

# Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



## MONGOLIA WINTER SNOW LEOPARD QUEST:

### Private Snow Leopard Tour in South Gobi

Sunday 18th - Wednesday 28th February 2024

**Wise Birding Leader:** Chris Townend

**Local Guides:** The Tumendelger Family

#### HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP:

**Snow Leopard:** The undoubted tour highlight was watching and hearing a male Snow Leopard calling continuously as the sound echoed throughout the mountains! Then a female Snow Leopard appeared! Views were as close as <200 metres. Fantastic!

**Mongolian Gazelle:** Small herds seen on the snow covered Steppe.

**Siberian Ibex:** Daily sightings of up to 30+ animals whilst scanning for cats!

**Argali:** Two males seen well in the Yol Valley.

**A good selection of birds including:** Bearded Vulture, Saker Falcon, Upland Buzzard, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Mongolian Lark, Brown Accentor, Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch, Azure Tit, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Grey-headed Woodpecker, White-throated Dipper subsp. *leucogaster*, and Pine Grosbeak.



**This male Snow Leopard seen on three days was the clear tour highlight!**  
You can see the video highlights from this tour [HERE](#)

## **Tour Summary**

This was a private tour with a primary focus on not only seeing Snow Leopard well, but also allowing enough time to enjoy numerous encounters. After the success of last year's winter tour, we again coincided our dates with the Snow Leopard mating season when animals become more visible and vocal and easier to track in snow.

A winter visit to Mongolia for wildlife is of course very much about quality over quantity! Many of the smaller mammals are hibernating or simply less active in the colder temperatures and many of the birds have left the country until Spring. However, if cats are on your wish list then this is a great time of year to visit. Temperatures in mid February in the South Gobi region are warmer than you might think, with average day temperatures at around -10C and dropping to -20C at night. We were a little unlucky this year to coincide with an unusual dip of colder than average temperatures for the first few days, but once the temperatures increased and the sun re-appeared, so did the Snow Leopards!

Despite sleeping in traditional Gers for much of the tour, one important factor was that we were never cold due to the ever glowing wood-burning stoves in each Ger! The food in Mongolia was, as always, very good and despite our remote location we were incredibly well looked after with a variety of meals and we were never hungry.

### **Was the tour a success?**

Hopefully the photos and video speak for themselves. This was our second successful winter tour to see Snow Leopards in South Gobi, Mongolia and the best result to date!

### **Ulaanbaatar (UB) to Dalanzadgad (DZ)**

An early morning arrival into Ulaanbaatar is typical, but the -29C temperature was certainly a shock to the system! Due to an unusually high amount of snowfall in Mongolia this winter, the road to Dalanzadgad was unexpectedly closed due to snow drifts when we arrived. However, it did not take too long for the road to be cleared and we were on our way by 11am, just 3-4 hours behind schedule.

The distance between the new Chinghis Khaan airport (50Km from UB) and DZ is around 540Km and the journey takes around 6.5 hours on a good tarmac road. Travelling across the vast open Steppe to DZ produced our first sightings of Mongolian Gazelle. In addition to mammals we enjoyed good views of a number of birds including Cinereous Vulture, Upland Buzzard and small flocks of Mongolian Larks and Pallas's Sandgrouse over the impressive snow covered Steppe landscape. A halfway lunch stop at Mandalgori broke the journey and we arrived in the early evening for a good meal and sleep.

### **The Gurvan Saikhan (Beautiful) Mountains & Yol Valley**

After a comfortable night at our hotel in DZ, we met for breakfast and headed straight to the Gurvan Saikhan Mountains ready for our cat quest! Our local guides and friends have been studying the Snow Leopards in these mountains in the Ömnögovi Province of southern Mongolia for many years and as a result they have a great network of local herders that help monitor and keep them updated on the latest sightings.



Many tour companies offering Snow Leopard tours tend to travel much further west into the Khovd region and the Altai Mountains, but this is really not necessary if you wish to see Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat.

We stayed in Gers with a local herding family, a drive of around 2hrs from our hotel. We headed straight to the nearby Snow Leopard hotspot close to our camp and within just a few minutes of us arriving (and almost an identical scenario to our trip in Feb 2023), our local guide found a Snow Leopard peering down at us from the top of one of the mountain crags! It was such a good feeling to know that we could relax, just a little, knowing that the quest had been successful on our first full day. However, despite being surrounded by spectacular mountains and watching such a beautiful animal, it was still a little frustrating! The cat would only show its head every now and again with its body hidden behind rocks. Of course, the scope views were great, so we waited patiently for a few hours and then also returned in the evening, though the cat refused to show its entire body to us for more than a few seconds. So, we finished the day very pleased to have seen our first leopard, but we were greedy for more!

The next four days were unusually cold and cat activity ceased despite finding a fresh kill. We persisted with our daily routine of scanning the vast landscape from vantage points, checking the usual Snow Leopard hotspots and speaking with the local herders to obtain the most recent updates. However, despite our best efforts we had no further sightings until finally, the sun re-appeared and the temperatures increased.

### **Then on day six we literally hit the jackpot!!**

Needless to say, it was a very memorable day as we watched a very relaxed male Snow Leopard at an amazingly close distance of under 200 metres!



Our first full out in the open view of this beautiful male Snow Leopard on the 24th Feb: Chris Townend



After some amazing views, the cat finally fell asleep, still in view, but in the shade. The weather was sunny with a cold slight breeze and the temperature was around -8C throughout the day as we simply enjoyed watching the cat washing, yawning, changing position and of course sleeping! Our hot lunch brought to us by our amazing hosts and we had time to take in the amazing landscape whilst we waited until early evening when we hoped the cat would become more active, **but we were not quite prepared for what happened next!**

At around 5pm the male Snow Leopard suddenly woke up and began to call continuously as its deep roar echoed throughout the incredible mountain landscape!  
**See video here:** <https://vimeo.com/920067939> (click settings 4K for best quality)

**It then proceeded to roll around in the dirt!**

**See video here:** <https://vimeo.com/917996726> (click settings 4K for best quality)

**Within 20 minutes a female then appeared!**

**See video here:** <https://vimeo.com/983223805> (click settings 4K for best quality)

The two cats followed each other and we finally lost sight of them at 5.30 pm - Wow!

**After all that excitement, we were then treated to more incredible views the next morning** as we watched the same two animals together for another two hours.



We always had a flexible itinerary dependent on our success with the leopard, but in the end we spent a total of five nights at our base camp. We were staying with a local herding family and were exceptionally well looked after with warmth and food! The beauty of the camp was that we were just a few minutes from our Snow Leopard valley and more importantly, we were supporting the local herders and promoting Snow Leopard tourism in order to help reduce Snow Leopard conflicts with herders.



Following our success with Snow Leopard we decided to return to the comfort of Dalanzadgad and spend time in the Yol Valley looking for Pallas's Cat where we had been successful in February 2023. This was never a key target species for the private trip and we really gave it less time than required despite visiting a previously successful vantage point at around 2,450M. We enjoyed the impressive snow covered mountains and some great views of Bearded Vulture and two Argali. We then spent time enjoying the culture and wonderful hospitality of the Mongolian people.

Our final day was spent near Ulaanbaatar birding the Tuul River and Zaisan Forest where we enjoyed a number of quality species that included Azure Tit, Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch, White-throated Dipper, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Pine Grosbeak.

**We recorded a total of 6 species of mammal and 36 birds on this tour.**

**The photos & video grabs that follow were taken by Chris Townend**





## Summary of daily itinerary

DAY	DATE	Short itinerary, temperatures & highlights
1	Sun 18th Feb	<b>Arrival UB airport - Travel to DZ - Lunch Mandalgovi</b> Weather: -29c to -15c sunny & calm <b>Highlights:</b> Mongolian Gazelle, Mongolian Larks & Pallas's Sandgrouse <b>Overnight Dalanzadgad Hotel</b>
2	Mon 19th Feb	<b>DZ to Beautiful Mts Base Camp</b> Weather: -21c to -12c sunny windy at times <b>Highlights:</b> Snow Leopard watched 10.30hrs - 13.00hrs & 17.00 - 18.45 <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
3	Tue 20th Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -21c to -17c overcast all day. Light snow showers in morning. <b>Highlights:</b> Siberian Ibex, Lammergeier, Beautiful Rosefinch, Brown Accentor, Horned Larks. Found fresh SL goat kill. <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
4	Wed 21st Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -21c to -15c overcast / sunny periods. Cold wind in afternoon. <b>Highlights:</b> Siberian Ibex, Lammergeier, Cinereous Vulture. <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
5	Thur 22nd Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -15c to -11c Overcast with a little sun in the afternoon. <b>Highlights:</b> Siberian Ibex, Hawfinch, Lammergeier, Red-billed Chough. <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
6	Fri 23rd Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley</b> Weather: -15c to -7c Sunny all day, cold wind. <b>Highlights:</b> Male and female Snow Leopards! Male watched from 09.15 - 17.30 and female 17.15 - 17.30. <b>Overnight Beautiful Mts Ger Base Camp</b>
7	Sat 24th Feb	<b>Snow Leopard Valley and Yol Valley PM</b> Weather: -15c to -8c Cold wind late afternoon <b>Highlights:</b> Same 2 Snow Leopards watched from 09.15 - 11.10. Pallas's Pika and White-winged Snowfinch flocks. <b>Overnight Dalanzadgad</b>
8	Sun 25th Feb	<b>DZ Park and Plantation and the Yol Valley</b> Weather: -14c to -8c sunny all day <b>Highlights:</b> Argali, Mongolian Gazelle, Bohemian Waxwing and a flock of 200+ Mongolian Lark. <b>Overnight Dalanzadgad</b>
9	Mon 26th Feb	<b>DZ to UB</b> Weather: -4c to -18 <b>Highlights:</b> Pallas's Sandgrouse, Upland Buzzards, Cinereous Vultures. <b>Overnight Mongolica Hotel, UB</b>
10	Tue 27th Feb	<b>Tuul River and Zaisan Forest Bogd Khan Camp</b> Weather: -29c to -11c calm and sunny <b>Highlights:</b> Wapiti, White-throated Dipper, GH Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak, Azure Tit, LT Rosefinch and Azure-winged Magpie! <b>Overnight Mongolica Hotel, UB</b>
11	Wed 28th Feb	<b>Breakfast and transfer to airport</b>

Male Siberian Ibex, Beautiful Mountains



Male Argali, Yol Valley





Mongolian Gazelle, Mongolian Steppe



Wapiti near Ulaanbaatar





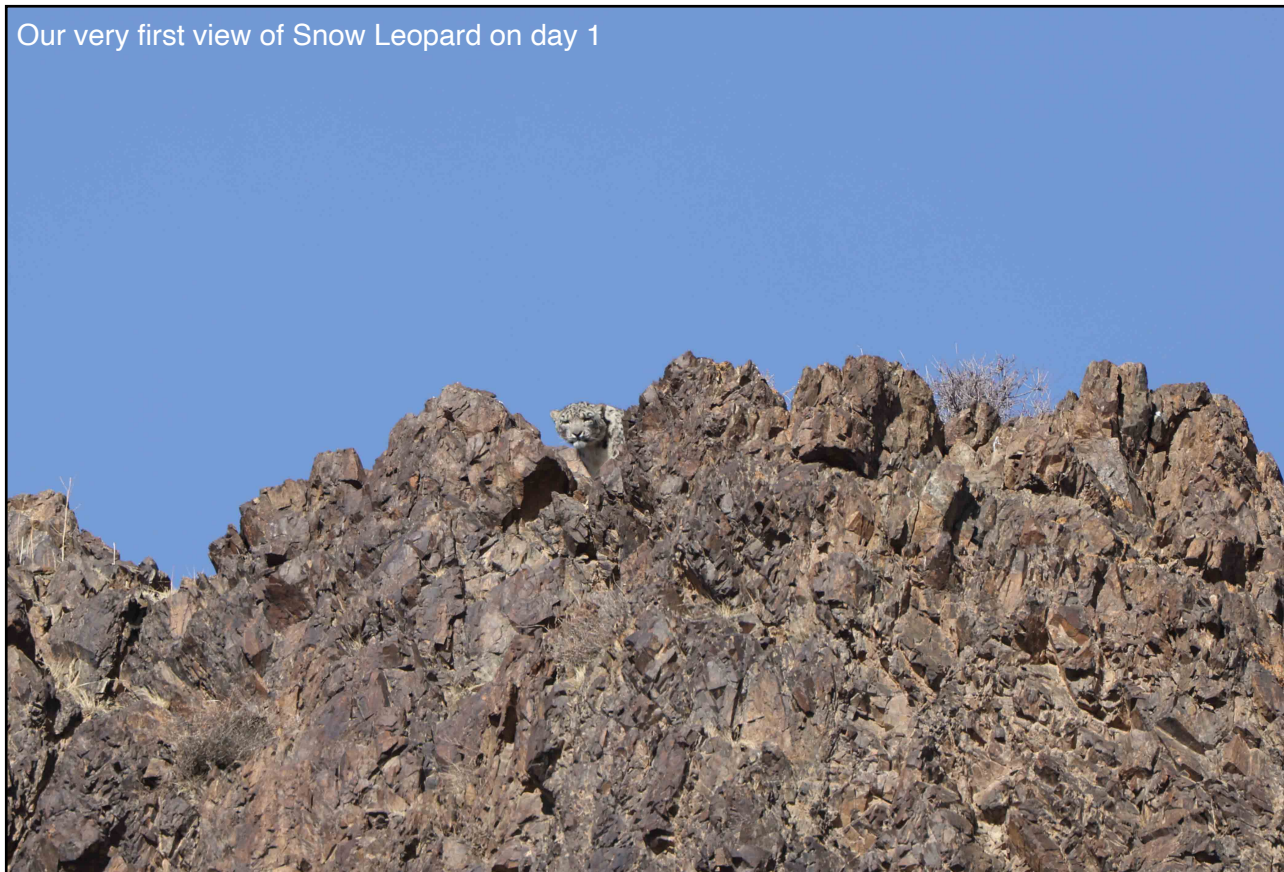
Presumed Pallas's Pika, Yol Valley



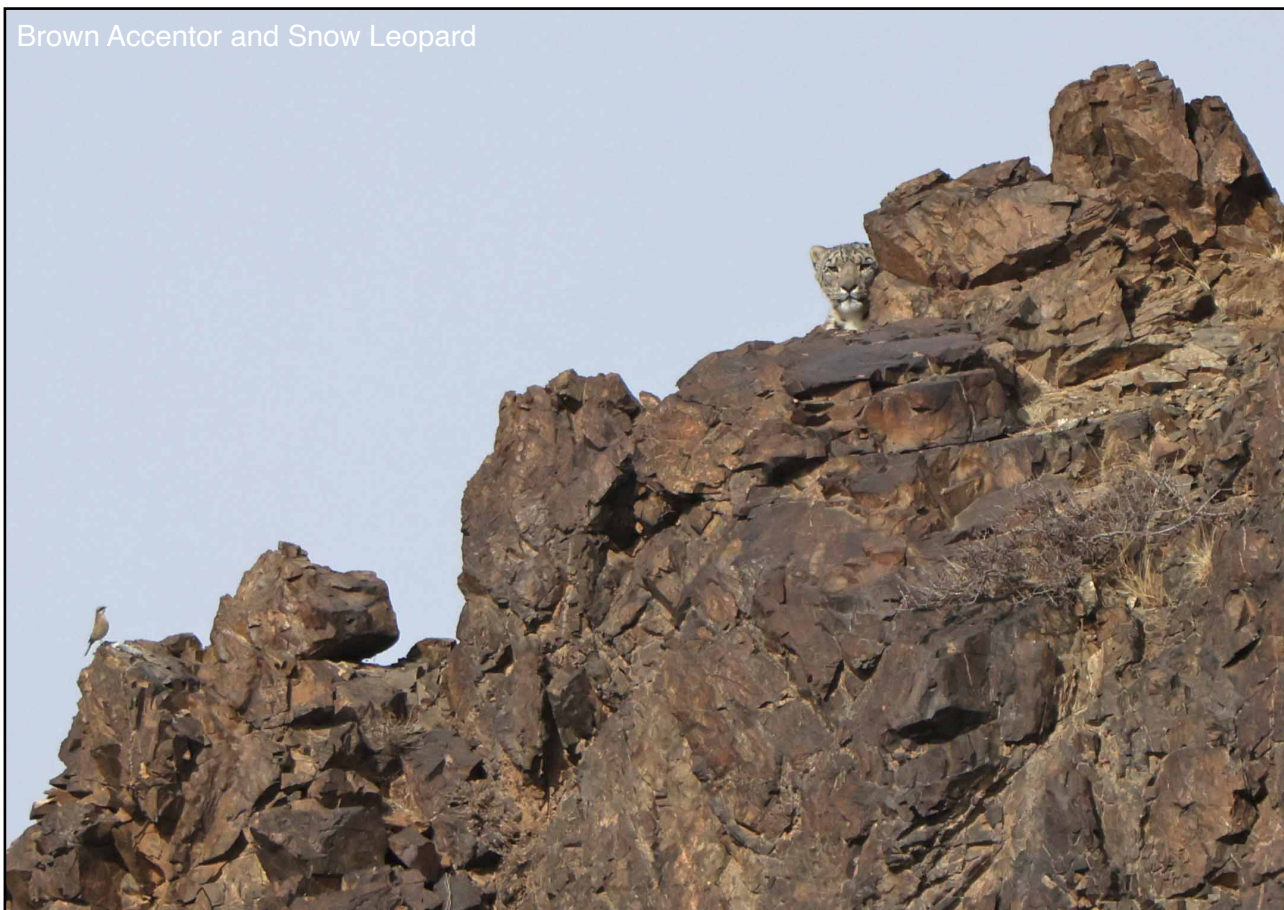
Siberian Ibex Snow Leopard Kill



Our very first view of Snow Leopard on day 1



Brown Accentor and Snow Leopard







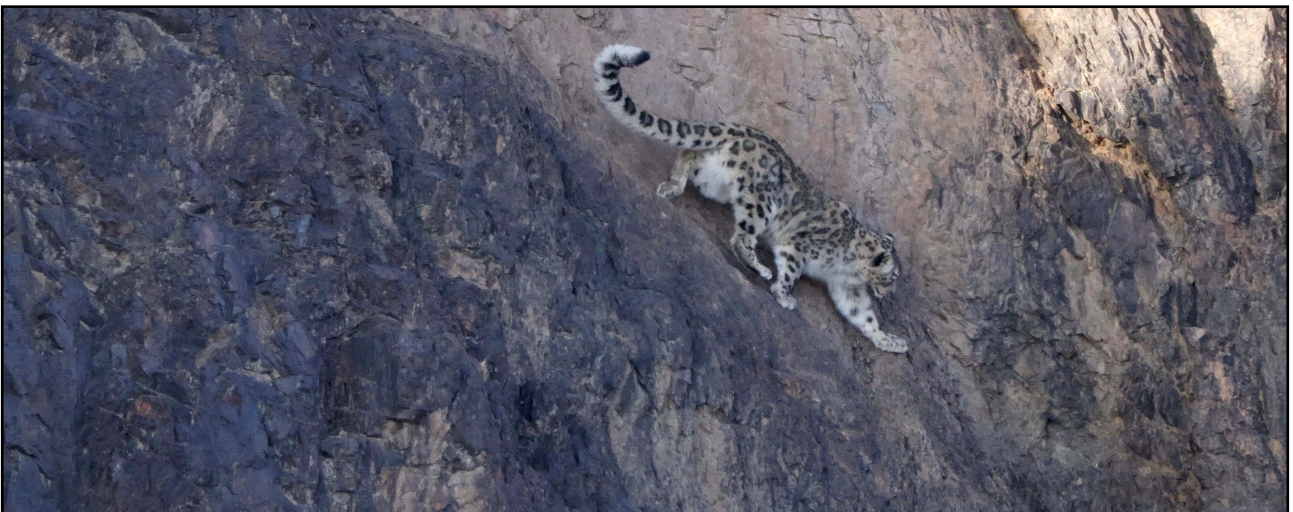
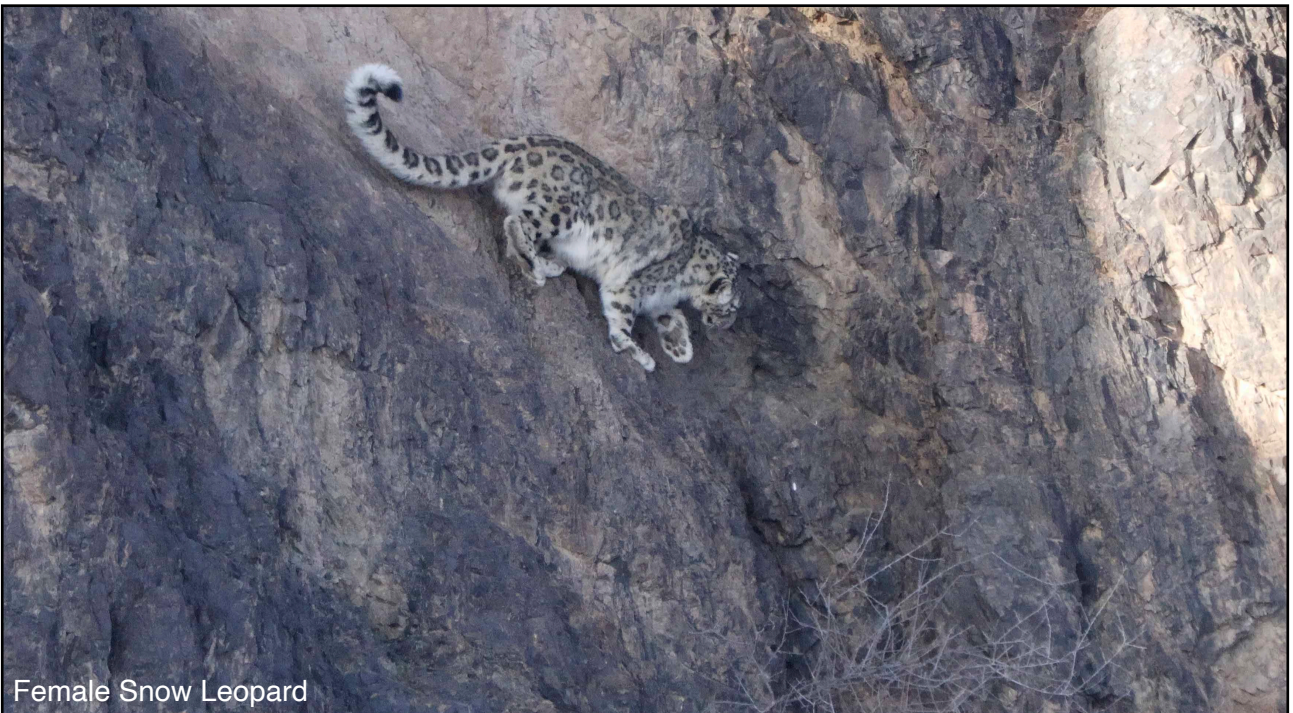
























Brown Accentor



Hawfinch





Male Pallas's Sandgrouse



Male Pallas's Sandgrouse





Bearded Vulture



Bearded Vulture





Immature Golden Eagle



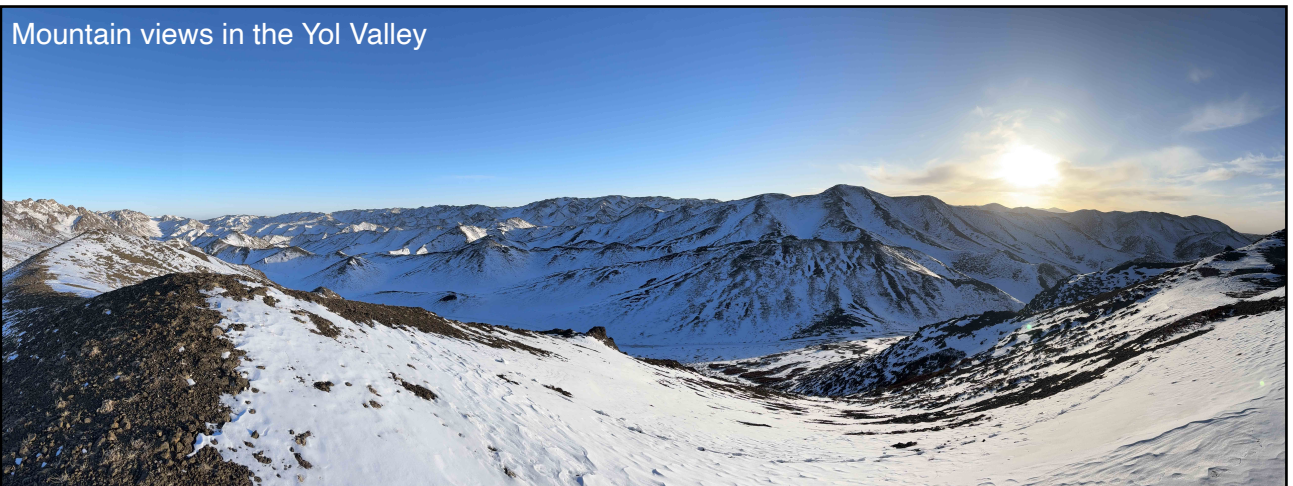
Upland Buzzard



Scanning for cats!



Mountain views in the Yol Valley



The Beautiful Mountains







Mongolian Lark



Flock of Mongolian Larks





Bohemian Waxwing



Bohemian Waxwing





Male Grey-headed Woodpecker



Male Grey-headed Woodpecker





"Steppe" Horned Lark



Male Pine Grosbeak





White-throated Dipper



White-throated Dipper



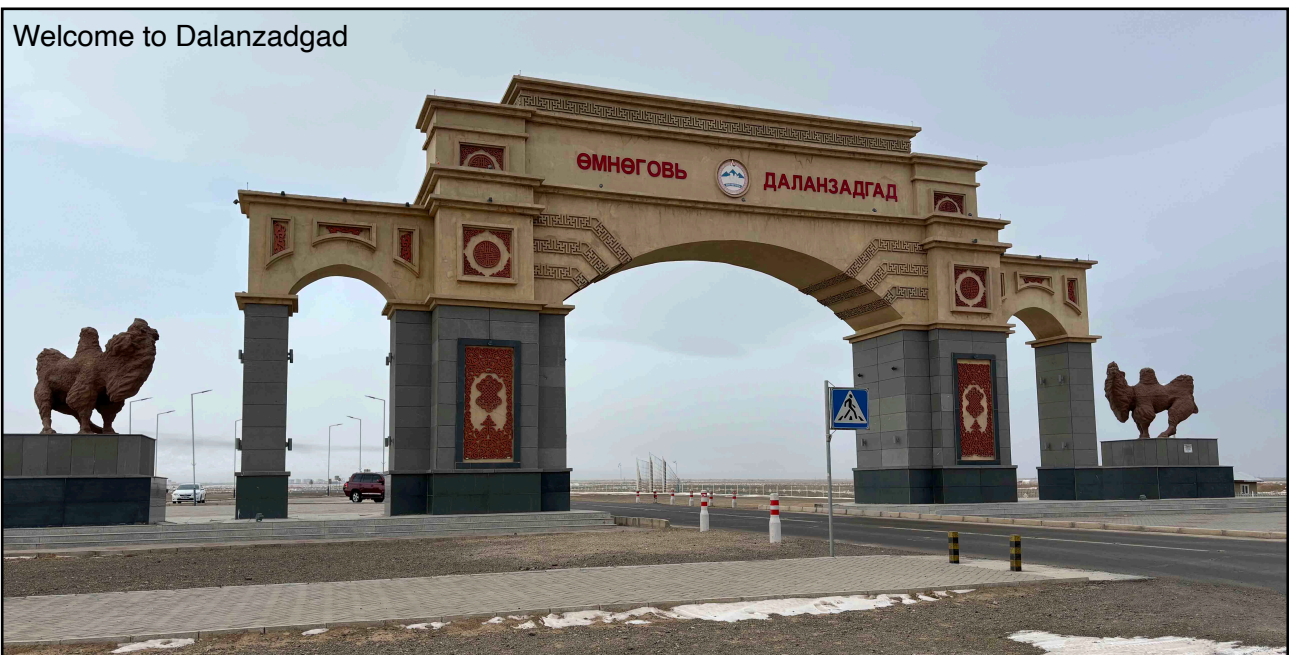




The Steppe road to Dalanzadgad



Welcome to Dalanzadgad



Queens of the Desert Statues, Dalanzadgad





Mongolica Hotel





**The following bird checklist** follows the nomenclature and classification from Gill F, D Donsker & P Rasmussen (Eds). 2024. **IOC World Bird List** (v14.1). <https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/>  
**The mammal checklist** mostly follows [the IUCN framework](#) (Red List) but also the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) [www.gbif.org](http://www.gbif.org) and Handbook of The Mammals of the World.

The IOC World Bird List complements three other primary world bird lists that differ slightly in their primary goals and taxonomic philosophy, i.e. [The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), [The Howard & Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), 4th Edition and [HBW Alive/Bird Life](#)

## **Total number of mammals recorded: 6 species**

This private tour was solely focused on obtaining numerous good sightings of Snow Leopard. As a result we recorded a few less mammals than on our winter 2023 trip.

### **Snow Leopard**

#### ***Panthera uncia***

The undoubted tour highlight was watching and hearing a male Snow Leopard calling continuously as the sound echoed throughout the mountains. Then, after 20 minutes, a female Snow Leopard appeared! We were privileged to have Snow Leopard sightings on three days with two animals together (male and female) on two days. A total of 15 hours viewing time and distances of 180M - 450M. Importantly, we had plenty of time to enjoy the behaviour and the sheer beauty of these amazing cats.

### **Wapiti**

#### ***Cervus canadensis sibiricus***

Two animals were seen close to our hotel near UB on the morning of the 27th and 28th.

### **Siberian Ibex**

#### ***Capra sibirica***

Many good views over five days whilst scanning for Snow Leopards in the Beautiful Mountains. Counts varied from 7 - 30+ individuals.

### **Argali**

#### ***Ovis ammon***

Two males seen well in the Yol Valley on the morning of the 25th.

### **Mongolian Gazelle**

#### ***Procapra gutturosa***

Recorded on two days whilst in the Steppe with smaller counts compared to last year. Counts of just 2 - 37 animals.

### **Pallas's Pika**

#### ***Ochotona pallasii***

Seen very well on two days with up to 6+ animals sunbathing in the Yol Valley.



Young Siberian Ibex



## **Total number of birds recorded: 34 species**

### **Chukar Partridge**

***Alectoris chukar***

Recorded on two days with a total of 13 birds on the 21st whilst in the Beautiful Mountains.

### **Pallas's Sandgrouse**

***Syrrhaptes paradoxus***

Small flocks recorded on four days with counts from 8 - 65 including some excellent views on the ground.

### **Rock Dove**

***Columba livia***

Small groups of 2 - 4 birds recorded on at least three days.

### **Bearded Vulture**

***Gypaetus barbatus***

Recorded on seven days with counts of 1 - 3 birds and many superb views.

### **Cinereous Vulture**

***Aegypius monachus***

Recorded on 8 days with some very close views. Daily counts of between 2 - 10 birds.

### **Golden Eagle**

***Aquila chrysaetos***

A single bird seen flying very low down and also perched on the morning of the 22nd.

### **Upland Buzzard**

***Buteo hemilasius***

Small numbers recorded on four days with a high count of 12+ birds on the 26th while travelling from Dalanzadgad to Ulaanbaatar.

### **Grey-headed Woodpecker**

***Picus canus***

Great views of a male in the snow close to the Zaisan Forest, Bogd Khan Tourist Camp.

### **Saker Falcon**

***Falco cherrug***

Two birds circled above us whilst looking for mammals in the Yol Valley on the 25th.

### **Eurasian Jay**

***Garrulus glandarius***

A single bird in the Zaisan Forest, near UB on the 27th.

### **Azure-winged Magpie**

***Cyanopica cyanus***

A minimum of 12 birds along the Tuul river on the morning of the 27th.

### **Eurasian Magpie**

***Pica pica***

Recorded near UB on the first and last days of the trip.

### **Red-billed Chough**

***Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax***

Recorded on three days with counts of 10+ birds.

### **Western Jackdaw**

***Corvus monedula***

Recorded on the final two days near the Mongolica hotel.

### **Daurian Jackdaw**

***Corvus dauuricus***

Recorded on the final two days near the Mongolica hotel. A high count of 41 birds in a mixed roosting flock of Western/Daurian on the evening of the 27th.

### **Carrion Crow**

***Corvus corone***

Recorded near UB on three days.

### **Northern Raven**

***Corvus corax***

A common species recorded daily.



**Bohemian Waxwing**

Six birds in a park in DZ on the 25th and a single on the 27th near the Mongolica hotel.

**Willow Tit**

At least 5 birds recorded on the 27th with birds at the Tuul River and the Zaisan Forest.

**Azure Tit**

Great views of at least 4 birds by the Tuul river on the 27th.

**Great Tit**

Counts of 6+ birds along the Tuul river on the 27th.

**“Steppe” Horned Lark**

Recorded daily with some very large flocks of hundreds of birds whilst travelling through the Steppe. The subspecies is *brandti* and sometimes referred to as Steppe Horned Lark.

**Mongolian Lark**

Great views of this unmistakable and very attractive species with flocks seen whilst travelling to and from Dalanzadgad. Typical flock sizes of 10+ birds, except in the Yol Valley on two days where we recorded surprise counts of 70+ and a flock of 200+ birds.

**Eurasian Nuthatch**

A single bird in the Zaisan Forest on the 27th.

**Black-throated Thrush**

Just a single bird near DZ Plantation on the 25th. Thrushes seemed scarce this winter.

**White-throated Dipper**

Great views of the distinctive white-bellied subsp *leucogaster* at the Tuul river on the 27th.

**White-winged Snowfinch**

Seen very well in the Yol Valley on two days with up to 100+ birds.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow**

Small flocks on at least four days around the Yol Valley and UB.

**House Sparrow**

Seen on two days around Ulaanbaatar and Dalanzadgad.

**Brown Accentor**

Some excellent views whilst in the Beautiful Mountains with counts of 6+ birds and even seen in the same scope view with Snow Leopard!

**Siberian Long-tailed Rosefinch**

Good views of 2 birds including a male near the Tuul river on the 27th.

**Hawfinch**

Unusual to see in winter with counts of 3-5 birds recorded on three days. Birds seen in the Beautiful Mountains on two days and near the Mongolica Hotel.

**Pine Grosbeak**

A flock of at least 12 birds, including both males and females. Seen at very close range whilst birding the Zaisan Forest near UB on the 27th.

**Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch**

Two female birds in the Beautiful Mountains were unusual for the time of year.

***Bombycilla garrulus******Poecile montanus******Cyanistes cyanus******Parus major******Eremophila alpestris******Melanocorypha mongolica******Sitta europaea******Turdus atrogularis******Cinclus cinclus******Montifringilla nivalis******Passer montanus******Passer domesticus******Prunella fulvescens******Carpodacus sibiricus******Coccothraustes coccothraustes******Pinicola enucleator******Carpodacus davidianus***



**Conservation Donation** – Following this tour to Mongolia, we donated a small amount to thank our local herders that hosted us in their Gers, kept us warm and generally showed us such wonderful hospitality.

Promoting Snow Leopard tourism in Mongolia and involving local herders in wildlife tourism is crucial to help reduce Snow Leopard conflicts with herders of livestock. With help from our local guides we hope to start a Snow Leopard tourism donation fee from tourists that visit this area specifically to see Snow Leopards. The money raised will benefit the local community and help promote the positive benefits of Snow Leopard tourism. Please visit [www.wisebirding.co.uk](http://www.wisebirding.co.uk) to find out more about other donations we make to help conservation projects.

## Wise Birding Holidays Ltd

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