

# ULTIMATE BIRDING MONGOLIA



Mongolia, perhaps the most sparsely populated country in the world, offers many different species of birds and wildlife localized in the variety of undisturbed habitats - seamless vast steppes, fresh and brackish water lakes, Gobi desert and rock-strewn mountains. This awe-inspiring trip touches some of the most extraordinary wildlife destinations in Mongolia, with abundant wildlife and brilliant scenery.

Winter visitors are generally present until March or April with some present into early May. Transient migrants are present mainly in May with a few in early June. Migratory breeding birds arrive in May and are present during the summer months. Snow Leopards are most easily seen from early July into the fall and even winter. Weather in the Altai Mountains is cold and often snowy from November through April and sometimes into early May so visiting that area for Snow Leopards during those months is problematical. Also, community ger camps are mainly not open until late May except with special arrangements. Snow Leopards are difficult to see in June as they are confined mainly to dens with young cubs. For pure birding with no opportunity to see Snow Leopards, the highest species counts are achieved by tours beginning in May as more migrants are possible during that time. Species counts will be lower for tours beginning in June, but early July is the best time to see Snow Leopards. Thus, there is a trade-off.

This is an ultimate adventure for Western birders to see some of their dream bird species from the eastern Palearctic in breeding plumage. This tour covers several sites rarely visited by birders, including Ikhes Lake (Relict Gull breeding colony), Jargalant Mountains (Snow Leopards), Khomyn Tal,

Otgontenger Mountain (White-throated Bushchat), Bulnai Mountains (taiga), and Khovsgol Lake (taiga),

Iconic bird species include among others Bar-headed & Swan Geese, Mandarin, Falcated & Eastern Spot-billed Ducks, Red-crested Pochard, White-winged Scoter, Black-billed Capercaillie, Altai Snowcock, Daurian Partridge, Bearded, Himalayan & Cinereous Vultures, Steppe & Golden Eagles, Eastern Marsh Harrier, Pallas's Fish Eagle, Upland, Eastern & Long-legged Buzzards, Lesser Kestrel, Amur & Saker Falcons, White-naped & Demoiselle Cranes, Greater Sandplover, Oriental Plover, Red-necked Stint, Asian Dowitcher, Relict Gull, White-winged Tern, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Hill Pigeon, Oriental Cuckoo, Pacific Swift, Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, Isabelline & Steppe Gray Shrike, Mongolian Ground Jay, Azure Tit, White-crowned Penduline-tit, Bearded Reedling, Mongolian Lark, Pale Martin, Pallas's Leaf, Sulphur-bellied, Oriental Reed, Chinese Bush, Barred & Asian Desert Warblers, Wallcreeper, White-cheeked Starling, Red-throated Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Taiga Flycatcher, Eversmann's, Black, Daurian & White-winged Redstarts, White-throated Bushchat, Desert & Pied Wheatears, Saxaul Sparrow, White-winged & Pere David's Snowfinches, Alpine, Altai, Brown & Mongolian Accentors, Olive-backed & Water Pipits, Mongolian Finch, Asian Rosy-finch, Common, Beautiful, Long-tailed & Pallas's Rosefinches, Pine, Godlewski's, Meadow, Gray-necked, Yellow-breasted, Black-faced & Pallas's Buntings.



Mongolia, the land of blue sky, provides home to many birds and is a real example of nomadic people and wildlife living in harmony.

## OUTLINE ITINERARY

<b>Days</b>	<b>Destination</b>	<b>Hours of Drive</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
1	Ulaanbaatar	1 hour	Hotel
2	Transfer to Dalanzadgad, Flaming Gorge	Flight	Ger camp
3	Yolyn Am	Local drive	Ger camp
4	Dalanzadgad to Khongoryn Els	5-6 hours?	Ger camp
5	Khongoryn Els	No travel	Ger camp
6	Khongoryn Els to Orog Lake	8 hours	Tents
7	Orog Lake-Kholboolj Lake	2 hours	Tents
8	Kholboolj Lake to Buuntsagaan	7-8 hours	Tents
9	Buuntsagaan	No travel	Tents
10	Transfer to Hovd	10 hours	Hotel
11	Jargalant Mountains (Snow Leopards)	2-3 hours	Ger camp
12-16	Jargalant Mountains (Snow Leopards)	Local drives	Ger camp
17	Khomyn Tal	4-6 hours	Ger camp
18 & 19	Otgontenger Mountain	3-4 hours	Tents
20 & 21	Bulnai Mountains	2-3 hours	Tents
22 & 23	Murun town, Khuvsgul Lake	4-5 hours	Hotel
24 & 25	Bayan Lake	8 hours	Tents
26	Bayan Lake, Ulaanbaatar	4-5 hours	Hotel
27	Swan Lake, Tuul River. Fly Home		

## DETAILED ITINERARY

### Day 1: Arrival

The crew will meet you at the airport and take you to your hotel. There is some birding around the hotel for early arrivals. Night at Hotel Mongolica.

### Day 2: Dalanzadgad

The first day we will take a morning flight south to the town of Dalanzadgad. Since domestic flights have quite strict luggage limits, we plan on sending most of our luggage ahead on our vehicles, which will do the 8-hour drive in advance. After arrival, we will visit the Bayanzag or Flaming Cliffs, famed for the world's first discovery of dinosaur eggs in the 20th century. We'll wander around the paleontological rich Flaming Cliffs and look for the fragments of the dinosaur bones buried by the dust.



Look for the localized birds at small spring, seamless steppe, saxaul forest, and sandstone cliffs. Night at tourist ger camp.

### Day 3: Yolyn Am (Lammergeier Gorge)

Depart very early for drive south to the incredibly scenic Gurvan Saikhan National Park which is a chain of 3 beautiful mountains stretching from the grand Gobi Altai mountain range. Yolyn Am is a deep gorge in the eastern extent of these mountains and is located 2-3 hours from our camp. Trek the deep, narrow gorge of Yolyn Am. Our main target birds are Mongolian Accentor, this being the best site for it, and Beautiful Rosefinch. Other possible birds are Altai Snowcock (rare), Chukar Partridge, Bearded Vulture, Himalayan Vulture, Cinereous Vulture, Golden Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Saker Falcon, Oriental Plover (down the valley), Isabelline Shrike, Wallcreeper, Barred Warbler, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Rock Thrush, Brown Accentor, and Godlewski's & Gray-necked Buntings. We also have a chance to see Siberian Ibex and Argali sheep. Night at tourist ger Camp.



### Days 4-5: Dalanzadgad to Khongoryn Els

On day 4 we'll drive through the Gobi Desert to Khongor Sand Dunes area. This vast "white sands" dune stretches 115 miles and covers about 360 square miles. The striking desert landscape is home to a number of specials. En route we'll look for rare mammals such as Asiatic Wild Ass, Goitered Gazelle, and Mongolian Gazelle. Possible birds enroute include Bearded Vulture, Pied Wheatear, and Mongolian Finch among others. We will arrive at our camp in the afternoon. The next day we'll set out after an early breakfast next morning to bird the adjacent hilly area to look for Mongolian Ground-Jay and visit a small patch of Saxaul forest for Saxaul Sparrow, Asian Desert Warbler, Southern Gray Shrike, and Desert Wheatear. Other birds we may see in the area include Long-legged Buzzard, Lesser Kestrel, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Hill Pigeon, Steppe Gray Shrike, Asian Short-toed Lark, and Asian Desert Warbler. Nights at an established Gobi ger camp.



#### **Days 6-7: Transfer, Orog Lake, Holboolj Lake**

Day 6 entails a long drive north to reach Orog Lake. The lake can be freshwater or a bit saline depending on rainfall levels. Shorelines are sandy and contain some salt marshes. As time permits after arrival, we'll do some birding near the lake. We'll have all the next day to bird around Orog Lake and to visit Holboolj Lake located an hour and a half to the north. Both areas are habitat for the Mongolian Ground-Jay if we missed it earlier at Khongoryn Els. Holboolj Lake is a possible site to see the rare Relict Gull. Numerous water birds are present on these lakes including Bar-headed Goose, Graylag Goose, Swan Goose, Whooper Swan, Common Pochard, Eurasian Spoonbill, Mongolian Gull, Pallas's Gull, Black-headed Gull, Brown-headed Gull, White-winged Tern, and a variety of shorebirds. In the surrounding desert are Pallas's Sandgrouse, Asian Desert Warbler, Desert Wheatear, and Mongolian Finch. Nights at a tent camp set up by our crew.

#### **Day 8: Orog Lake, Buuntsagaan Lake**

We'll have all morning to bird around Orog Lake with a focus on finding Mongolian Ground-Jay if not seen earlier on the tour. Many wetland birds are present around this large desert lake. After morning birding, transfer to Buuntsagaan Lake. Night at community ger camp.





Relict Gulls with an immature Mongolian Gull

#### **Day 9. Buuntsagaan Lake**

The lake is a dream destination for birding Mongolia being a largest water body in the immense Gobi Desert. We'll spend all day birding this area. The lake is another chance to find the rare Relict Gull. Notable birds in addition to those already mentioned above include Falcated Duck, Great Crested Grebe, Slender-billed Gull, Dalmatian Pelican, Pallas's Fish-Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Black-faced Bunting, and Pallas's Bunting. Night at community ger camp.

#### **Day 10. Transfer to Hovd**

Morning depart for the town of Hovd, a 10 hour drive. This is the longest drive of the tour and necessary to reach the Altai Mountains of western Mongolia. We'll keep an eye out for interesting birds en route. Night at a hotel in Hovd.

#### **Days 11-16. Jargalant Mountains**

The morning of Day 11 we'll transfer to a remote ger camp in the barren foothills of the Jargalant Mountains, our base for the next 6 days. Enroute near the very large Khar Us Lake we'll do some birding looking for Asian Short-toed Lark and the lovely white-headed race of Yellow Wagtail. We'll spend the next 6 days looking for Snow Leopards. We'll rely on local trackers to find Snow Leopards for us and there is an 80% chance of success. We'll also be birding this area. The highlands of this region are the best place for us to find the prized Altai Snowcock. A number of birds are restricted to western Mongolia and we hope to have good success seeing them. These are White-headed Duck,

Eurasian Golden Oriole, Rosy Starling, Turkestan Tit, Savi's Warbler, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Black-throated Accentor, Plain Mountain Finch, and Brandt's Mountain Finch. Possible but unlikely are Common Quail, Booted Warbler, and Common Grasshopper Warbler. Nights at ger camp.





### Day 17. Khomyn Tal National Park

Morning drive east to Khomyn Tal National Park, stopping en route at Khomyn Hooloi in the western section of the park, an inland waterway connecting the Khar and Durgun Lakes in western Mongolia to do some birding there. Relict Gull is possible there as well if we previously missed it. In addition to water birds, Hill Pigeon, a number of raptors, and various larks occur in that area. Khomyn Tal is a vast region of steppe and dunes and is home to reintroduced native Przewalski's Horses as well as Siberian Ibex, Mongolian Gazelles, Taiga Antelope, and Wolves. The park borders on Khar Us National Park and Mongol Els National Park. Night at community ger camp.

### Days 18-19. Khangai Mountains including Otgontenger Mountain

We'll spend the morning of Day 19 driving eastward 3-4 hours to the Otgontenger Mountain in the Khangai Range, a little visited mountain range in central Mongolia. Otgontenger is the highest peak, rising to an elevation of nearly 13,200ft. We'll have the rest of the day and the next day to bird this area. The main target bird here is the globally threatened and poorly known White-throated Bushchat, which occurs in subalpine meadows near streams, in many gorges, and in rocky outcrops at an elevation of 8000-8500ft. Some other birds of the Otgontenger Plateau are Black Grouse, Bearded Vulture, Saker Falcon, Water Pipit, Guldenstadt's Redstarts, Spotted Great Rosefinch, Mongolian Accentor, Altai Accentor, and Bluethroat. Mammals present in the area include Argali, Siberian Ibex, and Siberian Marmot, along with the rare Snow Leopard. Nights in tents.



### Days 20-21. Bulnai Mountains

On day 21 we'll continue east driving 2-3 hours to reach the Bulnai Mountains (Bulnayn Nuru). We'll have the rest of this day and the following day to bird this area of boreal forest, consisting mainly of pine and Siberian Larch. Special birds here are Black-billed Capercaillie, Daurian Partridge, Ural Owl, Boreal Owl, several woodpeckers, Siberian Rubythroat, Rugged-backed Redstart, Taiga Flycatcher,



Common Rosefinch, Pallas's Rosefinch, Spotted Nutcracker, and Pine Bunting. Mammals include Wapiti, Roe Deer, Wolf, Mongolian Marmot, and rarely seen Eurasian Lynx. Nights in tents.



#### **Days 22-23. Murun town**

We'll spend the morning birding in the Bulnai Mountains if necessary to look for any missed species. We'll then continue east driving 4-5 hours to Murun town. The following day we'll drive north to the little visited Khuvsgul Lake area located about 2 hours to the north, another region of boreal forest where we have another chance for boreal species not yet seen. Along the western shore of the lake are several lagoons and wet meadows with the taiga almost reaching the shoreline. This rarely visited site is one of the few places in Mongolia where Black-throated Thrush and Red-throated Thrush occur together. Other taiga species include Northern Hawk-Owl, Oriental Cuckoo, several species of leaf warbler, Siberian Rubythroat, Rufous-backed Redstart, and Daurian Redstart. Swinhoe's Snipe are also common in the forest while marshes near the lake usually have a few breeding pairs of Long-toed Stint. Nights in a hotel in Murun.

#### **Days 24-25. Bayan lake**

We'll depart early for Bayan Lake, about 7 hours drive to the east. We should have some time for late afternoon birding there. Bayan Lake is the nesting area for White-naped Cranes, and shallow pools suitable for waders. It offers another chance to find Relict Gull. Many other birds are present including Falcated Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Pin-tailed Snipe, Bearded Reedling, Oriental Reed Warbler, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Pere David's Snowfinch, Citrine Wagtail, Pallas's Bunting, and Reed Bunting. Night in tents.

#### **Day 26: Ulaanbaatar**

Morning depart for Ulaanbaatar, about a 3-4 hour drive. After arrival we'll have time to do some birding at the sewage pond and along the Tuul River. At the sewage ponds target birds are Long-tailed Rosefinch, Azure Tit, and Richard's Pipit. The rare Yellow-breasted Bunting is possible but hasn't been seen the last couple of years. Along the Tuul river the main target is White-cheeked Starling and White-crowned Penduline-Tit. Night in Hotel Mongolica.

#### **Day 27: Ulaanbaatar**

Morning visit the Swan Lake on the western outskirts of Ulaanbaatar city. Our hotel is nestled on the Tuul river bank in riparian forest close to the airport, away from the bustling city center. Afternoon or early evening transfer to the airport, depending on departure time of international flight home.



Azure Tit



Eastern Penduline Tit

### Day 28 Fly Home

Arrive home.

### Physical grading

Easy to Moderate. Be prepared for the inconveniences of tent camping and some long drives along sometimes rough roads.

Participants should be in good health and able to endure extended hours of walks on comparatively flat terrain (max. 4-5 hours per day). There are optional hard walks on request. We will make many reasonable stops to stretch your legs and enjoy natural beauties and wildlife. We will make a toilet stop each 2 hours where possible.

### Inclusions

The cost includes all transport and accommodation in Mongolia one-way flight between Ulaanbaatar and Dalanzadgad (if we don't drive it), local expert guides, trackers, road tolls and entry fees to national parks and protected areas, and drinking water.

### Important notes

The itinerary given above may be a subject to change due to domestic flight schedule.

### Accommodation

*Hotels - 5 nights, Ger camps - 11 nights, Tents - 10 nights*

Our selected ger camps are highest of local standard. Please understand that ensuite ger camps are limited in Mongolia. We will mostly stay in comfortable and clean ger camps on shared basis. But we will try to book the gers closest to the bathrooms. In case someone wants to stay singly, please check with us beforehand.

The ger camps provide gers for accommodation; a ger has 2-4 beds, a stove, chairs, a table, and drawers inside. Due to the remoteness, bathrooms are shared, and electricity is provided at limited hours, usually between 7 pm and 10 pm. The meals are served in a restaurant, usually an immense ger or a one-story building.



For tented camping, we will provide a tent, mattress, and sleeping bag for each person.

**Meals and culinary notes**

The price covers all the main meals during the whole trip. The restaurants in Ulaanbaatar serve with a wide variety of dishes from Mongolian barbeques to the Korean chilly cuisines. Due to remote location, meals in the ger camps and tented camps may lack variety, but they try hard to cater for the best available dishes for their guests. Vegetarians should not worry about Mongolian food, as the country is striving to grow as many as vegetables, even in the greenhouses. Our past vegetarian guests are happy with the food they had in Mongolia. If you do not eat meat or have other dietary restrictions, please let us know in advance, as the ger camps supply provisions at some distance.

**Transport and Roads**

4WD vehicles will be hired for the tour depending on the group size. We keep the least possible driving per day. We chose the best destinations in terms of the wildlife and birding opportunities. The trip is designed to give you more chance to explore the attractions, birding in the dramatic landscapes. However, covering a huge area in a tour requires long drives some days.

**Laundry**

The hotels in Ulaanbaatar have a service for laundry.

**Weather**

Mongolia is the 'Land of Blue Sky', the nickname comes from the number of sunny days throughout a year in the country – two thirds of the year. Temperatures should be relatively moderate and skies are usually brilliantly clear. The days will usually be sunny and cool, and pleasant though colder at higher altitudes. Nights will be considerably cooler after the sunset. Rain is possible. Please check the average temperatures by months at [timeanddate.com](http://timeanddate.com).