

Gobi Lakes Traverse - birdlife -

During the early spring migration and just later, the Gobi comes to life with many migrating birds occupying any available tree in the region. The migration period is spectacular for observing birds like songbirds, ducks and waders on their way between southern Asia and Siberia. In addition, there are many spectacular resident birds in exceptional environments. This birding journey will bring us to both the desert steppe and mountain areas of the Gobi. We will be able to view birds at the famous Yol Valley, which actually is a ravine, which is at this time certainly covered by permanent snow and ice. The Gurvansaikhan Mountains are an extension into the Gobi of the Altai Mountain range. Mongolia's large populations of steppe rodents support many raptors. Striking contrast of bird habitats is available in this roadless country of extremely varied habitats such as rocky and sandy desert plains, precipitous cliffs and ravines, salt pans, lakes and oases. However, what you will remember the most is the encounter with the hardy and friendly nomads who inhabit the Gobi areas. It is considered bad luck to hunt and shoot birds, so they are not hunted at all.

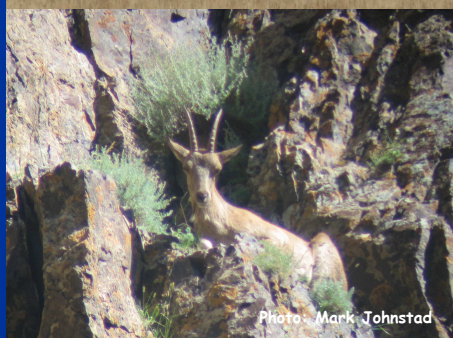


Photo: Mark Johnstad



Photo: Björn Anderson



Brief Outline Itinerary

We will fly to Dalanzadgad in the South Gobi. Camping equipment, all provisions, a cook, a trailfinder and vehicles will support the journey. We will make our way across the Gobi birding as we go. We will first head north towards the Hangai Mountains and pass giant sand dunes in southernmost Zavhan province until we reach the sacred Olgontenger Mountain (4092m), which has eternal snow. We will fly back to Ulaanbaatar from Uliastai. This trip is done twice, so there is also a reversed trip that starts in Uliastai and ends in Dalanzadgad.

Day 1: Ulaanbaatar

Arrive Ulaanbaatar by air. Transfer to the hotel. Tour briefing and dinner.

Day 2: To South Gobi

Early morning pick-up at your hotel in Ulaanbaatar, transfer to the airport and fly to Dalanzadgad (1h35). Although small, it is the main town in South Gobi. South Gobi (Ömnögobi) is the least populated province in all Mongolia. Start our drive to the nearby Yol Valley (Yoliin Am). Then entering the open expanses of the Gurvansaikhan Mountains (Three Beauties) where we already may be able to see Oriental Plover as well as Great Bustard.



We will stay for two overnights at a ger camp with poplars around it, trees which will attract a lot of migrants at this particular time. Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park precipitation ranges from less than 50 mm in the surrounding semi-desert lowlands to more than 200 mm in the higher mountain areas, which creates a variety of habitats.

Day 3: Yol Valley

Full day excursion to the Yol Valley. The Lammergeier is a prominent feature of this vertical ravine where it also nests. Other vultures, such as Eurasian Griffon, are more rare while Black Vultures are commonly seen. Many birds of prey are present here. Wallcreepers are guaranteed to be seen on the vertical rock walls and also present are Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Water and Blyth's Pipit. The rare Kozlov's (Mongolian) Accentor may usually be found in the junipers as well as the Alpine and Brown Accentors. A number of different rosefinches (Red-mantled; Beautiful; Common and Great) may all be seen. White-winged Snow finch, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Godlewski's & Chestnut-eared Bunting, Evermann's Redstart. We have also seen an Eagle Owl nesting at Yol Valley. We are likely to see Siberian Ibex and with luck also the large Argali Sheep. We will certainly climb one of the ridges in pursuit of the almost endemic Altai Snowcock. Return to the ger camp.

Day 4: Bayanzag

Today we will drive 90km on the desert steppe and explore the Bayanzag cliffs (Rich Saxaul), which were labeled "The Flaming Cliffs" by Roy Chapman Andrews, the famous American explorer, whose team was the first to unearth fossilized dinosaur eggs in this sandstone gorge in the 1920s. Eagle Owls hide in the crevices during the daytime. The Saxaul Sparrow, Henderson's Ground Jay and Isabelline and Saxaul (Steppe Grey) Shrike should be possible to see in the nearby bushland of the so-called Saxaul forest. Saxaul (*Haloxydon ammodendron*) is a woody shrub that plays an important ecological role helping protect fragile Gobi soils from damage and erosion. In the morning there might be spectacular flocks of Pallas's Sandgrouse, flying to their drinking places.

We may perhaps also find Brown Shrike, Lesser Kestrel and Rock Sparrow, Greater Sandplover and Desert Warbler. Overnight at a nearby ger camp.

Day 5: Towards Orog Lake

We will continue our journey northwesterly and pitch camp somewhere in Övörhangai province, within visibility of Baga Bogd Mountain (3590m).

Day 6: To Orog Lake

Today we will drive westerly across the dry desert steppes. On these steppes we might see Henderson's Ground Jay, MacQueen's Bustard, Steppe Grey Shrike, Desert Wheatear, Chukar, Mongolian Finch and, on migration, Siberian Flycatcher. We will eventually pass the Taatsiin White Lake where there will be an opportunity to see some of the waterfowl that migrate through the Gobi lakes. Eventually we will reach Orog Lake, one of the famous Gobi lakes. Pitch camp next to the lake.

Day 7: Orog Lake

A.m. Today we explore the 140 sq.km. Orog Lake and its immediate surroundings. The lake sits next to Ikh Bogd Mountain (3957m high). There are also some nearby sand dunes. It is a freshwater lake, but some years it will be totally dry. The Tuin River empties into the lake on its journey from Hangai Mountains. An abundance of food in the lake attracts plenty of birds. There is a small island with some 60 pairs of Grey Herons nesting on the ground! The world's longest fault line is visible through the terrain. It came about in 1957 and extends for some 270km westwards from Orog Lake. We are likely to see the famous Relict Gull here as well as migrants and residents such as wetland birds like Great Black-headed Gulls, Pallas' Fish Eagle, Bar-headed Goose, Falcated Duck, Great White Egret, Whooper and Mute Swans. Eastern Marsh Harrier, Eurasian Spoonbills, terns (Gull-billed, Caspian and Common). Pallas Reed Bunting and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler may also be observed. Anything can come here. Dalmatian Pelican is sometimes seen. In 2003 a stray Long-tailed Duck, the first for Mongolia ever, was seen here!

蒙古高原

Day 8: To Böön Tsagaan Lake

Half day drive westerly to the larger semi fresh and the biggest of the lakes (240 sq.km). Böön Tsagaan Nuur and pitch camp there for two nights. The elevation of the lake surface is 1336m above sea level. The Baidrag River empties into the lake. Birds likely to be seen here include Whooper Swan, Mute Swan, Bar-headed Goose, Swan Goose. Pallas' Eagle and Great Black-headed Gull. Böön Tsagaan Nuur and pitch camp there for two nights. The elevation of the lake surface is 1336m above sea level. The Baidrag River empties into the lake. Obvious birds here include Whooper Swan, Mute Swan, Bar-headed Goose, Swan Goose. Pallas' Eagle and Great Black-headed Gull.

Day 9: Böön Tsagaan Lake

Full day exploration of the lake area. We will continue birding in this striking and remote area, similar to Orog Nuur. We will probably see Black Stork, Relict Gull, Falcated Duck, Asiatic Dowitcher, Pallas's Reed Bunting and, on migration, Paddyfield Warbler, Blyth's Reed Warbler.

Day 10: To Mongol Sands

Today is a long drive north, through Bayanhongor towards the Hangai Mountains. We will move from desert steppe to the southern edge of the Hangai Mountains. On the steppe we may, if we are lucky, see Henderson's Ground Jay, and likely sightings of Pallas's Sandgrouse. We will reach the remote Gobi-Altai and Zavhan aimag camping next to some sand dunes. Zavhan province, in contrast to the Gobi areas, is one of the most populated provinces of Mongolia, meaning there are many nomads on horseback. By international standards, however, it is not densely populated. Near the sands they keep Bactrian Camels and in the mountains we will certainly also see yaks.

Day 11: Mongol Sands

The Mongol Sands are the most extensive and large sand dunes in all of Mongolia. They are quite vegetated. Shurag River runs along the sands, and

eventually becomes the Zavhan River. Here there are sands despite its northerly location. It is next to the Hangai Mountains and the eternally snow-capped Olgontenger. The Hangai Mountains are almost interconnected to the taiga life zone of Siberia. These locations are in fact the southernmost large forest zones of Mongolia, the southernmost permafrost area of the northern hemisphere, facing directly to the Gobi steppes and sands. This is an area that has not been seriously birded yet. If we can cross the rivers and we have the time, we might find our way to the beautiful Ereen Lake, next to Zavhan River and the Mongol Sands, which will provide exciting birding.

Day 12: To Hangai Mountains

Drive to the western side of the Hangai Mountains National Park. Olgontenger, eternally snow-capped at 4021m, is considered sacred by the Mongols. Olgontenger is 100km east of the town of Uliastai. The mountain is approached across a rather stony area, which eventually leads to the glacial lake of Bandar Khundaga. Pitch camp for two nights here. If there is little melting snow run-off from the Hangai Mountains, we might change this location for another valley, which has Saksaul Sparrow at the lowest elevation, with luck Hodgson's Bushchat at another higher up and Altai Snowcock on yet higher ground.

Day 13: Hangai Mountains

Today we will reach the highest altitudes of the entire trip. Many of Mongolia's mountain areas shows signs of previous Ice Ages, with U-shaped valleys and boulders left behind by retreating glaciers. Above the tree line, tundra, alpine-sedge meadows, highland swamps, and lichen-covered boulder fields characterize the high mountain zone. Snow-capped Olgontenger is one of four sacred peaks of Mongolia. In 2005 we saw Altai Snowcock, Hodgson's Bushchat and Kozlov's Accentor in one of the valleys at different altitudes. High mountain species such as Willow and Rock Ptarmigan, Pallas's Reed and Grey-necked Bunting, Plain Mountain Finch, Eurasian Dotterel, Hill Pigeon, Himalayan Accentor, Brandt's Finch, Gldenstdt's Redstart, and Red-billed Chough are possible.





Day 14: To Uliastai

We will use as much as possible of the day birding in the forested zones. Taiga is a boreal coniferous forest, comprised primarily of Siberian Larch (*Larix sibirica*) and Siberian Pine (*Pinus sibirica*). If we find pine forest patches there might be a chance to see Black-billed Capercaillie and/or Western Capercaillie. We might spot Hazel Grouse, Three-toed Woodpecker, Oriental Cuckoo, Eurasian Jay, Tengmalm's Owl, Eurasian Pygmy Owl, Siberian Jay, Pine Grosbeak and Great Grey Owl. Drive to Uliastai area. The flight to Ulaanbaatar usually departs at 17.35. Days are long this time of the year so we will overfly the entire range of the Hangai Mountains in the evening light. Transfer and check-in to the hotel in Ulaanbaatar.

Day 15: Ulaanbaatar

A.m. Visit Gandan Monastery, the most lively monastery of Mongolia, and the Natural History Museum. P.m. Free.

Day 16: Fly out

Transfer out to your next destination. Nomadic Journeys offer shorter birding itineraries to nearby locations such as Terelj-Khan Khentii as well as Gun Galuut Nature Reserve for easterly distributed rare cranes, only a 2-3 hours drive east of the city.

Practicalities

Transport: This journey is supported by a jeep or minibus on the Gobi road tracks.

Staff: A Mongolian English speaking local guide will accompany the group at all times, along with a cook and driver.

Meals: Our cook will prepare the meals. We pride ourselves in having cooks adept at both western and Mongolian cooking on our trips. There are always vegetables available and we have no problem accommodating vegetarians.

Overnights: This is a vehicle supported camping trip. Tents and mattresses will be provided for the camping nights. You need to bring your own sleeping bag. A portable camping shower will be provided.

PRICE ex Ulaanbaatar:

USD 2500 per person (4/12 members)

Supplement if 2-3 members:

USD 1050 per person

Includes: Leadership, breakfast every day, and all meals outside Ulaanbaatar. All overnights in tents, camping equipment and all local transport in the Gobi and transfers in Ulaanbaatar.

Excludes: Imported drinks, laundry. Visa fee. Private tent supplement USD 100. Additional hotel night in Ulaanbaatar is USD 90 per double room per night, or USD 65 in single. This rate includes taxes and breakfast. Domestic flights are currently USD 172 per person one way to Dalanzadgad (Apr2009), and USD 197 back to Ulaanbaatar from Uliastai.

Specialist Mongolian bird guide: Our Mongolian guide will speak English and know the routes and habitats, but will not be able to identify all birds. Nomadic Journeys works with Mongolian scientists and, subject to availability, we may by special arrangement add this service to the cost of the trip.

Domestic flights:

The flight schedules may change the days or the airports we may use.

DATES 2009 ex Ulaanbaatar (16d/15n):

GLT01: 18May-02Jun (Mon-Tue)

Reservations: