



Pallas's Sandgrouse epitomise the wilds of Mongolia (tour participant Martin Hale)

MONGOLIA

21 MAY – 4/8 JUNE 2016

LEADERS: MARK VAN BEIRS and TERBISH KHAYANKHAYRVAA

The enormous, landlocked country of Mongolia is the 19th largest and the most sparsely populated fully sovereign country in the world. At 1,564,116 km² (603,909 sq mi), Mongolia is larger than the combined areas of Germany, France and Spain and holds only three million people. It is one of our classic eastern Palearctic destinations and travelling through Mongolia is a fantastic experience as the scenery is some of the best in the world. Camping is the only way to discover the real Mongolia, as there are no hotels or ger camps away from the well-known tourist haunts. On our 19 day, 3,200km off-road odyssey we wandered through the wide and wild steppes, deserts, semi-deserts, mountains, marshes and taiga of Genghis Khan's country. The unfamiliar feeling of 'space' charged our batteries and we experienced both icy cold and rather hot weather. Mongolia does not yield a long birdlist, but it holds a fabulous array of attractive specialities, including many species that are only known as vagrants to Europe and North America. Spring migration was in full swing with various Siberia-bound migrants encountered at wetlands and migrant hotspots. The

endearing Oriental Plover was the Bird of the Trip as we witnessed its heart-warming flight display several times at close range. The magnificent eye-ball to eye-ball encounter with an angry Ural Owl in the Terej taiga will never be forgotten and we also much enjoyed the outstanding experience of observing a male Hodgson's Bushchat in his inhospitable mountain tundra habitat. Splendidly showy Henderson's Ground Jays performed very well in bushy desert, huge Lammergeiers were regularly seen close overhead and dainty Amur Falcons won a place in our hearts. Other highlights included Swan Goose, Black-billed Capercaillie, Willow Ptarmigan, Altai Snowcock, Black-throated Loon, Cinereous Vulture (still so marvellously common), Pallas's Fish Eagle, Baillon's Crake, White-naped and Demoiselle Cranes, Asian Dowitcher, Pallas's Gull, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Black, White-backed and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers, Saker Falcon, Azure Tit, Mongolian Lark, Pallas's Grasshopper and Asian Desert Warblers, Siberian Rubythroat, Gldenstdt's and Eversmann's Redstarts, Saxaul Sparrow, Kozlov's Accentor, Blyth's Pipit, Asian Rosy Finch and Pine, Meadow, Ortolan and Pallas's Reed Buntings. Several vagrants were found like Chinese Pond Heron, Grey-headed Lapwing and Slender-billed and Common Gulls. Interesting mammals included Mongolian and Goitred Gazelles, Siberian Ibex, Przevalski's Horse and a superb Asiatic Wild Ass.



The willows along the Tuul River are home to the adorable Azure Tit (tour participant Martin Hale)

The tour started with a leisurely walk along the willow and poplar-lined Tuul river, at the edge of the ever expanding capital Ulaanbaatar. We almost immediately heard the distinctive high pitched calls of White-crowned Penduline Tits and managed to observe three of these dainty birds at close range. Fluffy-looking Azure Tits also showed well, next to a pair of smart and sedate Long-tailed Rosefinches. A pale morph Booted Eagle and an unexpected Western Osprey flew over and we also noted Ruddy Shelduck, Lesser Whitethroat, Eurasian Magpie, Oriental Crow, Northern Raven and House and Tree Sparrows. A short drive took us then to the Zaisan valley, where at the edge of a nice stretch of larch and spruce forest we obtained brilliant scope views of a female White-backed Woodpecker. Two male Pine Buntings showed particularly well and Willow Tits played in the birch trees. We gradually walked higher in the hills and soon had a fantastic panoramic view over the chaotic city of Ulaanbataar, home to almost half the Mongolian population. Several Black Kites (of the black-eared form *lineatus*) cavorted overhead and tame Red-billed Choughs foraged in the flowery meadows, where shy Tarbagan Marmots kept an eye on us from the entrance of their

burrows. Spring seemed to be late as there was no sign of hirundines or swifts. Purple and yellow pasque flowers and violet irises added a splash of colour to the brown grassy hill slopes. This highly enjoyable introduction to Mongolian birding was followed by an excellent dinner in a Mongolian Barbeque restaurant.



The rather strange-looking Toad-headed Agama (tour participant Kalpesh Jain); a male Desert Wheatear (Mark Van Beirs)

Next morning, we boarded our two Russian-built minibuses, left the nightmarish traffic of the capital behind us and entered the real Mongolia with its ever changing, endless vistas of rolling steppe dotted here and there by white gers (yurts). We drove south along a new, quite smooth and fast tarmac road towards the town of Dalanzadgad and saw the habitat change from steppe and patches of agricultural development to semi desert. Herds of sheep, cattle and horses became a very common sight and we encountered our first smart-looking Bactrian Camels. Stops along the way gave us goodies like Ruddy Shelduck, a distant Cinereous Vulture, Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Common Kestrel, a couple of rather distant Saker Falcons, Greater Short-toed and smart Mongolian Larks, scores of Isabelline Wheatears and several herds of shy Mongolian (or White-tailed) Gazelle. A small roadside lake looked ideal for our picnic lunch and here we managed to scope our first Pallas's Sandgrouse coming in to drink. We saw one bird dip its belly into the water: typical behaviour of a male wanting to provide his distant chicks with drinking substance! Several superbly elegant Demoiselle Cranes joined them at the water's edge. A pair of Common Shelduck, a Pied Avocet, Common Sandpiper, Rock Sparrow, Pere David's Snowfinch and Citrine and Grey Wagtails were other nice additions to the list. A rather bizarre-looking Toad-headed Agama started the reptile list. Later, we stopped in a small town to buy our beer supply for the next week. Several Asian Brown Flycatchers and a Common Rosefinch were located in the few trees. In late afternoon we found a convenient looking valley and set up camp for the first time. After pitching the tents we strolled around and a nest of a Desert Wheatear was found. The sun set the whole desert ablaze as it disappeared behind the horizon.

After a rather cold night we did a bout of birding around the campsite getting good looks at Desert Wheatear and Mongolian Finch. We packed up and drove the remaining 100 or so kilometres to the town of Dalanzadgad. A short stop on the way produced a nice perched male Lesser Kestrel, quite a few Pallas's Sandgrouse and a Multi-ocellated Racerunner (a kind of lizard). A third minibus miraculously appeared so we could really space out and enjoy the sometimes long, but bumpy drives over the desert and steppe. A quick bit of shopping was followed by a short drive to our ger camp at the base of the Gobi Altai mountains. The views of the snow-covered mountain range were superb. At the camp we found a Brown Shrike and in the afternoon we visited Yolyn Am, the famous Valley of the Lammergeier. The rocky, juniper scrub covered slopes, the steep cliffs and the icy stream held a great selection of birds. A couple of Lammergeiers were regularly soaring along the high crags showing off their unique silhouette. Birds of prey stole the show here as we also noted Himalayan (Griffon) Vulture, an occupied eyrie of Steppe Eagle (with a chick), two Golden Eagles, Upland Buzzard and a pair of Saker Falcons on and around their old Upland Buzzard nest. Other interesting birds included a male Red-throated Thrush, a male Dusky Thrush, an unexpected Song Thrush (a

write in), Taiga Flycatcher, lovely Black Redstarts (of the red-bellied race *phoenicuroides*), lots of Isabelline Wheatears, Northern Wheatear, some extremely tame White-winged Snowfinches, Brown and adorable, endemic Kozlov's Accentors, Citrine Wagtail and Blyth's Pipit. Mammals were well represented as we observed lots of Pallas's Pikas, several Red-cheeked Ground Squirrels and a few dainty Mongolian Jirds (Gerbils). We experienced rain, snow and sunny weather during our enjoyable walk.



Cute Pallas's Pikas and tame White-winged Snowfinches showed well at Yolyn Am (Mark Van Beirs)

Early next morning we were climbing to the higher reaches of the Gobi-Altai mountains to try to find the shy Altai Snowcock at the edge of the snow patches. We climbed and scanned and scanned and climbed amidst magnificent mountain scenery till finally Andy managed to locate our quarry about a mile away. Uncanny spotting! We obtained fair views as the Snowcock was walking about, preening and foraging. It was decidedly strange that we didn't hear any calls nor found any droppings on the slopes where we had seen them quite easily on previous tours... A pair of superb Saker Falcons posed on a not too distant rocky ridge, Water Pipits flitted about and a Red Fox was patrolling the alpine meadows. After this success we walked down to our minibuses, enjoyed an al fresco breakfast and revisited the Valley of the Lammergeier. Although it snowed regularly, we still managed to find an all too distant Wallcreeper on the high cliffs, a migrant Asian Brown Flycatcher, a beautifully performing pair of Kozlov's Accentors, a pair of Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinches and three male Siberian Ibexes. Around midday we returned to our ger camp and after lunch drove west towards the famous dune area of Khongorynuls. The scenery kept us enthralled as mountain range after mountain range appeared on the horizon, often under dark threatening skies. During the final hours of the drive we could admire a long stretch of impressive barchan dunes. The highlight of the journey was a splendid Asiatic Wild Ass (or Khulan) that was slowly walking about in the wide open plains. We happily scoped and photographed this rarely seen mammal from a distance of only a few hundred metres. Brilliant stuff! We also observed several Goitred (or Black-tailed) Gazelle before we arrived at our cosy ger camp.

While the sun was thinking about getting up we were already driving to the nearby belt of scenic dunes and its nice stretch of Saxaul bushes (*Haloxylon ammodendron* – Amaranthaceae), where we soon encountered several pretty Saxaul Sparrows showing off their intricate colours and head pattern. We also obtained good looks at several Isabelline and Steppe Grey Shrikes. Little Ringed Plover, Common Swift, Asian Short-toed Lark and Desert Wheatear added to the fun. The early morning light on the splendid barchan dunes created a terrific background to our birding. After breakfast and packing up we boarded our vehicles and for most of the day our little caravan consisting of three minibuses and a sturdy kitchen truck made its way northwestwards through the endless semidesert of the Gobi, always surrounded by outstanding scenery. The wind was blowing quite hard, so the birds kept in hiding and just a few species were noted. Several Cinereous Vultures showed particularly well and a party of Greater Sand Plovers were found in the stony wastes. In late afternoon the truck developed a minor mechanical problem and while the drivers were fixing

it, we managed to get terrific looks at a delicate Asian Desert Warbler. In the course of the evening we finally arrived at Lake Holbooj and while our crew was setting up camp overlooking the lake, we enjoyed a delightful final hour of daylight along the shore of this superb body of water. A great selection of waterfowl was present, including the rare Swan Goose, Greylag and Bar-headed Geese, Whooper Swan, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, some lovely Garganey, Eurasian Teal, Red-crested and Common Pochards and Tufted Duck. We also found Great Crested Grebe, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Cormorant, Black-headed Gull and Gull-billed, Common and dainty White-winged Terns. The highlight however were the exquisite Asian Dowitchers that showed very well in their immaculate rufous-brown breeding attire. A few distant Relict Gulls were scoped and along the shore and at the marshy pools we observed Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Temminck's and pretty Long-toed Stints, Eurasian Skylark and Richard's Pipit.



*Terbish overlooks the Gobi-Altai while the group is observing a distant Altai Snowcock in the scenic Gobi-Altai Mountains
(Mark Van Beirs)*

A marvellous, totally windless morning along the very birdy, marshy shore of the lake gave us a superb list of waterfowl, waders and gulls and terns. The Asiatic Dowitchers showed very well at close range. We counted at least 12 individuals of this Near-Threatened wader. The lengthy scope views of these smart, breeding-plumaged birds were very much appreciated. We bumped into a couple of incredibly well-behaved Baillon's Crakes slowly walking about. Their subtle plumage characteristics and bright red eyes could easily be discerned. Very attractive Citrine Wagtails foraged in the green meadows and lovely Pallas's Reed Buntings obliged. Other new birds for the list included Mute Swan (a 'real' one), Northern Pintail, a distant sleeping drake White-winged Scoter, a female Common Goldeneye, Horned Grebe, Pacific Golden and Grey Plovers (both in immaculate breeding attire), Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Dunlin, Ruff, single Slender-billed and Common Gulls (both firsts for this tour!), Pale Martin and Little Bunting. Toad-headed Agamas and Gobi Racerunners were sunbathing in the dune vegetation. After a late lunch at this extraordinary lake we drove south to an area of tall, isolated bushes where we soon connected with the endearing Henderson's Ground Jay. We admired this strange corvid as it perched on top of bushes emitting its piping call, as it walked about and as it showed off its smart black and white wing pattern in flight. A camel corpse attracted several enormous Himalayan and Cinereous Vultures and good numbers of Isabelline Shrikes sat about. In the early evening we arrived at Lake Orog where we enjoyed a delightful warm evening overlooking the lake shore. Raucous Caspian Terns were the only addition to our tally.



A Baillon's Crake and graceful Demoiselle Cranes made our visit to Lake Holbooj a real delight (Mark Van Beirs)

The early morning walk at Lake Orog didn't produce anything new, although seven Mute Swans made quite an impression. We packed up and birded the more reedy, marshy southern shore where Grey Heron, a male Western Marsh Harrier, a lovely pair of Demoiselle Cranes, displaying Black-tailed Godwits, Little Tern, Pacific Swift and an Eurasian Hoopoe showed well. The strong wind sabotaged our efforts to find any reed-loving passerines so we continued our travels and made several stops in steep, dry, rocky valleys adorned with just a few bushes. Chukar Partridges ran around us uttering their distinctive chuckling calls, Godlewski's Buntings were singing away from the tops of rocks and we also observed Dusky Warbler, an all too brief Barred Warbler, several stunning Common Rock Thrushes and some immaculate-looking Pied Wheatears. In late afternoon we set up camp in a delightful mountain valley amongst rolling foothills. A pre-dinner stroll gave us cracking views of Lammergeier and Himalayan and Cinereous Vultures low overhead.



Impressive Cinereous Vultures are still a common sight; subtly-plumaged Arctic Rosy Finches were noted at two locations (Mark Van Beirs)

Early next morning found us driving up and up to the barren habitat of our target, the very little-known White-throated (or Hodgson's) Bushchat. We reached the tundra-like, rocky strewn snow fields after a fairly tough drive and spent an enjoyable, though quite cold, time in this amazing area. It didn't take too long before we found a Bushchat and although it was moving about all the time on the lichen-covered rocks, we soon all had excellent scope views of a smart male of this hardy little critter, which is a near endemic breeder to Mongolia. Several Asian Rosy Finches were a very nice surprise find. Brown Accentors and Water Pipits were

everywhere and we also managed pleasing scope views of several Altai Accentors and of two magnificent male Gldenstdt's Redstarts. A Lammergeier inspected us a few times just overhead and it was exhilarating to be able to observe this superb bird at such close range. In late morning we found a pair of foraging Altai Snowcocks on a nearby grassy slope and we studied these striking, near endemic gamebirds for quite a while. We even managed to discern the short spur on the leg of the male. After this exciting bout of birding we made our way down, packed up and stopped for a while in a dry rocky valley. Little was moving except for several Chukar Partridges and smart Common Rock Thrushes. We soon descended further and made camp on the shore of a large lake, where a couple of new birds were found by some of the keener participants along the reedy shoreline. A vagrant Grey-headed Lapwing was feeding on the short grass and several Great Egrets sat in the reeds. An impressive immature Pallas's Fish Eagle flew over our camp and Eurasian Hoopoes were foraging nearby. A White Wagtail of the Central Asian race *personata* briefly interrupted our dinner as it landed at the entrance of our dining tent.



Orog Nuur gave us a cracking immature Pallas's Fish Eagle; Caspian Terns were seen at several lakes (Mark Van Beirs)

A pre breakfast stroll along the reedy shore produced great looks at the smart vagrant Grey-headed Lapwing for all of us. A pair of Western Marsh Harriers and a female Eastern Marsh Harrier drifted over the extensive reed beds. A Common Crane foraged in a patch of dense grass, a vagrant Chinese Pond Heron was flushed and a couple of Eurasian Bitterns were chasing each other over the reeds. We heard the pig squeals of Brown-cheeked (or Eastern Water) Rails emanate from the reedbed. After breakfast and the now routine packing up we travelled towards the northwest over rocky wastes to the town of Jinst where we stacked up on beer and other goodies. The few bushy gardens held a lovely variety of migrants like Thick-billed, Two-barred Greenish, Dusky and Pallas's Leaf Warblers, a Dark-sided Flycatcher and a female Siberian Rubythroat. A couple of Eurasian Collared Dove were also noted. We continued our journey, had an alfresco lunch in the middle of an extended plain and arrived at huge Boon Tsagaan Lake in late afternoon. A thorough exploration of the nearby river mouth yielded great views of an immature Pallas's Fish Eagle and of bathing gulls and terns. Mongolian Gulls were decidedly common and very attractive Pallas's Gulls could also be studied in detail. Two Heuglin's Gulls (an adult and an immature) were found amongst the hordes of other gulls and we had lovely looks at smart Caspian Terns. Thousands of Great Cormorants were resting on the shoreline and a party of 15 Goosanders and a Black-necked Grebe were loafing offshore. The only downside were the 'bloody' midges which were quite annoying. Later in the evening the wind suddenly came up quite strongly and a powerful gust blew the toilet tent away...

We spent a delightful morning along the shoreline of this enormous lake. Small shallow pools with marshy edges were dotted about and different sized sand and mud banks held a marvellous variety of waterbirds. The highlight of our walk was a very obliging Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler that tried to hide unsuccessfully in the short grass. The scope studies of this usually skulking bird were out of this world and we could discern the distinctive rufous rump. A few immature Black Storks were loafing on a river bank and a smart Lesser Sand Plover was foraging amongst the many Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers. Several drake Garganey showed particularly well. Thousands of Great Cormorants were flying to and fro, fishing, drying their wings or collecting nesting material. Two immature Pallas's Fish Eagles were keeping an eye on things and very attractive Pallas's Gulls and dozens of arresting Caspian Terns were roosting nearby. Several intricately

patterned Pallas's Sandgrouse allowed a fairly close approach. A beautifully marbled Mongolian Toad was much photographed. Although we scanned and scanned no Relict Gulls could be found. On the return drive to camp we located a Northern Raven's nest only three metres up in a disused barn holding several young which were about to fledge. After a relaxed midday break we packed up and flushed a Mongolian Silver (or Royle's Mountain) Vole from under Rosy's tent. We proceeded driving to the northeast through gravelly steppe, stopped at one of our favourite plover spots and soon enough obtained fair views of a splendid male Oriental Plover. Best of all was his magnificent rocking display flight whereby he covered great distances. We also found the more approachable female and scoped her for excellent, prolonged looks. Prairiedog-like Long-tailed Ground Squirrels were dotted over the wide expanses of steppe.



Saker Falcons were regularly seen and Baikal White Wagtails were only noted in the north (Mark Van Beirs)

The morning drive to the provincial capital of Bayankhongor was interrupted by some mechanical problems with the truck's engine. As we happened to be in a very nice stretch of steppe, we birded the area and soon scoped a gorgeous Saker Falcon. We really enjoyed the display antics of several gorgeous Oriental Plovers, which kept showing off their amazing rocking flight around us. Pallas's Sandgrouse regularly flew past and soon our little caravan was on its way again. We stopped in the rather large town of Bayankhongor to restock our supplies and birded in the willow thickets lining the nearby stream. A fair assortment of already seen migrant warblers and flycatchers was found, but best of all was the splendid pair of fine-looking Eurasian Eagle Owls that was roosting on a rocky cliff. We continued our travels and entered the famous Khangai mountains via a wide U valley. The scenery was superb as we drove past rocky outcrops and rolling hills, crossing the pebbly river umpteen times. We visited the famous Buddhist monastery of Erdenesogt, where lovely White Wagtails of the race *baicalensis* walked about. A party of smart Daurian Jackdaws was following a herd of sheep and goats and in the early evening we reached our camp site just below a high pass. An evening stroll produced amazing scope studies of a gorgeous Willow Ptarmigan and a splendid adult Lammergeier.

An early morning walk in the alpine meadows and dwarf willow scrub near the pass produced great looks at fluffy Pallas's Reed Buntings, lovely Stejneger's Stonechats and subtle Hume's Leaf Warblers. The rest of the day we travelled east through the magnificent mountain scenery of the Khangai mountains. Herds of fleecy yak often lined the very rough tracks and we regularly had to drive through knee-deep rushing streams or tackle very steep hill slopes. We stopped for lunch at a high pass where an imposing rocky outcrop held several very obliging Asian Rosy Finches. Alpine Accentors were less accommodating, but a pair of impossibly smart Gldenstdt's Redstarts posed ever so well. When we reached the forested slopes near the Orkhon river we explored a lovely side valley where we soon managed good looks at a pair of fine-looking Eversmann's Redstarts at the edge of a larch wood. Twite also obliged here and in the early evening we finally reached the impressive gorge near the famous Orkhon Falls. While pitching the tents we noted several Common Goldeneyes in the river.



We managed to scope this well-camouflaged Willow Ptarmigan (tour participant Kalpesh Jain); a White-naped Crane is always a delight to observe (tour participant Martin Hale)

At dawn about 150 Daurian Jackdaws were seen leaving their roost from the cliffs in the gorge. The picturesque surroundings of our camp produced several alluring Ortolan Buntings and a showy Common Cuckoo and then we hit the road again. Our petrol stop in the town of Khujirt finally gave us several Hill Pigeons amongst the many feral Rock Doves. A pair of striking, ever so beautiful Black-throated Loons inhabited a nearby small lake. Around midday we reached the lake of Sangiy Dalay where we spent a delightful afternoon. The highlight here was a magnificent White-naped Crane, and although this stately bird kept its distance the scope views showed us all its exquisite characteristics. Pairs of elegant Demoiselle Cranes were dotted over the surrounding countryside and stunning Mongolian Larks were singing all around us. A great selection of (by now) familiar waterbirds were present. Another pair of Black-throated Loons could be admired and a female Red-necked Phalarope was doing its pirouettes amidst some Common Shelduck. We found a single Black Tern amongst the many graceful White-winged Terns dancing over the lake's surface. A female Hen Harrier was identified and in late afternoon we resumed our travels eastwards. It was strange to be on smooth tarmac again after ten days on dirt roads. After a long stretch of driving we camped in a quiet valley.



Upon entering the famous Hustai National Park we found an occupied eyrie of a Saker Falcon in the top of an utility pole. It contained three gorgeous young, almost ready to fledge, and the powerful female was keeping an eye on things from a not too distant viewpoint. Golden moments! We soon located several tawny-coloured Przewalski's Horses grazing on a nearby hill slope. The Hustai NP is one of three locations in Mongolia where 25 years ago this extinct (in the wild) species had been reintroduced. The last wild Przewalski's horses were seen in Mongolia in 1966. It was never domesticated and remains the only truly wild horse in the world today. An adolescent Golden Eagle sat on a distant rock and an exquisite pair of Amur Falcons perched for fantastic scope looks on a nearby wire. We really enjoyed admiring these neat, highly migratory falcons in action. A walk in a scrubby valley gave us a couple of fetching singing male Meadow Buntings and a pair of sneaky Barred Warblers. We flushed two Daurian Partridges from underfoot and had pretty good looks at them in flight. At least 20 Cinereous Vultures, several Himalayan (Griffon) Vultures and a few Steppe Eagles were sitting on a rocky slope and in late morning we saw them all lift into the air and form a neat kettle together with an adult Lammergeier, a Golden Eagle and several Black Kites. Raptor overdose! Other interesting species here included Eurasian Hobby, Rook, Yellow-browed Warbler, lots of Tarbagan Marmots and several Red Deer. In late afternoon we rolled into Ulaanbaatar, where the hot showers, the soft beds and the cold beer were much appreciated.



Hustai NP produced adorable Amur Falcons (tour participant Martin Hale) and several Steppe Eagles (Mark Van Beirs)

Next morning, we started the extension with a much reduced group, by driving to the taiga forest to the northeast of the capital. A stop in the willow and poplar forest along the Tuul River was sabotaged by persistent rain but eventually the skies cleared and Daurian Jackdaw, Great Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch (the very white race *asiatica*), Common and very smart Daurian Redstarts and Black-faced Bunting obliged. A marshy stream valley full of dense shrub gave us Common Whitethroat, a male Siberian Rubythroat, Meadow Bunting and a distant Grey-necked Bunting. In the afternoon we arrived at a lovely, well-hidden clearing, where we pitched our tents for the last time. The afternoon walk in the nearby mixed larch-birch forest with a rich undergrowth produced Coal and Willow Tits, Yellow-browed Warbler, Taiga Flycatcher and a smart grey morph Eurasian Red Squirrel, but the highlight was a fabulous Ural Owl that allowed exceptional views at close range. We couldn't believe our luck as we managed to observe this glorious species on a bough towering over us.

An early start allowed us to reach high altitude mixed pine larch forest after a stiff climb. The open forest with its undergrowth of different kinds of *Vaccinium* (berries) is the favourite habitat of the enigmatic Black-billed Capercaillie, but sadly we encountered many signs of disturbance. Pine seed gatherers had left lots of rubbish (empty vodka bottles and plastic) and although we encountered our quarry four times, we found the birds extremely skittish and only a few of us had decent views. Luckily the supporting cast performed well as we had eye-ball to eye-ball looks at a pair of Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers, a couple of Siberian Jays and scores of raucous Spotted Nutcrackers. We also noted Oriental Cuckoo, Pallas's Leaf and Arctic

Warblers, Olive-backed Pipit, Red Crossbill, Eurasian Siskin, Northern Pika and cute Siberian Chipmunks. We heard White's Thrush and several Red-flanked Bluetails on our wanderings and returned quite tired and rather frustrated to our camp that evening.



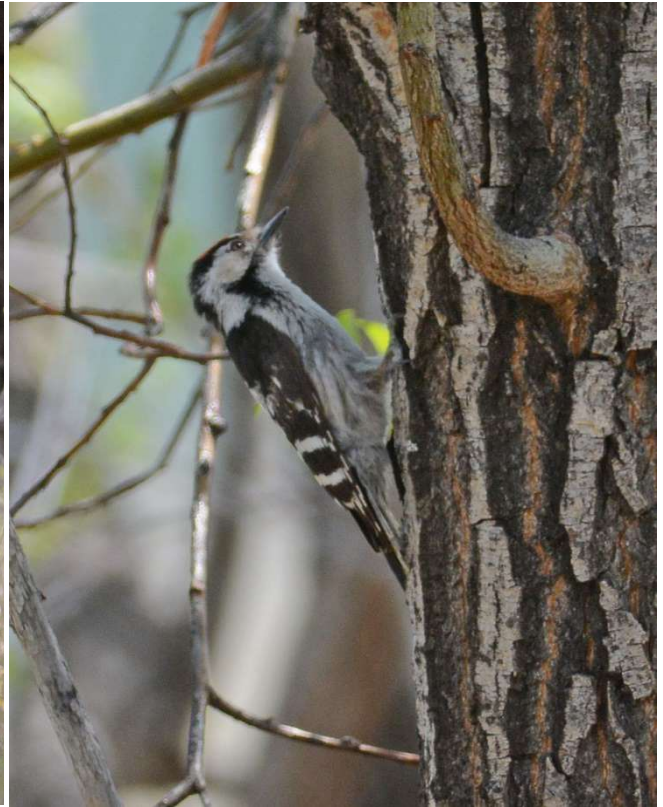
The Terelj taiga is a heaven for woodpeckers: Eurasian Three-toed and Black performed particularly well (Mark Van Beirs)

An easy day of birding followed as we explored a variety of habitats at lower altitudes. A marshy river valley gave us Japanese Quail (flushed), Steppe Eagle, Eurasian Hoopoe, a glorious Eurasian Wryneck, a fabulous male Amur Falcon, lots of Dusky Warblers singing away, several White-cheeked Starlings, a fantastic male Siberian Rubythroat, a male Siberian Stonechat and quite a few Blyth's Pipits. A stretch of old riverine woodland was inhabited by a pretty Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a pair of Long-tailed Rosefinches. A male Black Woodpecker gave an incredible performance in a stretch of larch forest and a rocky hillside tallied a Little Owl of the pale race *plumipes*.





This magnificent Ural Owl didn't like us being in its territory (Mark Van Beirs)



Eastern Roe Deer and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker enlivened our stay in the Terelj taiga (Mark Van Beirs)

On the final day of the tour we decided to give the Capercaillie another go and explored a stretch of old larch forest on a distant range. We soon found droppings of our target and after some wandering about, we all managed good looks at a male of this much wanted species in flight. We kept walking and enjoyed two more sightings in the less disturbed, very open forest. Eastern Buzzard, Red-throated Thrushes, Red Crossbills and an Eastern Roe Deer added to our enjoyment. The final new bird of the trip was a Great Spotted Woodpecker that we saw on the return drive to camp.



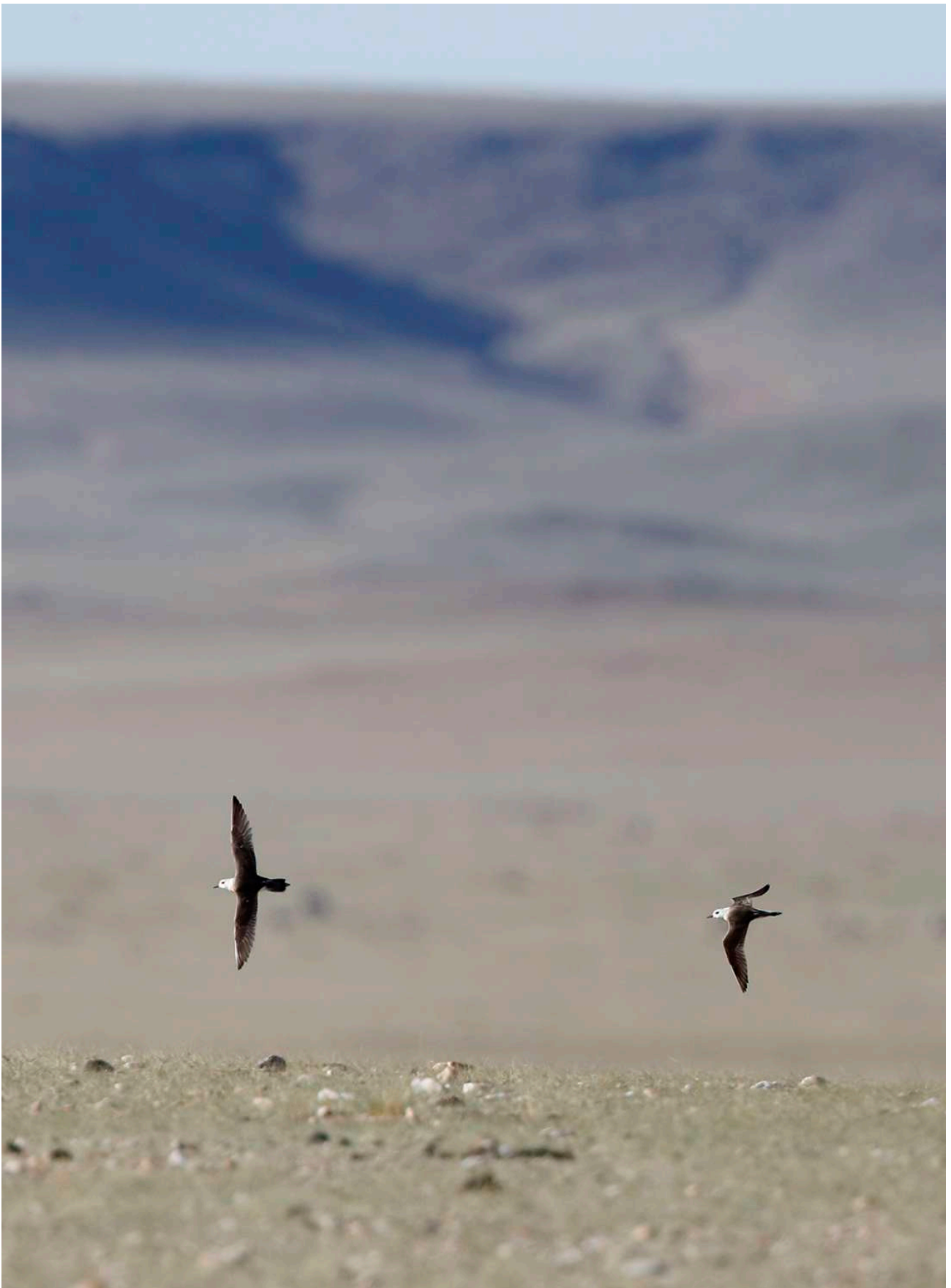
Northern Pika and Siberian Chipmunk were found in the montane forests (Mark Van Beirs)

We want to express our gratitude to wagonmaster Terbish and his fantastic camping crew: the drivers Galbadrakh, Myangan, Sumya and Bahkhihig and the cooks Tsevgee and Munkhzul. They did a splendid job in often difficult circumstances.

The wide open spaces of Mongolia cast their magic spell once more on our group and everyone went home with a number of high quality birds and lots of magical memories of one of the most scenic countries of our planet.



Black-throated Loons in breeding plumage are truly fabulous creatures (tour participant Martin Hale)



The Bird of the Trip was the magnificent Oriental Plover (tour participant Martin Hale)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

Swan Goose ◊ *Anser cygnoides* (**V**) Regular sightings at the steppe lakes. See Note.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* Quite common at most water bodies.



Bar-headed Goose; Black Kite (Mark Van Beirs)

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* Regular sightings of this amazing migrant.

Mute Swan ◊ *Cygnus olor* Several showed well at Orog and Holbooj lakes.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Fairly common. A couple of nests were found.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* Quite common.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* The most widespread species of waterfowl in Mongolia.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* A handful of sightings.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Small numbers were noted.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Regular.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Fairly common at most lakes.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Small numbers on the larger lakes.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* Regular observations of this attractive species.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Just a few sightings.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* Regular sightings of this most handsome duck.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* (**V**) Regular.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Small numbers.

White-winged Scoter (Stejneger's S) *Melanitta [deglandi] stejnegeri* Two observations only. See Note.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Small numbers were noted on the northern lakes.

Common Merganser (Goosander) *Mergus merganser* Fair numbers were noted, especially on the taiga rivers.

Black-billed Capercaillie (Spotted C) *Tetrao urogalloides* Good looks for all, eventually, in the taiga. See Note.

Willow Ptarmigan (W Grouse) *Lagopus lagopus* Fantastic scope studies in the Khangay Mountains.

Altai Snowcock (S) *Tetraogallus altaicus* Great scope views of a pair, after a distant one in the Gobi Altai. See Note.

Chukar Partridge *Alectoris chukar* Several excellent encounters.

Daurian Partridge (D) *Perdix dauurica* Two were flushed in the Hustai NP.

Japanese Quail (J) *Coturnix japonica* (NT) Several were flushed in the Terej area.

Black-throated Loon *Gavia arctica* Great looks at these marvelous birds on northern lakes.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Regular. Display and nests were observed.

Horned Grebe (H) *Podiceps auritus* (V) Several encounters, but usually quite distant. See Note.

Black-necked Grebe (Eared Grebe) *Podiceps nigricollis* Just a few sightings.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* A few encounters only.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Many sightings at reed-edged lakes.

Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* A displaying pair was seen at Orog Nuur.

Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* This vagrant was found at Orog Nuur.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Small numbers.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Small numbers were noted at larger lakes.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Thousands occupied the shores of Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* A single bird was seen on our first day in Mongolia.



Immature Bearded Vulture (Mark Van Beirs)

Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) *Gypaetus barbatus* (NT) Regular and so very impressive!

Himalayan Vulture *Gyps himalayensis* (NT) Small numbers were noted in the Gobi-Altai.

Cinereous Vulture (Eurasian Black V, Monk V) *Aegypius monachus* (NT) Still quite common. See Note.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* Several encounters with both morphs.

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis* (E) A regularly observed bird of prey.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* Several very nice sightings; also seen perched.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* A pair was displaying over the reeds at Orog Nuur.

Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* A female was noted at Orog Nuur.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* A female showed at one of the northern lakes.

Black Kite (Black-eared K) *Milvus [migrans] lineatus* The most common bird of prey in Mongolia.
Pallas's Fish Eagle ◊ *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* (V) Terrific looks at immature birds at two steppe lakes. See Note.
Upland Buzzard ◊ *Buteo hemilasius* Regular encounters. Also seen at eyries.
Eastern Buzzard ◊ (Japanese B) *Buteo japonicus* Two were seen in the Terelj area.
Brown-cheeked Rail ◊ (Eastern Water R) *Rallus indicus* (H) We heard the pig screams in the reeds of Orog Nuur.
Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* Fantastic looks at two at Holbooj lake.
Eurasian Coot (Common C) *Fulica atra* Small numbers.



White-naped Crane (tour participant Martin Hale)

White-naped Crane ◊ *Grus vipio* (V) One performed nicely at one of the northern lakes. See Note.
Demoiselle Crane ◊ *Grus virgo* Many sightings of these avian marvels. See Note.
Common Crane *Grus grus* A single bird was seen at Orog Nuur.
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* A regular bird of the steppe and desert lakes.
Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* One of the more common waders of the steppe and desert lakes.
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (NT) Small numbers of this well-known bird were noted.
Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* This vagrant was seen at Orog Nuur.
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Several observations of birds in lovely breeding attire.
Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola* A couple of encounters.
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* Regular observations.
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* Common around the steppe and desert lakes.
Lesser Sand Plover (Mongolian S P) *Charadrius mongolus* A single bird in breeding plumage was seen. See Note.
Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* Small numbers were found in gravelly semi-desert. See Note.
Oriental Plover ◊ *Charadrius veredus* The Bird of the Trip! Splendid encounters with displaying birds. See Note.
Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Regular in marshy areas.
Asian Dowitcher ◊ (Asiatic D) *Limnodromus semipalmatus* (NT) Cracking views of a dozen birds! See Note.
Black-tailed Godwit ◊ *Limosa limosa* (NT) Regular at steppe lakes. The race involved is *melanuroides*.
Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* Several birds in exquisite breeding plumage were seen.
Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Common in marshy areas.
Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis* Small numbers were observed in marshy areas.



Pied Avocet; a gnarled Saxaul tree (Mark Van Beirs)

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A single observation at Lake Holbooj.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* A few sightings.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A handful of observations.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* Two in breeding plumage were noted at Lake Holbooj.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* Small numbers were seen at muddy shores.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* Regular seen together with the previous species.

Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta* Great looks at several at Lake Holbooj.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* (NT) A few in breeding plumage.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Several in breeding attire.

Broad-billed Sandpiper ♦ ***Limicola falcinellus*** A dozen or so were seen at Lake Holbooj.



Pallas's Gull (tour participant Martin Hale)

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* A few sightings of nice males.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* A female in breeding plumage was at one of the northern lakes.

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei* This vagrant was found at Lake Holbooj.

Brown-headed Gull ◊ *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus* Just a few encounters.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* The most common small gull.

Relict Gull ◊ *Ichthyaetus relictus* (V) A few were seen at Lake Holbooj, but always distant. Disappointing. See Note.

Pallas's Gull (Great Black-headed G) *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus* Many in splendid breeding plumage.

Mew Gull *Larus canus* This vagrant was found at Lake Holbooj.

Vega Gull ◊ (Mongolian G) *Larus [vegae] mongolicus* Common at the larger steppe lakes. See Note.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (Heuglin's G) *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* An adult and an immature bird were identified.

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* Small numbers were noted at several lakes.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* Good numbers showed well at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* Just a few were seen at Orog Nuur.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Common. The race involved is *longipennis*. See Note.

White-winged Tern (W-w Black T) *Chlidonias leucopterus* Regular and so very elegant.

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* A single bird was found together with the previous species at a northern lake.

Pallas's Sandgrouse ◊ *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* Small numbers. See Note.

Rock Dove (R Pigeon) *Columba livia*

Hill Pigeon ◊ *Columba rupestris* A few sightings together with the previous species. See Note.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Three sightings only.

Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus optatus* Often heard in the taiga. A single observation.

Common Cuckoo (Eurasian C) *Cuculus canorus* Common in mountains and in the taiga.

Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo* A pair was roosting on a small cliff in the Khangay Mountains.

Ural Owl ◊ *Strix uralensis* A magnificent day time encounter with an angry bird in the Terej taiga!

Little Owl *Athene noctua* A single bird was seen at a rocky cliff at Terej. The race involved is *plumipes*.



Female Amur Falcon; White-backed Woodpecker (tour participant Martin Hale)

Common Swift *Apus apus* Regular in the second half of the tour.

Pacific Swift (Fork-tailed S) *Apus pacificus* Less common than previous species.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Several beautiful observations.

Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* Great views of a singing bird in the Terelj area.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor* Fantastic looks at a female in the Terelj area.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* Great looks at one in the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* One was seen in the Terelj area.

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker ◇ *Picoides tridactylus* Magnificent close up studies of several in the taiga.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* A male gave extraordinary views in the taiga!

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* Two males showed well in the steppe.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* Regular encounters.

Amur Falcon ◇ (Eastern Red-footed F) *Falco amurensis* Several sightings. So very attractive! See Note.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* A single sighting in Hustai NP.

Saker Falcon ◇ (Saker) *Falco cherrug* (E) Regular observations of this powerful bird. See Note.

Peregrine Falcon (Peregrine) *Falco peregrinus* (NL) Steve saw on near Ulaanbaatar.

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* Regular encounters.

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* Small numbers were noted.

Steppe Grey Shrike ◇ (Saxaul GS) *Lanius pallidirostris* Just a few sightings in semi-desert.

Siberian Jay ◇ *Perisoreus infaustus* Two vocal birds were found in the taiga, but disappeared quickly.



Red-billed Chough; Henderson's Ground Jay (Mark Van Beirs)

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* Common.

Henderson's Ground Jay ◇ *Podoces hendersoni* This intriguing species showed very well. See Note.

Spotted Nutcracker (Eurasian N) *Nucifraga caryocatactes* Many sightings in the taiga.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* Very common and vocal.

Daurian Jackdaw ◇ *Coloeus dauuricus* Regularly seen, sometimes in quite large groups.

Rook ◇ (Oriental R) *Corvus [frugilegus] pastinator* Just a few encounters in the steppe.

Carrion Crow ◇ (Oriental C) *Corvus [corone] orientalis* Small numbers.

Northern Raven (Common R) *Corvus corax* Common all over Mongolia.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Small numbers were recorded in the taiga.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* Delightfully common in the taiga.

Azure Tit ◇ *Cyanistes cyanus* Good looks at three of these fluffballs along the Tuul River in Ulaanbaatar.

Great Tit *Parus major* A few sightings.

White-crowned Penduline Tit ◇ *Remiz coronatus* We found three in the willows along the Tuul River in UB.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* Small numbers.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* Five encounters, usually near villages.

Horned Lark ◇ (Shore L) *Eremophila alpestris* One of the most common species in the steppe and desert. See Note.

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* Several observations.

Mongolian Lark ◇ *Melanocorypha mongolica* Common and so attractive in the steppe.

Asian Short-toed Lark ◇ *Alaudala cheleensis* Common in the desert and semi-desert.

Pale Martin ◇ *Riparia diluta* A few encounters. No active colonies were found. See Note.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Small numbers. The red-bellied breeding race is *tytleri*.
Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* Small numbers.
Common House Martin (Northern H M) *Delichon urbicum* Small numbers were noted. See Note.
Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus* Common and very vocal in river valleys in the taiga.
Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus* Seen both on migration and in the taiga. Attractive.
Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* Regular in the taiga.
Hume's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* Several nice encounters.
Arctic Warbler* *Phylloscopus borealis* A few, both on migration and in the taiga.
Two-barred Warbler (T-b Greenish W) *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus* Good looks at several.
Thick-billed Warbler ♦ *Iduna aedon* Several migrating birds were identified.



Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (tour participant Kalpesh Jain); Asian Desert Warbler (Mark Van Beirs)

Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola* Perfect looks at two along the shore of Boon Tsagaan Nuur.
Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* Several in breeding habitat, but never very cooperative.



Asian Brown Flycatcher; Black Redstart of the race phoenicuroides (Mark Van Beirs)

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* Four observations.
Asian Desert Warbler ◊ *Sylvia nana* Perfect studies at close range of this cutie in the Gobi desert.
Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* A few were seen in shrubby areas in the taiga.
Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* The very white race *asiatica* showed well in the taiga.
Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* Not very satisfactory looks at one at Yolyn Am.
Eurasian Treecreeper (Common T) *Certhia familiaris* (H) We heard the distinctive song in the taiga.
White-cheeked Starling ◊ *Spodiopsar cineraceus* Good looks at several in the poplar woodlands of Terej.
White's Thrush ◊ *Zoothera aurea* (H) Two were singing very early in the morning in the taiga.
Red-throated Thrush ◊ *Turdus ruficollis* Several very nice encounters in the taiga.
Dusky Thrush ◊ *Turdus eunomus* A male showed well at Yolyn Am.
Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* One was seen at Yolyn Am. Quite unusual!
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* Two were seen at our Orkhon River camp.
Dark-sided Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica* Several nice observations.
Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* Small numbers were noted.
Siberian Rubythroat *Calliope calliope* Fantastic looks at singing males in the taiga.
Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* Regularly recorded in the taiga.
Taiga Flycatcher (Red-throated F) *Ficedula albicilla* Four observations of this dainty species.
Eversmann's Redstart ◊ (Rufous-backed R) *Phoenicurus erythronotus* A pair showed well. See Note.
Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* Regular observations of the race *phoenicuroides*.
Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* Several in the poplar woods at Terej.
Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus* Nice looks at this smart species in the Terej area. See Note.



Hodgson's Bushchat; Güldenstädt's Redstart (tour participant Stephen Cooper)

Güldenstädt's Redstart ◊ (White-winged R) *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus* This cracker showed very well. See Note.
Common Rock Thrush (Rufous-tailed RT, White-backed RT) *Monticola saxatilis* Many sightings of this beauty.
White-throated Bush Chat ◊ (Hodgson's Bushchat) *Saxicola insignis* (V) One of the highlights! See Note
Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus* Two males were observed in the Terej area. See Note.
Stejneger's Stonechat *Saxicola stejnegeri* Several performed in the Khangay Mountains. See Note.
Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Regular observations.
Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* Very common and vocal in the steppe.
Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti* Small numbers showed well in sandy areas.
Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* Regular encounters.
Saxaul Sparrow ◊ *Passer ammodendri* Perfect looks at several of these smart sparrows at Khongorynels. See Note.
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Common in towns and villages.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Common all along our route.
Rock Sparrow (Rock Petronia) *Petronia petronia* Several nice observations.

White-winged Snowfinch (Eurasian S) *Montifringilla nivalis* Fantastic encounters in the Gobi-Altai mountains.

Pere David's Snowfinch ◊ *Pyrgilauda davidiana* Strangely enough, only seen on the first day of the tour. See Note.

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris* Seen distantly in the Khangay Mountains.

Altai Accentor ◊ *Prunella himalayana* Good looks at several at the Hodgson's Bushchat spot.

Brown Accentor ◊ *Prunella fulvescens* Common in the mountains.

Kozlov's Accentor ◊ (Mongolian A) *Prunella koslowi* Magnificent looks at this breeding endemic. See Note.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* Many encounters.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Regular.

White Wagtail ◊ (Masked W) *Motacilla [alba] personata* A male showed well at Orog Nuur.

White Wagtail ◊ (Baikal W) *Motacilla [alba] baicalensis* Regular in the north.

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi* Regular around marshy lakes.

Blyth's Pipit ◊ *Anthus godlewskii* Fairly common on stony slopes. See Note.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* A single bird was seen in the Khangay Mountains.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* Common in the taiga.

Water Pipit ◊ *Anthus spinoletta* Regular at higher elevations in the Gobi-Altai. See Note.

Eurasian Bullfinch ◊ *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (H) We heard the distinctive call in the Terej area.

Mongolian Finch ◊ (M Trumpeter F) *Bucanetes mongolicus* Small numbers were seen in the first week of the trip.

Asian Rosy Finch ◊ *Leucosticte arctoa* Next to the a pair in the Khangay, we found quite a few in the Gobi-Altai.

Common Rosefinch (Scarlet R) *Carpodacus erythrinus* Regular observations.

Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch ◊ *Carpodacus pulcherrimus* Male and female showed well at Yolyn Am. See Note.

Long-tailed Rosefinch *Carpodacus sibiricus* Pairs showed quite well at UB and in the Terej area.

Twite *Linaria flavirostris* A few sightings only.

Red Crossbill (Common C) *Loxia curvirostra* Fair numbers performed very well in the taiga.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A pair was seen at Terej.

Pine Bunting ◊ *Emberiza leucocephalos* Terrific looks at singing males in the north. See Note.

Godlewski's Bunting ◊ *Emberiza godlewskii* Several males were scoped in the Gobi-Altai. See Note.

Meadow Bunting ◊ *Emberiza cioides* Seen well in the Hustai NP and in the Terej area.

Grey-necked Bunting ◊ *Emberiza buchanani* One in the Khangay Mts and a distant male at Terej.

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* Marvelous looks at singing males along the Orkhon River.

Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* A single migrant was seen at Lake Holbooj.

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* A few were noted in the taiga.

Pallas's Reed Bunting ◊ *Emberiza pallasi* Regular sightings of this elegant species. See Note.



Mongolian Lark; Horned Lark (tour participant Kalpesh Jain)



Asiatic Wild Ass (tour participant Kalpesh Jain); Przewalski's Horses (Mark Van Beirs)

MAMMALS

Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai* Several were seen.

Northern Pika *Ochotona hyperborea* A few showed in the scree of the taiga.

Pallas's Pika *Ochotona pallasi* Very common in the Gobi-Altai.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* Both grey and black morphs were seen in the taiga.

Tarbagan Marmot (Siberian/Mongolian M) *Marmota sibirica* Common and widespread.

Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel (R-c Souslik) *Spermophilus erythrogenys* Just a few observations.

Long-tailed Ground Squirrel (L-T Souslik) *Spermophilus undulatus* Many sightings of this prairie dog like critter.

Siberian Chipmunk *Tamias sibiricus* Regular and adorable in the taiga. See Note.

Mongolian Silver Vole (Royle's Mountain V) *Alticola semicanus* One was discovered under Rosy's tent.

Mongolian Jird (M Gerbil) *Meriones unguiculatus* Regular in the Gobi-Altai.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Nice looks at one in the Gobi-Altai.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus* Several showed well in Hustai NP.

Eastern Roe Deer *Capreolus pygargus* Three observations in the taiga.

Goitred Gazelle (Black-tailed G) *Gazella subgutturosa* Two herds were seen in the Gobi desert.

Mongolian Gazelle (White-tailed G) *Gazella gutturosa* Nice looks at several on our drive south to the Gobi-Altai.

Siberian Ibex *Capra sibirica* Two adult males and a youngster were seen at Yolyn Am.

Przewalski's Horse *Equus ferus przewalskii* c30 of these re-introduced horses were observed in the Hustai NP.

Asiatic Wild Ass (Kulan) *Equus hemionus* A single gave excellent looks as we left the Gobi-Altai behind. See Note.





Siberian Sand Toad (Mark Van Beirs)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus versicolor* Common in the semi-desert.

Gobi Racetracer *Eremias przewalskii* Two showed well in the semi-desert.

Multi-ocellated Racetracer *Eremias multiocellata* A single sighting in semi-desert.

Siberian Sand (Mongolian/Radde's) Toad *Bufo raddei* One was found at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.



Sand dunes (Mark Van Beirs)



Kozlov's Accentors; Ortolan Bunting (tour participant Kalpesh Jain)

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

The most up to date referenced taxonomic list referred to in the Tour Report is that of the IOC World Bird Names. Gill, F and Donsker, D (Eds). 2016. IOC World Bird Names (v6.2). Available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>

Swan Goose *Anser cygnoides*

This rare species only breeds in Russia, Mongolia and China and the border area between these three countries is their key breeding location. They winter in North and South Korea and central China. The world population stands at 60–90,000 birds and is sadly declining as a result of habitat loss (drainage) and unsustainable levels of hunting.

White-winged Scoter (Stejneger's S) *Melanitta [deglandi] stejnegeri*

Leonhard Stejneger (1851-1943) was a Norwegian ornithologist and collector.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian Grebe) *Podiceps auritus*

Slavonia is a geographical and historical region in eastern Croatia.

Black-billed Capercaillie (Siberian/Rock Capercaillie) *Tetrao parvirostris*

We obtained pretty good views of this very special bird after a fair amount of effort. Both Western and Black-billed Capercaillie occur in Mongolia, but don't seem to overlap here. These two form a superspecies and in the limited area of overlap in the basin of the Yenisey River (Russia) hybrids are frequently encountered. The male can reach a weight of up to 4.5 kg.

Altai Snowcock *Tetraogallus altaicus*

This species is quite heavily hunted in Mongolia, because of its supposed medicinal powers. The total population is estimated at 50-100,000 individuals and is probably slowly declining. The distinctive Palearctic genus *Tetraogallus* consists of five closely-related species, which all occur in remote and steep mountainous areas and are all highly-desired by Palearctic birding enthusiasts. One has to work to see snowcocks!!!

Cinereous Vulture (Eurasian Black V, Monk V) *Aegypius monachus*

We had more than 85 encounters, often at close range. The total population is less than 20,000 birds.



Asian Dowitchers (tour participant Kalpesh Jain)

Pallas's Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus leucoryphus*

The world population is likely to be less than 15,000 individuals. It is one of the many birds named after Peter Simon Pallas, a German doctor and scientist, who was invited by Catherine II to become professor at the Academy of Sciences at St Petersburg. He organised a six year long expedition through central Russia, which reached Transbaikalia and the border of Mongolia. He was one of the greatest of all eighteenth century naturalists.

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*

Its population is estimated at c6,500 individuals and is probably declining.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*

The world population is currently estimated at 230-280,000 birds. Mongolian birds winter in India, including at the famous Khichan site.

Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*

The form concerned is *schaeferi*. It has recently been suggested that Lesser Sand Plover (or Mongolian Plover) *C. mongolus* should be treated as two species: Himalayan and Central Asian breeding Lesser Sand Plover *C. atrifrons* (including the nominate race plus *pamirensis* and *schaeferi*) and Mongolian (Sand) Plover *C. mongolus* which breeds further north and east in Asia and uses a more easterly, coastal migration route. It has a rather distinctive breeding plumage and different proportions.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaulti*

The species is named after Jean Baptiste Leschenault de la Tour (1773-1826), French botanist and collector in Australia, Java and India.

Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus*

This cracker only breeds in southern Siberia, Mongolia and north-eastern China and winters in north-western and north central Australia. The total population is estimated at 160,000 birds.

Asian Dowitcher ◊ (Asiatic D) *Limnodromus semipalmatus*

The total population is estimated at 23,000 birds.

Relict Gull *Larus relictus*

The world population is c20,000 birds and is declining as a result of predation, disturbance, variable climatic factors at breeding colonies and the development of coastal wetlands in its wintering range. It only breeds in eastern Kazakhstan (two localities), Russia (one spot), China (one or two localities holding the largest known colonies) and Mongolia (several colonies). It was originally described as a race of Mediterranean Gull, known from one specimen, then suspected of being an aberrant Brown-headed Gull or a hybrid Brown-headed x Pallas's Gull. But since breeding colonies were found in 1970 (only!!) it has now universally been considered a distinct species.

Vega Gull ◊ (Mongolian G) *Larus [vegae] mongolicus*

The whole taxonomy of the "Herring Gull/Yellow-legged Gull" complex is indeed very complex and the form involved (*mongolicus*) is now treated as a subspecies of Vega Gull. Other authors consider it a subspecies of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* or as a separate species (Mongolian Gull *L. mongolicus*).



Male Common Rock Thrush; Crested Lark (Mark Van Beirs)

Lesser Black-backed Gull (Heuglin's G) *Larus [fuscus] heuglini*

This form has variously been regarded as a race of Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* and Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* or as a species in its own right (Heuglin's Gull *L. heuglini*) to name just three of the more recent taxonomic treatments.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

The birds seen were quite variable with most obviously belonging to the race *longipennis*, with totally black bill and greyer plumage, compared to European birds.

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

Only small numbers were seen as it had rained in the steppe and semi-desert, so there was no need for the birds to concentrate at lakes and ponds. This species has a wide breeding range and occurs from the Caspian Sea east to north-eastern China, but it is mainly known for its irruptive behaviour. Several major irruptions have taken place in western Europe, notably in 1863, 1888 and 1908, when thousands of birds were observed and whereby some birds settled and bred in countries as far apart as Great-Britain, Sweden and Poland. The epithet *paradoxus* (= unexpected, strange) obviously relates to this unique behaviour.

Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris*

This species probably suffers from rivalry with the ever increasing Rock Dove, although studies in the Ulan Ude area (just across the border in Russia) have shown that hybridization remains limited.

Amur Falcon (Eastern Red-footed Falcon) *Falco amurensis*

This social bird of prey is named after the Amur river of Eastern Siberia and is famous for its amazing migration over the Indian Ocean to its wintering haunts in southern central Africa, where roosts of several thousand birds are known. The disastrous trapping in NE India has now been stopped.

Saker Falcon (Saker) *Falco cherrug*

The total population is estimated at fewer than 30,000 birds and the Mongolian population is considered to be c4,000 pairs and declining. The illegal trapping of Sakers is a sad fact. A single bird may fetch a price of up to 2,500\$ in a country where the monthly average wage is less than 100\$. Cherrug is derived from the Hindi word *charg* for the female Saker. The tiercel (male) is known as *chargela*.



Globeflower; Dark-sided Flycatcher (Mark Van Beirs)

Henderson's Ground Jay *Podoces hendersoni*

It is restricted to southern Mongolia, north-western China and gets just into Kazakhstan. The four species of ground jay (genus *Podoces*) are all enigmatic species of remote, hard to reach places that appeal very much to Palearctic birding fanatics. The bird is named after Lieutenant Colonel George Henderson, a 19th century British soldier, explorer and author.

Horned Lark (Shore L) *Eremophila alpestris*

The form concerned is *brandti*. A recent genetic study sampled numerous individuals from across this species very wide range and concluded that it should be split into six species with *brandti* to become a monotypic species, perhaps to be called Brandt's or Mongolian Horned Lark.

Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*

This form has now been split off as a separate species (from Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*) and usually occupies drier habitat and lives in smaller colonies. They overlap in Kazakhstan and probably in western Mongolia.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

The form concerned is *lagopodum* which differs from nominate *urbicum* in having a much more extensive white rump patch and shallower tail fork. In the small area of contact between the two taxa to the south and east of Lake Baikal they reportedly behave as separate species so, pending further research, a split seems possible.

Eversmann's Redstart (Rufous-backed Redstart) *Phoenicurus erythronota*

Eduard Friedrich Eversmann (1794-1860) was a German naturalist, collector and author who travelled in Kirghizia and Siberia.

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureoreus*

The bird is named after Dauria or Dahuria, in ancient times the name for the area encompassing parts of eastern Mongolia and the Chinese province of Heilongjiang.

Güldenstädt's Redstart (White-winged Redstart) *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

Johann Anton Güldenstädt (1745-1781) was a botanist and zoologist and a colleague of Peter Simon Pallas. He explored the Caucasus for nearly seven years.

White-throated Bush Chat (Hodgson's Bushchat) *Saxicola insignis*

It only breeds very locally in the mountains of Mongolia and adjacent parts of Russia and winters in the terai of northern India and Nepal. Its population is probably only a few thousand birds and the species is virtually unknown on its breeding grounds. Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-1894) was an English diplomat, ethnologist, naturalist and author.



Asian Short-toed Lark; Tree Sparrow (Mark Van Beirs)

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus* and **Stejneger's Stonechat** *S. stejnegeri*

What was formerly Common Stonechat *S. torquatus* has gone through a number of recent revisions including the separation of Palearctic taxa from African Stonechat *S. torquatus* as Common Stonechat *S. rubicola* and more recently the further separation of Eastern Palearctic forms as Siberian Stonechat *S. maurus*. More recently still the easternmost forms of *maurus* have been further split by IOC as Stejneger's Stonechat *S. stejnegeri*, primarily on the basis of genetic evidence though usable field characters are gradually being described. The range limits and migration routes of *maurus* and *stejnegeri* remain poorly understood but based on the most recent evidence both occur as passage migrants and breeding visitors to Mongolia, *stejnegeri* breeding around Ulaanbaatar and mainly to the north and east of there and *maurus* breeding further west – though both could conceivably occur as migrants anywhere in central Mongolia. The subtle plumage differences between the species are at their most obvious in fresh autumn plumage but well-marked individuals are identifiable with a moderate degree of confidence in spring given good views.

Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*

It is only found where the famous Saxaul tree (*Haloxylon ammodendron* - Amaranthaceae) survives. Its distribution falls into six disjunct areas across Central Asia, where it is a bird of deserts, favouring areas with shrubs such as the saxaul, near rivers and oases.

Père David's Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda davidiana*

This species is always associated with sousliks or pikas, as they breed in their burrows. The bird is named after the famous Abbé Père Armand David, a 19th century French missionary to China, naturalist, intrepid explorer and author. A splendid book about this amazing man and his incredible accomplishments is: "Travels in Imperial China: The Exploration & Discoveries of Père David" by George Bishop.

Kozlov's Accentor (Mongolian Accentor) *Prunella koslowi*

This is a true Mongolian breeding endemic, although there are several winter observations in China. The bird is named after General Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov (1863 -1935), a Russian explorer of central Asia and Mongolia.

Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*

It is not always easy to separate from Richard's Pipit, although the display flight and song are quite different. Edward Blyth was an 19th century English zoologist who contributed hugely to early Indian ornithology.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

This species was formerly called Rock Pipit, but that name is now used for the coastal form *petrosus*, which is nowadays split off as a separate species with the name Water Pipit now used for the residual *A. spinoletta*. The form concerned is *blakistoni*; recent studies of plumage, voice and genetics suggest that the three races of Water Pipit might be better regarded as three separate species with the name Eastern or Blakiston's Water Pipit used for the present taxon.



Our faithful crew and part of the group (Mark Van Beirs)

Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch *Carpodacus pulcherrimus*

The form concerned is *argyrophrys* which IOC now regard as a race of the present species rather than, as previously, of Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch *C. davidianus*; all were formerly considered conspecific with the name Beautiful Rosefinch *C. pulcherrimus* used for the enlarged species.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

Good looks at many smart males along forest edges near Ulaanbaatar and at Terelj (nominate). They really sing almost exactly like a Yellowhammer and in the zone of overlap in the Urals and western Siberia hybrids are well known.

Godlewski's Bunting *Emberiza godlewskii*

The bird is named after Wictor Witold Godlewski, a 19th century Polish farmer and amateur naturalist, who was exiled to Siberia.

Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasii*

The form concerned is *lydiae* which differs from other races slightly in plumage but more distinctly in voice and ecology and potentially represents a separate species.

Siberian Chipmunk *Tamias sibiricus*

This is the only Old World representative of the genus *Tamias* (25 species).

Asiatic Wild Ass (Kulan) *Equus hemionus*

The form from western India (Onager previously *Equus onager*) has now been lumped into this species.

Bird of the Trip:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Oriental Plover | 30 points |
| 2. Ural Owl | 24 points |
| 3. Hodgson's Bushchat | 16 points |
| 4. Henderson's Ground Jay | 12 points |
| 5. Lammergeier | 11 points |
| 6. Amur Falcon | 8 points |



The Gobi-Altai Mountains (Mark Van Beirs)