



*Snow Leopard tracks*

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**Jan Ebr, Ivana Ebrová, Eliška Majorová**

When I was buying tickets to Ulaanbaatar, I thought that Mongolia was an obscure destination - the large number of existing reports has quickly proven me wrong. I also had no particular idea about the country and expected yet another variation on central Asia. In reality I found a surprisingly East Asian culture - and, to my relief, also cuisine, with an unexpected number of Korean restaurants to make things even better.

My third misconception, the most noticeable, was thinking that early May would be “spring” in Mongolia. Instead the whole desert around Dalanzagdad got covered by snow during the second night and we saw even more snowfall two weeks later in Terelj. While the deserts of lower altitudes were occasionally even unpleasantly warm during the day, we continued to encounter bitter cold throughout the trip. On one hand, I like cold better than hot, on the other it was clear that many animals were not active due to the temperature - as proven by the one particularly warm night, when we suddenly found an explosion of rodents. The cold weather also meant fewer birds and very few insects. Perhaps the second half of May would have been the best time for a spring visit.

We rented a self-drive Ford Everest from Drive Mongolia, which is a marvelous little company - Baatar, with whom we handled everything, is a very pleasant person and was always keen to help. He hasn't even lost his smile after I returned the car with one mirror hanging on a cable after my failed attempt to drive out of an underground car wash just a few minutes earlier - he also charged me just 60k MNT for it. The Everest is the “cheaper” option at 150 USD per day, but I was very happy with it - it handled terrain very well while not being as bulky as a Landcruiser; the only major drawback was the lack of a snorkel, without which the Terelj river is too deep to be crossed - at least in May. There were also minor problems with opening doors and closing windows, but for example the tires were brand new and we had zero flats (and two spare tires). Baatar also gave



*Alashan, Pallid, Daurian and Long-tailed Ground Squirrels*

us a compressor and some tools that could have come handy. Right next to the Drive Mongolia office, there was a shop selling outdoor gas canisters (EN417) and a really good supermarket - strangely, as it was the case throughout Mongolia, a large fraction of goods sold were imported from ... Poland.

We planned the route mainly based on Daan Drukker's report, but much shorter, given that we had only two weeks, not wanting to spend all the time driving. This worked less well than I hoped - even the shorter circuit ended up being 3000 kms, with a half of it on corrugated or barely visible tracks where we would rarely get above 40 km/h. We used mapy.cz and satellite images on Google together with a paper map that we got from Baatar - while virtually every track shown on mapy.cz (even most "footpaths") could be driven, some principal tracks were missing and then the paper map would sometimes provide an idea in which direction to go. There are nice little towns scattered across the deserts and steppes, in each of them we could get gas and food supplies (sometimes after asking around a bit). The gas hungry car could only do about 400 kms on a full tank, which, with night driving for mammals, went by quite fast. Many of these towns aren't connected to any roads to speak of, regardless of what the maps say - just tracks, sometimes a confusing mesh of parallel ones - only the few main roads to the various corners of the country are paved. Note that while even the tracks connecting the towns look like an offroad trails to Europeans, the locals routinely traverse them in Priuses; in the mountains, we often met locals in various sedans on trails which we were unsure about even in the Everest! One could be thus tempted to rent a sedan as well to save money, but I am sure that damage would be all but guaranteed.



*Mongolian and Goitered Gazelles*



*Red and Corsac Fox*

There was cell phone reception here and there (SIM cards available at the airport); we also had a satellite messenger in case we needed help (which we didn't). Apart from two nights, we always camped, which was always easy, as nobody seems to care where you pitch your tent. The only problem was sometimes very strong winds. Excluding air tickets, the trip cost us about \$1100 per person, so less than \$75 per day of the 15-day stay in actual Mongolia (of which \$50 was just the car rental and most of the rest was fuel).

We recorded 29 species of mammals and (by a preliminary count) 116 birds in 15 days. While most of the mammals (22) were lifers, only 16 birds were new - many species seen were good old European birds.

[https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d2=2024-05-12&place\\_id=7347&taxon\\_id=40151&user\\_id=opisska](https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d2=2024-05-12&place_id=7347&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska)

Driving south from Ulaanbaatar, we saw Brandt's Voles around the road several times and a herd of Mongolian gazelles once. After a snowy night in Dalanzagdad, even the paved road further southwest was barely passable, but to our surprise, we managed to drive all the way to the end of the track in Yolín Am; the snow was melting quickly during the day. We stopped at some points to scan the hills around, this brought us our only Argali of the trip, seen from a hill next to the highest point on the track. Siberian Ibexes, Alashan Ground Squirrels, Mongolian Jirds and many pikas were seen even from the car. The jirds were particularly numerous around the car park, while the pikas were incredibly plentiful everywhere, in particular in a random side valley going south just before the rocky gorge. Pika ID is not easy, but we believe that those were generally Pallas' Pikas - this is at least clear for the ones found directly in the gorge, because we have good sound recordings for them - it's a shame we were not really prepared before the trip, because if I had known that the pika calls are so diagnostic, I would have recorded them more. We saw one Red Fox running away in the distance during the day and more of those during the night drive in the valley (I have read that spotlighting may not be allowed in Yolín Am, but there was nobody even collecting entry fees in this season); then an unidentified jerboa in the steppe.

In the morning, we saw a large herd of Mongolian Gazelles next to our campsite NE of Bayandalai and another one in the broad grassy valley north of the mountains to the NW of Bayandalai, which we, using extrapolation from the other two mountain ranges on the map, call Western Beauty; this valley also had Alashan Ground squirrels. We parked the car close to the northern edge of the mountains and hiked in. Early next morning we summited the 2613 meter peak; just below the summit, there were huge cat footprints in snow that couldn't



*Jirds from various sites, probably all Mongolian*



*Siberian Ibex, Argali, Brandt's Vole*

be anything but Snow Leopard - and were clearly not older than two days at that point, considering the last snowfall, but probably even more fresh. We lost the trail where the leopard left the snow, then found more tracks on another ridge; despite meticulous searching with a spotting scope from all possible places, we did not find any leopards, just ibexes and pikas.

A full day's hike using the larger valleys to the west brought a quick glimpse of our first Corsac Fox in the grassy plateau to the north and the realization that we could have driven our car much deeper into the mountains, because these valleys had reasonable tracks. We thus returned with the car in the evening and did an extensive drive through the mountain valleys, smaller rocky hills in the north and the grassy plateau, getting several Red Foxes and Ibexes, one Stone Marten and some more unidentified Jerboas. Near our campsite on the grassy plateau, we found a series of mounds that made us think of mole-voles, but digging into them, we could not find any tunnels.

The arrival at the Khongor dunes was a bit of a shock - the area is now much more developed than what the satellite images show, with new hotels, and a weird fence across the landscape blocking car access to the biggest dunes; in other places, access to the dunes was prevented by a lot of water in the short "river" that flows alongside them. We walked around the fenced part, finding only small bats over water (*Myotis* sp. guessing by ultrasound) and then drove around at night, finding Anderson's Three-toed Jerboa and Long-eared Hedgehog, both near the dune crossing to Servei. We crossed the dunes in the morning (which is easier than it looks like) and found Goitered gazelles on the southern site, then another herd along the long drive from Servei to Bayanlig. Before we reached Bayanlig, the night fell, so we continued spotlighting - the night was warm and full of animals - Goitered Gazelle, Siberian Jerboas, an unidentified three-toed jerboa, Five-toed Pygmy Jerboa (and another unclear PJ, the pygmy jerboas both seen directly on the track by the driver) and Red Fox.



*Stone Marten*



*Anderson's Three-toed, Siberian and Five-toed Pygmy Jerboas (the second PJ is less clear, despite having a visible foot)*

Having reached Bayanlig, I felt like we were basically in Ikh Bogd, but it took us the entire day to get to the mountains - the track shown along the southern shore of (mostly dry) Orog Nuur from the main "road" didn't seem to exist, so we had to go all the way through Bogd and then back around the western end of the lake. We wanted to follow Daan's route to the mountains and there was only one promising track on mapy.cz starting at 45.0332N, 100.6349E, which turned out to be the correct one. The track was so bad that Eliška (who otherwise usually insists on driving outside cities) let me drive and I called it the worst road I ever took, but reaching the end of the valley was ultimately easy. However just above the steep ascent to the mountain plateau, we encountered deep snow and had to stop; we camped there and scanned for leopards late evening and early morning from some strategic hills, but there was nothing but more pikas and ibexes; the Orog Nuur area had Goitered Gazelles and Tolai Hare.



Moving on, we dug out some more possibly-mole-vole mounds near Jinst, this time finding a tunnel, but no animal came out. Turning east in Jinst, we eventually reached a beautiful river to camp some 30 km south of Nariinteel, but the night there produced only Siberian Jerboa. Driving further east, we encountered various ground squirrels, which I mistakenly considered to be all long-tailed - in fact there were both Pallid Ground Squirrels and Daurian Ground Squirrels in the area! In hindsight, we should have learned the GS ID better and not relied on the length of the tail, which turned out to be quite variable - due to our ignorance, we later spent time looking for species that we already had. Apart from the squirrels, there were just more Mongolian Jirds - and then we hit the tarmac

and before the end of the day, we were already crossing Tuul south of Endeshireet, ready for the night drive through a promising area not far from Hustai. In the evening, we found the first Siberian Marmot very far away in the scope. The night drive brought Mongolian Gazelles, Red Foxes, Elk, Siberian Jerboas, Daurian Hedgehog and a pika.



*Przewalski's Horses with a Siberian Marmot*



*Long-eared and Daurian Hedgehog, a bat, Elks*

Driving to Hustai, we saw Daurian Ground Squirrels at least twice, once just a few kms before the park entrance. In Hustai, there was again nobody to pay to, so we just entered. First we needlessly checked the Daurian Squirrel site 3 km west of the entrance, with no luck, and then started the endless parade of Siberian Marmots and Elks, with an occasional Long-tailed Ground Squirrel and Mongolian Gazelle. Already at our first stop we scoped some distant Przewalski's Horses on a ridge; a lot more horses came in the evening to the valley that turns west at the only houses within the park and those were happily watched from up close. Watching these horses, which came from the breeding program of our very own Prague ZOO here on



the other side of the world, was a bit funny. A single Red Fox walked slowly across the main valley in late afternoon. Night driving east along Tuul and then north across the mountains brought Tolai Hare, Daurian Hedgehog, Brandt's Vole, some not entirely clear jirds, a pika, Siberian Jerboa and the first really good views of Corsac Foxes. Both this and the previous night were very windy and dusty, which made observations difficult.

Mapy.cz show Terelj NP as a small area SW of Terelj, but that's a misunderstanding - this is just the "tourist area", a hopeless theme park; the real wilderness lies NE, across the Terelj river. The current in the crossing, which is right in Terelj village, was mild, but the river was simply too deep to risk ingesting water without a snorkel - I waded it and turned back when it was above my knees. We thus drove a few kms north along the western bank, parked at the end of the track and went for a two-night trek, despite the mildly frightening weather forecast. In hindsight, we could have reached most of this area by driving back west and then north, but the walk was really nice - I have never walked through extensive larch forests before!



*Daurian Zokor, Siberian Chipmunk, Tolai Hare*



*Vole (Alexandromys sp.?), Snow Leopard and Lynx tracks (the camera bag is 12 cm long)*

The first evening brought just blurry pictures of a vespertine bat, the second afternoon, around our camp at 48.0367N, 107.3450E was much better - first we heard Eastern Roe Deer barking, then saw two Siberian Chipmunks and found a large amount of Zokor mounds nearby. We first opened the freshest-looking one with no success, then Ivana dug out a few more and when I checked them after some time, one of them had a freshly growing mound on top of it; we removed it again and the Daurian Zokor living there showed up after just a few minutes. While watching it, we heard a really peculiar sound and I went to follow it - still unsure whether it was an animal, human activity, or something even weirder, I suddenly noticed the huge Black-billed Capercaillie sitting on the top of the tree - surely this is a bird that moves even the most hardcore mammal specialist! A night walk brought a small vole, probably one of the *Alexandromys* species, and fresh large cat tracks in snow, quite certainly a Lynx!

With a night to spare, we tried for Pallas' Cat at Daan's site north of Bayandelger, but after 7 hours from afternoon till midnight, we only had Siberian Jerboas and Corsac Foxes, not even any ground squirrels. We also checked the woodland on the northern side of the hills, but it doesn't really fit Hoffmann's Pika habitat - the forest is dense and logged, with almost no fallen wood. A brief visit to the eastern side of Bogd Khan (where we paid 50k MNT because apparently, we were a bus) brought more marmots and then we checked into the marvelous LG hostel in Ulaanbaatar.

Throughout the trip, we saw quite a large selection of mammal species (even though we were not really aware of some until after return when Daan helped us with the IDs). Our attempts at Snow Leopard and Pallas' Cat were long shots at best, but we were thrilled to see at least leopard tracks. Quite a few other rodent species were theoretically possible, but I think the low temperatures contributed to their absence a lot. We have seen both polecat species before, so we are not that sad for missing them, but I find it interesting how often other people saw them, yet we didn't. Going for wild camels with only 15 days overall would not have made any sense to me at all, considering that even the shorter route was already way too long; even the Saiga area was too far to include.

Mongolia was in many ways very different from how I imagined it, but it was in most ways magnificent. The absolute freedom of movement and lack of any kind of a hassle is something really precious in today's world, where more and more pieces of nature disappear behind red tape. Combined with the pleasant people, ease of logistics and fantastic food, Mongolia was the first country I visited in a while, where I felt a strong need to return soon.

Many thanks to Daan Drukker for his extensive help with IDs.



*During the trip we saw a lot of pikas, but their ID is notoriously difficult. At least some should be Pallas' Pika.*