

## Mongolia: Snow Leopards & Birds Itinerary

[Link: Mongolia: Snow Leopards & Birds](#)

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### Tour Overview

An awe-inspiring tour to Mongolia, at the heart of the Asian continent - with a dream list of sought-after Asian specialities, Snow Leopard, Saiga Antelope, resident birds and migrants to be seen amidst a majestic landscape of seemingly endless desert, steppe, and mountains.

This is a journey that will carry you from the wilds of the Gobi Desert and the Altai Mountains, via Gun Galuut and the bird-rich steppe lakes, to the taiga forests of Terelj National Park. We stay in good hotels and comfortable, permanent ger camps with good facilities (a tour highlight, not to be confused with traditional camping), making this far-flung, incredible destination accessible to everyone. Snow Leopard, Saiga Antelope, Przewalski's Horse, Argali sheep, Mongolian Gazelle, Swan Goose, White-naped Crane, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Mongolian Ground Jay, Altai Snowcock, Siberian Rubythroat, Pine Bunting and more.

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### Itinerary

#### Day 1: Arrive Ulaanbaatar

Arriving at Ulaanbaatar we check into our comfortable hotel. Depending on the time of arrival we will do an introductory birding walk in the east of the city. Amur Falcon, Azure Tit, Azure-winged Magpie, Long-tailed Rosefinch, White-crowned Penduline Tit, White-cheeked Starling are all possible along the Tuul River. Night in Ulaanbaatar.

#### Days 2-3: Gun Galuut Nature Reserve



After breakfast we start driving towards Gun Galuut Nature Reserve. On the way we may stop at the huge statue of Genghis Khan. Shortly before arriving to camp there will be some very productive shallow lakes and marshes where we should encounter suites of common shorebirds including Long-toed and Red-necked Stints, Pacific Golden-Plover, Spotted Redshank, Wood and Marsh Sandpiper. The lakes have yielded many surprises in the past including Baikal Teal, Falcated Duck, Little Curlew, Asian Dowitcher and Grey-tailed Tattler. Our ger camp is situated in a beautiful river valley surrounded by steppes and rocky hills. Gun Galuut protects a range of mountain and steppe habitats along with some varied and exciting wetlands. The rocky hills are home to a strong population of Argali Sheep and Pallas's Cat in good rodent years. We will scan the rocky outcrops during late afternoon for the cats hunting Brandt's Voles, their favourite prey. Argali sheep are the world's largest sheep and are usually seen in small groups grazing on the mountainside in the early morning so after some 30 minutes driving and scanning we should be able to find them. Other mammals of the area include Corsac Fox, Daurian Pika, Mongolian Jird and the nocturnal Siberian Jerboa. The birdlife of Gun Galuut is very rich. We will explore the vegetation along the river near our campsite for migratory songbirds. In the past, these have been quite rewarding, rendering a variety of warblers including Pallas's Grasshopper, Greenish, Two-barred, Dusky and Thick-billed, as well as Olive-backed Pipit, Taiga Flycatcher, and Black-faced and Pallas's buntings. White-naped Cranes nest in the marshes and we should find this magnificent bird in family groups along with other crane species including Common and the daintier Demoiselles. The lakes also attract numerous water birds including grebes, swans, ducks, gulls and as many as five species of terns. We may see Bar-headed and Swan geese, Whooper Swan, Common and Ruddy shelducks, Eurasian Wigeon, Garganey, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Stejneger's Scoter. As we drive across the shortgrass steppe we may find several species of larks including Asian Short-toed, Horned and Mongolian larks, Isabelline and Northern wheatears, and Richard's and Blyth's pipits. We will particularly be on the lookout for the sandy coloured Pere David's Snowfinch that inhabits the steppes. Raptors will be represented by Upland Buzzard, Steppe Eagle, Cinereous Vulture, Black-eared Kite, Eastern Marsh Harrier, and Saker and Amur falcons. The rocky slopes are home to Rock Sparrow and Twite, while Pallas's Sandgrouse could be present anywhere in the area. Night in permanent ger camp, en suite chalets available for an extra charge.

## Days 4 - 5: Birding Terelj NP



We leave Gun Galuut and visit Terelj National Park on the way to Ulaanbaatar. Terelj has fantastic rock formations, coniferous and riparian forests and is home to many birds. It is a stretch of the Siberian Taiga Forest, and a completely different habitat compared to other regions we will visit. Eastern Buzzard is usually seen patrolling the mountains and Lammergeier is also often seen. Rocky outcrops are home to Kozlov's Accentor, Rock Thrush and Godlewski's Bunting. There are many woodland birds found in the coniferous forests including chances for Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Daurian Redstart, Taiga and Dark-sided Flycatcher, Red-throated Thrush, Dusky, Hume's and Two-barred Warbler, Nutcracker and Black Woodpecker. Black-billed Capercaillie is a secretive and rare bird that can be seen in Terelj during the lekking season in the spring. It requires an early morning walk to the lek, but the views of these magnificent birds lekking are worth all the efforts. Night in Terelj. On Day 5, we will spend the morning birding the Terelj area. After lunch, we drive back to the capital. Night in Ulaanbaatar hotel.

## Day 6: Fly to Khovd, Western Altai Mountains



We take a domestic flight to Khovd and we drive to our ger camp where we will stay for the next 6 nights. It is operated by a local wildlife protection community, which is a local organization with the single purpose of protecting the extremely rich nature and wildlife reserve. The camp is located by the foothills of Jargalant Mountain facing the mountain chain on the one side and the semi desert and a huge lake on the other. The facilities here are basic, shared, but comfortable and clean. Our local team is keen to provide everything we need for the maximum comfort in the area where we will be literally on our own apart from a few nomadic herders and their animals. We will spend 6 nights in Snow Leopard ger camp.

## Days 7 - 11: Western Altai Mountains



The next 5 days will find us searching primarily for the elusive Snow Leopard as one of our main priorities. We timed our trip to match the period when the cats are most likely to be seen hunting or guarding their prey. It is difficult to say how good the chances are. There is no guarantee of sightings, but by working with our local team to find the best location we hope to see this majestic animal and they have had very good luck in the past. The terrain here is considerably easier to negotiate and conditions are much more favourable than in other areas where people search for Snow Leopards (high altitude, low temperature, difficult terrain, need of acclimatization, hikes, sleeping in tents, etc.). Our experienced drivers will take us as close as possible to the observation sites. Most of the time walking will be limited to a few meters. Other times we will have to take a short or medium length walk that will demand 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 short walk. 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. Our local scouts will be on the mountain most of the time looking for a Snow Leopard. They successfully locate one or more Snow Leopards during most tours, and we hope one will be in an easily accessible area. We are also in contact with local shepherds and if one of their animals was killed by the leopards, they will immediately report it to our local team. It is very important for conservation reasons and for us it is a great help. While our local helpers are scouting, we might opt to locate ourselves in a key area to scan the mountainsides where animals occur regularly during hunting or patrolling 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 breath-taking scenery, incredible 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 grazing Siberian Ibex with their amazing ability to climb almost vertical cliffs. There will be White-winged Snowfinches and Mongolian Finches flying around us, as well as Brown Accentor and the local race of Horned Lark. Those with sharp eyes will be able to spot the beautiful Guldenstadt's Redstart that inhabits the highest peaks, and we will surely have time to track down some of the flocks of Altai Snowcocks by scanning the cliffs. Lammergeier, Steppe Eagle, Black-eared Kite, Saker Falcon, Cinereous and Himalayan Vulture are often seen as they scan the pastures for prey or carcasses, the latter most probably left by the Snow Leopards. The Saiga Antelope is probably one of the oddest-looking animals of its kind, and now it's critically endangered due to a variety of factors. Mongolia has two populations; one of them is actually a few kilometres from our base, in a flat semi desert area. The local subspecies is called "tatarica" which is sometimes considered to be a separate species. They can run at a very high speed and are easily identifiable as they always keep their head down, even while running. Another possible highlight here is strictly an after-dinner activity just in and around our campsite. We will walk in the flat rocky desert area scanning with our torchlights for small "jumping, glowing eyes". The tiny kangaroo-like rodents are most likely Siberian and Mongolian Three-toed Jerboas, which with luck and with some skill they can be approached and observed as they feed on insects just a few meters away, sometimes even jumping between our shoes. Their long ears and tails that end in a fluffy ball of fur make them very special, unique animals to watch. We will also visit nearby lakes and adjacent wetlands, which offer a lot to see. 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. Sometimes large concentrations of White-headed Ducks are seen and Red-crested Pochards are also found on the lake. The nearby grasslands seem to be perfect for many passerines including Asian Short-toed Lark, Richard's Pipit, Western Yellow and Citrine Wagtail and Pallas's Bunting. Another avian highlight of Mongolia, the Mongolian Ground-Jay live near to our campsite, and a short walk or drive should produce sightings of these wonderful birds.

## Days 12 - 13: Return Ulaanbaatar then Hustain Nuruu National Park



We will drive to the airport and fly back to Ulaanbaatar. Depending on arrival time, we either stay in a hotel in stay in Ulaanbaatar for the night or we will drive to our ger camp in Hustai National Park, which is two hours away. Hustain Nuruu National Park is home to the successfully reintroduced wild horse, the Thaki or Przewalski's Horse. Short walks along the rolling hills will bring us Long-tailed Souslik and Tarbagan Marmot, but most probably we will spend quite some time admiring the beauty of the world's only true wild horse species. The rocky areas are home to Pied Wheatear, Meadow Bunting and 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. Some spots are productive for Daurian Partridge. This is our chance to add Mongolian 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. We also plan for a visit to a section of the park that is normally closed to visitors. The park rangers will join us to take us into this area which will give us another chance for Argali sheep, Pallas's cat, and even wolf.

## Day 14: Morning birding around Hustai National Park, then transfer to Ulaanbaatar



After a morning of birding around Hustai National Park, we will then drive back to Ulaanbaatar. We may visit the capital in the afternoon if guests are interested in a short city sightseeing, or perhaps a high quality cashmere shop. Night in Ulaanbaatar.

## Day 15: Departure

Our Mongolia Snow Leopards and Birding tour ends today. You can depart anytime for flights home.

## What to Expect

### Accommodation

The overall standard of accommodation on this tour is good, but please note that Mongolian hotels generally average below the international standard in the West. All hotel rooms are en suite. We spend ten nights in comfortable *ger* (yurt) camps, which for many visitors are a highlight of the tour. The ger camps are permanent and purpose-built to accommodate tourists, offering comfortable but simply furnished accommodation. The ger contain beds and a sink. Bathroom facilities at the ger camps are en suite or in shared permanent toilet blocks and are usually clean. Hot showers are also available in shared facilities. Internet connectivity on this tour will be available in most

accommodations but may vary in quality and level of consistency.

Please note that there are en suite rooms (chalets) available at Gun Galuut camp, so please let us know if you want to upgrade.

### **Meals**

All meals are included in the price. Food is generally good and wholesome although for some it may seem to lack variety. We can cater to most people with special diets.

### **Walking**

Some easy to moderate hill trails, all taken at a gentle pace, with most walking short and on gentle terrain. Snow Leopard viewing is largely vehicle-based, with optional short walks and alternatives for those who prefer to stay near the vehicle. Comfy walking shoes or lightweight boots recommended. Be prepared for optional early starts tempered where possible with a break after lunch prior to birding again later in the afternoon.

### **Weather**

Mongolia has a continental climate and can vary considerably at this time of year - you need to dress accordingly. Generally, it will be warm or hot during the day, but it can be chilly at night and in the early mornings. Cold weather can be expected at the higher altitudes with strong winds, and rain is also possible at almost any time. Temperatures during the day may range between 15-28°C, while night-time temperatures in the mountains can drop significantly.

### **Altitude**

Most of the tour will be spent above 1300m and we will spend time in landscapes often at 1800m. Our camp in the Altai Mountains is situated at an elevation of 1700m and we will drive up to maximum 3200m in search of Snow Leopard.

### **Internal Flights**

There are 1 or 2 companies offering flights between the capital and Khovd. Their annual schedule is usually not announced before March. It may happen that there are no daily flights, which may result in the slight rearrangement of our itinerary.

### **Ground Transport**

Japanese 4WDs provide greater comfort and safety, with knowledgeable local drivers who will ensure we get to our destinations safely. There will be some long drives, some along unsealed roads through scenic landscapes, but we will stop regularly. A window seat will be provided to all clients and there is permanent radio contact between vehicles.

### **Insects**

There is no malaria risk on this tour. Mosquitoes are not present during most of our itinerary, but in Terelj and Gun Galuut and some steppe lake shores there might be some, especially in wet years. Be sure to bring repellent.

### **Photo opportunities**

Good, plus incidental photographic opportunities.

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## What's Included

### **Tour Price Includes**

- All accommodation (see What to Expect for more info)
- All meals and soft drinks
- Ground transportation + internal flights
- 4 - 8 participants with one guide, 9 - 12 participants with two guides plus local guides at several locations
- All park, conservation and entrance fees

### **Tour Price Does Not Include**

- Flights to and from the start/end location
  - Optional accommodation upgrades where available
  - Travel Insurance
  - Alcoholic beverages
  - Items of a personal nature
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