

# MONGOLIA

23 MAY – 7/12 JUNE 2010

## TOUR REPORT

**LEADER:** MARK VAN BEIRS

Our epic voyage through one of the most beautiful countries in the world yielded a splendid assortment of Palearctic specialities. The bird of the trip was, without any doubt, the amazing Oriental Plover, which showed off its rich finery and amazing display flight over the gravelly steppe. We recorded 223 species on this tour, including many Siberian specialties that occur as vagrants to European migration hotspots, and came away with finger-licking quality species like Swan Goose, Falcated Duck, Baikal Teal, Stejneger's Scoter, Pallas's Fish Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Lammergeier, Amur and Saker Falcons, Black-billed Capercaillie, Altai Snowcock, Baillon's Crake, White-naped and Demoiselle Cranes, Oriental Plover, Pallas's and Relict Gulls, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Eurasian Eagle and Ural Owls, White-backed and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers, Mongolian Lark, Blyth's Pipit, Kozlov's Accentor, Siberian Rubythroat, Gldenstdt's and Eversmann's Redstarts, Hodgson's Bushchat, Asian Desert Warbler, Azure Tit, Wallcreeper, Henderson's Ground Jay, Saxaul Sparrow and Pine, Meadow and Pallas's Reed Buntings. Interesting mammals included Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa, Mid-day Gerbil, Corsac Fox, Goitred and Mongolian Gazelles and Argali. This tour combines, more than almost any other Birdquest trip, exquisite birding with a real travel experience in some of the most spectacular landscapes our globe has on offer. We wandered for 19 days through the wide and wild steppes, deserts and semi-deserts, mountains, marshes and taiga of the thinly-populated republic of Mongolia. We experienced all kinds of weather, feasted on appetizing food and gorged ourselves on that unfamiliar feeling of 'space' in a country where looking at dunes and mountains more than hundred kilometres away is not unusual! The camping was really magnificent and we were spoilt by an exceptional crew. It is the only way to discover the 'real' Mongolia, where more than half of its population also sleeps under canvas in their traditional gers.

A very smooth Aeroflot flight took us via Moscow to Ulaan Baatar (UB for the connoisseurs), the capital of the little visited country of Mongolia. Upon arrival we transferred to our hotel, had a rest and a meal and in the afternoon we explored the willow and poplar shrubbery along the Tuul river. The trees and bushes were just coming into leaf, and it was obvious that after a very hard winter – which had killed almost a quarter of Mongolia's livestock – the country was also experiencing a late

spring. A pair of lovely, fluffy Azure Tits showed well, a male Daurian Redstart cooperated, Little Ringed Plovers and Common Sandpipers displayed on the shingle banks, an Eurasian Hoopoe walked about, an Arctic Warbler performed, Dark-sided and Red-throated Flycatchers obliged and eventually we found a dainty White-crowned Penduline Tit that allowed close scrutiny. Overhead we noted Black Stork, lots of menacing-looking Black-eared Kites, Ruddy Shelduck, Goosander, scores of Fork-tailed Swifts and a nice assortment of corvids including Common Raven, Oriental Rook, Oriental Crow, Red-billed Chough and several pied Daurian Jackdaws. A cute Daurian Pika played hide and seek and later we worked a grassy hill slope where Golden Eagle, Asian Brown Flycatcher, displaying Blyth's Pipits and Northern and Pied Wheatears gave great views. An excellent dinner in a BBQ restaurant rounded of our first day in this magnificent country.

It had been six years since my last visit and a lots of things had evidently changed since in the capital. The frightening amount of traffic and ensuing traffic jams, lots of new and fancy shops and malls, the wide variety of available restaurants, many people dressed according to the latest fashion and the multitudes of glitzy cars were all new aspects. Luckily, it soon appeared that once outside the city things had remained unchanged, except for the ubiquitous solar panels and satellite dishes at every ger (or yurt) we encountered.

Next morning we explored the forest edges of the Bogd Khan National Park on the outskirts of UB. The rocky, sparsely-vegetated hill slopes held several smart, singing, males Meadow Bunting, a number of displaying Isabelline Wheatears and Blyth's Pipits, a cracking male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, an overly excited male Common Cuckoo and several fat and important-looking Tarbagan Marmots. In the larch forest we encountered a black Eurasian Red Squirrel and some curious Siberian Chipmunks, while the skies offered views of Eurasian Black Vulture, Steppe and Booted Eagles and a rather distant Saker Falcon. Later, a thorough exploration of some quite open willow groves along the Tuul river produced a pair of elegant Amur Falcons, several adorable Demoiselle Cranes, Olive-backed Pipit, Citrine Wagtail, a fantastic male Siberian Rubythroat, lots of Arctic Warblers on passage, a delightful Pallas's Leaf Warbler and our only Yellow-breasted Bunting of the tour. An early evening flight took us southwards to the small town of Dalanzadgad, where we were welcomed by our three sturdy Russian minibuses and our faithful crew. On the drive to our ger camp at the base of the Gobi Altai mountains some of us observed a Short-eared Owl.

It rained and stormed heavily overnight and although the new experience of spending a night in a Mongolian ger had been quite exciting, at dawn we looked with dismay at the clouded skies and the freshly fallen shroud of snow on the mountains of the nearby Gurvansaikhan National Park. We headed for Yolyn Am, the Valley of the Lammergeier, but limited visibility and continuous cold rain made us feel quite miserable for most of the morning. We kept on going nevertheless and explored the juniper-covered hill slopes of the grassy valleys and the scenic narrow canyon with its steep rock faces and scree slopes. Birds of prey kept a very low profile and we only had brief looks at a Lammergeier and an Upland Buzzard. Eventually we were rewarded with a nice assortment of migrating and resident passerines and noted Horned Lark, Water Pipit, Eastern Grey-headed Wagtail, Brown, the endemic Kozlov's and Alpine Accentors, Black Redstart (of a red-bellied race), lots of Isabelline Wheatears, Naumann's Thrush, Dusky Warbler, a couple of wary Wallcreepers, Brown Shrike, White-winged Snowfinch, Twite, Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch and Black-faced and Godlewski's Buntings. The furry department was represented by Pallas's Pika, Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel, Red Fox and several imposing Siberian Ibex.

Quite early next morning we hiked to the higher reaches of the Gobi Altai mountains and finally met some excellent open weather that allowed full appreciation of the fantastic, very picturesque surroundings. Spirits were high and methodical scanning (scanscanscan!!) of the surrounding slopes gave us a group of Siberian Ibex, several inspiring Argali, some migrating Crested Honey Buzzards, Alpine Accentor and a pair of Altai Snowcocks walking about on a lower slope. We never managed to hear their curlew-like calls, although we saw the male stretch and throw his voice, allowing for

pretty good views of this very special bird. Later, we explored a nearby valley where Upland Buzzard, Lammergeier and a dashing Saker Falcon allowed great looks. We reluctantly left this magic area and started driving west across gravelly plains and undulating foothills into the real wilds of Mongolia. Small numbers of Mongolian Gazelles and just a few Goitred Gazelles escorted us on our drive and in late afternoon we arrived at another ger camp, where we enjoyed excellent food, hot showers and an eye-opening contortionist show.

For the next ten days we wandered, often far away from roads or tracks, over the deserts, steppes, hills and mountains of southern central Mongolia, admired improbable pyrotechnic shows of spectacular sunsets, watched open mouthed at magnificent mountain scenery more than hundred kilometres away, stood in awe at shimmering sand dunes of enormous proportions and enjoyed amazing vistas with no sign of human presence visible. We experienced some extreme weather, as we got chilled to the bone and roasted by a fierce sun on the same day and got regularly battered by snow, hail, sand and rain. There are now very few places in the world where one can undergo this unique feeling of nothingness, remoteness and wildness while observing some of the rarest birds in the world. Our party was totally self-contained with a sturdy truck and three minibuses, manned by a knowledgeable trekmaster, three experienced drivers and three excellent cooks. The latter managed to provide us with three course lunches and four course dinners every day and we never ate the same dish twice! The drivers were regularly seen to dismantle their engines totally overnight and although one of them was rather prone to get himself stuck (we nicknamed him "Stucky"), they did an admirable job. This was the only real way to explore this extraordinary country, and although it was a bit adventurous at times with some more than exciting river crossings and some rather extended "vehicles stuck in the mud" sessions, we savoured it all with much gusto.

The remnants of the bizarre saxaul forest at the edge of some of the most impressive dunes in the world are the favourite habitat of the pretty Saxaul Sparrow. Saxaul bushes are small, gnarled and often very old and provide the ideal hide outs for this localized species. After a bit of searching we located a pair of these beautiful birds near its nesting hole in a manmade construction. Growing on the Saxaul roots we found a beautiful kind of broomrape, *Cistanche deserticola*, a holoparasitic plant, that is prized in Chinese medicine as the 'ginseng of the desert'. Along a small stream a Green Sandpiper was loafing and we also observed a male Lesser Kestrel, Richard's Pipit, Desert Wheatear and Isabelline and Steppe Grey Shrikes in this extreme habitat.

The large expanses of desert and semi-desert of the Gobi span most of southern Mongolia, but hold relatively few bird targets. Our main priority here was getting to grips with the most amazing member of the Sandgrouse family: the inscrutable Pallas's Sandgrouse. Strangely enough, it took us several days before we encountered this mysterious inhabitant of these wastes, but then we were spoiled as we were able to study them at close range at a drinking puddle. With their subtly soft colours and delicate markings they could be admired approaching the water quite warily and drinking carefully. We even saw a male dunk his belly feathers in the water, obviously filling the specially-adapted feathers to provide water for his offspring waiting somewhere far away in the desert. The feathered tarsi could also be seen in the scope. In flight the spiky tail, pointed wings and purring call attracted attention and we could only wonder about the baffling westward eruptions of this much-desired species. A gravelly plain covered in a thin layer of freshly-sprouted grass eventually yielded the very attractive Oriental Plover. We were lucky enough to be able to admire a gorgeous male perform his amazing almost shearwater or petrel-like display flight. Because of this extraordinary show this long distance migrant was voted Bird of the Trip. Other goodies in these sandy or stony wastes included Greater Sand Plover, Mongolian Finch and several interesting reptiles like Toad-headed Agama, Gobi Racerunner and Kaspischer Even-fingered Gecko.

In a desert area with man-high bushes we concentrated on finding the wacky Henderson's Ground Jay, a member of one of the most sought after Palearctic bird genera. In the middle of the day they kept a very low profile, but in the cooler hours we could scope this cracker perched on top of a bush

or running about in search of prey. In flight the white wing patches really drew our attention and we once saw a bird with a lizard in its bill. Here too we scrutinized displaying Asian Desert Warblers with their pale eyes and yellow legs and a migrant Radde's Warbler. A night walk produced a sweet very endearing Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa and after a truly spectacular sunrise we found a docile Mid-day Gerbil and a Multi-ocellated Racerunner.

Central Mongolia is crisscrossed by major mountain ranges like the Gobi Altai and the Khangai and by the end of May we found the hard to reach higher areas still covered in a thick layer of snow. At dawn (chilly) we heard the distinctive whistles of the Altai Snowcocks emanate from rocky escarpments and we also found some foraging on snow-free patches or dust bathing under a favourite bush. But our main objective in these little visited uplands was trying to see the rare Hodgson's Bushchat. Although it is sometimes seen on its wintering grounds in the terai of India or Nepal, very, very few birdwatchers have ever observed it on its breeding grounds. After a bit of searching we were able to examine a pair in the middle of its territory. The subtle female was seen to collect nesting material and disappear into a tiny bush, while the more apparent male kept an eye on her and accompanied his partner by singing a few strophes. Magic moments with a rare species! The rocky ridges, boulders and frozen meadows also held singing Brown and Altai Accentors and some superb Gldenstdt's Redstarts. Subtle Brandt's Rosefinches eked out a living amongst the pebbles and a Golden Eagle regularly patrolled. In areas with dwarf willow vegetation we found droppings of Willow Ptarmigan and flushed several. Siberian Stonechat, Twite and Pallas's Reed Bunting held territory and migrants included attractive Red-throated Thrushes and Hume's Leaf Warblers. Lower down, on north facing slopes patches of larch forest were found to hold the exquisite Eversmann's Redstart. A small crag showing a big patch of whitewash gave away the location of a raptor's eyrie and a closer look produced amazingly detailed views of an adult and a youngster Lammergeier on their huge stick nest. We were able to admire the white iris surrounded by a red orbital ring and the fluttering, wispy beard. Formidable Saker Falcons, Chukar, Barred Warbler, Rock Sparrow, lovely Mongolian Finches and Grey-necked Bunting favoured the warmer rocky slopes of the lower reaches.

Further north, the well-known steppes, which in the days of Genghis Khan produced the multitudes of swift riding warriors, gave us many Eurasian Black Vultures. They had a marvellous time with the many corpses lying about of animals that perished in the extremely hard winter. Demoiselle Cranes were dotted over the extensive greens and could often be seen dancing. Colonies of Long-tailed Ground Squirrels were usually attended by unpretentious Pre David's Snowfinches and colourful Mongolian Larks hovered over the wide expanses singing their ebullient songs. Here and there we found Amur Falcons perched on wires and Upland Buzzards perched above breeding cliffs. Once, we managed to observe a Corsac Fox cautiously hunting. Because of the extensive rains, the rivers were very full and the Orkhon Waterfall, Mongolia's most famous, offered a truly impressive sight. Nearby we found an angry-looking female Eagle Owl with her two chicks in a cliff, while Spotted Flycatchers flitted through the flowering cherry trees and a huge White-tailed Eagle patrolled the river.

The Mongolian countryside is dotted with lakes and these proved to be the richest habitat for birds on our camping tour. Some of the lakes hold fresh water, others are brackish or totally saline. Sadly, during the past twenty years many of the lakes in central Mongolia have started to dry up, not only because of an ongoing drought, but mainly because a lot of the water has been piped away to be used in gold mining ventures. Both famous Orog Nuur and Boon Tsagaan Nuur have greatly suffered from this and are now only a shadow of their former self. The few pools at Orog Nuur still held a wide variety of well-known species, including Grey Heron (nests in reeds), Greylag Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Shelduck, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Tufted Duck, Coot, Northern Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, White-winged Tern, Eurasian Skylark and Pale and House Martins, while Paddyfield and Oriental Reed Warblers and Common Reed Bunting were singing away in the reedbeds. Best of all was an unexpected, solitary, inspiring White-naped Crane that foraged in the meadows.

At illustrious Boon Tsagaan Nuur, put on the birding map through Birdquest's first historical tour there in 1989, birds were everywhere, but it was sad to see that the shoreline had receded by more than a kilometre, leaving several of the old breeding islands of cormorants and gulls totally bare. Our productive stay here gave us Great Cormorant, Great Egret, good numbers of Swan Geese, Pallas's Fish Eagle (two adults and two youngsters), many handsome Pallas's Gulls, several Brown-headed Gulls, ten beautiful Relict Gulls, scores of Mongolian Gulls, Little, Whiskered and many Caspian Terns, and a flourishing Pale Martin colony. Max found a drake Baikal Teal amongst some grazing Eurasian Wigeon and Radde's Toads were croaking from the puddles.

At another large lake we were amazed by the sheer numbers of birds and during several very happy hours we amassed a long list which tallied goodies like Great Crested and Horned Grebes, Whooper Swan, Swan Goose, Eurasian Spoonbill, Bar-headed Goose, Eurasian Teal, Chinese Spot-billed Duck, Northern Pintail, Red-crested Pochard, Common Goldeneye, a cracking Baillon's Crake, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Sanderling, Little Stint, Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, Dunlin, Common Snipe, Reeve, Red-necked Phalaropes in breeding plumage, an adult Relict Gull (with its distinctive and peculiar gait), Gull-billed Tern and several migrant Tree Pipits.

The more northern steppe lakes, situated not too far south of the forest belt, held a slightly different avifauna. Highlights here were the extremely handsome Black-throated Divers, the many vocal Whooper Swans, the three drakes Falcated Duck, the remarkable Stejneger's Scoters, Marsh, Wood and a single Terek Sandpiper, some graceful Long-toed Stints, a couple of Black Terns and a fabulous Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler that obliged so well in the scopes.

Villages or towns, consisting of communist grey, concrete blocks surrounded by a concentration of gers, were usually few and far in between, but now and then we needed to replenish our petrol and water supply. Only here we found the unobtrusive Hill Pigeons, while in one area at the edge of a town, some willow bushes along a stream held migrants like Thick-billed and Paddyfield Warblers, Two-barred Greenish Warbler and Siberian Chiffchaff. On one occasion we visited an active Monastery, where orange-clad monks preyed. Buddhism is obviously doing well after it was clamped down upon for decades by the Sovjets. On our final day before returning to UB, we again hit a smooth metalled road! Quite a surprise after ten days on bumpy sandy tracks through desert and steppe. And so ended the main part of the tour and several participants went home.

The remaining seven gluttons for punishment started the extension by visiting a lake and marshland to the east of UB where three pairs of stylish White-naped Cranes were found. We obtained great views of these large and imposing cranes. We also noted Swan Goose, Pacific Golden Plover, Red-necked Stint, Ruddy Turnstone and Common Greenshank and enjoyed observing Black-necked Grebes together with Horned Grebes in the same telescope view. Later, we stood in awe at a gigantic statue of Genghis Khan, the great man of Mongolia and drove to the famous village of Terelj, observing scores of Daurian Jackdaws on the way. Terelj had changed a lot since my last visit as many more colourful holiday cottages and holiday camps had been built, but luckily for us none of these Mongolian and other tourists ventured into the surrounding forests. A first exploration of the river valley woodland gave us a fabulous close up female Black Woodpecker, an Eurasian Hobby, a female Goosander on her breeding tree, several Common Redstarts, a couple of White-cheeked Starlings and some stout Hawfinches.

Next day, with the help of a local naturalist we explored several new areas where Black-billed Capercaillie was known to occur, but extremely high water levels impeded our endeavours. Once again, one of our minibuses got briefly stuck in the middle of a fast flowing river creating some agitation. We then thoroughly worked a larch forest-clad mountain slope where we found some droppings of our main target. Lucky Bruce flushed a noisy female Black-billed Capercaillie, but that remained our only sighting that day. We also observed a male Black Grouse, Oriental Cuckoo, Olive-backed Pipit, Daurian Redstart and several fine male Pine Buntings. On our evening walk near our

hotel we waited in vain for the crepuscular displaying Swinhoe's Snipe, but luckily an Ural Owl and a roding Eurasian Woodcock saved the day.

The following morning we walked in a stretch of mixed broadleaf-larch forest where a singing male Hazel Grouse sneaked away and a cuddly Northern Pika inhabited a scree slope. Later, the river valley yielded perfect views of Grey-headed, Lesser Spotted, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers all more or less in the same patch. Other additions included a male Eurasian Sparrowhawk, a pale morph Booted Eagle, a pair of gaudy Red-throated Thrushes and a female Common Goldeneye near her nest tree. The meadows showed ample proof of the digging prowess of the False Zokor, a rodent whose long lines of mole hills adorned the landscape.

Our full day on Black-billed Capercaillie mountain is best forgotten. After a stiff climb, we wandered for hours at the appropriate altitude through the favoured pine-larch forest with its undergrowth of Vaccinium bushes. We walked and walked and saw lots of droppings, but never had a sniff of our objective. The nice weather was a bit of a consolation as were the excellent observations of a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, several Northern Red-flanked Bluetails, a charming Mountain Hare, several inquisitive Siberian Chipmunks, a female Red Deer and some fairly recent Grey Wolf scat. A tired, but rather depressed group made its way down the mountain at the end of the afternoon.

But next morning, on our final full day in Mongolia several extra keen Birdquesters hiked up in the middle of the night and braved the mountain again. Eventually we flushed two large Black-billed Capercaillies, including a male which showed quite well to most. A great ending of a very special tour!

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

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

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

Subspecies names are given where known and/or appropriate, either in a comment or in parentheses.

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/index.html>

### GAVIIDAE

Black-throated Loon (Black-throated Diver) *Gavia arctica*: Excellent views of several pairs in pristine breeding plumage on a couple of steppe lakes. We also heard the distinctive, far-ringing, wailing calls of these really stunning creatures.

### PODICIPEDIDAE

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*: Lovely displaying pairs were common along the shore line of Boon Tsagaan Nuur and on a couple of other lakes (nominate).

Horned Grebe (Slavonian Grebe) *Podiceps auritus*: Excellent studies of several pairs in magnificent breeding attire on three different steppe lakes. On one occasion, this and the following species obliged beautifully in the same scope view (nominate). Slavonia is a geographical and historical region in eastern Croatia.

Black-necked Grebe (Eared Grebe) *Podiceps nigricollis*: Several of these gems in exquisite breeding plumage showed on a steppe lake near Ulaan Baatar (nominate).

### PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: This well known species was common at Boon Tsagaan Nuur. The subspecies involved is *sinensis*.

### PELECANIDAE

Dalmatian Pelican *Pelecanus crispus* (NL): Sieghard had brief views of one at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

### ARDEIDAE

Great Egret (Great White Egret) *Egretta alba*: Three birds were fishing together with Grey Herons at Boon Tsagaan Nuur (nominate).

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Regular encounters with this widespread species (nominate). Small colonies were found in the reedbeds of a couple of lakes, where one could easily spot the nests, just above water level.

### CICONIIDAE

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*: Six observations of this attractive, almost prehistoric-looking bird.

### THRESKIORNITHIDAE

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: Regular sightings of both adults in breeding condition and last year's immatures with obvious black wingtips (nominate).

### ANATIDAE

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Good numbers were noted on several steppe lakes, where we enjoyed their fabulous, haunting, nasal trumpeting calls.

- Swan Goose *Anser cygnoides*: A maximum of 40 birds was counted at Boon Tsagaan Nuur, offering many opportunities for study. We also found this rare species at several other steppe lakes. It 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 60–80,000 birds and is sadly declining as a result of habitat loss (drainage) and unsustainable levels of hunting. It is therefore treated as **Vulnerable** in “Threatened Birds of the World”, BirdLife International’s magnificent book on the future of the birds on our planet.
- Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Small numbers on Boon Tsagaan Nuur and several other lakes (*rubrirostris*).
- Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*: Small numbers were seen at various lakes, including a maximum of 30 at Boon Tsagaan Nuur. Bob’s favourite.
- Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*: Easily the most widespread and vociferous duck in Mongolia. Even tiny pools in the middle of nowhere held a honking pair.
- Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*: Small numbers, both on saline and fresh water lakes.
- Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Grazing flocks were found on the shores of several lakes, including Boon Tsagaan Nuur. Penelops is Greek for a kind of duck.
- Falcatid Duck *Anas falcata*: Three gorgeous males performed quite well, eventually, on one of the steppe lakes.
- Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Moderate numbers were noted on most lakes (nominate).
- Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*: Max did a great job finding a cracking drake foraging with Eurasian Wigeon on the grassy shore of Boon Tsagaan Nuur. Our first observation in Mongolia! It is treated as **Vulnerable** by BirdLife International and its population stands at 500,000-700,000 birds.
- Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Small numbers of the nominate race were observed at Boon Tsagaan Nuur and several other steppe lakes.
- Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Small numbers were noted on most lakes (nominate).
- Chinese Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha*: Two pairs of this modestly-clad duck showed well on a steppe lake. This form is now usually split from *Anas poecilorhyncha*, which is then renamed Burmese Spot-billed Duck.
- Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Small numbers of these most elegant ducks were counted on several lakes.
- Garganey *Anas querquedula*: A regular duck of most steppe lakes. Many excellent eye-ball to eye-ball studies of beautiful drakes.
- Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Regular sightings of this well known species on most lakes.
- Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*: Just a few observations of this exquisite duck on a couple of steppe lakes. The males are really extremely handsome.
- Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: Many observations of these widespread duck on a variety of lakes.
- Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Another regularly encountered species of the steppe lakes.
- Stejneger’s Scoter *Melanitta stejnegeri*: Splendid encounters with this Velvet Scoter split on a couple of steppe lakes. Leonhard Stejneger (1851-1943) was a Norwegian ornithologist and collector.
- Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: Regular encounters on steppe lakes and along the river at Terelj, where a female behaved quite suspiciously near a hollow tree (nominate).
- Goosander (Common Merganser) *Mergus merganser*: Regular sightings of both handsome males and females, usually along fast-flowing rivers (nominate).



## ACCIPITRIDAE

- Crested Honey Buzzard (Oriental Honey Buzzard) *Pernis ptilorhyncus*: We witnessed a bout of migration in the Gobi Altai as ten birds very obviously made their way northwards over the mountains (*orientalis*).
- Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*: Ubiquitous, but in fact only where people live. This form is now usually considered to be a separate species from Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, although the situation is not that clear cut.
- Pallas's Fish Eagle (Pallas's Sea Eagle) *Haliaeetus leucoryphus*: Two beautiful adults and two immature birds were regularly observed along the shoreline at Boon Tsagaan Nuur. The world population is likely to be less than 10,000 individuals. This species is treated as **Vulnerable** in "Threatened Birds of the World". 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-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: Great looks at one of these magnificent raptors in a broad valley of the Khangai mountains on one of our most scenic and snowy days of the tour. The following day we found another bird near the famous Orkhon Falls.
- Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) *Gypaetus barbatus*: This spectacular raptor was regularly observed in the Gobi Altai and in the Khangai (nominate). Both adult and immature birds were seen, often gliding over at very close range. We obtained splendid scope views of a sitting adult bird at its eyrie allowing us to discern the white iris and the wispy beard. A truly glorious species!
- Himalayan Griffon Vulture *Gyps himalayensis*: Small numbers were noted in the Gobi Altai and in the Khangai.
- Eurasian Black Vulture (Cinereous Vulture, Monk Vulture) *Aegypius monachus*: This huge and widespread vulture is still a regular sight in the steppe. We had more than 100 encounters, often at close range. This species is treated as **Near-Threatened** and the total population is less than 20,000 birds.
- Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: A single observation at Terelj (nominate?).
- Japanese Buzzard *Buteo [buteo] japonicus*: Just a few observations in the wooded areas of our itinerary.
- Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius*: A regularly encountered, impressive and distinctive raptor of the steppe.
- Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*: 14 observations of this widespread raptor (nominate).
- Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: Regular observations of this striking bird of prey in the Gobi Altai and in the Khangai mountains (nominate).
- Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*: Four very nice observations of both dark and pale morph birds.

## FALCONIDAE

- Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*: Good looks at two dainty males. It is treated as **Vulnerable** in "Threatened Birds of the World", and the population is thought to number c140,000 birds.
- Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*: Regular sightings of this well-known raptor (nominate).
- Amur Falcon (Eastern Red-footed Falcon) *Falco amurensis*: Seven nice encounters with this unique little falcon. 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.
- Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*: A couple of sightings of this endearing bird of prey. This splendid creature is one of the speediest birds in horizontal flight (nominate).

Saker Falcon (Saker) *Falco cherrug*: Still a fairly common bird in Mongolia. We had a total of seven sightings of this powerful raptor. There has been a lot of discussion about Saker Falcons in Mongolia lately, as the government has allowed the export of 300+ Falcons a year to Arabian countries. Mongolian ornithologists have estimated that the population stands at only 3-4,000 birds (c1600 nests), which definitely could not survive this massive depletion. Biologists of the Ministry of Environment on the other hand estimate a rosy population figure of over 6500 birds and state that it can easily survive this capture. But the fact that Arabian sponsoring is involved makes this all look very, very fishy!!! The illegal trapping of Sakers is another sad fact. A single bird may fetch a price of up to 2500\$ in a country where the monthly average wage is less than 100\$. This impressive species is treated as **Vulnerable** by BirdLife International. Cherrug is derived from the Hindi word *charg* for the female Saker. The tiercel (male) is known as *chargela*.

#### TETRAONIDAE

Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia* (H): We heard a male sing at close range on one of our wanderings through the taiga at Terelj, but he disappeared before we managed to see him (*sibirica*).

Willow Ptarmigan (Willow Grouse) *Lagopus lagopus*: Several birds were flushed from dwarf willow vegetation near a pass in the Khangai mountains, and on our last morning there we managed to scope a distant bird (*kozlowae*).

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*: Excellent views of a lovely male in flight in the Terelj area (*baikalensis*).

Black-billed Capercaillie (Siberian/Rock Capercaillie) *Tetrao parvirostris*: It took a lot of effort this year to connect with this ghostly and much-wanted species. First Bruce managed to lay eyes on a flushed female along a forest edge. The following day we worked its favourite open larch-pine forest for hours without a sniff, except for the many droppings. On our final morning at Terelj several very keen participants braved the rather intense two hour climb up 'capercaillie mountain' in true Birdquest fashion and eventually obtained pretty good views of two birds (including a male) flushed from the *Vaccinium* shrub vegetation of the open larch-pine forest (*stegmanni*). 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.

#### PHASIANIDAE

Altai Snowcock *Tetraogallus altaicus*: Excellent studies of several birds amongst the crags of the upper reaches of the Gobi Altai and the Khangai mountains. 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!!!

Chukar (Chukar Partridge) *Alectoris chukar*: Great looks at a pair in the lower reaches of the Gobi Altai mountains.

#### RALLIDAE

Baillon's Crane *Porzana pusilla*: Excellent scope studies of this lovely red-eyed skulker along the shore of a marshy steppe lake (nominate). Always a great bird to see well. Jean François Emanuel Baillon (1744-1802) was a French lawyer, naturalist and collector.

Eurasian Coot (Common Coot) *Fulica atra*: Small numbers of the nominate race were seen at various steppe lakes.

## GRUIDAE

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*: Surprisingly, we first found a single bird along the shore of almost dried out Orog Nuur. Later we saw three pairs of this imposing species in a marshy valley not too far from the capital. This magnificent bird is treated as **Vulnerable** by BirdLife International. Its population is estimated at c6,500 individuals and is probably declining.

Demoiselle Crane *Anthropoides virgo*: A common and lovely sight over most of Mongolia. We had repeated excellent encounters with this red-eyed beauty. The world population is currently estimated at 230-280,000 birds. Mongolian birds winter in India, including at the famous Khichan site.

## RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: c30 were found at one of the steppe lakes.

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avocetta*: Regular encounters with this delightful bird full of character.

## CHARADRIIDAE

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: A common bird of streams and rivers (*curonicus*). Yellow orbital ring!!

Common Ringed Plover (Ringed Plover) *Charadrius hiaticula*: A single bird was noted at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*: Many were seen at several saline steppe lakes, including Boon Tsagaan Nuur (nominate).

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaulti*: Regular observations of the nominate race. 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*: A truly marvellous and much-wanted plover. We eventually found a splendid male on the grassy plains bordering the Gobi desert, where we admired his bizarre and magnificent, petrel-like display flight. It 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 70,000 birds. **THE BIRD OF THE TRIP!** The favourite species for Sieghard, Bruce, Marius, Ian and Max.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*: A single in resplendent breeding plumage was located at a steppe lake not too far from the capital.

Grey Plover (Black-bellied Plover) *Pluvialis squatarola*: A single was found at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*: A regular, well-known bird of most wetland meadows.

## SCOLOPACIDAE

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: A single in breeding plumage at one of the steppe lakes.

Red-necked Stint (Rufous-necked Stint) *Calidris ruficollis*: A solitary bird in exquisite breeding attire at a lake not too far from Ulaan Baatar.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*: Just a few observations of this well-known species.

Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*: Four birds showed well at a marshy steppe lake, allowing in depth scrutiny.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*: A couple, of which one was in breeding attire, at a steppe lake.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Four of these well-known waders were found at the same lake.

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*: Three of these fine waders showed very well on the muddy shore of a steppe lake.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: A single, unobtrusive female was found at a steppe lake.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: A few observations of displaying birds in marshy areas (nominate).

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: A single bird was flushed in the riverine vegetation along the Tuul river at Ulaan Baatar and one was also seen and heard roding while we were waiting for the Swinhoe's Snipe.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*: Quite a few sightings of this delightful species (*melanuroides*).

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*: A regular bird of most wetland meadows (*ussuriensis*). Lovely display.

Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*: We only found this species at a couple of lakes, where they showed really well.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: A single bird was scoped at a lake near Ulaan Baatar.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: A single sighting of this well-known species near our Saxaul Sparrow spot.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: A few observations only. Its Russian name Fifi is onomatopoeic.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*: A solitary bird was flushed at the Falcated Duck lake.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Regular sightings and we also witnessed some lovely display.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: A solitary bird in immaculate breeding plumage was noted at a lake near the capital (nominate).

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: Five birds in breeding plumage showed well on a steppe lake and another couple were found while waiting for our minibus to be dislodged from the mud, just before returning to Ulaan Baatar.

#### LARIDAE

Pallas's Gull (Great Black-headed Gull) *Larus ichthyaetus*: 30+ of these impressive gulls were scoped at Boon Tsagaan Nuur. At close range they are really extremely attractive!

Relict Gull *Larus relictus*: We first found three (2 adults and an immature) on a rich steppe lake. Later we counted a maximum of 10 birds along the shore of Boon Tsagaan Nuur. The birds were fairly approachable and allowed us to study and admire them at moderate range. No colony was found. An immature bird was later located on another lake. The world population varies between 2,500 and 10,000 birds and is declining as a result of predation, disturbance, variable climatic factors at breeding colonies and the development of coastal wetlands in its presumed 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). The species is treated as **Vulnerable** in "Threatened Birds of the World", BirdLife International's magnificent book on the future of the birds on our planet. 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.

Black-headed Gull (Common Black-headed Gull) *Larus ridibundus*: Fairly common at many steppe lakes.

Brown-headed Gull *Larus brunnicephalus*: Up to 15 birds in breeding plumage showed well at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

Mongolian Gull *Larus [cachinnans] mongolicus*: A commonly encountered species. The whole taxonomy of the "Herring Gull/Yellow-legged Gull" complex is indeed very complex and the form involved (*mongolicus*) is now usually treated as a separate species. It was formerly considered belonging with Vega or East Siberian Gull *Larus vegae*, while other authors considered it a subspecies of Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans*. We had close looks at small numbers at Boon Tsagaan Nuur and found the adults to be quite variable, with

both yellow and pink legs and with both one and two mirrors in the wing. Even the colour of the mantle varied. The last word on this matter has not been said yet!!

#### STERNIDAE

Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica*: Fairly commonly encountered at Boon Tsagaan Nuur (*addenda*). A highly distinctive voice.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*: This impressive species was commonly observed at Boon Tsagaan Nuur, with up to 80 birds roosting together.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*: A regular inhabitant of steppe lakes. The birds seen were quite variable with some obviously belonging to the race *longipennis*, with totally black bill and greyer plumage, compared to European birds. Others looked exactly like our birds or showed intermediate characteristics.

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*: Several showed well along the shores of Boon Tsagaan Nuur (*sinensis*).

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*: Excellent views of two birds in breeding plumage at Boon Tsagaan Nuur (*swinhoei*).

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*: A couple showed well at the Whooper Swan lake (nominate).

White-winged Tern (White-winged Black Tern) *Chlidonias leucopterus*: Small numbers of these adorable creatures were found at a variety of steppe lakes. Definitely one of the finest terns in existence. Theo's favourite.

#### PTEROCLIDIDAE

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus*: A fairly common inhabitant of the semi-desert. We obtained excellent scope views of this highly wanted bird at a drinking puddle. We were even able to discern the feathered legs and toes, a characteristic of this enigmatic genus. We also managed to observe the amazing behaviour of a male filling up its specially adapted belly feathers to take water to its chicks! 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. One of the birds of the tour and the favourite species for Dave, Sue and John.

#### COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove (Rock Pigeon) *Columba livia*: Regular near human settlements.

Hill Pigeon (Blue Hill Pigeon) *Columba rupestris*: Common in a variety of villages (nominate). 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.

Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous Turtle Dove) *Streptopelia orientalis*: Several excellent encounters in the Terelj taiga (nominate).

#### CUCULIDAE

Common Cuckoo (Eurasian Cuckoo) *Cuculus canorus*: Many splendid views of the nominate race. They were calling all over the mountains and the taiga.

Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus optatus*: Quite a few could be heard in the taiga and we obtained excellent views.

## STRIGIDAE

Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*: After a fair bit of scanning we found a splendidly impressive female with two chicks in the rock face near our camping spot close to the famous Orkhon Falls (*yenisseensis*).

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: Good flight views, just at dusk, of this magnificent creature in the Terelj taiga (*nikolskii*).

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: A single was seen on our evening drive to our first ger camp (nominate).

## APODIDAE

Common Swift *Apus apus*: Very common and highly vocal (*pekinensis*).

Fork-tailed Swift (Pacific Swift) *Apus pacificus*: Very common all over Mongolia (nominate).

## UPUPIDAE

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*: Regular encounters with this adorable species (*saturata*).

## PICIDAE

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*: A single excellent sighting of this often unobtrusive woodpecker at Terelj.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*: Another species that showed really very well in the taiga near Terelj (nominate). Many superb and close encounters with this white-eyed marvel of a bird.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major*: A few sightings of the race *brevirostris*.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopus leucotos*: A fantastic observation of a very cooperative bird in the Terelj taiga (probably of the nominate race).

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus minor*: A cracking observation of this diminutive critter in riverine forest at Terelj (*kamtschatkensis*). Great scope views.

Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus*: Splendid studies of a foraging male in the Capercaillie forest (nominate). The Nearctic form is now split off as a separate species: American Three-toed Woodpecker *P. dorsalis*.

## ALAUDIDAE

Mongolian Lark *Melanocorypha mongolica*: This very handsome lark is a regular and much appreciated sight of the Mongolian steppes. A great bird! Gudrun's favourite.

Asian Short-toed Lark *Calandrella cheleensis*: A very common bird of the sandy desert (nominate). This form used to be lumped in Lesser Short-toed Lark *C. rufescens*.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: Regular in meadows near lakes (*kiborti*).

Horned Lark (Shore Lark) *Eremophila alpestris*: One of the more common birds of the semi-deserts, steppes and mountains. The race involved (*brandti?*) does not show any yellow on the face.

## HIRUNDINIDAE

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

Eurasian Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris*: Small numbers showed beautifully near rock faces in mountain areas (nominate).

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Small numbers. The race involved is *tytleri*.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbica*: Regular observations of the race *lagopoda*.

## MOTACILLIDAE

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*: A regular bird of most habitats. In Mongolia the subspecies (*dauuricus*) is rather small and looks remarkably like the next species.

Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*: Repeated good sightings. Not always easy to separate from the previous species, though the display flight and song are quite different. Edward Blyth was an 19<sup>th</sup> century English zoologist who contributed hugely to early Indian ornithology.

Olive-backed Pipit (Indian Tree Pipit/Hodgson's Tree Pipit) *Anthus hodgsoni*: A very common species of the taiga (nominate). Lovely display flights.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*: A couple of migrants were found at one of the steppe lakes.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*: A common species of the alpine meadows of the Gobi Altai and the Khangai mountains (*blakistoni*).

Eastern Grey-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] macronyx*: A few sightings in marshy meadows.

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: We observed this beauty regularly in marshy habitat. The subspecies involved is the grey-backed *citreola*.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: Regular observations of the race *melanope*.

Baikal Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] baicalensis*: Regular sightings in the northern part of the country.

## PRUNELLIDAE

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*: Regularly encountered in the sparsely-vegetated rocky hills and mountains of the Gobi Altai and the Khangai (*dahurica*). Many splendid observations.

Kozlov's Accentor (Mongolian Accentor) *Prunella koslowi*: Several excellent scope studies. A bit more secretive and unobtrusive than the previous species. 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.

Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana*: Regular sightings in the higher reaches of the Gobi Altai.

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*: Quite common above 2200m in the Gobi Altai and the Khangai (*erythropygia*). Lovely communal display flights.

## TURDIDAE

Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*: Fantastic eye-ball to eye-ball scope studies on a number of occasions. A cracking species.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*: A single migrant showed briefly in the Gobi Altai.

Northern Red-flanked Bluetail (Northern Orange-flanked Bush Robin) *Tarsiger cyanurus*: Several nice encounters in the Terelj taiga (nominate). Males here are usually modestly-clad and we often heard the distinctive song emanating from the pine-larch woods.

Eversmann's Redstart (Rufous-backed Redstart) *Phoenicurus erythronota*: Great looks at a pair in a larch valley in the Khangai mountains. Eduard Friedrich Eversmann (1794-1860) was a German naturalist, collector and author who travelled in Kirghizia and Siberia.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*: A common species of the higher altitudes of the Gobi Altai and the Khangai. Here of the race *phoenicuroides*, one of the red-bellied races.

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*: A regular species of the river valleys at Terelj (nominate).

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus*: This very smart species was observed on migration and in the Terelj area (nominate). 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 erythrogaster*: We saw a pair of this much-wanted and beautiful species at a high pass in the Gobi Altai (*grandis*). Johann

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

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura*: Quite common in the Khangai mountains.

Hodgson's Bushchat (White-throated Bushchat) *Saxicola insignis*: One of the most important birds of the tour! Great studies of a nest-building pair of this rare species in its montane habitat in Central Mongolia. 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. Hodgson's Bushchat is treated by BirdLife International as **Vulnerable**. 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. The number four in the BIRD of the TRIP game.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*: Regular in the steppes and the foothills and most common where pikas or sousliks abound. A lovely display flight!

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: A common species of the mountains (*libanotica*).

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*: Regular observations in rocky areas. Pleshanka is the Russian name of this species.

Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*: This lovely species was quite common in the sandy desert (*atroglaris*).

Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*: This handsome bird was commonly found wherever rocky outcrops occurred. The males are really handsomely attired.

Naumann's Thrush *Turdus naumanni*: Perfect looks at several birds of this migratory species.

Red-throated Thrush *Turdus ruficollis*: Regular excellent encounters with this attractive bird. First a few on migration in the mountains and we then found them also on our walks through the taiga at Terelj. Black-throated Thrush *T. atrogularis* is often lumped in this species, whereby the name Dark-throated Thrush is used for the enlarged species.

#### SYLVIIDAE

Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola*: We found a couple of migrants in marshy habitat surrounding a steppe lake, where we managed to scope this inveterate skulker.

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*: Rather good views of several birds in the reedbeds at Orog Nuur (*capistrata*).

Oriental Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus orientalis*: Great scope studies of singing birds in a reedbed at Orog Nuur.

Thick-billed Warbler *Acrocephalus aedon*: Perfect views on several occasions of this distinctive *Acrocephalus (stegmanni)*. We saw it both on migration and in its dense breeding habitat at Terelj.

Asian Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*: Several performed extremely well in the southern semi-desert. Pale eye and rufous tail!! The form in northern Africa is now split off as African Desert Warbler *Sylvia deserti*.

Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*: Smashing views of an individual in the shrub of a damp valley in the Gobi Altai (*merzbacheri*). The barred underparts, eye-colour, large size and white tail tips were noted.

Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*: A few encounters with this well-known species (*blythi/telengitica*?).

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*: A few in the Terelj area, where the race involved is the not very well marked *volgensis*.

Two-barred Warbler (Two-barred Greenish Warbler) *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*: A common bird of bushy habitats and forests.

Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*: Regular observations of distinctively-plumaged migrants. We also heard the characteristic song.



Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus*: Quite common in the Terelj taiga where the singing birds love to play hide and seek in the highest canopies (nominate). But our best encounters were with very cooperative migrants in bushes in the Gobi desert. Cracking views!!

Yellow-browed Warbler (Inornate Warbler) *Phylloscopus inornatus*: Just a few sightings.

Hume's Leaf warbler (Hume's Warbler) *Phylloscopus humei*: Regular encounters in the conifers near the Orkhon Falls.

Radde's Warbler *Phylloscopus schwarzi*: A single migrant showed well at the Henderson's Ground Jay spot.

Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*: Many immaculate observations of this usually ground-hugging *Phylloscopus* (nominate). Not very secretive on migration!!

Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus tristis*: A solitary bird was found in some willows at the base of the Khangai mountains.

#### MUSCICAPIDAE

Dark-sided Flycatcher (Siberian Flycatcher) *Muscicapa sibirica*: Regular observations on migration and in the Terelj taiga (nominate).

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*: Several excellent sightings.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*: Three or four showed very well in the forested gully near the Orkhon Falls in the Khangai mountains (*mongola*).

Red-throated Flycatcher (Taiga Flycatcher) *Ficedula albicilla*: Great looks at several on migration and on territory along forest edges in the Terelj taiga. This form is now usually split off from the more western Red-breasted Flycatcher *F. parva*.

#### PARADOXORNITHIDAE

Bearded Reedling (Bearded Tit, Bearded Parrotbill) *Panurus biarmicus* (H): We heard the calls emanate from a dense reedbed at Orog Nuur (*russicus*).

#### AEGITHALIDAE

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* (NL): A single was noted in the Terelj forests.

#### PARIDAE

Willow Tit *Parus montanus*: A regularly encountered species in the Terelj taiga (*baicalensis*). A distinctive voice!!

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: Just a few were noted in the taiga at Terelj (nominate).

Azure Tit *Parus cyanus*: Good looks at a couple in the willow vegetation along the Tuul in Ulaan Baatar on our first afternoon (*tianschanicus*). A much-desired species.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Quite common (*kapustini*).

#### SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Regularly encountered. The race involved is *asiatica*, with its very white underparts.

#### TICHODROMIDAE

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*: Several nice encounters with this avian butterfly in the Gobi Altai mountains (*nepalensis*). Definitely one of the most striking birds in existence and one of those MUST SEE birds!

## REMIZIDAE

White-crowned Penduline Tit *Remiz coronatus*: We found two birds in the willows and poplars along the Tuul river in Ulaan Baatar on our first afternoon. This form is now usually split off as a separate species from Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*.

## LANIIDAE

Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*: Regular on migration in the steppe and semi-desert and also on territory along forest edges in the Terelj area (nominate).

Isabelline Shrike *Lanius [isabellinus] isabellinus*: Regular encounters with this lovely species in the semi-desert.

Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius pallidirostris*: A few in saxaul forest and in bushy desert. All nine birds observed lacked the black frontal band and had black bills, which seems not unusual.

## CORVIDAE

Siberian Jay *Perisoreus infaustus* (H): We heard the distinctive calls on Capercaillie mountain (*rogosowi*). Always a bit secretive during the breeding season.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Extremely common wherever trees occur (*leucoptera*).

Henderson's Ground Jay *Podoces hendersoni*: Several splendid observations of this truly bizarre species in bushy sandy desert. 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.

Spotted Nutcracker (Eurasian Nutcracker) *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: Several showed very well in the higher reaches of the taiga at Terelj (*macrorhynchos*).

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*: Very common everywhere in Mongolia and a town bird in Ulaan Baatar (*brachypus*). Lovely calls.

Daurian Jackdaw *Corvus dauuricus*: Commonly encountered; both in the pied adult plumage and in the dark immature attire. Several times seen to attend and follow horses, yak or cattle like a Cattle Egret.

Oriental Rook *Corvus pastinator*: Regular in the Ulaan Baatar area.

Oriental Crow *Corvus cornix*: A common species.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Common, even in Ulaan Baatar. An attractive voice!

## STURNIDAE

White-cheeked Starling *Sturnus cineraceus*: Two showed well in the open willow and poplar forest along the Tuul river.

## PASSERIDAE

Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*: We eventually scoped a handsome pair interacting in a patch of Saxaul forest (*stoliczkae*). 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.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Common in towns and villages.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Common in towns and villages, often together with previous species (*dilutus*).

Rock Sparrow (Rock Petronia) *Petronia petronia*: Several excellent observations, whereby we even managed to observe the yellow throat patch (*brevirostris*).

Père David's Snowfinch *Montifringilla davidiana*: Quite a few showed brilliantly on our wanderings through the Mongolian steppes (nominate). This species is always associated with sousliks or pikas, as they breed in their burrows. Sometimes separated generically (together with 3 other species) from *Montifringilla* in the genus *Pyrgilauda*. 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.

White-winged Snowfinch (Eurasian Snowfinch) *Montifringilla nivalis*: Fairly regular and tame in the Gobi Altai mountains and allowing prolonged study. The race involved is *groum-grzimaili*.

#### FRINGILLIDAE

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris*: Regular and very approachable in the Khangai mountains (*altaica*).

Common Crossbill (Red Crossbill) *Loxia curvirostra*: Two birds showed briefly in the Terelj taiga (nominate).

Brandt's Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti*: Several birds showed well in the higher reaches of the Gobi Altai. This modestly-clad species is known to occur up to the amazing altitude of 6,000m in summer!

Mongolian Finch (Mongolian Trumpeter Finch) *Bucanetes mongolicus*: Regular in the southern steppes and deserts. Males in breeding condition are really quite smart. Sometimes put in the genus *Rhodopechys*.

Common Rosefinch (Scarlet Rosefinch) *Carpodacus erythrinus*: Regular wherever trees occur. A highly distinctive song.

Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch *Carpodacus davidianus*: Quite common in the Gobi Altai, where we obtained excellent scope views (*davidianus*). Handsome males!!

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: A few showed well in the river valleys at Terelj (nominate).

#### EMBERIZIDAE

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*: Migrants were regularly encountered in the mountains and the desert and we also found this species on territory in the Terelj river valleys (nominate). Many fabulous looks.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*: Good looks at many smart males along forest edges 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*: Several eye-ball to eye-ball observations with this handsome bunting in the Gobi Altai (nominate). The bird is named after Victor Witold Godlewski, a 19th century Polish farmer and amateur naturalist, who was exiled to Siberia.

Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides*: Several excellent encounters with attractive males on our second afternoon near Ulaan Baatar (nominate).

Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* (H): We heard the distinctive song of this species just before we were hit by a heavy rain shower in the Khangai mountains.

Grey-necked Bunting *Emberiza buchanani*: Fabulous looks at several singing males on rocky slopes in the Gobi Altai (*neobscura*).

Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*: Several close up observations of this adorable migrant.

Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*: A single female showed in willow bushes along the Tuul river near Ulaan Baatar (nominate).

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Several singing males and a couple of females showed well in the reedbeds of Orog Nuur (*pyrrhuloides*).

Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasii*: Excellent views of several males and females in the Khangai mountains and we also found several in a patch of tall grasses near the Whooper Swan lake. The race involved, *lydiae* is endemic to the mountains of central Mongolia.

#### MAMMALS

Daurian Pika *Ochotona dauurica*: A single animal showed in riverine shrub near the capital.

Northern Pika *Ochotona hyperborea*: Several of these cuties obliged at length on scree areas in the Terelj taiga.

Pallas's Pika *Ochotona pallasii*: The common pika of the Gobi Altai. This adorable cuddly animal performed splendidly.

Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus*: A couple of encounters with this widespread species.

Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*: Several observations in the steppe.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*: Several encounters with almost black-coloured animals in the northern forests.

Tarbagan Marmot (Siberian/Mongolian Marmot) *Marmota sibirica*: These cuddly creatures are still fairly common in the steppes. They were previously considered as a form of Bobak Marmot.

Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel (Red-cheeked Souslik) *Spermophilus erythrogenys*: These are the shorter-tailed sousliks of the foothills of the Gobi Altai. We could not detect red cheeks though.

Long-tailed Ground Squirrel (Long-tailed Souslik) *Spermophilus undulatus*: These were the sousliks seen in the steppes.

Siberian Chipmunk *Tamias sibiricus*: Several performed very well in the Ulaan Baatar neighbourhood and in the Terelj taiga. Often very approachable. This is the only Old World representative of the genus *Tamias* (25 species).

Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa (Mongolian Jerboa) *Stylodipus andrewsi*: Great views of this endearing critter on our evening walk at the Henderson's Ground Jay spot. A real gem!

Mid-day Jird (Mid-day Gerbil) *Meriones meridianus*: This one showed quite well, just after dawn at the Henderson's Ground Jay spot.

False Zokor (Steppe Zokor) *Myospalax aspalax*: The mounds of this inveterate digger were an obvious feature of the river valleys at Terelj.

Corsac Fox *Vulpes corsac*: A splendid observation of a hunting animal in the northern steppes.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: Three sightings of this well-known species.

Grey Wolf *Canis lupus*: Scat of this powerful animal was found high up on Capercaillie mountain.

Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: The obvious diggings of this widespread species were seen in the terelj taiga.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*: We bumped into a nice female in the Terelj taiga.

Goitred Gazelle (Black-tailed Gazelle) *Gazella subgutturosa*: Four of these light-footed animals showed well in the southern semi-desert.

Mongolian Gazelle (White-tailed Gazelle) *Procapra gutturosa*: Several small groups performed well on our wanderings through the southern semi-desert. It is still common in eastern Mongolia, but is only rarely seen further west. It is not a real Gazelle in se (different genus) and its nearest relatives are the Tibetan and Przewalski's Gazelles of Tibet and China. The Duff & Lawson checklist place it in the genus *Gazella*.

Siberian Ibex (Asiatic Ibex) *Capra sibirica*: Fairly common in the Gobi Altai, where we saw some impressive males.

Argali *Ovis ammon*: Good scope views of six of these impressive wild sheep in the Gobi Altai mountains.

#### REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Kaspischer Even-fingered Gecko *Alsophylax pipiens*: Trekmaster Terbish found us one of these cuties in the southern desert.

Toad-headed Agama *Phrynocephalus versicolor*: Common in the semi-desert. The red flank patch and the turned up black and white tail are very distinctive.

Multi-ocellated Racerunner *Eremias multiocellata*: A single sighting in the semi desert.

Gobi Racerunner *Eremias przewalskii*: A few in the semi-desert, usually near rocky areas.

Siberian Toad (Radde's Toad) *Bufo raddei*: A couple were found in the meadows at Boon Tsagaan Nuur.

#### **BIRD OF THE TRIP**

1. Oriental Plover
2. Pallas's Sandgrouse
3. Mongolian Lark
4. Hodgson's Bushchat
5. Henderson's Ground Jay
6. Bar-headed Goose
7. White-winged Tern

MONGOLIA 2010 - photos by Dave Williamson (DW), Max Berlijn (MB) and Mark Van Beirs (MVB).



Mongolia offers an incredible variety of magnificent landscapes: The Gobi Altai mountains (MVB); The enormous sand dunes of Khongoryn Els (MVB); The higher reaches of the Gobi Altai (DW); The Khangai mountains (MVB); One of the many steppe lakes (MVB); Saxaul forest (DW).





Altai Snowcock (MB); Hodgson's Bushchat (MB); Demoiselle Crane (MB); Whooper Swan (MVB); Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (DW); Oriental Plover (DW).





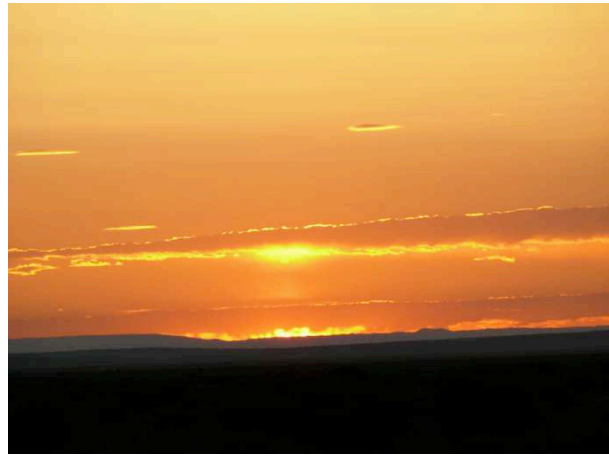
Desert Wheatear (MVB); Relict Gull (MB); Mongolian Lark (DW); Red-billed Cough (MVB); Pallas's Sandgrouse (DW); Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa (DW).





Lunch al fresco (MVB); Observing Altai Snowcocks (MVB); Yellow Pasque Flower (DW); Frejya's Fritillary (DW); The group and the crew (MVB); Globe Flower (DW).





A glorious campsite (MVB); Sunset pyrotechnics (MVB); Northern Pika (DW); Buddhist monastery (MVB); Black Woodpecker (DW); Lammergeier (DW).