



CAT EXPEDITIONS

Manul of Mongolia Photo Tour 2024 Trip Report

July 9, 2024 - July 15, 2024



Group: Jia
Kate
Luveen
Robert

Trip Leaders: Sebastian Kennerknecht
Rachel Tobias

Supported: This trip helped support 2 local guides,
2 drivers, and 6 local staff members

Places Visited: Steppes of Eastern Mongolia



Trip Highlights

Manul: We photographed **3 different manul families**, but the resounding highlight was time spent with 'BBC Cat', a force of nature, highly effective first-time mother, and incredibly tolerant and trusting cat with whom we were able to photograph numerous kinds of behavior, from the adult grooming, hunting and feeding kittens, to kittens playing, learning new skills like stalking, and beautiful interactions with mom. Seeing a litter of six cubs was a remarkable highlight; the healthy population of Brandt's voles this year played a key role in larger litters, like hers as the average is typically closer to 3-4 cubs.

Mammals: We saw **8 mammal species**. In addition to the Manul and the plentiful Brandt's Voles, we had some great opportunities to photograph and observe Corsac Foxes, and got quick looks at a few small mammals like the Daurian Ground Squirrel, the Tolai Hare and the Mongolian Marmot. We also had distant views of Mongolian Gazelle, though not close enough to photograph.

Birds: We identified **28 different bird species**, including opportunities to photograph Eurasian Eagle-Owl fledglings on foot, Demoiselle Cranes, and Whooper Swans foraging in the water, and Cinereous Vultures along the road to our ger camp. Northern and Isabelline Wheatears and Rock Sparrows were plentiful at the manul dens, and often gave us clues and signals as to the cat's whereabouts.

Day 1 | Tuesday, July 9

We arose bright and early to head east, departing the hotel at 6a bound for the steppes! The drive to our ger camp took us through beautiful rolling hills, where livestock like camels, horses and cattle roamed freely and tiny ger camps and villages sparsely dotted the landscape. We had the opportunity to see loads of upland buzzards along the road and even spotted one Mongolian Gazelle from a long distance, as we got closer and closer to camp.

After dropping our stuff at camp, we headed out on a short game drive to check out the local wildlife. On that first drive, we spotted 6 different Corsac Foxes, and 2 Steppe Eagles. The highlight was finding three Eurasian Eagle-Owl chicks sitting together on the side of a rocky hillside. They allowed us to slowly approach on foot.



Steppe Eagle in Flight



Manul female searching for voles from rock outcropping.

Day 2 | Wednesday, July 10

Our first day with the manul, and it was an early 4a departure to head out to the den area and look for a cat! After finding an occupied den, we entered our blind for the first time. We waited a little over an hour and finally the mom emerged at the top of the rock. We would refer to this cat as 'BBC Cat'; a BBC crew had spent three weeks filming her and her kittens just before our tour. BBC Cat kittens, estimated at about 7 weeks old soon followed, playing and climbing around her. After a while, mom went out to hunt; we watched a couple of unsuccessful attempts, and then saw her bring in a big Brandt's vole to the den, delivering it to her litter.

After a midday rest, we left at 4p, headed back to the same den. Mom came out within just a few minutes of setting up the blind, and headed straight out hunting. All six cubs were out shortly after, active and playing. On the way back to camp, we got a quick sighting of a Tolai Hare.

Day 3 | Thursday, July 11

In the morning, we visited a different den. This new den had an incredible view of the valley below, and the morning light was beautiful. A Eurasian Hoopoe landed on the den (and then on the back of Bob's chair!), as we waited for the cats to come out. Finally, a mom cat revealed herself, slowly peeking above the top of the rocks a couple of times. However, she was exceedingly shy, and we never got more than those short peeks. We left the den about 7:30, as it was getting quite hot.



After another hot afternoon rest, we headed back out to look for BBC cat once again. At her den, she once again came out right away, and was off to the races hunting for her family. She caught vole after vole, bringing them one-by-one back to the den, dropping them at the entrance with all of her kittens scrambling to grab the meal. At one point, she even went far behind the blind to hunt, a great sign of trust that we were very happy to see.



Unfortunately, a storm was fast-approaching and the wind became very heavy. One of the stakes of the blind came loose, and we had to jerry-rig a quick solution to stabilize the blind. Our solution didn't stop the rain, though, which forced us to load back into the vehicles and wait a distance away for the storm to pass. We went back to the blind after the rain stopped, but the lightning inched closer and closer, and so we decided to pack it up and head back for the night. On the way back, we photographed a Steppe Eagle and an empty Steppe Eagle nest, as well as three Eurasian Eagle-Owl chicks, lying flat on the ground trying to camouflage themselves in the dirt. It was fascinating to see these raptors adapting to an environment without trees, utilizing rock ledges and hillsides as cover and nesting sites.

Day 4 | Friday, July 12

BBC Mom had moved the next day, and so we went back to the beautiful den site with the shy cat from the previous day; however, nobody showed up. On the way back, one of the vehicles spotted a Mongolian Marmot, a special sighting given the rarity of these animals in the area.

While we enjoyed an afternoon rest, one of the manul biologists found BBC Cat's new den, and we headed there for the afternoon. Mom spent time watching over the den, and we had some nice looks at the kittens out and about on top of the den.

Day 5 | Saturday, July 13

We'd hoped to be able to find BBC Cat again at the same den from the previous evening, but alas, she had moved. We looked for her at all her known den sites, but couldn't find her, so we tried another den of a cat with five kittens. We waited for a long time; because we were on an uneven hillside, a small part of the den was viewable to half the group, and there were a couple of kittens that played there for some time. Otherwise, it was quiet. But, we did enjoy observing the family of rock sparrows that had built their nest right next to the den, undoubtedly a stressful and risky endeavor for the birds, as illustrated by their nervous and flighty behavior.



We found BBC Cat once again in the afternoon at a large, wide den with a big cavernous opening on one side. For awhile, we could see the kittens playing inside, rolling around with each other and periodically popping their heads out of the entrance to the 'cave.' BBC Cat was out hunting, and began to return with voles; her cubs came out of the interior den to greet her. Lots of great interactions between mom and kittens during this session.

Day 6 | Sunday, July 14

Our group opted to split in two for the morning session. Half of the group headed back out for cats, while half of us did a car-based session focused on trying to get some good shots of Corsac Foxes.

Team Fox saw many Corsac Foxes, including a few that were fairly tolerant and gave us some good looks in beautiful light. We also had a great Steppe Eagle sighting with one sitting right next to the vehicle, possibly eating, although we weren't able to see the prey. We also saw a Daurian Ground Squirrel, a common mammal but very difficult to spot. With the extra time in the morning, we spent some time shooting voles back at camp before breakfast.



Team Cat went back to BBC Cat. We photographed some beautiful interactions between the cubs and mom. She then went out for a hunt out beyond the blind, and soon made her way just past the blind, walking about 15 yards away while seeing us in the blind. We stayed absolutely still, and she continued hunting, despite seeing us sitting there. She caught a vole and brought it back to the cubs, who played with their new meal.

During our rest time, we did some Lightroom editing together, helping edit a select few photos and practicing our Lightroom skills!

For the afternoon session, we headed back to BBC cat. It was a slower showing than usual. We got one last look at Mom, who then went out hunting and didn't return while were there. The kittens were rolling around and playing inside the den; we had a window into den through a large, triangular opening; however, the kittens never came outside to play.



Day 7 | Monday, July 15

We packed up the cars and began the long drive back to Ulaanbaatar. Along the way, we saw a large herd of Mongolian Gazelle running at a distance. We also witnessed an encounter with a domestic dog chasing a Corsac Fox, but were able to use the car to safely impede the dog's chase and let the fox get away. It was an alarming look at some of the threats that face the animals here in the steppe as they live alongside humans and livestock.

SPECIES LIST

Mammals

Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>
Mongolian Marmot	<i>Marmota sibirica</i>
Daurian Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus dauricus</i>
Brandt's Vole	<i>Lasiopodomys brandtii</i>
Mongolian Gerbil	<i>Meriones unguiculatus</i>
Corsac Fox	<i>Vulpes corsac</i>
Manul	<i>Otocolobus manul</i>
Mongolian Gazelle	<i>Procaptra gutturosa</i>

Birds

Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mongolian Gull	<i>Larus argentatus mongolicus</i>
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Demoiselle Crane	<i>Anthropoides virgo</i>
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>
Black Kite	<i>Milvas migrans</i>
Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>
Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>
Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Pacific Swift	<i>Apus pacificus</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Red-Billed Cough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus dauuircus</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Isabelline Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>

Mongolian Lark
House Sparrow
Eurasian Tree Sparrow
Rock Sparrow

Melanocorypha mongolica
Passer domesticus
Passer montanus
Petronia petronia