

Snow Leopards of Mongolia

Mammal-Watching

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Departure

Day 2

Ulaanbaatar

We'll arrive into Ulaanbaatar in the morning and check in to our comfortable hotel. Depending on the time of arrival, we will do an introductory birding and wildlife watching walk in the east of the city. Alternatively (or additionally if times allows) we will make a short sightseeing tour in the city of Ulaanbaatar. We'll have dinner in a traditional Mongolian restaurant offering delicious local and regional cuisine.

Days 3 - 8

Jargalant Mountains in the Altai – Snow Leopards, Saiga, Black-tailed Gazelle, Argali and Ibex!

We take a domestic flight to Khovd and we drive to our ger camp where we will stay for the next six nights. It is operated by a local wildlife protection community, which is a local organization with the single purpose of protecting this extremely rich nature and wildlife reserve, and which we aim to support with our tours. The camp is located by the foothills of Jargalant Mountains, looking at the mountain chain on the one side and the semi desert and a huge lake on the other. These remote and beautiful mountains in the Western Mongolian Altai host a truly remarkable assemblage of mammals. And amazingly they can be seen with relative ease and in relative comfort! For here researchers have discovered a healthy population of 30-35 Snow Leopards in a limited range and at altitudes of between only 2000m and 3000m which means that from our carefully sited and comfortable but basic Ger Camp we can reach them after short drives and only short walks!

The next five days will find us searching primarily for the elusive Snow Leopard as one of our main priorities. We have timed our trip to match the period when the young cats are still together with their mother, but spend plenty of time outside of the den playing, practicing their hunting skills assisted by their mother who sometimes brings birds or smaller mammals to help this learning process and to become a perfect predator. Needless to say succeeding in finding the site will be the experience of a lifetime – more likely we'll just find them out hunting on the rocky slopes! Our experienced drivers will take us as close as possible to the observation sites. At times walking will be limited to a few meters, other times we will have to take a short or medium length walk that will demand only basic fitness and ability to walk on rocky, uneven or steep terrain. However, many of the typical

observation points can be reached by a 4X4 vehicle, or a maximum of two kilometres walking on almost flat terrain. As we have plenty of time we will be able to proceed at a speed that is comfortable for everyone. This holiday is planned to be a very slow paced one with plenty of time for everything. During our recce we found and watched a hunting Snow Leopard for an hour and we were just standing by our car, drinking our coffee. Our local guides, founders of the local association aiming to preserve the Snow Leopard and many other vulnerable species successfully locate one or more dens every year, and we hope one will be in an easily accessible area. If this is not the case, we might opt to locate ourselves in several key areas where animals occur regularly for hunting or patrolling and marking their territories. To find a Snow Leopard needs patience, but it is in fact a special aspect of the holiday: it is a very slow-paced activity that allows us to admire the breathtaking scenery, the alpine flora, and the highlights of the avifauna without haste. There will always be things to look at, the soaring raptors above us, the playful Siberian Marmots that keep whistling to each other signalling danger, or the grazing herds of Argali, or Ibex with their amazing ability to climb almost vertical cliffs. There will be many White-winged Snowfinches flying around us, as well as the local race of Shore Lark. Those with sharp eyes will be able to spot the beautiful Gldenstadt's Redstart that inhabit the peaks, and we will surely have time to track down some of the many flocks of Altai Snowcocks that are surprisingly numerous and visible in this area, and are often found by following their far reaching calls, or just by scanning the cliffs. Lammergeier, Steppe Eagle, Black-eared Kite, Saker Falcon and Cinereous Vulture are often seen as they survey the pastures for prey or carcasses, the latter most probably left by the Snow Leopards. Our hosts are volunteer rangers recognized by the local authority, partners of the WWF Snow Leopard project and will willingly share their knowledge of the ecology of the area, the difficulties preserving the wildlife, their struggle with illegal hunters, and will also show us the many signs of the activities of these secretive animals. We will hopefully be able to check some of the camera traps which is always an exciting activity.

The Saiga Antelope is probably one of the oddest-looking animals of its kind, and now it's critically endangered due to various factors. Mongolia has two populations; one of them is actually a few kilometres from our base, in a flat semi-desert area. The subspecies is called "*tatarica*" and is sometimes considered to be a separate species. They are able to run at a very high speed, but are easily identifiable as they always keep their head down, even while running.

Another possible highlight here is strictly an after-dinner activity. We will find ourselves in a flat rocky desert area, scanning with our torches for small "jumping, glowing eyes". The tiny 'kangaroos' are Jerboas, which with luck and with some skill can be approached and observed as they feed on insects just a few meters away, sometimes even jumping between our shoes. Their huge ears and long tails that end in a fluffy ball of fur make them very special, unique animals to watch.

We will also visit a huge lake and the adjacent wetland nearby which offers a lot to see, perhaps less "furry things" but equally special. Pallas's Sandgrouse might come to drink on the shore, Whooper Swan and Dalmatian Pelican breed

amongst the vast expanse of reedbeds, Pallas's Gulls, Whiskered and Gull-billed terns are also here. Massive concentrations of hundreds of Red-crested Pochards are likely. The nearby grasslands seem to be perfect for Pallas's Bunting, and we found at least two pairs of Eastern Marsh Harrier here, along with Citrine Wagtail and Steppe Grey Shrike. Another avian highlight of Mongolia, the Henderson's Ground-jay is found very near to our campsite, and a short drive should produce one if not more of these wonderful birds. On one of the evenings we will try to organize a local cultural group to visit our ger camp for a short performance: we feel this is a great addition to our tour and allows us to appreciate the region's ancient and rich cultural and spiritual heritage.

Days 9-12

Hustai Nuruu National Park

Leaving the magical Jargalant Mountains, we drive to the airport and fly to Ulaanbaatar, where our private coach is waiting for us. In less than two hours we will find ourselves in Hustai Nuruu National Park, home to the successfully reintroduced wild horse, the Thaki or Przewalski's Horse. Short walks along the rolling hills will allow us to watch Long-tailed Souseliks, but most probably we will spend quite some time admiring the beauty of the world's only truly wild horse species.

Rocky areas are home to Pied Wheatear, Meadow Bunting and Siberian Lesser Whitethroat. The elm trees along the valleys hold a small population of the elegant Amur Falcon, while Lesser Kestrels hunt on the hillsides and Golden Eagles patrol the skies. This reserve is particularly productive for Daurian Partridge. This is our chance to add Mongolian (White-tailed) Gazelle to our list of mammals. We shall drive a few kilometres away from the central part of the national park to find them in the lowlands. Should time permit we can reach the meandering Tuul River, where we will hopefully find Azure Tit in the riparian woods. On our way towards the river we will stop to search for the impressively large Mongolian Lark.

Should we have failed to see the Grey Wolf earlier on the tour this area offers us another chance. Here we just need to scan and scan and scan the gently rolling hillsides, grasslands and shrubs as the relatively small area holds at least two packs of Wolves, and early evening is when they start hunting for Marmots or some unwary Red Deer. Local rangers may try to lure them closer to us, imitating their distinctive howling.

In the afternoon of Day 12 we'll return to Ulaanbaatar and spend the night there.

Day 13

Arrive Europe

We've an early morning departure for the flight home.

To ask about any aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from www.greentours.co.uk (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post/fax to Greentours, PO Box 148, Buxton SK17 1BE, UK. Tel/Fax +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Mammal and bird checklists are available.