

Mongolia's Snow Leopards

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 - 24 August 2018

Report compiled by Nick Acheson



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With 12 Naturetrek Clients

Day 1

Monday 13th August

Today we took two long flights, starting at Heathrow, stopping at Moscow Sheremetyevo, and connecting from there to Ulaanbaatar.

Day 2

Tuesday 14th August

We flew into Ulaanbaatar in the dawn, to be met by our local leader Uugan and by our Hungarian and Slovenian friends István and Milan. From here we moved to our hotel, Zuchi, to check in and have breakfast and to admire the Pacific Swifts overhead and the impressive train of Bactrian camel statues in the central reservation of the road outside. We then took a break until lunchtime when we ate at a local restaurant called Cozy Nomad and from there went birding at wetlands close to the airport. Here there were plenty of Common Terns, including some individuals of the black-billed eastern subspecies *longipennis*. With them was a juvenile White-winged Tern. There were plenty of ducks and waders too, including Tufted Ducks, Gadwall with many young, a flock of Black-tailed Godwits, a Common Redshank and a juvenile Wood Sandpiper.

We walked towards the massif behind the lakes, over which a huge flock of Black Kites was swirling. Moving into willow scrub along an old railway line, we briefly saw a Brown Shrike. After our first distant Amur Falcon and flypast White-cheeked Starlings (for some of us), we put a great deal of effort into seeing a family of Azure Tits. They didn't want to be seen initially but, with hard work, eventually everyone saw these exquisite birds. Little did we know how well we would see them the following day.

Day 3

Wednesday 15th August

This morning's westward flight to Khovd was postponed until the afternoon, so we made a plan B and went birding along the Tuul River just outside the capital. Azure Tits and Great Tits were the main players in the willow and Sea Buckthorn scrub here, though we also heard White-crowned Penduline Tits, and some had a glimpse of a male Long-tailed Rosefinch. By the river - before the job's-worth intervention of a policeman on a motorbike who felt that birdwatching was a dangerous and subversive activity - we saw Grey, White and Citrine Wagtails, a Eurasian Nuthatch (a very distinctive Asian form) and more lovely Amur Falcons.

Perhaps even more dazzling here was the flora, with the yellow bells of *Clematis tangutica* delighting everyone. Equally fine were the blue blooms of sage-like *Dracocephalum* and several strongly-scented species of *Artemisia*. Heading back into town we stopped along a towpath, lightly wooded with poplars and hornbeams, and met Daurian Redstarts and a Siberian Chiffchaff.

At four in the afternoon we finally took our flight to Khovd and drove from here to our camp, seeing Goitred Gazelle, Red Fox and Siberian Jerboas along the way. We arrived at night for the first fine meal we would be served by our helpful hosts. Everyone then settled, exhausted by long days of travel, into their gers for the night, under the wide starry sky of the Gobi-Altai.

Day 4

Thursday 16th August

This morning, after Desert Wheatears and Pallas's Pikas visited us around camp over breakfast, we headed up the closest valley in the massif just north of us, while our trackers were off in the mountains searching for Snow Leopards. Sitting still in one place, dwarfed by the region's dramatic scenery, we watched as the wildlife moved around us. There were plenty of Twite, Horned Larks and Isabelline Wheatears in the rocky river bed, accompanied by Rock Sparrows and Water Pipits on the lower slopes. High over the mountain ridges there were Golden Eagles and Lammergeiers, plus Common Swifts and (eastern) Common House Martins on their migrations. Scurrying around us all the while were Pallas's Pikas and a few Long-tailed Susliks.

News came that the trackers had seen two Snow Leopards, so our plans changed and, via lunch at camp, we moved to the next valley to the north.

There followed a tense wait as the trackers had lost the Snow Leopards. Late in the afternoon however, another was found, on the carcass of a domestic goat it had killed. It took a little while for everyone to get onto this hyper-camouflaged cat, which was blending in so well with the dust-grey hillside. But, once you all had, we walked across a somewhat slippery scree slope to get closer views. Then, with dusk looming, we left the Snow Leopard to its meal and went down the mountain delighted to have seen our principal target!

Day 5

Friday 17th August

With a Snow Leopard under our belts, this morning we headed to the plains for a different view of the region's remarkable wildlife. Stopping for fuel in the village of our chief Snow Leopard tracker Soronzon, we saw our first Pale Martins plus a large flock of beautiful Hill Pigeons. From here we drove across an extraordinary lakeside desert, festooned with the blooms of millions of wild Chives. Here we saw an Upland Buzzard perched on the ground beside our track and — always distant — scurrying groups of Saiga Antelope.

At the lake we saw plenty of waterbirds including Greylag Goose, Whooper Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Eurasian Spoonbill and plenty of Great Egrets. Highlights here included some flyby Pallas's Sandgrouse, Siberian Stonechats, a pair of Pallas's Reed Buntings and a magnificent Eastern Marsh Harrier. Having returned to camp we next ventured out at night, after dinner, in search of small mammals. We were pleased to find several Siberian Jerboas, scuttling as nervously as the Saiga had done during the day.

Day 6

Saturday 18th August

This morning, with no news of Snow Leopards, we drove up a ridge which took us right to the head of the Snow Leopard valleys, where our horsemen-trackers camp during the season. One lucky member of the group saw a Snow Leopard run down a slope and across the precarious road. Sadly, despite Soronzon locating the animal's tracks we were unable to relocate it. By way of consolation prize, we saw a Stoat hunting Pallas's Pikas here.

We continued our journey to the crest of the ridge, where we stopped for lunch and to spend a long, contemplative period exploring this magnificent landscape at our own speed, scanning, scanning and scanning some more for Snow Leopards. We found Siberian Ibex, we found Gldenstdt's (White-winged) Redstarts, we found Golden Eagles, playful Ravens, and at least four Lammergeiers. Some wandered off and found our first

Siberian Marmots. But we found no Snow Leopards, not for want of searching. Looking down from these breathtaking landscapes and their eagles, in cracks and crevices by our feet we admired the tiny, hardy blooms of saxifrages.

Our night walk this evening was hampered by a very strong wind, which appeared out of nowhere at dusk.

Day 7

Sunday 19th August

Today we headed back towards Khovd, to visit the internationally important Kharus Lake. On the way we made stops at known sites for Henderson's (Mongolian) Ground Jay, but they were not to be found. At a line of poplars along the river, in the village of one of our drivers, we found a Daurian Shrike, a Pied Wheatear, several Spotted Flycatchers and hundreds of migrating Barn Swallows.

From the tower at the lake, where we had lunch, we saw hundreds of waterbirds, including Greylag Geese, Common Coots, Great Crested Grebes, Gadwall, Ruddy Shelduck, Caspian Terns and Demoiselle Cranes. Our next stop was rather mosquito-laden, but highlights here included White-headed Ducks, Western Marsh Harrier and plenty of Richard's Pipits along the shore.

Again this evening, our night walk was wrecked by high winds. Oh for some high winds when we had been enduring the mosquitos by the lake shore in the afternoon!

Day 8

Monday 20th August

Today we drove into the mountain range which lies to the south of our camp. Here the landscape is quite different, and we made several stops on the long drive up to the plain where we would have lunch and spend much of the day scanning. At one stop there were migrating Common Redstarts and some Rock Sparrows. At another a Little Owl (of the pale eastern form, very different from our own) was being furiously harried by Isabelline Wheatears.

Over lunch and the middle of the day we spread out to explore the beautiful plateau. A colony of Pallas's Pikas was very photogenic here and overhead there were almost always Cinereous Vultures, Steppe Eagles or Lammergeiers. A Black Kite even dropped in for a swipe at the leftovers from our lunch.

In the afternoon we headed back to camp, eyes peeled for Isabelline Wheatears and Horned Larks, for our last night in our charming gers.

Day 9

Tuesday 21st August

Today we left camp, drove back to Khovd, flew to Ulaanbaatar, had lunch and drove from there to our rustic lodge on the edge of Hustai National Park, arriving in the evening.

Day 10

Wednesday 22nd August

Today began with the song of a Common Quail in the dawn, from the cereal fields over the road from our lodge, with Eurasian Hoopoes and Common Kestrels along the wires and with Eurasian Tree Sparrows dripping from the lodge roof tiles.

This morning we drove to the open grassland in the park along the Tuul River, in the hope of finding the herd of Mongolian Gazelles which lives here. We searched high and low but could not find them. We were rewarded instead by finding numerous Mongolian Larks, watching a gorgeous Red Fox hunting, seeing plenty of Brandt's Voles scurrying across the track and witnessing a remarkable rainbow in a sky dark and heavy with rain. Also this morning, there were plenty of Amur Falcons, Siberian Marmots and Long-tailed Susliks, Cinereous Vultures and Upland Buzzards.

The rain promised by the clouds didn't come and this afternoon we went back into the park to scan for its large mammals. Watching a known area for Wolves (which we didn't see) we found plenty of their prey, the magnificent Altai Wapiti (Red Deer in old money).

We then drove a short distance to a stream, full of Great Burnet and Grass of Parnassus (among many other beautiful flowers) which is visited in the evening by family groups of reintroduced Przewalski's Horses. Though the latest take on their taxonomy declares these horses an ancient feral species, rather than a truly wild one, they are nonetheless striking and beautiful beasts, especially as they glow in the horizontal evening light while drinking just a short distance away.

Day 11

Thursday 23rd August

Early this morning the most hardcore of the group set out from our lodge for a spot of migrant birdwatching. There was a strong wind, but we did manage to see a few birds including Taiga and Asian Brown Flycatchers, plus the lodge's attendant Red-billed Choughs and Eurasian Hoopoes.

While ostensibly heading back to Ulaanbaatar, this morning we made a detour to a wetland where Uugan had previously monitored breeding cranes. We were not disappointed as here there were Common Cranes, Demoiselle Cranes and rare White-naped Cranes, plus plenty of Northern Lapwings. Even more enchanting was the carpet of juvenile Siberian Toads. We didn't like to think what the cranes might be doing to them.

We drove back to Ulaanbaatar in the afternoon.

Day 12

Friday 24th August

All too early this morning we made our way to Ulaanbaatar airport for the first of our flights home, reaching Heathrow in the afternoon.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	August									
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓								
2	Siberian Marmot	<i>Marmota sibirica</i>					✓				✓	
3	Long-tailed Suslik	<i>Spermophilus undulatus</i>			✓		✓		✓		✓	
4	Siberian Jerboa	<i>Allactaga sibirica</i>		✓	✓	✓						
5	Brandt's Vole	<i>Lasiopodomys brandtii</i>									✓	✓
6	Mongolian Silver Vole	<i>Alticola semicanus</i>					✓					
7	Midday Jird	<i>Meriones meridianus</i>					✓					
8	Pallas's Pika	<i>Ochotona pallasii</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
9	Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
10	Snow Leopard	<i>Uncia uncia</i>			✓		✓					
11	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓				✓		✓	
12	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>					✓					
13	Przewalski's Horse	<i>Equus ferus przewalskii</i>									✓	
14	Altai Wapiti	<i>Cervus canadensis sibiricus</i>									✓	
15	Goitred Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>		✓	✓				✓			
16	Saiga Antelope	<i>Saiga tatarica</i>				✓	✓					
17	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>			✓							

Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				✓		✓				
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>				✓		✓				
3	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>				✓		✓				
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓					✓				
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				✓		✓				
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>						✓				
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓				
8	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>	✓					✓				
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓					✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	August									
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
10	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>				✓		✓				
11	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓		✓				
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓									
13	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓									
14	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>							✓			
15	Chukar Partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>			✓							
16	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>									h	
17	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓			✓		✓				
18	Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	✓									
19	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				✓		✓				✓
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓				✓
21	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓		✓				
22	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓			✓		✓				✓
23	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓			
24	Himalayan Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>			✓				✓			
25	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
26	Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>			✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
27	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓		✓				✓	
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓								
29	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>						✓				✓
30	Eastern Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus spilonotus</i>				✓						
31	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
32	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
33	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>			✓							
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓			✓		✓				
35	White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>										✓
36	Demoiselle Crane	<i>Grus virgo</i>	h			✓		✓			✓	✓
37	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>										✓
38	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				✓						
39	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓						✓
40	Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>				✓						
41	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				✓						

	Common name	Scientific name	August									
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
42	Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>				✓						
43	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓						✓			
44	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓			✓						
45	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓						
46	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓			✓						
47	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	✓	✓								
48	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	✓			✓						
49	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓		✓						
50	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓						
51	Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>				✓						
52	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				✓						
53	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓		✓				
54	Pallas's Gull	<i>Ichthyaeus ichthyaeus</i>				✓		✓				
55	Vega Gull	<i>Larus vegae mongolicus</i>		✓		✓		✓				
56	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>				✓		✓				
57	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓				
58	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>						✓				
59	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	✓									
60	Pallas's Sandgrouse	<i>Syrrhaptes paradoxus</i>				✓		✓				
61	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
62	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>				✓						
63	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	✓									
64	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓									
65	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>							✓		✓	
66	Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>		h		h						
67	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>			✓							
68	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓			
69	Pacific Swift	<i>Apus pacificus</i>	✓	✓								
70	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				✓		✓			✓	✓
71	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
72	Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>	✓	✓							✓	✓
73	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓								

	Common name	Scientific name	August									
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
74	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>			✓		✓		✓			
75	Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	✓									
76	Isabelline (Daurian) Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>				✓			✓		✓	
77	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓							✓	✓
78	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓
79	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	✓	✓		✓						✓
80	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
81	Azure Tit	<i>Cyanistes cyanus</i>	✓	✓								
82	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓								
83	White-crowned Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz coronatus</i>		h								
84	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
85	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>										✓
86	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>				✓					✓	✓
87	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala cheleensis</i>				✓						
88	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				✓		✓				
89	Pale Martin	<i>Riparia diluta</i>				✓						
90	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
91	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓							
92	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓							
93	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita tristis</i>		✓								
94	Sulphur-bellied Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus griseolus</i>		✓								
95	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>		✓	✓							✓
96	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea asiatica</i>		✓								
97	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	✓									
98	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata mongola</i>				✓		✓				
99	Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa dauurica</i>										✓
100	Taiga Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicilla</i>										✓
101	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>							✓			
102	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>		✓								
103	Güldenstädt's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>			✓		✓					
104	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>					✓					
105	Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola maurus</i>				✓		✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	August									
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
106	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
107	Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
108	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
109	Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>							✓			
110	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓							✓	✓
111	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓
112	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓		✓		✓			
113	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>			✓							
114	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>				✓		✓			✓	✓
115	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	✓	✓								
116	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓						✓
117	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba baicalensis</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓
118	Richard's Pipit	<i>Anthus richardi</i>				✓		✓				✓
119	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			✓							
120	Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus sibiricus</i>		h								
121	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>			✓							
122	Yellow-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza aureola</i>						✓				
123	Pallas's Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza pallasii</i>				✓						
124	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				✓						

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