



HILLSTAR NATURE

Mongolia

Rare Cats in the Vastness

9 to 24 August, 2025

Leader: Adam Walley



Snow Leopard... steeped in myth and legend is now possible to seek. The rugged, wild lands of Mongolia is fast emerging as perhaps the best place to seek them. Here they can be found near areas accessible by four wheel drive vehicle and at only moderate elevations. Seldom exceeding 8,000 feet elevation at the highest, we have a relatively comfortable Ger camp to return to each evening. We will

spend a week immersed in their territory and with the help of our local trackers and guides, the odds of actually seeing one are excellent.

The sneaky and elusive Pallas' Cat also inhabits the open spaces of Mongolia and for many is equally enticing. A truly unique looking wild cat with an incredible pelage, we spend several days searching for them with good chances of connecting with them.

While seeking out the cats we can hope to see several other exciting mammals: the incredible Saiga, Argali, Siberian Ibex, Mongolia Gazelle and even Przewalski's Horse. Birding is exciting in these habitats

too and we could encounter White-naped Crane, Altai Snowcock, Mongolian Ground Jay and Pallas's Sandgrouse.

We will travel mainly by four wheel drive vehicle with lots of scanning and some enjoyable walks too, all while based at traditional Ger camps. Almost the entire time we will be surrounded by some of the wildest open spaces remaining on our planet. Mongolia beckons!

Detailed itinerary

Day 1, Aug 9th: Ulaanbaatar

Our tour begins in the city of Ulaanbaatar. Nearly half of the country's population resides here in the capital city. We will assemble and spend the night in the hotel. If we have time today or perhaps later in the trip we can do a bit of easy birding along the Tuul River. The lush riparian habitats hold a few species that we won't see elsewhere

so we will try and track down Azure tit, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Azure-winged Magpie and White-crowned Penduline Tit in this area.



Ger Camp at the base of the Altai Mountains

Day 2, Aug 10th: Gun Galuut Nature Reserve

This morning we will head eastwards to visit the Gun Galuut Nature Reserve. This wetland area set amongst the vast Mongolian steppe is thriving with birds during the summer period. Our key target here will be the majestic White-naped Crane, a spectacular and vulnerable crane breeding in these remote Asian steppes. We also hope to see Demoiselle Cranes as well. A long list of intriguing waterfowl are to be found here: Bar-headed and Swan Goose, Whooper Swan and most of the Eurasian ducks. Breeding shorebirds will be augmented by migrants from further north at this time of year and possibilities seem nearly endless. We could dream of a rare sighting of Little Curlew or Asian Dowitcher while more likely possibilities include Pied Avocet, Bar-tailed Godwit, Broad-billed and Curlew Sandpiper, Temminck's, Long-toed and Red-necked Stint, Terek Sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. Additional species could include Citrine Wagtail, Pallas' Bunting and many more. While the focus today will largely be on birds we can hope that a couple mammal species are out and about preparing for their upcoming hibernations: Tarbagan Marmot and Long-tailed Ground Squirrel! After what should be an incredible introduction to Mongolia we will settle into our Ger camp for our first of 4 nights!



Days 3 to 6, Aug 11th to Aug 14th: Pallas' Cat Searching in the Bayandelgar Steppe

Our next three days will be spent roaming the endless steppe seeking out the incredible Pallas' Cat. This is one of the most unique looking and hardiest of the wild cats with a wonderfully dense coat. They hunt primarily rodents and while they may be active any time of day or night, it is early mornings and late afternoons that will give us our best shot at finding them. With perseverance and a lot of scanning, we have high hopes of spotting one! Other fantastic mammals in this area include Corsac Fox, Argali Sheep and very cute Mongolian Jirds. Birdlife is relatively sparse but we should see some interesting raptors including Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Cinereous Vulture and Amur and Saker Falcons along with a few interesting passerines including Mongolian and Asian Short-toed Lark and hopefully Pere David's Snowfinch. When not looking for mammals, down time along the river near our camp could produce all kinds of migratory passerines.

Day 7, Aug 15th: Hustai National Park. We will now head to the west of Ulaanbaatar to visit this interesting national park. During our visit here we will aim to see Przewalski's Horse. Considered to be the last surviving subspecies of Wild Horse, it went extinct in the wild some time in the past century with the species making its last stand in Mongolia until at least the 1960s. A small captive population persisted, albeit with something of a genetic bottleneck and were released back into Mongolia in the 1990s where they are now doing quite well. In addition to these powerful horses, we should also see

Altai Wapiti, more closely related to the North American Elk than the Eurasian Red Deer. Mongolian Gazelle are also to be found here and there are Wolf in the park hunting all these ungulates although seeing those would take a great deal of luck! Birding here will be interesting with some new species to be on the lookout for including Daurian Partridge, Isabelline and Pied Wheatear and Meadow Bunting. Again there should be some great raptor watching: Cinereous Vulture, Steppe and Golden Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Eurasian and Lesser Kestrel, and both Amur and Saker Falcon are all possible here!



Przewalski's Horse, the last species of wild horse, grazes on the steppes.

Day 8, Aug 16th: Transfer to Altai Mountains. Today will be a major change of pace as we head back to Ulaanbaatar to catch a flight way out west to Khovd. From there we will head towards our ger camp in the Altai and settle in for a week long stay! This is a truly remote and beautiful area, set in arid country of stark beauty in the foothills of the mighty Altai Mountains.

Days 9 to 15, Aug 17th to 23rd Snow Leopard searching in the Altai Mountains. The area around our camp has emerged as one the premiere places to see the once mythical Snow Leopard. Our trackers will head out and scan each morning and we can either join them in their search or bird around our campsite where they will immediately contact us by radio should they find a leopard. We will have four wheel drive vehicles at our disposal and hikes will generally be of short duration with moderate inclines. Our chances of a sighting of arguably the world's ultimate mammal are reasonably high during a week here but the animals may well be distant. If a leopard is found we will attempt to get as close as possible once everyone has had scope views. In this case, the walking could be quite challenging and bear in mind that we are still at moderately high elevation.

The main prey of the leopards here is the Siberian Ibex and we should certainly see these along with Tarbagan Marmot and perhaps the cute little Pallas' Pika. Bird diversity in this arid habitat is rather low but includes some really interesting stuff. One species we will be keen to see is the Altai Snowcock although finding that may require a strenuous hike. Other exciting birds to look out for here are Chukar, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon, Brown Accentor, Guldenstadt's Redstart and White-winged Snowfinch.

On at least one day we will head into the flatter deserts below camp to seek out the bizarre Saiga. This completely bizarre looking antelope was once one of the most common large mammals on earth but has undergone a

catastrophic decline in recent years. There is a rather small population in this part of Mongolia but we have good chances to see it here in addition to Goitred Gazelle. We could also try some night driving in this area to look out for Steppe Polecat and try and identify the various species of gerbils and jerboas darting around. Birding is good here too with the real drawcard being the incredible Mongolian Ground Jay.



Near our camp is a tree-lined river and at this time of year, all sorts of odd migrants could turn up in this little bit of cover in an otherwise inhospitable area. And not far away is Khar-Uls Lake. We will be certain to visit this birding hotspot during our time here. The key species here are Pallas' Sandgrouse, White-headed Duck, Pallas' Gull and possibly the rare Dalmatian Pelican. There is a huge diversity of wetland species present at this time of year.

Day 16, Aug 24th: Transfer to Ulaanbaatar. We will return by air to Ulaanbaatar where the tour will conclude.



Snow Leopard habitat in the Altai Mountains.

Tour Price/person*: \$7395

Deposit: \$1000

Final Payment Due: 9 April 2025

*Based on double occupancy at lodgings, with a group size of a minimum of 4 to maximum of 8 registrants. Group also includes guide(s) and driver(s). If less than 4 registrants, trip may be cancelled or re-negotiated.

The tour price (fee) includes services from upon arrival on Day 1 into Chinggis Khaan International Airport (UBN) until our return there on Day 16, including:

- All meals from dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 16.
- All accommodations from Day 1 through until Day 16. Single supplements are typically not available at the Ger Camps where we spend the bulk of our time on this trip. The camping is comfortable, especially considering the remote location. Yurts are shared by 2 guests. (See image below).
- All transport from arrival into the UBN on Day 1 through to Day 16, until guests are transported back to UBN (usually mid to late afternoon).
- Domestic flight between Ulaanbaatar and Khovd, return

- All guiding services, access permits and entrance fees to mammal watching and birding areas.
- Tips for drivers and staff at hotels and restaurants.

Excluded from your tour fee are:

- International flights. (We can advise you on best times for your flights, but Hillstar does not book flights or arrange air travel).
- Excess luggage on domestic flights (only 10 kg check in and 5 kg hand luggage is included)
- Alcoholic beverages, laundry services, charges for phone calls, and any other items of a personal nature.
- Expenses associated with travel such as insurance, visa fees, airport taxes, airline baggage fees, COVID tests, vaccinations, etc.

Documents

All travelers must have a current passport, valid for six months beyond the start date of this tour, with at least one blank page for visas. A visa is not required of US citizens entering Mongolia.

Cancellation Policy

If a guest/participant cancels registration:

- 120 days or more prior to the start of the tour, a refund is issued minus a \$500/person processing fee.
- Between 119 and 90 days prior to the start of the tour, half of the tour fee will be returned to the registrant.
- 89 days or less prior to departure, no refund of payments or deposits are issued.

The team at Hillstar Nature reserves the right to refuse service to any registrant/participant who acts disruptive, routinely disrespectful, or in a manner inconsistent with the goals of the company. All guests are expected to comply with the rules and agenda set forth by the guide(s) of the tour, and to behave in a way that is considerate and conducive to a quality group experience.

Please contact us if you have any questions about if a tour is a good fit for your goals and/or level of fitness.



Pace, Rigor, Climate & Pests

- Moderate pace with some long drives. We use a fleet of 4-wheel drive vehicles. Walking is slow and steady for mostly, although there may be a few optional strenuous uphill walks at moderate elevation while in the Altai.
- Apart from our nights in Ulaanbaatar we stay in ger (yurt) camps. The yurts are comfortable and warm. Generally there will be shared bathroom facilities and there may or may not be a shower operating in the Snow Leopard Ger camp.
- Cuisine is a bit different in Mongolia to what most travelers are used to, especially in regards to lack of

vegetables. However we will be traveling with our own chef who specializes in making western food so expect tasty meals throughout. Vegetarian diets can be accommodated.

- Reasonably pleasant weather at this time of year. Expect highs to about 80 F and lows to about 40 F at night. We do not anticipate accessing areas much above 8,000 feet.
- Expect a few mosquitoes but generally not too bad.

The main focus of our tour is to attempt to see two cat species: Snow Leopard and Pallas' Cat. This involves a lot of scanning (much of it by our expert guides/trackers) and the best times are near dawn and dusk. While our chances of seeing the two species are reasonably good, both are shy, so sightings may be distant. You may wish to bring your own spotting scope and tripod, such that you can enjoy lengthier views if and when an animal is spotted. We will attempt to close the distance if possible, but these animals tend to keep their distance. While the cats are our main focus, we also spend time looking for some of the other fantastic mammals here and may do some night-driving. Much of the birding in these areas is incidental, yet it is very much worthwhile and we visit a few wetlands, primarily to see the birds there.

Expect to be out early and back late, but often with some down-time at camp in the middle of the day. Sunrise is around 6 am and sunset around 8 pm. While at the Snow Leopard camp we have the option of being in the field with our trackers or relaxing/birding around camp, awaiting radio calls to alert us of any cat activity.

Weather is typically pleasant at this time of year, and this is one of the reasons we are doing the trip at this season. Expect daytime highs of 80F and nighttime lows down to about 40F. Bear in mind that in many cases we will be standing around scanning at some length, so layers and a windproof outer shell are highly recommended. Neutral colors are best for clothing. Sunscreen, hat and sunglasses are good for time spent in prolonged sun. We don't expect much rain in these arid areas but it is a possibility. We will spend most of our time between 4000-8000 feet above sea level, which isn't really high enough for the air to thin too much for low-landers. Biting insects are not usually a nuisance but do come prepared for a few mosquitoes.

Packing



White-naped Crane striding across a wetland.

Please limit yourself to one mid-size suitcase/duffel and another smaller bag (daypack, small backpack, etc.) for daily outings. Group travel dictates we consider our fellow traveler's comfort, and this includes not over-packing. Please note that included in your domestic flight is only 10 kg check in and 5 kg hand held. Additional weight will need to be purchased but is at a reasonable rate. While temperatures will not be extreme, please be prepared for standing

around in moderately chilly weather especially during our early mornings in the Altai. A windbreaker is recommended and a sturdy pair of hiking shoes will be a necessity.

Some species we are focused on finding include these below:

TARGET MAMMALS

- Snow Leopard
- Pallas's Cat
- Saiga Antelope
- Goitered Gazelle
- Siberian Ibex
- Argali Sheep
- Mongolian Gazelle
- Przewalski's Horse
- Corsac Fox
- Red Fox
- Stoat
- Mongolian Marmot
- Long-tailed Ground Squirrel
- Midday Gerbil
- Mongolian Gerbil
- Brandt's Vole
- Siberian Jerboa
- Northern Three-toed Jerboa
- Tolai Hare
- Pallas's Pika

TARGET BIRDS

- White-naped Crane
- Mongolian Lark
- Small Snowfinch
- Steppe Eagle
- Upland Buzzard
- Saker Falcon
- Meadow Bunting
- Azure Tit
- Long-tailed Rosefinch
- Azure-winged Magpie
- Pallas's Sandgrouse
- Altai Snowcock
- Daurian Partridge
- Mongolian Ground-jay
- Brown Accentor
- Godlewski's Bunting



Inside a tent (yurt) at a Ger Camp.

Bayarlalaa for joining this Hillstar Nature Wildlife Experience!