

## LAKE BAIKAL (RUSSIA)

August 2015

Since 2 years I wanted to go to Lake Baikal to see Baikal Seal or Nerpas. I didn't want to go there for only 1 target species so I looked how to combine it with another trip: Japan or a cruise in the sea of Okhotsk. In both cases it was really expensive to do a stop there. So when Richard WEBB offered me to join him on a trip to Mongolia I realised it was the occasion. The trip in Mongolia was quite successful (see Richard Webb trip report).

I contacted many companies offering tours to see Nerpas, most of them never responded. One told me I had to charter a boat to the Uskhanys islands where they are regular and that I haven't any chance to see one outside of this place at this season. But the price of the boat was too expensive for me. Two other companies offer a tour to this place, but they have very rarely tourists booking it, so it is a 500 euros for 1 person. Expensive to see only 1 species. Finally I don't recommend to go to Ust Barguzin and try to arrange something there. You may be lucky, but I saw several trip reports of travellers unable to do anything there. But I saw on internet a picture of Nerpas at cap Khoboi at the northern tip of Olkhon island. I was decided to go and sleep there, but was told by different local persons "you won't see any".

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August I took a bus from Oulan Bator (Mongolia) to Ulan Ude (Russia), then a train to Irkhutsk, and finally a minibus to Khuzir on Olkhon island in lake Baikal. I slept in a local house. From the train I already saw 4 or 5 Nerpas on the southern part of the island. Arriving at the lake and while waiting for the ferry to the island I saw another one, maybe the same that I saw from the ferry.

I spent 3 full days on Olkhon. The first day I walked 20km to the north and saw only 1 very distant. The second day I went in a minibus on an organized tour to cap Khoboi at the northern tip of the island. By 1pm the place was crowded with plenty of tourists and I didn't see any seal. Two hours later it began to be quiet and I saw a seal swimming next to the shore below the cliffs. Later I found it sunbathing on a rock. I stayed there nearly 1 hour. When the sun was too low the seal went in the water and finally disappeared. I slept on a mattress near Cap Sayan Kushir. It was a great experience to be alone there: the lake for me without the crowd of tourists that you find along the shores of the center of the island. The following day I walked the 40km back to Khuzir.

Every day I saw Red Squirrels (most of them black), Long tailed Ground Squirrels, and droppings of Hare (species?), Siberian Roe Deer and Manchurian Red Deer (the 2 later reintroduced).

The day after I returned to Irkhutsk seeing again a Nerpa from the ferry. Finally I returned to Oulan Bator seeing Nerpa from the train between Irkhutsk and Ulan Ude.

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