeper into the park, and a brief hike up a ridge brought us within close viewing distance of several herds of Przewalski's horses. To our delight, this visit also unveiled a pair of Mongolian wolves stealthily trailing a herd of Wapiti, not too far from the tourist camp!



Przewalski's horses in grazing on the last grass in winter

TAIGA FOREST

With the extra time in Ulaanbaatar, **Bolormunkh** proposed a visit to another ecosystem in Mongolia – the Taiga forest. The sight of the coniferous trees in the forest was particularly striking, given the sparse vegetation we had encountered during our travels through Mongolia, and this lush vegetation attracts a host of wildlife.

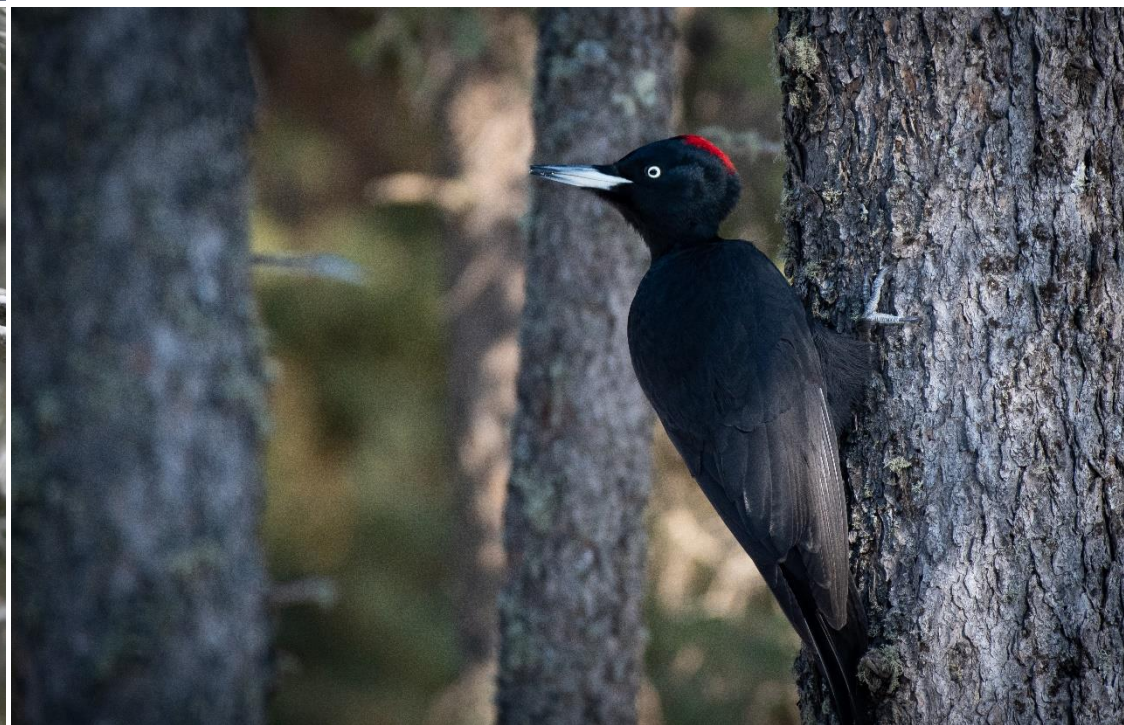
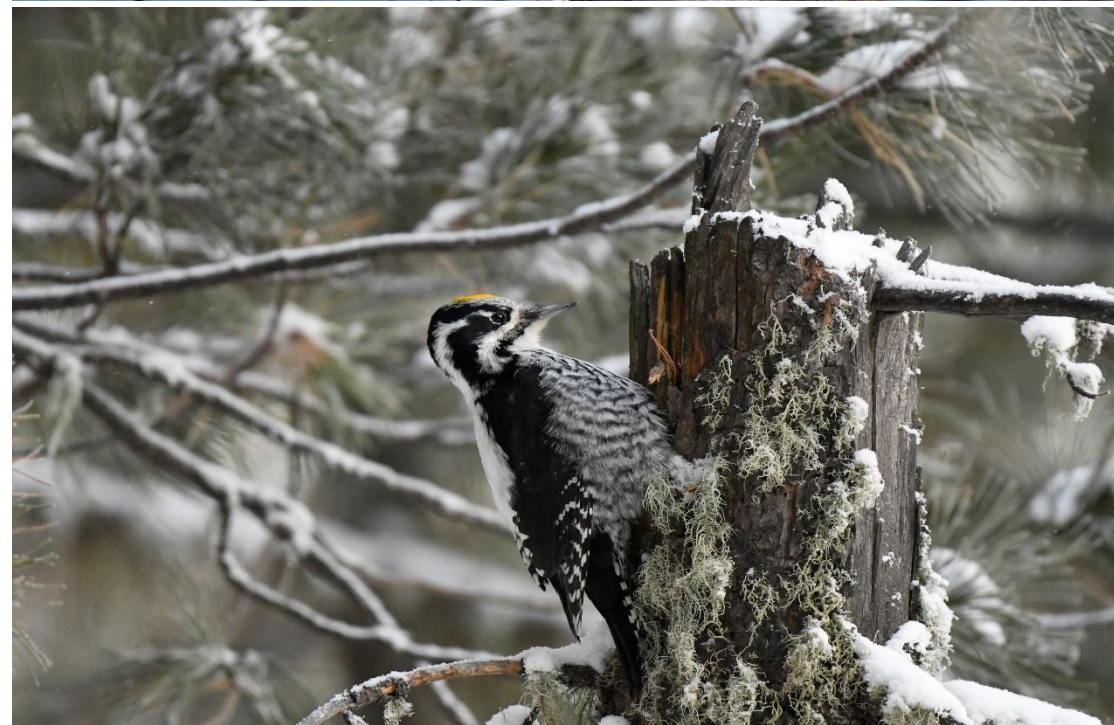
We were treated to sightings of many birds, including a **Siberian jay**, many **Spotted Nutcrackers**, a pair of **Hazel grouse**, hundreds of **Pine grossbeaks** (all types of age), **Red Crossbills**, a few **Two-barred Crossbills** and **gorgeous Black Woodpecker**, **Three-toed Woodpecker** and **Grey-headed Woodpeckers**. As we explored, we uncovered tracks of **sable** and **wolverine**, though our encounters were limited to glimpses of Siberian roe deer (*Capreolus pygargus*) and red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). Our visit to taiga forest was totally worth it and we enjoyed it thoroughly.



Taiga forest



Siberian roe deer



Hazel grouse, Three-toed and Black Woodpecker



Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill and female Two-barred Crossbill



Siberian Jay and Grey-headed Woodpecker in the taiga



Daurian Partridges, Cinereous vultures in Hustai and Spotted Nutcracker

Mammal	Number	Hustai	Altai mountain	Taiga
Argali <i>Ovis ammon ammon</i>	7	-	X	-
Black-tailed Gazelle <i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>	c20	-	X	-
Mongolian Gazelle <i>Procapra subgutturosa</i>	c50	X	-	-
Mongolian Gerbil <i>Meriones unguiculatus</i>	c20	X		-
Mongolian Wolf <i>Canis lupus</i>	10	X	-	-
Pallas's Cat <i>Otocolobus manul</i>	1	X	-	-
Przewalski's Horse <i>Equus przewalskii</i>	c30	X	-	-
Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	4	-	X	X
Red Squirrel <i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	5	-	-	X
Roe Deer <i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	2	-	-	X
Saiga Antelope <i>Saiga tatarica mongolica</i>	4	-	X	-
Siberian Ibex <i>Capra sibirica</i>	c20	-	X	-
Snow Leopard <i>Panthera uncia irbis</i>	7	-	X	-
Tolai Hare <i>Lepus tolai</i>	1	X	-	-
Altai Wapiti <i>Cervus canadensis sibiricus</i>	c50	X	-	-