

MONGOLIA

19th July – 1st August 2015

Richard Webb



Long-eared Jerboa (Duncan Macdonald)

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in Mongolia first arose when watching Planet Earth and the BBC's quest to see wild Bactrian Camels. Given the difficulty that they had filming them I thought the chances of success were limited but on discovering that James Eaton and Rob Hutchinson (from Birdtour Asia) had seen them in 2014 and that there were also good chances of 'Gobi' Bear (a possible split with only 26 individuals thought to survive in the wild), Snow Leopard (that had regularly been seen drinking at a pool at a site

in 2014), 'Mongolian' Saiga (a particular draw following the crash of the population of 'Western' Saiga) and a range of other species the temptation was too great. It transpired that John Wright and John Pilgrim were planning a similar trip and the three of us teamed up together with Nigel Goodgame, Dominique Brugiere and Duncan Macdonald for a two-week trip. JW and JP actually flew out two days before us to look for Hodgson's Bushchat but as a bonus also saw four Siberian White Cranes and two White-naped Cranes, most definitely honorary mammals in my book.

Although we were unsuccessful for the bear, see the checklist for details of how close we actually got to seeing no fewer than three different individuals, and JP was the only person to see a leopard, we did see the other main target species plus a host of other species including the superb Long-eared Jerboa. I can thoroughly recommend the trip although it is somewhat of an endurance test and you need to be prepared for expedition conditions particularly if you go in mid-summer.

Notes:

- **All photos are RW's unless otherwise marked.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Tumen and his team for all their hard work during the trip, the other members of the party for their company, photographs and for not 'gripping me off' too much, and to James Eaton for his advice during the planning stages of the trip.

REFERENCES

- **A Field Guide to the Mammals of Mongolia.** Batsaikhan et al. The second edition published in 2014 is a massive improvement on the first edition with lots of useful new photos.
- **Mammals of China. Smith & Xie.** Useful additional information particularly for rodents and to compare ranges in Mongolia with those the other side of the border.
- **Mongolia Map for Businessmen and Tourists. Gizi Map.**
- **Mongolian Gobi. August 2013.** John Pilgrim and Conrad Savy.
<http://mammalwatching.com/Palearctic/Otherreports/JP%20Mongolia%2013.pdf>

MAMMAL LIST

Bat sp? - Bats flying around Mother Mountain and the viewpoint near the ranger station at Great Gobi Reserve A were most likely to have been Alashanian Bat.

Long-eared Hedgehog *Hemiechinus auritus* - Singles by the ranger station and by the first bear trap in Great Gobi Reserve A and a young one at Ulaan Khuree.



Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai* - One at lake c.80 km east of Bayankhongor, one on route to Altai City, one on route to Mother Mountain, 2-3 at Mother Mountain, one Great Gobi Reserve A, two Sevrey Mountain, one north of Sevrey Mountain, and also seen by JP and JW at Barigiin nuruu mountains and Zuslangiin nuruu mountain.

Pallas' Pika *Ochotoma pallasii* - 20+ in a colony along the road c.50 km east of Bayankhongor. Common in Tuin River Valley, and Gobi Gurvansaikhan including Yolyn Am Valley. According to the guide book for the park both Daurian and Alpine Pikas occur in Gobi Gurvansaikhan but both are crepuscular and nocturnal and we were not confident that we saw either species although some individuals in a gorge at Yolyn Am Valley resembled the latter. Pallas's Pika were also seen by JP and JW in Barigiin nuruu mountains and at Zuslangiin nuruu mountain,



Tolai Hare

Pallas's Pika

Siberian Marmot *Marmota sibirica* - 7+ in mountains on route from Darvi to Mother Mountain and extremely common in Hustai. Also seen by JP and JW on the pre-tour extension at Gun Gulaat, Barigiin nuruu mountains, Zuslangiin nuruu mountains and Tuin River Valley.

Long-tailed Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus undulates*- Seen at Tuin River Valley (2), in mountains on route from Darvi to Mother Mountain (6+) and Hustai (5+). Also seen by JP and JW east of Bayankhongor, and at Barigiin nuruu and Zuslangiin nuruu mountains.

Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel *S. erythrogenys* - Seen west of Bayankhongor (4) and west of Gurvantes (4).

Alashan Ground Squirrel *S. alashanicus*- One seen by the front vehicle in Yolyn Am Valley.

Daurian Ground Squirrel *S. dauricus* - One seen at Hustai at a stakeout just outside the park itself.

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* - One seen by JP in Tuin River Valley.



Long-tailed Ground Squirrel



Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel

Brandt's Vole *Lasiopodomys brandtii* - Common on route to Bayankhongar and in the Tuin River Valley. Also seen by JP and JW in Barigiin and Zuslangiin nuruu mountains.

Mongolian Silver Vole *Alticola semicanus* - 10+ in Tuin River valley. Also seen by JP and JW in Barigiin nuruu mountains on pre-trip extension.



Brandt's Vole



Mongolian Silver Vole (Nigel Goodgame)

Mongolian Gerbil *Meriones unguiculatus* - A total of at least 20 at three locations within Yolyn Am Valley, the dark claws being readily visible in the field and photos.

Midday Gerbil *M. meridianus* - Singles trapped at Mother Mountain and the ranger camp at Great Gobi Reserve A. Two gerbils seen in the field at Mother Mountain were also assumed to be this species.

Great Gerbil *Rhombomys opimus* – 5+ in saxual habitat north of Sevrei Mountain and at two roadside stops between and here and Ulaan Khuree.

Gobi Jerboa *A. bullata* - One caught by hand near Darvi. Possibly two others seen but not trapped at the same site.

Siberian Jerboa *A. sibirica* - 3+ seen (by one vehicle) in the field at Ulaan Khuree but not caught. Identified on the basis of length of ears and behaviour.



Siberian Jerboa (Duncan Macdonald)



Long-eared Jerboa (Duncan Macdonald)

Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa *Stylodipus andrewsi* - One caught by hand at Ulaan Khuree and two other probables seen.

Long-eared Jerboa *Euchoreutes naso* - 5+ seen in the field at Ulaan Khuree Easily identified in the field, reminding me of a miniature Bilby on steroids. One of the mammals of the trip.

Northern Three-toed Jerboa *Dipus sagitta* - Five caught by hand at Darvi. Three caught at Ulaan Khuree and at least two other probables seen.



Northern Three-toed Jerboas (Nigel Goodgame/Richard Webb)

Corsac Fox *Vulpes corsac* - Three singles between our campsite 80 kms east of Bayankhongor, and Bayankhongar, (JP and JW also saw them in the same area on the pre-trip extension) and two singles on route from Sevrey Mountain to Ulaan Khuree.

Red Fox *V. vulpes* - At least 10 individuals seen on six days.

'Gobi' Bear *Ursus arctos isabellinus* - Not seen but fresh tracks, droppings and camera trap images from the bear feeding stations in Great Gobi Reserve A. At least three individuals involved. See site guide below for further details.

Steppe Polecat *V. eversmanni* - Three seen together while spotlighting in Yolyn Am Valley.

Beech Marten *Martes foina* - One possibly two individuals while spotlighting in Yolyn Am Valley.

Snow Leopard *Uncia uncia* - One seen briefly, by JP, on the first morning at Sevrey Mountain. Fresh droppings also found at this site. In 2014 a female with two young was regularly seen at a small waterhole in Sevrey Mountain but despite staking this out over two nights there was no sign during our visit and camera traps set up here in 2014 were no longer in situ. Mongolia is one of the strongholds for this species and we travelled through a number of areas where it occurs.

Asiatic Wild Ass (Kulan) *Equus hemionus* - Three single stallions seen in the Great Gobi Reserve A.

Przewalski's Horse *E. ferus przewalskii* - Common in Hustai with at least 90 seen including foals, and several heavily pregnant mares.



Red Deer *Cervus elaphus* - Two groups totalling at least 34 individuals in Hustai.

Goitered Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* - Seen between Altai City and Darvi (6), on route from Mother Mountain to Great Gobi Reserve A (5), in Great Gobi Reserve A (16), north of Sevrey Mountain (7), on route from Sevrey to Ulaan Khuree (22 including a group of 14), and south of Gobi Gurvansaikhan (7). Like Saiga extremely jumpy and one running alongside our vehicle south of Gobi Gurvansaikhan was clocking upwards of 40 kph!

Mongolian Gazelle *Procapra gutturosa* - A group of 8 seen between Ulaan Khuree to Gobi Gurvansaikhan and a further three seen just south of Gobi Gurvansaikhan. Hustai is the best site for this species but we failed to see it here.

Saiga *Saiga tatarica* - 28 seen on route to Darvi including several females with two young. A further eight the following morning as we drove south towards Togrog. Extremely jumpy and unapproachable, the most approachable being two young animals.

Siberian Ibex *Capra sibirica* - One Great Gobi Reserve A, at least 14 Sevrey Mountain and six Gobi Gurvansaikhan.

Argali *Ovis ammon* - One ram seen briefly in foothills c.60 kms west of Gurvantes and another seen three days running at Sevrey Mountain. JW also saw six in Zuslangiin nuruu mountains.

Wild Bactrian Camel *Camelus bactrianus* - Two seen at in excess of over five kilometres range in horrendous heat haze on our first afternoon in the northern part of Great Gobi Reserve A and even then they ran off at a rate of knots as soon as they saw us. Three in the eastern part of Great Gobi Reserve A c.200 kilometres west of Gurvantes on our final afternoon in the park. These were slightly closer, i.e. 2-3 kilometres range but still walked away from us as soon as they saw the vehicles! Feral camels occur to the north of Great Gobi Reserve A and the domestic version is widespread.

LOGISTICS

International flights – We all flew out to Ulaanbator (UB from here on) with MIAT from either Berlin or Frankfurt with connecting flights to UK airports with British Airways. Flying via Frankfurt is quicker and avoids a transit stop in Moscow that involves a ridiculous passport check. There are alternative, but much longer routes, via Beijing or Seoul.

Ground arrangements - We used the same ground agents as James and Rob, i.e. Tumen Ecological Tourism Company, tumen106@yahoo.com , www.WildlifeMongolia.com , JP had also used them in 2013. **They did an excellent job** even though there were a number of frustrations during the trip. I have highlighted some of these in the information provided below not as a criticism of Tumen but to alert future visitors to the sorts of things that need to be allowed for when planning the trip.

- **Costs** – The international flights cost us anything from £627(JW got lucky) to £740. The ground arrangements including internal flights were 3,500 USD per person.
- **Timing** – We visited in late July as Tumen recommended this as the best time to look for camels and snow leopards as it would be extremely dry and they would be coming to water. In hindsight due to the vagaries of the weather this did not work out and to be honest the temperatures in the Great Gobi Reserve A were still 40C at 2000 hours one day, it was seriously hot. I would go a month earlier or if your targets really are the bear and snow leopard probably go in April or September just after the bears come out of denning or just before they hibernate as at both times the bears will be using the feeding stations even in daylight. In July they only seem to use them at night judging by the camera trap footage. The leopards are also likely to be lower down as there will be more snow around. Having said that in July they are still down at 2,400m much lower than in Ladakh. The downside of earlier or later trips is that some of the smaller species, jerboas, gerbils, ground-squirrels etc may not be active.
- **Duration/Itinerary** – We went for two weeks which was actually pushing it too much as although many of the drives are not that long in distance they take a long time. Other than the following roads which were asphalt all the other roads were dirt, gravel etc.
 1. UB-Bayankhongor – days1-2.
 2. Yolyn Am Valley – Dalanzadgad day 13.
 3. UB-Hustai – day 14.Tumen regularly under-estimated the length of the drives. Some days we were on the road for much of the day and as a consequence did far less spotlighting than we might normally have done. I would recommend following a different itinerary to ours and outline this alongside our own itinerary later in the report.
- **Internal flights** - We also lost two days as Tumen was unable to book internal flights from UB to Altai City as the flights had supposedly been cancelled and we had to drive 1,000 kilometres instead. I don't know what happened here as we met someone who was actually flying to Altai City the day we had wanted to. Although we did see two rodents on this drive that we did not see elsewhere the moral to the story is make sure that internal flights are available to avoid wasting two days.
- **Ground transportation** –
 1. We travelled everywhere (except Hustai where we had a 15-seater minibus) in three 4x4s, with two of us plus a driver, and a 'translator' in each vehicle. The vehicles kept in touch via CB radio but communication did cause some difficulties when the vehicles communicated in Mongolian and we did not get a translation. It nearly cost the first two vehicles Bactrian Camel when the message that the third vehicle had seen two did not get through. It was not unusual for one or more of the vehicles to miss the odd mammal and/or for it not to be clear which side of the vehicle something had been seen. It is advisable for the clients to have control of the CBs for communicating when something is seen.

2. It is essential that you carry sufficient extra fuel with you. In the GSPAA one vehicle ran out of fuel 120 kms short of the nearest supplies and the second vehicle only had another 20 kms supply. Fortunately the third vehicle was able to make it to the station and bring back supplies for the other vehicles but it could have been nasty. We had several punctures but having three vehicles each with two spares meant that we were quickly back on the road each time. The drivers did a great job repairing punctures overnight and dealing with other mechanical problems with the vehicles, including oil leaks.



- **Accommodation –**

1. We spent one night in a hotel in Altai City, another in Tumen's house in Dalanzadgad and the last night in the Hotel Mongolika in UB. Note the latter does not serve alcohol on a Saturday, particularly pertinent if that's the last night of the trip and you are hoping to celebrate.
2. The rest of the time was spent camping, Tumen providing three two-man tents that you need to erect and take-down yourself, with roll mats and warm sleeping bags. The one downside of camping is that we rarely got an early start in the morning and were often erecting tents at dusk rather than being out in the field. In the Great Gobi Reserve A we did have access to a ranger station which was a blessing as it gave us some respite from the soaring temperatures.



- **Food/drink –**

1. Most meals were prepared for us by Tumen's team and most people found them more than adequate, vegetarians and carnivores both being well catered for. We did stop in restaurants

for lunch on the first day, for dinner on the second evening and for lunch in Gurvantes after six successive nights camping, the food in the latter even appealing to RW, and in Hustai. The food in the Mongolika was also good.

2. We took supplies of bottled water with us supplementing this with soft drinks and beer, none of us spending more than £25 on these. It is important that you have adequate supplies of water though. We ran out of bottled water halfway through our stay in the Great Gobi Reserve A in temperatures of 40C and had to boil water from the oasis instead. This was annoying as we had emphasised the need for adequate supplies of water in advance, and could have actually proved very dangerous given the extreme temperatures.
- **Weather** – JP and JW had a lot of rain in the two days prior to our arrival and we had some rain in Yolyn Am and Hustai on the final two days. Other than that very hot and dry even in the mountains when looking for leopards although the temperature did dip for those staking out the leopard-less waterhole at night.
 - **Insects** – Mosquitoes were a problem at Darvi and to a lesser extent at Mother Mountain, probably as a consequence of the heavy rains earlier in the summer. Around the oases, ticks were common and moved at Usain Bolt speeds whenever they detected humans so it's well worth checking yourself for ticks every night.
 - **Spotlighting** – We only actually spotlighted on four evenings for one reason or another, much less than I normally would have. When spotlighting for jerboas we tended to have three of us in each vehicle and for the two vehicles to split up. We would generally try to catch jerboas by hand to measure and identify them, identification of most species in the field is almost impossible but you can easily approach them with a torch and throw a hat over them to catch them by hand. Once a vehicle had caught something we joined forces.
 - **Camera traps** – Make sure the rangers check the camera traps at the first opportunity otherwise it can prove costly! See site details for further information regarding this.
 - **Small-mammal trapping** – We set up to seven Sherman traps on several nights but only caught two Midday Gerbils in over 40 trap-nights.
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ITINERARIES

I set out both our actual itinerary and my suggestions for future two-week trips.

Note: Mongolian place names vary from map to map and book to book so some localities may not be obvious on every map.

Day Our itinerary

- 1 Arrive in Ulaanbator and drive west towards Bayankhongor. Spent night at a lake 80 km short of Bayankhongor. Total distance driven 560 km.
- 2 Continued west to Tuin River Valley near Bayankhongor where we met up with JP and JW. Lunch in Tuin River Valley and then drove west to Altai City arriving after midnight.
- 3 Early morning prepping for six nights camping ahead then drove west for 80 km through Sharga Nature Reserve towards Darvi finding Saiga in the heat of the day. After lunch continued onto Darvi to look for Relict Gulls. Mosquito-infested night near Darvi after one vehicle got stuck in the mud near the lake and had to be pulled out.
- 4 All day driving south-east towards Mother Mountain with stops for Saiga et al on route. Lunched in mountain range with marmots etc. Apparently 300 km but appears far longer. Camped at Mother Mountain.
- 5 All day driving 360 km south from Mother Mountain to Great Gobi Reserve A, picking up a ranger in Bayan Tooroi, to 20 km north of the oasis at Baruun Sharga seeing two intergalactic camels (they were that far away) on route. Night camping north of the oasis.
- 6 Early morning visit to Baruun Sharga. Packed up camp in extremely strong winds a challenge in itself and headed south to the ranger station at Shar Xuls for two nights finding first evidence of 'Gobi' Bear on route. Night camping at Shar Xuls.

- 7 All day around Shar Xuls including 70 km round trip to two more oases in the adjacent valley. Night camping Shar Xuls.
- 8 Early morning drive to the second bear feeding station in the adjacent valley. After breaking camp long drive east towards Gurvantes eventually finding wild camels around 200 km west of Gurvantes, and finally camping 120 km west of Gurvantes when one of the vehicles ran out of fuel.
- 9 Drove east to Gurvantes via Snow Leopard Research Station. Arrived midday and had two hour lunch and supply stop before continuing north-east to Sevrey Mountain via herders' camps. Night camping Sevrey Mountain.
- 10 Full day Sevrey Mountain most of the group 'overnighting' by the waterhole while RW stayed in and around camp.
- 11 Full day Sevrey Mountain JW 'overnighting' by the waterhole while the rest of the group stayed in and around camp.
- 12 Early morning Sevrey Mountain before departing for long nine-hour drive south-east to Ulaan Khuree. Night camping Ulaan Khuree.
- 13 Relatively short drive north to Yolyn Am Valley, the only area we saw any other tourists outside Hustai, via Gobi Gurvansaikhan. Late afternoon and evening in Yolyn Am Valley before returning to Dalanzadgad arriving shortly after midnight. Night Tumen's house.
- 14 Early morning flight to Ulaanbator followed by drive to Hustai where we spent the afternoon and early evening before returning to the Hotel Mongolika in Ulaanbator for the final night.

Day Suggested itinerary – the order may need to be adjusted to ensure that internal flights are available from Ulaanbator to Altai City. In addition an alternative would be to spend two nights at Ick Hart to the south-east of Ulaanbator where JP saw Pallas's Cat in 2013 but these are also present in Hustai and Gobi Gurvansaikhan.

- 1 Spend day visiting wetlands east of Ulaanbator for cranes and rodents.
- 2 Early morning flight to Altai City. Drive to Darvi for Saiga and then drive south-east avoiding need to spend night in Darvi and reducing length of drive the following day. Drive as far south as practical.
- 3 Drive south towards Great Gobi Reserve A. No need to visit Mother Mountain it doesn't add anything and frees up more time for later. Aim to be in mountains at north end of Great Gobi Reserve A for night. This area offers chances of Snow Leopard and ungulates and we saw camels a few kilometres south of here. Camels are said to use the valley immediately south of the mountain range to de-tick!
- 4 Drive south looking for camels. Depending on success you could push on all the way to Shar Xuls but it may be necessary to overnight somewhere near Baruun Sharga.
- 5 Continue to Shar Xuls to spend evening and night looking for 'Gobi' Bear. Night Shar Xuls.
- 6 All day Shar Xuls and adjacent valley looking for 'Gobi Bear et al. Night Shar Xuls.
- 7 Assuming that camels and bears are under the belt drive east towards Gurvantes looking for further camels on route. Aim to camp in mountains about 60 km west of Gurvantes for ungulates and outside chance of Snow Leopard. If still requiring bears or camels spend a further night in the park and only spend one full day in Gobi Gurvansaikhan.
- 8 Continue east to Gurvantes and then drive south-east to Ulaan Khuree for one night.
- 9 Drive north to Gobi Gurvansaikhan and spend night in valley where JP saw Snow Leopard in 2013.
- 10 Full day in valley in Gobi Gurvansaikhan. Possibly spotlight the desert south of here for jerboas.
- 11 As day 10.
- 12 Morning in valley in Gobi Gurvansaikhan. Then transfer to Yolyn Am for afternoon and evening before returning for Dalanzadgad for night.
- 13 Early morning flight to Ulaanbator followed by drive to Hustai to spend the afternoon and early evening looking for horses etc. and spend night in accommodation in park. Increases chance of Daurian Hedgehog, Mongolian Gazelle, jerboas, Wolf and Pallas's Cat.
- 14 Full day Hustai before returning to the Hotel Mongolika in Ulaanbator for the final night.

SITE GUIDE

Note: The notes below only cover the trips visited in the main trip not the sites visited by JP and JW on the pre-trip extension.

Ulaanbator to Bayankhongor

On an ideal trip you would avoid this drive by flying direct to Altai City but driving the asphalt road did produce large numbers of Brandt's Voles, Corsac and Red Fox, Tolai Hare and a colony of Pallas's Pika between our camp 80 km east of Bayankhongor and Bayankhongor. Around the camp itself there were vast numbers of rodent burrows but a short walk by RW in the middle of the night produced nothing of note.

Tuin River Valley

Tuin River valley lies immediately to the east of Bayankhongor and is accessed along a track to the north of the main road. Brandt's Vole were common on the open plains here alongside Long-tailed Ground Squirrels and we saw several Mongolian Silver Voles and Pallas's Pikas on cliffs c.10 km north of the main road. We met up with JP and JW here and JP had seen Red Squirrel in a patch of forest further to the north.

Bayankhongor to Altai City

If you can avoid this drive it is better to do so the main road being nothing more than a series of dirt tracks. We saw our first Red-cheeked Ground-Squirrels crossing this area and Tolai Hare and Red Fox as we neared Altai City but little else. We did cross a couple of hilly areas that could be with exploring at dawn or dusk but we whizzed through in the heat of the afternoon.

Sharga Nature Reserve



- Sharga Nature Reserve lies c.60 km west of Altai City on route to Darvi. Saiga are still relatively common here but extremely jumpy and difficult to get close views of. In the past there were 1,000s here and the jumpiness reflects on the degree to which they have been hunted in the past. We saw 26, mainly females with young on our first afternoon, and another eight along another road the following morning. We also saw several Goitered Gazelles in this general area.

- We continued on to Ikhes Lake near Darvi where Relict Gulls breed but not really worth it on a mammal trip. We camped on a hillside just outside Darvi and although it was still some way from the lake in hindsight it was still too close with mosquitoes being a major issue after the heavy recent rains. We did see and catch several jerboas including Gobi and Northern Three-toed while spotlighting at night but I think we should probably have continued south and camped and spotlighted somewhere else instead to save time. I suspect we would have seen similar species when spotlighting.

Mother Mountain

After departing Darvi by mid-morning we had a long, all day, drive south to Mother Mountain. A lunch stop in a mountain range on route produced Siberian Marmot and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel. We also saw several Goitered Gazelles on route. Mother Mountain itself could be avoided if time is short. We did trap here overnight and find Midday Gerbil and saw Tolai Hare and several unidentified jerboas but I think the time would be better spent elsewhere, see suggested itinerary for more details.

Great Gobi Reserve A - Special Protected Area

This area in extreme south-west Mongolia seems to have different names in different books and on different maps but is the home of both wild Bactrian Camels and 'Gobi' Bears. You need to allow a minimum of four nights and preferably five here and ensure that you have plenty of water, we ran out and had to boil water from one of the oases, and fuel, one vehicle ran out, a second one would have, and the third had to go another 120 km to Gurvantes to get further supplies after we ran out.

- Travelling south from Bayan Tooroi, the last fuel and water stop, and where you need to pick up a park ranger to accompany you, you go through an area of open desert before hitting a small mountain range after c.50 km?. We had lunch here but I recommend trying to get here for late afternoon or early evening and camping here as it has potential for Argali, Siberian Ibex and Snow Leopard and wild camels apparently use a river valley just south of here for 'de-ticking'.
- We saw our first, unbelievably distant and jumpy camels a few kilometres south of here, and along the following 150 kilometres stretch to the oasis at Baruun Sharga found fresh evidence of camels at several points (there are no feral or domestic camels in the protected area) but for some strange reason rarely stopped to scan and simply blazed on towards the oasis where I believe James Eaton had been successful in 2014. This stretch also has a viewpoint where bears are occasionally seen. In hindsight we should have stopped and scanned far more often than we did. It later transpired that the majority of the camels were supposed to have moved north into this area as a consequence of the recent rains so we should have spent more time here.
- The area around the oasis at Baruun Sharga held plenty of evidence of camels but no signs of bear and we continued south-east towards another oasis at Shar Zuls finding further evidence of camels, wild ass and bear on route with Tumen also seeing Great Gerbil.
- We spent two nights camping at the ranger station at Shar Zuls where the 'ranger bunker' provided some shelter from the sweltering temperatures. Just by the entrance to the campsite a small hill provides panoramic views over a large area of desert and we spent a lot of hours over the next two days unsuccessfully scanning for camels. In fact the only mammal seen was a solitary Asiatic Wild Ass seen on three separate occasions.
- Behind the camp, where we set traps and caught Midday Gerbil, a trail takes you up to a viewpoint overlooking the oasis and two 'Gobi' Bear feeding stations with camera traps. The walk takes 15-20 minutes not the 45-60 minutes indicated to us in advance. Two rangers had come with us to check the traps but frustratingly did not do so on the day we arrived. This proved costly. The first night JP remained at the viewpoint until 11 pm. The following morning we checked the traps around 9 am. The rangers had wanted to check them first light but hadn't explained why and it transpired that they sometimes see bears when they check the camera traps at dawn. Had we known this we might have been successful as on checking the camera trap we found that bears

had visited the station on the previous two nights staying from 2320-0500 and 2350-0515 respectively. There were also fresh droppings around the feeding station. JP had missed the arrival of the second one by 50 minutes. Had we checked the traps a day earlier we would undoubtedly all have been sitting up waiting the following night. As it was on the third night we sat up until 0100 but nothing came in and there was no evidence of bears on the camera trap the following morning. If only! Checking back on older images on the traps there did appear to be a pattern of bears coming in for two successive nights followed by several blank nights. I suspect that if you visited in early spring or late autumn you would have more success with bears visiting the stations during the day, whereas they only seem to visit at night in mid-summer.

- Beyond the camera traps there is a valley that continues to two further oases with feeding stations etc after c.15 and c.35 kilometres. To add insult to injury when we drove this we found fresh tracks of three separate bears, including a female with a young one, that had visited the second feeding station and wandered up the valley to drink before disappearing into the hills. We only saw Siberian Ibex in this valley but did find scat of wolf and polecat as well as bears. Had we checked the feeding stations at dawn we might well have scored.
- At the third of the feeding stations we also found evidence of bears albeit two to three days old.

Bear trap



Bear feeding station



Fresh droppings



Slightly older droppings

- After leaving Shar Zuls we drove back down the valley past the feeding stations and continued east on the long drive towards Gurvantes. Again we stopped to scan far too infrequently but did see a couple of Asiatic Wild Ass and Goitered Gazelle. Eventually towards the eastern limit of the special protected area Dominique finally found three camels about 2-3 kilometres from the track. Although wary, they changed direction and walked away from us as soon as they saw us, at least they did not charge off into the distance as the previous two had done and we finally got good

views through the scopes. This is an area where wild camels have been seen previously so is worth a stop on your way out of the reserve.

- **Summary – I recommend spending one night in the north of the reserve, two to three nights in southern core area of the reserve, and a final night to the east of the reserve. Stop and scan for camels wherever you find fresh evidence, don't just push on regardless, and check the camera traps around the feeding stations as soon as you get there. Don't leave it until the following day!**

Mountains west of Gurvantes

We did not spend any time here passing through the area quickly other than to stop to look at a solitary Argali and to briefly visit a Snow Leopard research station although most of the researchers were out checking camera traps. However the area has a good population of Snow Leopards, at least 26 animals in one of the ranges, and might be worth a lot more effort. We did see Red-cheeked Ground Squirrels between here and Gurvantes and JP/JW also saw an unidentified ground-squirrel.

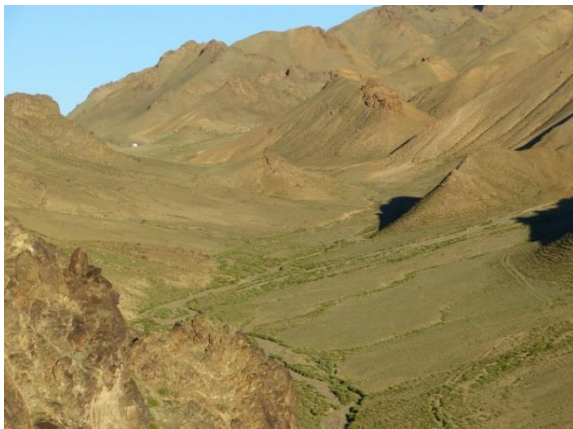
Sevrey Mountain

Sevrey Mountain is a small isolated range north-east of Gurvantes. In 2014 it had become a reliable stakeout for Snow Leopard with a female and two young regularly coming to drink at a water hole here. JW staked out this waterhole on two nights and the others excluding RW on one but had no joy although fresh droppings thought to be snow leopard were found here. The walk to the viewpoint for the waterhole is quite difficult in places and viewing conditions not ideal. We had been lead to believe that we would only be c.100 metres from the waterhole whereas in reality both viewpoints were nearly 400 metres from the waterhole in difficult terrain. In addition we were told that the camera traps would be checked for recent activity prior to our visit but despite attempts to get information on this in advance none was forthcoming and when we arrived on site there were no camera traps in situ.

Scanning from the main valley above our camp did however produce a brief sighting of a Snow Leopard disappearing over a ridge for JP, and we saw several groups of Siberian Ibex here, a solitary Argali on three consecutive days and a couple of Tolai Hares. Amazingly despite the good habitat we saw absolutely no rodents or pikas here.

The area is heavily disturbed by nomadic herders and their goats and a goat had been taken by a leopard about three weeks prior to our arrival, while another was attacked by what was thought to be a leopard while we were there. On our final night the dogs guarding the nearest herd of goats were barking on and off all night suggesting that may have been either a leopard or wolves in the vicinity.

Although leopards clearly occur 2014 appears to have been exceptional and I believe that there may be better places in Mongolia to look for leopards and the three days spent here would have been better spent elsewhere.



A stop in an area of saxual dunes to the north of the mountain produced Tolai Hare and several Great Gerbils.

Ulaan Khuree

An area of barely vegetated open desert 6-hours' drive south of Dalanzadgad. We camped in the middle of nowhere and spotlighted around the camp area. The two vehicles split up, both vehicles encountered several Long-eared and Northern Three-toed Jerboas, one vehicle encountered several Siberian Jerboas while the other found (and caught) Andrews' Three-toed Jerboa, and Long-eared Hedgehog. Several unidentified gerbils were also seen. The drive south to Ulaan Khuree and the drive back north to Gobi Gurvansaikhan produced Goitered (Black-tailed) and our first Mongolian Gazelles. The drive south also produced Great Gerbil and Corsac Fox c.60 km north of Ulaan Khuree.



Great Gerbil (Duncan Macdonald)

Gobi Gurvansaikhan

Gobi Gurvansaikhan is a mountainous area south-west of Dalanzadgad. We visited two areas. The first was a brief lunch stop in a remote valley where JP had seen Snow Leopard in 2013 and which produced several Siberian Ibex and good numbers of Pallas's Pika. This looked a great area to look for Snow Leopard and I wish we had had more time here rather than at Sevrey. The desert immediately to the south of here produced Goitered and Mongolian Gazelle and Red Fox and would probably be good for spotlighting for jerboas et al at night.

The second spot was Yolyn Am Valley where we explored three areas finding Mongolian Gerbils and Pallas's Pikas at all three. Rain and cooler conditions hindered us here but the first valley visited produced Alashan Ground Squirrel for the first vehicle (Tumen also saw one at a second location) and after dark three Steppe Polecats, at least one and possibly two Beech Martens and a Red Fox. The other areas were less productive but Yol is the most likely area for Alashan Ground Squirrel. JP saw Argali here on his 2013 trip.

Both Daurian and Alpine Pikas (an isolated population of the latter) also occur here but both are predominantly crepuscular and nocturnal and we were not convinced that we saw either although some in a steep gorge in Yolyn Am did resemble Alpine being seemingly larger and darker than the ubiquitous Pallas's. Alpine are a stockier animal than Pallas's.

Yolyn Am was the only area away from Hustai where we saw any other 'tourists'.

Hustai (Khustain Nuruu) National Park

Hustai National Park is a park c.100 km north-west of Ulaanbator all bar the last 13 km being on asphalt, a pleasant change at the end of the trip. Przewalski's Wild Horse is easy to find, we saw more than ninety, Red Deer (potentially a split) is easiest early and late in the day, we saw two distant groups totalling c.35 individuals, Siberian Marmot is abundant and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel common. It is a reliable site for Daurian Ground Squirrel and we scored at a stakeout provided by a researcher just outside the park itself. As you arrive at the park gate turn back right and follow a track across the grasslands. After 3 km stop and scan for squirrels. We found one literally in seconds.

Hustai is also known as the best site for Mongolian Gazelle although we were unsuccessful here, and JP had seen Daurian Hedgehog and Siberian Jerboa when overnighting here in 2013. There is accommodation and a restaurant by the entrance gate where there is also an excellent gift shop with lots of Mongolian wildlife books, park guides etc. Worth a visit, the second edition of the mammal guide was USD25, USD20 cheaper than at the airport in Ulaanbator!

SELECTED BIRD LIST

- Bar-headed Goose
- Lammergeier, Black and Himalayan Griffon Vulture
- Steppe and Golden Eagle
- Saker and Amur Falcon
- Altai Snowcock (JP/JW)
- Siberian White and White-naped Cranes (JP/JW), Demoiselle Crane (common)
- Greater Sand Plover
- Long-toed Stint
- Relict Gull
- Pallas's Sandgrouse (common)
- Hill Pigeon
- Eagle Owl
- Mongolian Lark
- Pied, Isabelline and Desert Wheatear
- Hodgson's Bushchat (JP/JW)
- Mongolian and Brown Accentors
- Citrine Wagtail
- Azure Tit
- Mongolian Ground Jay
- Mongolian Finch
- Pallas's Reed and Meadow Bunting.

RICHARD WEBB

8TH AUGUST 2015