

Holiday Highlights  
Mongolia  
31 May – 14 June 2013

**Guides:** Roy Atkins (Speyside Wildlife) and Balazs Szigeti (Ecotours Wildlife Holidays)

**Guests:** John Oates, Sue Cable, Ruth Dow, Chris Hind, John Duerden, Ken Sutton, Hilary Rolton, Andrew Dodd, Tony Lack and Keith Stedman

**Travel Day:** It takes a long time to get to Mongolia! We start with a flight from Heathrow to Seoul which means going past Ulaanbaatar - our final destination and then back on ourselves. Although a little frustrating when you look at the map there are not many other ways to get there and probably none as comfortable as Korean Air. Comfortable seats with plenty of legroom, a good service and good food mean that we decide it is perhaps worth the extra time and Seoul's Incheon Airport is very pleasant with some comfortable sitting areas and even free showers and cinema! We enjoy an Italian meal and try looking out from the large windows by some of the gates - but the world outside looks pretty sterile and the only birds seen are a couple of crows and a distant Great Cormorant.

We finally arrive at Ulaanbaatar where Balazs is waiting to greet us and show us to our vehicles. We divide ourselves between four, very comfortable, four wheel drive landcruiser type vehicles - very suitable for the famously bad roads and dirt tracks in this country. We meet the drivers who seem very friendly though they have little English, and then we are on our way taking around two hours to make the journey to our hotel and arriving late. It has been a long day and very tired we head for bed and try to catch some sleep.

**Day 1:** We wake to a glorious sunny day with no wind, which is excellent news and a few of us take a walk before breakfast. Daurian Jackdaws are on the grass outside the hotel and Daurian Redstart in the trees - very smart little birds and much whiter capped than they look in the book. There are a few Carrion Crows and Ravens plus Grey and White Wagtails as we approach the stream. We find a calling Cuckoo, several Red-billed Choughs, Great and Marsh Tits plus more Daurian Redstarts and a single Common Redstart.

The scenery is rather lovely with very alpine looking hills with rocky outcrops and patchy taiga forest. Between the hills are rather damp valleys filled with scrubby bushes and through the main valley is the River Tuul lined with tall trees that look rather like poplars and splitting and joining again to create lots of narrower channels with small bridges.

At the far side of the first bridge we find a Nuthatch of the Siberian race which some people split as Siberian Nuthatch – noticeably different to ours in having very clean white underparts. There are at least two Taiga Flycatchers and Roy whistles in a Grey-headed Woodpecker. We get brief views of an Asian Brown Flycatcher and a Hawfinch flies into the trees above us. In a clearing we find a singing Olive-backed Pipit and watch raptors circling over the hillside including what look like Honey Buzzards but have to be Oriental Honey Buzzard this far east. Two Black Vultures cruise along the ridge and a Black-eared Kite. A very dark coloured Red Squirrel runs past – a rather smart animal all dark grey with very large ear tufts. Two Ruddy Shelduck fly past and amongst lots of House Martins we find a couple of Pacific Swifts. Chris and John appear through the trees – they have seen a Yellow-breasted Bunting but when we go in search there is no sign.

All over the ground are branches that have clearly very recently broken off the trees. They are still covered in fresh green leaves and we assume there must have been an incredible gale! When we meet up with our local guide Uugan he tells us it was in fact a massive dump of snow just a few days ago and it was the weight of the snow that broke the branches of the trees!! All of it has gone which is not surprising given the pleasant warm temperatures.

We enjoy a breakfast with eggs and cheese and sausage with bread and spreads while out of the window we spot Pacific Swifts and a Common Swift too - a rather pale bird of the eastern race. After breakfast we gather outside the hotel and it seems it is going to be difficult to get anyone into the vehicles! A big flock of Daurian Jackdaws has gathered on the hillside and superb pair of Brown Shrikes are hunting from the fence posts. Another Black-eared Kite circles in the distance and those who were not out early are keen to see Daurian Redstart.

We drive a short distance and make a stop where we can scan a valley of damp scrubby bushes with larch and spruce on the valley slopes and impressive rocky outcrops higher on the tops. We walk a short distance along the edge of the forest so we can check the scrubby bushes too. There are a couple of birds singing and we soon realise one is a Siberian Rubythroat! This can be an incredibly skulky bird and we decide to try and coax it out by playing a little song. We are not sure at first if the bird is just continuing to sing or responding to the recording - then suddenly it hops up and sings from a higher vantage point and there are audible gasps from everyone as we get our first views through the scope of this bird in full song. It is stunning!! Its brilliant red throat puffs out as it sings - an incredible almost glittering red bordered by crisp black and white edges. What an astonishing start to the trip to get this species so quickly and we take plenty of time to enjoy prolonged views and make the most of what must surely be one of the best birds in the country!

The keen botanists amongst us have also noticed some interesting flowers that we manage to identify using John D's book on Mongolian flowers - including Birdseye Primrose, Sweetflower Rock Jasmine (*Androsace chamaejasme*) an orange flowered Globe Flower (*Trollius ledebourii*) and a creamy coloured Pasque Flower (*Pulsatilla flavescens*).

Back at the vans we enjoy a coffee - but not just any coffee!! Balazs takes coffee seriously and instant Nescafe is not for him - he has brought some Brazilian coffee with him and great trouble is taken to get it just right, a real treat for the connoisseurs. There are a few birds singing nearby and we know one is a Pine Bunting as it sounds just like a Yellowhammer! While we look for it we discover a Black-faced Bunting and get fantastic views of Citrine Wagtail - indeed in the same meadow we see Citrine, White and Grey Wagtails - a strange combination! We locate the Pine Bunting and at least two Siberian Stonechats are singing from the tops of the bushes looking incredibly smart and overhead we get superb views of Black-eared Kite and a couple of displaying buzzards - but what sort? They are a little odd looking plumage-wise like the illustrations of Upland Buzzard but they are far too small and eventually we realise they are in fact Eastern Buzzard. This is now split by most authorities but in some books is considered a subspecies of Common Buzzard.

We drive a little further and take a side valley, pulling in at a nice area of short grass for lunch and we are amazed when two tables and lots of fold away chairs are brought out and a buffet set up! Cheese, meat, tomatoes, cucumber, bread and spreads are all laid out – a fine spread! As they set all this up we wander in search of birds spotting Black Vultures, more Pine Buntings, Dusky Warbler and a Two-barred Greenish Warbler which proves a bit of a challenge to identify but we get there in the end. A Lammergeier appears over the ridge above us and even lands for a little while on the rock face allowing superb views through the scope. There are a few Long-tailed Ground Squirrels running around on the grassy slopes eating the rather beautiful Pasque Flowers. Amongst more lovely flowers there is even Wild Rhubarb!

Walk after lunch we take a walk in the forest up the valley and search for Red-flanked Bluetail. We find Lesser Whitethroats and a Dusky Warbler in the dense scrub and as we come back out of the trees find more Pine Buntings at very close range and lots of other birds flitting around - Pied Wheatear, Daurian Redstart, a pair of Rock Thrush and lots of Choughs. Olive-backed Pipits are singing higher on the slope and are Black-eared Kites and a superb Booted Eagle. John O even finds another distant Siberian Rubythroat! We get fabulous views of two Lammergeier circling over the rocky outcrop at the head of the valley and find more Eastern Buzzards before we walk back down to the vehicles. A Red-flanked Bluetail starts singing as we walk back and we spend a while trying to locate it. In the end we try playing some song but it doesn't respond and in the end it stops singing without showing itself and we have to admit defeat. The warmth is beginning to go out of the air as we walk back but the lighting is wonderful and scenery superb.

In the evening we gather outside after the meal to go in search of Grey Nightjar after watching a few Hill Pigeons on the hotel roof. The Grey Nightjars are not so obliging unfortunately but it is nice being out - but we are pretty tired now and when Balazs suggests we head back no-one argues!!

## Day 2:

John and Andrew are up bright and early and spend an hour birding before the rest of meet at 7am! They have already seen Common Rosefinch, Oriental Cuckoo, Steppe Eagle, Yellow-browed Warbler and other species we saw yesterday as well as a huge surprise - Mandarin

Duck!! This is a very rare bird in Mongolia and generally only further east - this may even be the first record for this area!

We walk across a little stream and search for a drumming Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which we eventually find and we enjoy close views of it drumming. There are Olive-backed Pipits singing, both Willow and Marsh Tit and we get good views of Taiga Flycatcher. We try to find the Mandarin Ducks but there is no sign but while on the river bank suddenly John O shouts that he has found a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler! It is incredibly skulky but Roy finds it again sat quietly in the long grass before it flies to a fallen tree in the river. After a search we get one more view as it scuttles along the branches then flies out of sight - a great find.

We head back for breakfast before packing up our bags and loading up for today's journey east. We travel slowly out of the valley then stop at another valley at the entrance to which is a huge rock that apparently looks like a tortoise - if you have a good imagination.

We park up and walk along the edge of some damp scrub and listen for singing buntings - soon finding several Pine Buntings and a brief Black-faced Bunting. There is a beautiful Citrine Wagtail and we enjoy the sight of Red-billed Choughs all playing and feeding together around some little chalets. High overhead spot Black Vultures and a Steppe Eagle and at the far end of the valley a Faker Falcon!! This is in fact the top of a telegraph pole but it really does look very like a Saker through binoculars! Balazs whistles in a Black Woodpecker with an excellent impression though it doesn't land in view - but the flight views are excellent. We spend a while trying to get better views of the Black-faced Bunting just getting glimpses but eventually we have to give up.

It is quite a long drive to our next destination so we get going making few stops before lunch. We pause briefly to check the trees beside the river where Balazs has seen White-cheeked Starling in the past. We don't see this species but we do find a couple of Goosander and to our astonishment two Mandarin Ducks!! Amazingly we get the chance to catch up on such a rare bird and wonder whether there has been a small influx. Isabelline Wheatears are in good numbers en route and Roy spots an Amur Falcon. We eventually arrive at our lunch spot below a scrubby woodland we are going to check after we have eaten. There

is a great view out over rolling steppe to distant sloping hills and it is very peaceful watching the herds of sheep ambling around and flocks of mixed crows including Rooks, Daurian Jackdaws and Red-billed Choughs all feeding in one big flock. A Black-eared Kite gives good views and there are distant Black Vultures but even better are more Amur Falcons! We see several and enjoy some fantastic close views before one even lands in the trees higher up the slope allowing us good scope views. They are beautiful and we realise that they are actually nesting in the trees higher on the slope. There are plenty of Isabelline Wheatears plus Tree Sparrows and a Booted Eagle.

We walk up into the scrubby area after we have eaten where we flush a flock of Daurian Partridge as we enter the wood. There seem to be few birds but we find singing Whitethroat of the eastern race which is much greyer than ours and almost looks like Lesser Whitethroat, though the song is clearly Whitethroat. We get more excellent views of Amur Falcon and while hunting for an accentor that Uugaa flushed we find a Siberian Rubythroat. Despite a thorough search we have to eventually give up on the accentor and walk back to the vehicles finding a Siberian Chipmunk on the way - a superb animal. From the vehicles we find a beautifully marked female Amur Falcon before we leave.

We still have some way to go so we get moving and hit perhaps the best road we have been on so far - not just is it tarmac but there aren't even any potholes!! Some of the roads have been incredible with more potholes than tarmac and much of the time there have just been dirt tracks. There seem to be no sign posts anywhere and we simply don't understand how the drivers find their way! We pass Isabelline Wheatears and then stop to enjoy the sight of a beautiful Demoiselle Crane close to the road, then as we get closer to our destination we start seeing larks too - Shorelarks and superb Mongolian Larks.

We have time to visit a lake near our destination and drive down to the shore pausing to watch a flock of Demoiselle Cranes. The lake looks a bit bleak from a distance but then looking through the binoculars we are astonished - it is covered in birds!! Rafts of duck out in the middle include Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Pochard and several rather smart looking White-winged Scoter's of the stejnergeri race sometimes called Stejnerger's Scoter - strange looking with a pointed 'knobble' on the bill.

There are loads of Ruddy and Common Shelducks plus a few Great-crested, Black-necked and Slavonian Grebes. Skimming the water we find all three marsh tern species, White-winged being the most common and then Black with just a couple of Whiskered Terns. There are Common Terns too of the rather beautiful longipennis race, smooth grey on the body with an almost all dark bill. A superb Barn Swallow of the rufous race tytleri – all rusty coloured underneath joins the terns. We find Black-throated Divers and on the far side are Avocets, a Black-winged Stilt and several Little Ringed Plovers. John brilliantly spots a Grey-headed Lapwing - a big surprise!! This is rare indeed here so we make sure everyone has a good look before we move round to see if we can get closer. We also enjoy superb views of Mongolian Lark, with a huge black chest-band and a crazy Isabelline Wheatear displaying very close by. A Spoonbill flies over and while we are checking through a flock of Wigeon, which also hold a nice male Pintail, we pick out a Saker Falcon on the ground behind them. It is a lovely pale bird that flies heavily away perching briefly on the far side. John also picks out a couple of distant Corsac Foxes - rather pale animals with short legs but very pretty.

There appear to be more birds on a shallow pool just out of view so we drive round to this area where we find yet more great birds! There are lots of Avocets here, a couple of Redshank, two eastern race Black-tailed Godwits (another bird split by many as Eastern Black-tailed Godwit), Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers and we enjoy incredibly close views of Grey-headed Lapwing. A pair of Whooper swans are nesting here and there are Shoveler too plus some rather beautiful Mongolian Gulls, a bird considered a separate species by many but by some a race of either Caspian or Vega Gull - the latter being more recently supported by DNA evidence. Several Asian Short-toed Larks are flitting round in front of us and do seem to look rather different to Lesser Short-toed to which they used to be allied. There are Northern Lapwings, Black-winged Stilt and we enjoy lovely views of more longipennis Common Terns, with dark bill and beautiful grey flush to the underparts. The scoter are closer from here and the bill structure is very strange!

It is really hard to drag ourselves away but eventually we realise we do want to eat at some point and so we head back along the dirt tracks

to the main road and our hotel in the town, with Pacific Swift, Hill Pigeons and Red-billed Choughs to welcome us. It has been a long but fabulous day and this morning already seems ages ago!

### Day 3:

After a leisurely breakfast we start by heading back out to the lakes where we finished the day yesterday. The sky is very moody as we drive with a huge cumulus cloud overhead underneath which are a very unusual cloud formation called 'mamma', large bulging clouds that hang down and look like they going to burst with rain! Fortunately the rain does not come and the clouds gradually disperse but it is a chilly start!

We arrive at the pools and enjoy excellent views of lots of the same birds as yesterday. The Black-throated Divers are showing particularly well and we find all the grebes and ducks again but on the smaller pool add Garganey and Gadwall as well as finding Pintail and more Shoveler today. The Grey-headed Lapwing is here still and many of the other species but there are a few new waders which prove very exciting!! John O is on astonishing form today and finds many of the best birds! He starts with Pacific Golden Plover finding four on the far side which eventually come much closer allowing good views. He then finds a Garganey but swiftly follows with something much better - Asian Dowitcher!! This is a very rare wader and although on the list it is not really one we expect to see. It is in superb plumage and feeding very actively with deep probing of its long, all dark bill. We all enjoy great scope views then he finds a group of five Red-necked Stints! These are rather distant and it is hard to see the details but you can see enough to be able to make out the deep coloured necks. We also add Wood Sandpiper and there is a superb flock of Demoiselle Cranes.

Behind us there are plenty of larks in the wide open grasslands and there are several Mongolian Larks looking superb. We see the Asian Short-toed and lovely Shorelarks again and also a Skylark and Andrew finds a Richards Pipit. Black Vultures keep flying over and the occasional Kestrel and Raven. There is also a little animal throwing soil out of its burrow! It appears at the surface and we identify it as a Mongolian Jird (or Mongolian Gerbil) a delightful little animal with a lovely long ginger tail!

We drive on to another more grassy pool where we stop to check the birds and have lunch. There are more ducks here including several Pintail

and Garganey. There are Greenshank, Redshank plus Wood and Marsh Sandpiper. A flock of White-winged Terns flies through and some pass high overhead with both Common and Pacific Swift.

It is nice just taking in the scene with some really nice combinations of species in the view at the same time - for example in one view through the scope there are White-winged Black Tern and Avocets feeding round a peninsula covered in Demoiselle Cranes with a Whooper Swan swimming by in the foreground - just delightful.

It is another excellent lunch including the usual cheeses, meats and an assortment of spreads and things and we enjoy trying a couple of interesting items including a marmalade that is called Lemon and Honey Tea!! After spreading it on bread we then watch Uugan stir a spoonful into a cup of hot water!! It tastes just like lemsip and since a couple of us have colds it goes down very well!

We drive on to large wet meadow area pausing en route when Roy spots a Père David's Snowfinch drop in to feed on a patch of bare ground. We stop and enjoy excellent scope views as it and a second bird feed - one also behaving quite strangely, rolling onto its side as if having a little lie down.

Well pleased with this sighting we continue to a viewpoint from which we scan the valley picking out three distant White-naped Cranes. Even at a distance the white on the head and neck stands out along with the pale tail end and they look beautiful, but we want a closer view and drop down towards the wet meadow area which is alive with birds! Redshanks and Marsh Sandpipers potter amongst the wet grassy edges, perhaps ten or more Marsh Sandpipers, and we are delighted to find a Bittern which shows remarkably well! There are several Citrine Wagtails here too plus a variety of ducks. In the distance there is a carcass of a horse which is attracting Black Vultures and Steppe Eagles (plus the odd dog!) and as a result there are frequent views of these birds overhead too as they drift in. A Hobby appears and we suddenly realise we are listening to Skylarks singing.

We decide to walk a little closer and almost immediately a Blyth's Pipit flies across in front of us landing on the tussocky grass and showing very well. It is surprisingly easy to identify with a much shorter more wagtail

like call and shorter less pointed bill, more 'open' face with what almost feels like a big ring of pale round the eye. Chris is particularly pleased as it is a bird he has been keen to see for a long time. John O suddenly announces he has found a Baikal Teal!! This is a fantastic find and there is a slight panic as we try to get on the bird which is almost hidden in the long grass. There is a bit of debate about what we should do - should we try and walk forwards which risks flushing the bird or try and gain height which makes us more distant but could give a better view. We opt for the latter and it works like a dream - we are soon enjoying much better views with the bird more visible above the grass and the distinctive face pattern a lovely sight. Even better the ducks are disturbed by something and take off allowing not just flight views but views of the whole bird once it lands - and what a gorgeous bird it is with the white lines and pinkish breast and brilliant green head markings. We are absolutely thrilled and Balazs even manages to get some excellent video for the dvd! In the meantime as we walked up the slope John flushed a warbler from the grasses so we try to relocate it. It is incredibly skulking and suddenly bursts from cover dropping into another clump of rushes and we creep carefully forwards trying to see it - the long tail and colour suggesting a Thick-billed Warbler. It flies again but this time lands in the middle of the grassy slope and sits out in the open allowing us to even get the scopes on it - and indeed it is a Thick-billed Warbler and we can see the distinctive bill shape as it looks round - another great find John!

The vultures are really gathering on the carcass now and we enjoy watching them through the scopes as they squabble and feed. They have a wonderful way of 'bouncing' along the ground towards the carcass. They are all Black Vultures with a couple of Steppe Eagles waiting their turn and another Steppe Eagle in the grass much closer - a great view. We get fabulous views of both species low overhead and then realise that higher in the sky are a couple of Griffon Vultures.

It has been a wonderful time here and we gather back at the van before driving a little further to see if we can find any of the Argali Sheep for which the reserve is famous. Scanning the slopes and hill tops we fail to find any but we get fabulous views of more vultures and find several Pied Wheatears, Northern Wheatears, more Blyth's Pipits and a couple

of Twite. A pair of Rock Sparrows appear to be nesting here and an Amur Falcon flies over. Some distance away we find Siberian Marmots and a Corsac Fox and high above the opposite slope an Upland Buzzard is hovering. A second Upland Buzzard is spotted much closer as we head back to our hotel and our evening meal.

#### Day 4:

Today is a travelling day and after a breakfast of eggs, bread, eggs, a delicious soft blue cheese, eggs, marmalade and eggs we are soon on our way heading west back in the direction of Ulaanbaatar. There are many familiar birds such as Mongolian Lark, Demoiselle Crane, Black Vulture and others as we travel and then we make a stop on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar beside the river.

Several of us are particularly keen to see Azure Tit and this is our first chance to try for this enigmatic little bird, so with fingers crossed we make our way down the track into the bushes. Balazs has already warned us that this can be a tricky bird but we have not gone far when we hear what sounds like a Blue Tit. Presumably a bird that sounds like a Blue Tit stands a good chance of being a Blue Tit but we are almost holding our breath as Azure Tit can also sound very like that! A bird is moving in the bushes and we follow the movement until at last it reaches the outer branches and comes into view – and YES!!! It is an Azure Tit! Over the next few minutes we get superb views of this delightful little bird with its white head and brilliant blue wings with broad white wing bar. It is just lovely and we are thrilled, getting good views for several minutes before it finally flies into the treetops and disappears.

We are very pleased to have seen the most wanted bird here but there are a couple more species we would also like to see so we walk on and soon hear a high thin call of a White-headed Penduline Tit. We soon spot it in the tree tops and get some good views as it collects fluff from the willows and takes it away presumably to build its nest. It is surprisingly similar to European but has a white crown and small black speckles leading round the back of the head behind the eye mask. This just leaves Long-tailed Rosefinch but sadly we have less luck here and cannot find any of this species - though we do get excellent views of a Pallas's Warbler as we walk back towards the vehicles and we're still on a high from the Azure Tit as we enjoy a coffee before we move on.

Driving through Ulaanbaatar is horribly similar to driving through any other big city with crazy driving by some of the locals and fewer of the recognisable big logos - we don't see and MacDonald's or Tesco's for example! The houses are built right up the slopes around the city and look surprisingly colourful with their red, green or blue roofs. We phone ahead and order take away Pizzas to be delivered to a pull in beside the baseball ground and can't help smiling at this arrangement as the guy on his moped arrives loaded with Pizzas. Even in the scruffy patch of waste ground there are birds and we see Northern Wheatears and several Pacific swifts overhead.

It is then back on the road stopping briefly at the supermarket for supplies then a long drive before making a stop at a small lake where there has recently been a Relict Gull seen! This would be a fabulous bird to get but sadly there is no sign, though there are a few ducks including Wigeon, Mallard, Shoveler, Pintail and Garganey, plus a few Ruddy Shelducks. A few Demoiselle Cranes flying by, three Mongolian Gulls are here and we are surrounded by singing Mongolian and Asian Short-toed Larks. We make a search for Pallas's Reed Bunting but without any luck and decide with time flying by to head to the Ger Camp where we are staying for the next three nights. We make one brief stop to admire a superb Upland Buzzard on a post near the road.

We arrive at the Ger Camp and are shown to our Yurts which are cosy and beautifully decorated inside. The door is small and we feel a bit like hobbits as we disappear inside. There is a fire with a chimney and a supply of wood though Balazs warns us that you don't have much control and the temperature can become unbearable if you are not careful - it is better colder! There are electric lights and it feels really special! A small number of them are even en-suite while the rest have shared facilities in a toilet and shower block but they are clean and the showers nice and hot - hooray!!

There seem to be Tree Sparrows everywhere and if you leave your door open they even come inside the yurts! There are Choughs too and a Blyth's Pipit singing over the camp along with Mongolian and Asian Short-toed Larks. After a great evening meal in a much bigger yurt - again beautifully decorated and adorned with a stuffed Black Vulture and

a couple of Ruddy Shelducks, we do our usual run through the checklist and head to bed.

### Day 5:

A few people who wake up early head out into the sand dunes near the camp and enjoy a bit of pre-breakfast birding with Mongolian and Asian Short-toed Larks a plenty plus Blyth's Pipit and a nice Isabelline Shrike (Daurian Shrike). There are also a group of three Mongolian Gazelles across the far side of the valley and Andrew spots a Tolai Hare. After breakfast we are soon on our way towards an excellent birding site at an alkaline lake about an hour's drive away. We spot an Upland Buzzards and several Black Vultures plus a few Barn Swallows en route.

We arrive at the lake and park a little distance away first scanning from some way away. There are clearly lots of birds here and our first scan produces lots of Ruddy and Common Shelducks, some eastern race Greylag Geese, lots of ducks including Mallard, Shoveler, Garganey, Wigeon and Pintail and our first Black-headed Gulls. We walk a short distance across the wet meadow and then a further scan finds two birds that we are pretty excited about - Bar-headed Goose and Swan Goose. John is particularly pleased about these species as they are two of the very few new birds he is hoping for the on the trip. We enjoy reasonable views of these plus our first Red-crested Pochards and a nice male Eastern Marsh Harrier. There are lots of Avocets and as we get closer we realise that just about all the waders round the shore are Marsh Sandpipers!! It has to be said there is something very odd about scanning through Marsh Sandpipers to try and find if there is anything else of note - like a Greenshank perhaps?! There are few Demoiselle Cranes in the background and two White-naped Cranes over to one side. We are also pleased to see Common Crane - the least common of the cranes we have seen - three species of cranes from one spot!

Walking further the ground gets wetter and soon we are getting wet feet but decide to continue anyway. Mongolian Toads are everywhere, robust animals with superb marbled patterns on their backs. Roy scans through the gulls on the near ashore and then suddenly his heart misses a beat as he realises that there in his view is a beautiful Relict Gull!!!! This is a seriously rare bird and although we knew it was technically possible it is not a species we really thought there was much chance of seeing. A second bird is beside it and he is almost lost for words asking

someone to come and check that he has really found two Relict Gulls! We spend some considerable time enjoying these birds and gradually working our way closer so that we might even get photos. They are just superb - one bird a full adult the other a second year bird then after a while we realise there are in fact three - the third bird also a second summer. They are amongst Black-headed Gulls and it is nice to be able to compare the general shape and size - they are quite a bit bigger and more robust looking with a shorter stubbier bill. The head is black with large white eye-crescents - a really beautiful bird.

Over the next hour or more we continue to enjoy these but also add more birds to the list with some gorgeous Gull-billed Terns, Pochard, Spoonbills, Grey Heron, Redshank and much better views of Bar-headed Geese as a couple fly in and land on the near shore. There are better views of Swan Geese too and amongst the larks we find a couple of Yellow Wagtail of the macronyx race with dark grey heads rather similar to Grey-headed race of Scandinavia. Some authorities have split these eastern forms as Eastern Yellow Wagtail.

Well pleased with our sightings we walk back to the vehicles where lunch is now ready! We get great views of a female Eastern Marsh Harrier as we enjoy lunch then walk over towards the far end of the lake where there is a tall reed bed. Here we find several Red-crested Pochards, a Great Crested Grebe and in the reeds lots of Oriental Reed Warblers with their grouchy song that is very reminiscent of Great Reed Warbler. There is the entertainment of a big herd of camels on the far side that come down to drink, their backs looking like a mountain range on legs! Their presence makes you feel even more like you are in a far off place - and seeing a big herd of them is just brilliant! They also start making a loud wailing noise - a wonderful sound like mourning seals! There is also a guy who seems to be doing something with the horses, apparently trying to split a group of them into two groups - but he falls off his horse!! He looks clearly embarrassed and is back in the saddle in a moment shouting something to us as he rides away. We ask Uugaa what he said and apparently it basically translates to, "What are you looking at me for!"

We put a bit of time in here to try and find Pallas's Reed Bunting and do pick out a Reed Bunting in the reeds but close examination reveals it to

be a Common Reed Bunting! There are more Oriental Reed Warblers but also some smaller birds that turn out to be Paddyfield Warblers. We find a Sand Martin in with some Barn Swallows then get more views of Eastern Marsh Harrier. A flock of White-winged Black Terns fly through and we get good views of Citrine Wagtail and Richards Pipit.

This is not really the best habitat for Pallas's Reed Bunting and we decide to try the other side of the lake where there is better habitat of scrubby tall grass. After some time searching we have just glimpsed a bunting once and so we decide to try another spot Ugar knows. This second area of tall grasses looks across to a small wetland with a Grey Heron colony. There is a pair of Western Marsh Harriers here which causes a moment of confusion after just seeing eastern at the previous site – but we get there in the end! Again the air is full of larks and pipits but it is not long before a Reed Bunting flies in and lands in the tops of the grasses! It is a bit confusing as it should be Pallas's in this habitat but this does not look quite like the picture in the book and we have doubts! We try to get better views and there is much discussion but the book shows this species to have no rufous in the wings at all and this bird certainly has rufous. Eventually a bird lands in the very short grass and at last we can get a scope on it and make excellent studies! The bird is noticeably small and delicate looking with a small bill and while definitely rufous in the wings the underparts are very pale and there are strongly contrasting stripes of dark and almost white on the mantle. Roy checks the lesser coverts and they are grey - an absolutely conclusive feature and we are now 100% happy that this is Pallas's Reed Bunting. It has certainly proved a very educational bird!

Scanning across to the wetland area we add Swan Goose to the tally for this spot, perhaps the best views of this species today. We get more views of the Western Marsh Harriers and find White-naped Cranes too. Time is now flying past and we decide that with some distance to still travel back we had better get going! Back at the Ger Camp we enjoy a very nice evening meal of soup and meat or vegetables wrapped in pastry which is delicious. The general discussion suggests that we have been pleasantly surprised by the food here as Mongolia does not have a good reputation!

## Day 6:

Those out before breakfast find Isabelline Shrike, Daurian Partridge, Thick-billed Warbler and mammals too such as Tolai Hare and Mongolian Gird. After breakfast we simply drive further up the valley in which we are staying and onto the Hustai National Park.

An Upland Buzzard flaps lazily away as we set off then further up the track there is a Saker Falcon nest on one the pylons - an adult bird perched nearby. We enjoy excellent scope views then a little further on we find a male Lesser Kestrel on the wires - a superb bird with apparently no spots at all! We drive on further and make a stop when we spot several Przewalski's Horses on the rocky slopes of the hills. They are beautiful looking animals with pale, tan-coloured bodies and dark manes apart from one rather leucistic animal that is paler and even the mane is blonde! On the slopes the other side of the valley are several Red Deer including some with calves. There are Griffon Vultures and a Steppe Eagle overhead and we spot a Red Fox and several Siberian Marmots.

Further on we make a stop to search for Meadow Bunting and enjoy a coffee while we scan around. There are a couple of Hoopoes on the rocky slopes and both Pied and Northern Wheatears. Both Griffon and Black Vultures soar along the ridge and a Sparrowhawk flies over plus another Steppe Eagle before finally Keith spots a Meadow Bunting on the top of the bushes. We walk over to the spot to get better views and it comes to within a few feet - a very strikingly marked bird. An immature Golden Eagle with big white patches in the wings and tail appears over the mountain top opposite and two Steppe Eagles fly over allowing for a very nice comparison. Beautiful flowers including something very similar to Alpine Forget-me-not and a saxifrage with leaves like Mossy Saxifrage but much rounder flowers that clearly change colour from pink to white. Neither are in the book!

We drive on to a spot where Balazs has seen Daurian Partridge in the past and while the drivers set up lunch we take a walk - soon finding a couple which vanish into the vegetation at the edge of a dry stream. We try to get more views of them but then suddenly they burst from cover and fly off up the hillside and into a gully. As we enjoy lunch we keep an eye on the mountain slopes around us for Argali sheep, picking out more wheatears, Red Deer, Rock Thrush and even a Lammergeier.

Eventually we drive on to a very promising looking little valley with a long line of trees and scrubby bushes following a dry river bed. Apparently it has been very good for migrants in the past but today it seems to be birdless despite our best efforts, though there are several Tolai Hares. We also scan the hillsides finding more Red Deer but also at least three Agali Sheep! They wander up and over the skyline but we enjoy very good scope views and one is quite an impressive male.

We make our next stop where we can scan a wide open view in the hope of finding Mongolian Gazelle. We soon find three animals sat down below us then shortly add another four and single male and get quite good views. There is little else seen here despite putting in time while we have a coffee. We are puzzled by a guy on a motorbike chasing a small group of horses right across the plain for huge distance - they must be exhausted!

We make a final stop to scan the hillsides for Wolves which are not uncommon here though they are always elusive. There are several Red Deer with young on the hilltops and we comment that they would make good wolf food but the best we see are great views of Amur Falcon and Lesser Kestrel plus a distant Saker Falcon. Heading back towards the ger camp we make one final stop when we find several Przewalski's Horses on the track. It is a great chance to enjoy close up views of these beautiful animals including a delightful little foal before we finally head back for our evening meal, waving goodbye to our drivers who are now setting off to Dalanzadgad where we will meet them tomorrow.

#### Day 7:

With rain over night it feels cold in the morning with a cold wind as we head for breakfast at 8am. A couple of people have been walking in the sand dunes before breakfast and report that there is almost nothing to see this morning, so we decide instead to take in another site for Long-tailed Rosefinch when we are near Ulaanbaatar from where we are catching an internal flight today.

A coach turns up to take us to Ulaanbaatar and the journey is very quiet with few birds other than larks, Upland Buzzard and the occasional Demoiselle Crane. We arrive at the river and walk down through the bushes and trees to see what we can find. Almost immediately a White-crowned Penduline Tit starts calling and we locate its nest in the trees.

The bird appears and hops into the top of the bushes to check us out allowing excellent views. It is joined briefly by a second bird before both head into the denser vegetation. We walk under the bridge and hear a calling Azure Tit so try playing a little of the call to see if it will come in. It responds very quickly and flies across to land nearby skulking around in the bushes and allowing us good if brief views before heading back across the river. We see a few Ravens, a pale phase Booted Eagle and several Black-eared Kites.

But our real target is Long-tailed Rosefinch and we walk on slowly until we hear one calling. Again the recording is useful and pulls the birds towards us with both a male and a female appearing in the trees right in front of us - and what a beautiful bird it is!! The lovely pink flush with paler streaking and broad white wing-bars make a lovely combination and we are thrilled.

We wander on finding little more though a Black Stork circles briefly overhead and a couple of longipennis race Common Terns fly past. A Little Ringed Plover flies down the river and we get more good views of the Booted Eagle plus a dark phase bird as we walk back to the vans. We enjoy Pizza at the van which is delivered to the layby where we are parked and then it is time to head to the airport for our short flight to Dalanzadgad and what feels like the second part of our adventure!

Our flight actually leaves a little early and our group fills about half of the plane for the short flight. We arrive to find the drivers all waiting for us and looking surprisingly happy and fresh given the number of hours they were driving! Then we gather our bags and walk out to the vehicles which are almost unrecognisable!! Apparently there was rain during the night and the vehicles are absolutely smothered in mud - the whole of the vehicles and the windows too! We climb aboard and reckon we have just enough time for an hour or so birding en route to the hotel which is nearby.

We make a short stop to check a cluster of trees very close to the Airport and find them to be almost devoid of birds. There are however Isabelline Shrikes here and they look lovely in the sunshine. We set off towards another group of trees but have not gone far and suddenly Balazs calls that he has spotted an Oriental Plover! This is one the key

species of the trip - a real must see - and we pull up and are soon enjoying scope filling views of this absolutely exquisite bird. You would think we were watching a firework display hearing the oooing and ahing as we look through the scope - and that is just from Roy! The beautiful contrast between the white head and the black belly with the gradual darkening of the chestnut chest-band from a very pale buff on the high chest to rich chestnut on the belly before it turns black is simply exquisite. We spend quite a while enjoying wonderful views of this bird and a rather duller female before it finally flies further away and we find ourselves focussing instead on little mammals running and scurrying about outside their holes. They are similar to the Mongolian Gird we have already seen but these are a touch smaller and shorter tailed and are actually Mid-day Girds - a great name - and we wonder why they are out and about at 6pm!

We move on to make a short stop to at the taller trees we aiming or when we spotted the plover and start checking them for migrants. At fist it seems quiet then we flush an oriole! It flies on a bit and vanishes into the foliage and we move down to try and relocate it. In doing so we discover several Hawfinches here which fly around and then land on the ground where we get very good views before we again flush the oriole. This time it lands in the top of one of the bushes and we get very good views - a nice immature male Golden Oriole and a lovely finish to the day.

#### **Day 8:**

After breakfast we set off towards the Altai Mountains, a drive of around an hour and as we get closer we see more and more birds. There are Shorelarks everywhere and we pass lots of Pallas's Sandgrouse as we drive. As we get closer to the mountains Uugan spots a Snow Bunting but it flies over the ridge with Andrew the only other person to see it. There are Isabelline Wheatears everywhere and lots of Pallas's Pikas collecting hay ready for the winter! There are astonishing numbers of them and lots of Mid-day Girds and Red-cheeked Ground Squirrels.

We reach the end of the road and start our walk down towards the gorge. There are White-winged Snowfinches almost at our feet and above the cliffs both Eurasian and Himalayan Griffon Vultures plus a beautiful adult Lammergeier. We find our first Brown Accentors and we enjoy good views of several before we add Koslov's Accentors too.

This is technically the species to see here as it is quite localised in distribution but to be honest they are rather too similar to Dunnocks and rather drab in plumage. We enjoy wonderful views of Pacific Swifts looking great as they cruise around in front of the cliffs and we spend a lot of time scanning the tops of the cliffs in the vain hope of spotting Altai Snowcock. Continuing towards the gorge finding a few Rock Sparrows and get great views of a superb male eastern Black Redstart - another potential split with an orange belly and grey back almost like a Common Redstart. John O finds a White wagtail of the black-backed race leucopsis then further on we find our first Beautiful Rosefinch.

As we walk on down the gorge we are constantly finding more of these birds including several Beautiful Rosefinches which we actually decide are not quite as beautiful as the name suggests and they should be called Quite-nice Rosefinches. Some come down to the stream and allow us excellent views. There are also a family of Siberian Ibex high above us on the rocky slopes, the male with impressive horns. The walls of the gorge start to become more vertical here and closer together too so that the bottom of the gorge sees very little sunlight. The air feels quite warm but the lack of sunshine means that from here on the bottom of the gorge is a thick layer of ice! It appears to be a foot thick or so and the stream is flowing underneath with the result that the ice has fallen through in a few places over the water. It feels a little worrying walking over it but it seems pretty solid and the dirt that has fallen on top means it is not even slippery.

Further on we find a small warbler singing in the scrubby bushes. It has a pale bill and a longish supercilium and takes a bit of sorting out as it is very active and after some careful checking we identify it as a Greenish Warbler which is confirmed when we listen to a recording of the song which sounds identical - a nice find. We walk on further searching for Wallcreeper in the area where Balazs has seen it in the past and feel very confident but as time passes and we get no sightings our confidence starts to wane and eventually we have to drag ourselves away having not seen a glimpse of one. Walking back to the vehicles we get good views of perched vultures including both European and Himalayan Griffon Vultures - the Himalayan noticeably paler. Back at the vehicles then drive a short distance to a lovely spot for lunch.

We are really getting a bit late as we have a very long journey ahead of us. We load up and start the long drive across the steppes and into the Gobi Desert. This year is unusual as there is a swathe of grass and usually Uugan says that this is just bare stony desert! We make a brief stop to check out a rather angry looking Lilith's Owl - the very sandy coloured form of Little Owl - on a little rocky outcrop.

We are completely puzzled as to how the drivers navigate here as the whole area seems to be crisscrossed with dirt tracks and they just seem to speed along taking left and right options at random! It is an immense area of flat land and it seems impossible to know where you are going with any accuracy to our minds! We start seeing Pallas's Sandgrouse with some regularity and those of us who have wanted to see this species for a very long time are nervous that the flight views as we flush them from beside the track is all we are going to see but soon enough we find a pair that don't fly away and just continue to wander round on the ground nearby allowing us some wonderful views. We are thrilled and guess this behaviour is due to the presence of a tiny chick we find nearby. As we are about to leave John spots a Greater Sandplover! This is a great find and we enjoy very good views before continuing on our way.

Shorelarks scatter from beside the tracks as we drive - there must be thousands of them - and we continue to flush Pallas's Sandgrouse. At times we are not even driving along dirt tracks but just racing across the grassy steppe and the distances are astonishing - grass for miles and miles and flat to the horizon in every direction except to the north where the Altai Mountains form a skyline. It feels incredibly remote and empty with just the occasional group of horses or camels out in the middle of nowhere - we have no idea how anyone would ever find them here. A brief stop and we find fast running lizards - large headed little guys called Toad-headed Agama. One vehicle gets a brief view of an Oriental Plover and we make a stop when we spot some Gazelles! There are four on a close hillside and we watch them vanish over the top of a rise. When the other vehicles arrive we jump out and run to the top - astonished at the incredible distance they have covered in such a short time! They are rather lovely looking Goitered Gazelles, named

after the enlarged throat that the male attains during the mating season.  
A. Saker Falcon flies through while we watch.

We race on as darkness falls and eventually arrive at the ger camp. We jump out then suddenly there is confusion as we realise it is the wrong one!! We still have 10km to go and set off again but stop almost immediately when a Daurian Hedgehog wanders across the track. We all jump out and enjoy this absolutely delightful little creature - much paler than our hedgehog and with remarkably long ears!

At last we arrive and have a very late meal before heading to bed stopping as we walk to our yurts to stare in astonishment at the night sky - it is simply incredible to see and to realise how much more impressive it is when you are out in the middle of nowhere with zero light pollution - a beautiful finish to the day and for some people their magic moment!

### Day 9:

Today we have a leisurely day without everything close at hand and after breakfast we start by heading down to a small stream where Pallas's Sandgrouse come to drink early in the morning. As we arrive there are four birds already there and over the next hour or so many more come in and take a drink before flying away again. They are such beautiful birds and look even better with a backdrop of huge sand dunes and the Altai Mountains in the distance. The sand dunes are astonishing. The whole area for miles around is flat stony desert with rather sparse scrubby vegetation but then suddenly a bank of sand rises up, the highest dunes being perhaps 300 feet high!! Behind them are the Altai Mountains and making an amazing back drop to everything.

We scan around the area and soon find a Steppe Grey Shrike carrying a small lizard. It is very similar to Great Grey Shrike and we are surprised at the darkness and thickness of the mask but there are subtle differences in the amount of white in the wing that are conclusive. There is an Isabelline Shrike too and we find singing Desert Wheatear right on top of one of the bushes. Small birds are flying in to drink alongside the sandgrouse and we see Asian Short-toed Lark, Shorelark and Mongolian Finch. The finches are the bird we are most interested in seeing and we get a few quite good views of them but they don't stay long.

After a while things seem to quieten down a little so we decide to move on and have a try for the Henderson's Ground Jay - a species that

everyone is very keen to see. This very localised species is not far away and we pause en route to look at a Little Owl on the corner of a low building in which Lesser Kestrels are breeding. We arrive in an area where there are few low scrubby bushes and Ugan tells us that this is the right habitat - so we pause and scan and immediately there is a Ground Jay running along the ground between the bushes - fantastic!! What a fabulous bird this is, way better than most of us are expecting and very active, running around and pausing now and then to look for food. It catches a huge grasshopper and runs around with it in its bill for a little while before burying it in the ground. We enjoy the most wonderful views as it runs around and also perches on the tops of the bushes. It appears to be going into one bush quite frequently and later we check it out to discover there is a nest! We decide to take lunch nearby so the keener photographers can creep closer, the birds don't seem the least bit bothered by our presence.

After we have eaten and drunk more of Balazs's wonderful coffee we head in the direction of the stream again to a stand of Saxaul Bushes. Immediately we get out of the vehicles Balazs spots a Black Drongo!! This is big surprise and a national rarity. Ugan tells us that this species was not even recorded until the last three or four years but since then there have been quite a few records and they are now annual though in very small numbers.

We walk on and soon discover a huge Upland Buzzard nest which is important as it is in the base of these nests that Saxaul Sparrows nest! Steppe Grey Shrike and Daurian Shrike show well as we wait then suddenly a bird appears and we enjoy excellent views of a pair of Sexual Sparrows that are clearly nesting here. They are very smart and clean looking birds and we spend a while enjoying excellent scope views. John O starts wondering about the identification of the Black Drongo so when he relocates it we try and get a closer view. We conclude it is a Black Drongo rather than any other species despite his reservations about the tail shape but as we are watching it Balazs flushes a Nightjar. We get a couple more views and it settles under one of the bushes where we can even get a photo which will help with identification. Back at the vehicles comparison with the books suggests it is European rather than

Grey which could also occur here. We also get very good views of Asian Desert Warbler as it flits around the lower bushes.

We finish the day back at the stream where we enjoy good views of Little Ringed Plover, Blyth's Pipit, lots of Ruddy Shelducks, more Pallas's Sandgrouse and get much better views of Mongolian Finch. As we enjoy coffee and delicious biscuits and chocolate some guys appear leading some camels and we hail them to stop and a few folk enjoy a short camel ride!

We then head back to the ger camp for an earlier evening meal before we have a try for the jerboas!! These lovely little animals are nocturnal and the best way to find them is to wander out from the camp and scan round with a torch until you spot some eye-shine then run over. They seem to be remarkably tame once you have them in the spotlight. But while we search we find a smaller little animal with almost no tail and rather grey – it is very cute and we later identify it as Roborovski Hamster. It is not long before Balazs spots a jerboa and dashes across to pinpoint it in his light. When we catch up we find this delightful little creature wandering round looking for food as though there is nothing different! It hops around on long back legs with the tiny front feet tucked up like a tiny Kangaroo. The tail is long with a black and white tuft at the tip. It is ridiculously tame and wanders around between our feet and when Balazs bends down and reaches out his hands it happily lets him pick it up and even takes some food from his fingers – astonishing!

#### Day 10:

A 7am start sees us down at the stream where the plan is to simply watch the Pallas's Sandgrouse coming in to drink. We arrive and sneak forwards in the hope that a few might be at the water's edge and there are loads of them! They are coming and going constantly and we are thrilled to see them flying around and dropping down the flat ground beside the stream before walking down to the water's edge to drink. One scan produces 70 birds and more are flying in and out all the time. It is interesting to see some are squatting down in the water as they are famous for collecting water in the breast feathers to take to their chicks. The constant sound of their lovely bubbling call fills the air and they look especially good when flying across with the enormous sand dunes as a backdrop. By the time we head back for breakfast we must have seen hundreds and are delighted with our success.

After breakfast we have the long journey back to Dalanzadgad with a couple of stops for birding and lunch built in. Again we see hundreds of Shorelarks as we drive and also many Pallas's Sandgrouse but little else.

We make a stop in a rocky valley for coffee as this gives us a good chance of two new species of buntings. While the coffee is being made we scan the rocky slopes and discover the area is jumping with Mongolian Finches. They are flying around wherever you scan and at times land very close by. We find several Pied Wheatears and enjoy good views of a displaying Rock Thrush which looks wonderful against the blue sky. It is some time before we find any buntings and it is John who picks out a Grey-necked high on the slopes. This bird proves quite skittish with few people getting on it to start with but eventually it perches up to sing and everyone gets good scope views. From the same spot Tony picks out a bird high on the skyline and we are very pleased when it turns out to be the other species we are looking for - a Godlewski's Bunting. We get prolonged views as it sings and also find a big male Siberian Ibex.

We continue our journey over vast plains of empty space with a charm of its own and make a stop for lunch in the middle of nowhere. Shortly after that we head down to a small village where we buy water and fill with petrol. There are a few trees here and as they can sometimes act as a bird magnet in these remote places they are worth a check. Amongst many Tree Sparrows we find several Hawfinches which seem so out of place so far from anywhere then add White cheeked Starling. A small flock of Collared Dove include a single Oriental Turtle Dove which is a very nice find. There are lots of larks here including many Asian Short-toed with a lucky few seeing finding Greater Short-toed and Crested Lark too.

Further on we reach a rather nice ger camp with trees round two sides and scattered bushes in the grounds. Ugan knows the people here and they are more than happy for us to wander round and see what birds might be. We start walking round the edge of the trees and almost immediately flush a thrush!! This causes great excitement as any thrush here will be of interest so we follow the line of trees hoping for another sighting. What we have seen suggests Red-throated Thrush or perhaps

Naumann's Thrush but we are not sure which and sadly we have to remain unsure as we fail to relocate it despite great efforts. What we briefly saw suggests Red-throated and this is certainly the more likely species.

In our efforts to relocate the thrush we discover several other birds however, including yet more Hawfinches, at least two Thick-billed Warblers, Common Rosefinch and Pallas's Warbler. An Asian Brown Flycatcher shows well before we go in for a coffee and a final push for the town.

## Day 11:

Today the plan is to fly back to Ulaanbaatar and after breakfast we drive round to the airport where we are greeted by the unhappy faces of several potential passengers and the news that we might not have a flight! Our flight was due to leave at 9am but we are told that high winds in Ulaanbaatar mean it has not left and yesterdays flights were all cancelled. We make enquiries and discover that our flight has been postponed until at least 11pm tonight!! Our big worry is what happens if the flight is then cancelled given that our flight home from Ulaanbaatar is tomorrow evening.

After a lot of consideration Uugan suggests we drive and stay at a very nice hotel in a small town en route, then cover the remaining miles tomorrow. This is a shame as it means we will miss the dance ensemble we were hoping to watch tonight but at least we are guaranteed to be at the airport for our flight home so we decide to go with this idea. This means a very long drive today and after stocking up with supplies for lunch etc we are soon on our way across the steppe.

As we drive it is Shorelarks and Asian Short-toed Larks that are the most numerous though there is the occasional Desert Wheatear and Isabelline Wheatear and we regularly put Pallas's Sandgrouse to flight as we disturb them from beside the track. Eventually we arrive at a cluster of Elm trees following the line of a dry riverbed and a short walk here reveals Little Owl, Hoopoe and several Black-eared Kites. We soon discover they are nesting here and even find two fluffy white chicks in one nest, but we are disappointed at the lack of migrants.

We pass groups of Horses and Camels and regular herds of Sheep and Goats as we continue our drive plus the clouds are incredible again – this

time a huge Cumulus cloud that takes up about half of the horizon! We eventually arrive at our hotel which has very nice rooms and good food too but it has been a long day and we soon head to bed.

## Day 12:

Chris and John are out before breakfast (how do they do it!) checking the trees in the square near the hotel and find a few nice birds including Two-barred Greenish and Arctic Warblers, then after breakfast we are soon on our way. It is still a long drive to go though at least some of it is on tarmac!

We have not gone far when we find a small lake and make a stop to scan for waders. There are loads of Avocet here and they have clearly had a good breeding year as there are chicks all over the place. There are plenty of Shelduck and Ruddy Shelduck too then suddenly a group of four waders appears flying round the lake before settling. We are astonished when they turn out to be Lesser Sandplovers!! The race here is often considered a split and called Mongolian Plover which seems very appropriate but this is a very rare species here and completely unexpected! Astonishing that there should be such a good species here but so little else!

We drive on and have covered a lot of miles before we are delighted by excellent views of a lovely male Oriental Plover, a species we were very keen to see again. A lunch stop provides the chance for Ken to make a lovely speech to the local guide and drivers thanking them for their expertise. They have been a real pleasure to get to know and we have enjoyed their company and humour despite the lack of a common language. After much hand-shaking and slapping of backs we travel on add little else until we start to get closer to Ulaanbaatar when the habitat changes becoming gradually hillier and lush and there are even some trees! Suddenly we are back into Red-billed Choughs all over the place plus Mongolian Larks.

We take a detour round the city and eventually arrive at some gravel pits the other side of town and not too far from the airport. There are plenty of ducks here though nothing different - Tufted Duck, Pochard, Pintail and Gadwall, a Demoiselle Crane and several Little Ringed Plovers including a few displaying birds. There are a few Redshank, a pair of Whooper Swans with lovely little cygnets and a Daurian Jackdaw

amongst the Choughs. We spot a single Pale Martin looking rather similar to Sand Martin but with paler underwings the most obvious feature. We are surprised to find both Red Fox and Corsac Fox here.

In the evening we head to a restaurant to eat and then make the short journey to the airport where we say our fond farewells to the drivers. We check in the bags then have enough time to do a final run through the checklist before our traditional round-up of the trip in which each member of the group choose species of the trip, a favourite place and a 'magic moment'. We decide that with so many exciting species it is impossible to only choose one so we allow three birds and a mammal.

It is lovely to hear peoples thoughts about the holiday and what they have enjoyed and there are clearly certain species that have left a lasting impression - and nothing more so than the Siberian Rubythroat that gets one mention after another despite being a bird seen right back on the first day! Other bird highlights have been the Pallas's Sandgrouse coming to drink, beautiful Oriental Plovers, Demoiselle Cranes, Baikal Teal and others but it is the Henderson's Ground Jay that gets the most mentions, largely because of its uniqueness - it is nothing like anything else any of us have seen. Of the mammals the Daurian Hedgehog, Siberian Chipmunk, Pikas and Gazelles get a mention or two but it is the delightful little Jerboas that are the clear winners with five people saying they were their favourites! Of the places we have been it is the Gobi Desert that is the most popular with the wonderful gorge also mentioned by many. Magic moments are always harder to predict but it is interesting that on this trip one particular moment does get a lot of votes and this is the early morning watching the Pallas's Sandgrouse coming in to drink at the little stream in the Gobi desert. It is certainly a very special sight and one we will all remember

Time has flown by and we say our final farewells to Balazs and thanking him for his excellent guiding through the trip then it is through security and to the gates for our flight to Seoul

**Day 13:** Our flight leaves at around midnight and we are prepared for a long journey with books to read and films to watch - but most people are soon asleep! A few hours later we arrive in Seoul and Roy leads us through to the information desk where they sort out the hopper bus

to our day-hotel -we have a nine hour wait and are delighted to have somewhere to sleep and also a breakfast! The rooms are very comfortable and breakfast turns out to be superb! There is everything you can possibly imagine available from the typical ingredients of a standard English to all kinds of muesli, pastries, curry, porridge, Asian type breakfast, fruits, yogurts, and even spicy fish!

Those of us who could not resist the chance for a final spot of birding somewhere exotic take a short stroll outside where there are trees and scattered bushes - though there are rather few birds in them. Those we find are mainly a bit disappointing - Magpie, Tree Sparrow, Grey Heron, and we glimpse what might be a Thick-billed Warbler but we are delighted to see Brown-eared Bulbuls - a bird with character and a nice bonus to finish our trip before we head back to the airport and our flight home.

## BIRDS

Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Great Cormorant (Seoul)	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Little Egret (Seoul)	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>	Red-necked Stint	<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		<i>melanuroides</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser rubrirostris</i>	Asian Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus</i>
Bar-headed Goose	<i>Anser indica</i>		<i>semipalmatus</i>
Swan Goose	<i>Anser cygnoides</i>	Relict Gull	<i>Larus relictus</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	Mongolian Gull	<i>Larus mongolicus</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Baikal Duck	<i>Anas formosa</i>	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	Pallas's Sandgrouse	<i>Syrnhytes paradoxus</i>
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Garganey	<i>Anas guerguedula</i>	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Mandarin	<i>Aix galericulata</i>	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		<i>orientalis</i>
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Oriental Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus saturatus</i>
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>
White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>
	<i>stejnegeri</i>	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	Pacific Swift	<i>Apus pacificus</i>
Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
Eastern Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus spinolotus</i>	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>	Pale Martin	<i>Riparia diluta</i>
Common (Eastern) Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo japonicus</i>	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella cheleensis</i>
Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanicorypha</i>
Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>		<i>mongolica</i>
Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>	Shorelark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Amur Falcon	<i>Falco amurensis</i>	Richard's Pipit	<i>Anthus richardi</i>
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	Blyth's Pipit	<i>Anthus godlewskii</i>
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>
Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Yellow Wagtail (Eastern)	<i>Motacilla flava macronyx</i>
Daurian Partridge	<i>Perdix dauuricae</i>	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White-naped Crane	<i>Grus vipio</i>	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Demoiselle Crane	<i>Anthropoides virgo</i>		<i>baicalensis and leucopsis</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	Isabelline Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		<i>isabellinus</i>
Greater Sandplover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	Southern (Steppe) Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Lesser (Mongolian) Sandplover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>		<i>pallidirostris</i>
	<i>mongolus</i>	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
Oriental Plover	<i>Charadrius veredus</i>	Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	White-cheeked Starling	<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>
Grey-headed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>

Daurian Jackdaw  
Rook (Eastern)  
Carrion Crow (Oriental Crow)  
Common Raven  
Henderson's Ground Jay  
Brown Accentor  
Kozlov's (Mongolian) Accentor  
Pallas' Grasshopper Warbler  
Paddyfield Warbler  
Oriental Reed Warbler  
Thick-billed Warbler  
Whitethroat  
Lesser Whitethroat  
Asian Desert Warbler  
Arctic Warbler  
Greenish Warbler  
Two-barred Greenish Warbler  
Yellow-browed Warbler  
Pallas's Warbler  
Dusky Warbler  
Taiga Flycatcher  
Asian Brown Flycatcher  
Siberian Stonechat  
Northern Wheatear  
Pied Wheatear  
Isabelline Wheatear  
Desert Wheatear  
Common Redstart  
Black Redstart

Daurian Redstart  
Siberian Rubythroat  
Rock Thrush  
Red-throated Thrush (?)  
Bearded Tit  
White-crowned Penduline Tit  
Marsh Tit  
Willow Tit  
Azure Tit  
Great Tit  
Nuthatch (Siberian)  
House Sparrow  
Saxaul Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Rock Sparrow  
White-winged Snowfinch  
Père David's Snowfinch  
Twite  
Mongolian Finch  
Common Rosefinch  
Beautiful Rosefinch  
Long-tailed Rosefinch  
Hawfinch

Pine Bunting  
Godlewski's Bunting  
Meadow Bunting  
Reed Bunting  
Pallas's Reed Bunting  
Snow Bunting  
Black-faced Bunting  
Yellow-breasted Bunting  
Grey-necked Bunting  
184 species

*Corvus dauuricus*  
*Corvus frugilegus pastinator*  
*Corvus corone orientalis*  
*Corvus corax*  
*Podoces hendersoni*  
*Prunella fulvescens*  
*Prunella kozlowi*  
*Locustella certhiola*  
*Acrocephalus agricola*  
*Acrocephalus orientalis*  
*Acrocephalus aedon*  
*Sylvia communis rubicola*  
*Sylvia curruca*  
*Sylvia nana*  
*Phylloscopus borealis*  
*Phylloscopus trochiloides*  
*Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*  
*Phylloscopus inornatus*  
*Phylloscopus proregulus*  
*Phylloscopus fuscatu*  
*Ficedula albicilla*  
*Muscicapa latirostris*  
*Saxicola maurus*  
*Oenanthe oenanthe*  
*Oenanthe pleschanka*  
*Oenanthe isabellina*  
*Oenanthe deserti*  
*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*  
*Phoenicurus ochruros*  
*phoenicuriodes*  
*Phoenicurus aureoreus*  
*Luscinia calliope*  
*Monticola saxatilis*  
*Turdus ruficollis*  
*Panurus biarmicus*  
*Remiz coronatus*  
*Parus palustris*  
*Parus montanus*  
*Parus cyanus*  
*Parus major*  
*Sitta europaea arctica*  
*Passer domesticus*  
*Passer ammodendri*  
*Passer montanus*  
*Petronia petronia*  
*Montifringilla nivalis*  
*Pyrgilauda davidiana*  
*Acanthis flavirostris*  
*Bucanetes mongolicus*  
*Carpodacus erythrinus*  
*Carpodacus pulcherrimus*  
*Uragus sibiricus*  
*Coccothraustes*  
*coccothraustes*  
*Emberiza leucocephala*  
*Emberiza godlewski*  
*Emberiza cioides*  
*Emberiza schoeniclus*  
*Emberiza pallasi*  
*Plectrophenax nivalis*  
*Emberiza spodocephala*  
*Emberiza aureola*  
*Emberiza buchanani*

## MAMMALS

Siberian Marmot  
Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel  
Long-tailed Ground Squirrel  
Siberian Chipmunk  
Red Squirrel  
Mongolian Five-toed Jerboa  
Northern Three-toed Jerboa  
Mid-day Jird  
Mongolian Jird  
Great Gerbil  
Roborovski Hamster  
Pallas's Pika  
Tolai Hare  
Daurian Hedgehog  
Corsac Fox  
Red Fox  
Przewalski's Horse  
Red Deer  
Goitered Gazelle  
Mongolian Gazelle  
Siberian Ibex  
Argali Sheep

## REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Toad-headed Agama  
Gobi Racerunner  
Mongolian Toad

*Marmota sibirica*  
*Spermophilus erythrogenys*  
*Spermophilus undulatus*  
*Tamias sibiricus*  
*Sciurus vulgaris*  
*Allactaga sibirica*  
*Dipus sagitta*  
*Meriones meridianus*  
*Meriones unguiculatus*  
*Rhombomys opimus*  
*Phodopus roborovskii*  
*Ochotona pallasi*  
*Lepus tolai*  
*Mesechinus dauuricus*  
*Vulpes corsac*  
*Vulpes vulpes*  
*Equus ferus*  
*Cervus elaphus*  
*Gazella subgutturosa*  
*Procapra gutturosa*  
*Capra sibirica*  
*Ovis ammon*

**FLOWERS - Many thanks to John Duerden for the flower list**

Common Name	Botanical Name	Location
Blue Stemmed Joint Fir	Ephedra Equisetina	Gobi
	Eritichium villosum	Terej
Common Mouse-ear	Cerastium fontanum	Terej
Moss Champion	Silene acaulis	Tuul River
Saxaul Tree	Haloxylon ammodendron	Khongorin Els
(Aster)	Asterothamnus centrali-asiaticus	Gobi
	Scorzonera radiata	Terej
Roseroot	Rhodiola rosea	Altai
Shepherd's Purse	Capsella bursa-pastoris	Terej
	Alyssum obovatum	Common
Marsh Yellowcress	Rorippa palustris	Altai
(Azalia)	Rhododendron dauricum	Terej
(Spurge)	Euphorbia discolor	Terej
(Gentian)	Gentiana pseudoaquatica	Terej
(Skullcap)	Scutellaria (grandiflora)	Dalandzadgad
	Caragana microphylla	Gun Galuut
	Caragana pygmaea	River Tuul
(Milk-vetch)	Oxytropis ambigua	Gun Guluut
(Milk-vetch)	Oxytropis sajanensis	Southern
	Hypocoum erectum	Southern
(Poppy)	Papaver croceum	River Tuul
(Poppy)	Papaver nudicaule	Terej
	Aconogonon angustifolium	Gun Galuut
Iceland Purslane	Koenigia islandica	Altai
(Wild Rhubarb)	Rheum undulatum	Widespread
(Rock Jasmine)	Androsace chamaejasme	Terej
(Rock Jasmine)	Androsace lactifolia	Terej
Sea Milkwort	Glaux maritima	Hustai
Birds-eye Primrose	Primula farinosa	Widespread
(Wintergreen)	prob Pyrola incarnata ssp incarnata	Terej
	Anemone crinita	Turtle Rock Valley
(Pasque Flower)	Pulsatilla ambigua	Terej
(Pasque Flower)	Pulsatilla flavescens	Terej
(Buttercup)	Ranunculus natans	Altai
(Meadow-rue)	Thalictrum petaloideum	Terej
(Globe Flower)	Trollius ledebourii	Terej
Marsh Marigold	Caltha palustris ?	Terej
Creeping Spearwort	Ranunculus reptans	Gun Galuut
	Potentilla acaulis	Widespread
Shrubby Cinquefoil	Potentilla fruticosa	Terej
Silverweed	Potentilla anserina	Widespread
	Potentilla tanacetifolia	Terej
Bird Cherry	Prunus padus	Turtle Rock Valley
	Spiraea aquilegifolia	Hustai
	Spiraea flexuosa	Hustai
Lady's Bedstraw	Galium verum	Hustai
(Lousewort)	Pedicularis flava	Turtle Rock Valley
(Lousewort)	Pedicularis rubens	Hustai/Altai
	Physochlaina physaloides	Hustai
	Stellera chamaejasme	Terej
	Viola arenaria	Terej
Yellow Wood-violet	Viola biflora	Terej
	Viola uniflora	Turtle Rock Valley
	Iris lactea	Terej
	Iris ruthenica	Hustai
	Iris tigridia	Terej
Sea Arrowgrass	Triglochin maritimum	Hustai
Marsh Arrowgrass	Triglochin palustre	Hustai
(Onion)	Allium flavidum	Gobi