MONGOLIA – 24 August to 9 September 2018

TOUR DESCRIPTION: Even for the most seasoned of global travellers, Mongolia rates as one of the world’s most compelling destinations. To visit this far flung country is to be immersed in a true adventure. From the capital city of Ulaan Bator we will travel out into lands largely unchanged for centuries where the nomadic way of life is still king. We will witness stunning landscapes seen by few Westerners, and later return home with memories that are never to be forgotten.

The ancestral home of the great warrior leader, Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, Mongolia is one of the world’s largest landlocked nations, bounded to the north by Russia and to the south by China. The country remains largely unspoilt and is fast emerging as one of the wildlife destinations for the discerning naturalist. With the lowest population density on earth, minimal infrastructure and huge tracts of virgin landscape, it enjoys abundant wildlife. It is scenically diverse as well. Landscapes may be vast, but are curiously ever changing; snow capped peaks giving way to tranquil steppe lakes with rolling grasslands and sand dune deserts sandwiched in between, sometimes all in the same day! Here is where the southern fringe of the great Siberian taiga forest gives way to grassy steppe and then further south to the sands of the infamous Gobi Desert. Amongst the stunning scenery, hospitable nomadic herders still roam the grasslands, scraping a living out of the harsh landscape. Even today Mongolia remains the last unspoiled travel destination in Asia. Away from the capital, Ulan Bator, roads as we know them are almost unknown, though this only adds to the adventure. It is a safe and healthy country and an English speaker is never far away. For all its remoteness, Mongolia has a well organised system of national parks and strictly protected areas, with purpose built and welcoming tourist ger camps ensuring you have a comfortable stay.
It is also a superb birding and wildlife destination, with over 440 species of birds on its national list. Some of these birds, such as Pallas’s Sandgrouse, the beautiful and graceful White-naped Crane, the enigmatic Henderson’s Ground-jay and stunning Oriental Plover are highly sought after species on a global scale and Mongolia offers superb chances to see them. More frequent fare in the forested north includes Red-flanked Bluetail, Arctic and Pallas’s Warblers, with Azure Tit and Pine Buntings. In the Gobi, huge flocks of larks include the near endemic Mongolian Lark whilst breeding Pied and Isabelline Wheatears thrive alongside Richard’s and Blyth’s Pipits. Remnant Saxual forest is, not surprisingly, home to Saxual Sparrow and Saxual Shrike, the latter more commonly known in Britain as Steppe Grey Shrike. Grasslands hold scattered pairs of Demoiselle Crane which collect in autumn and are a delight to watch.

This is more than just a trip – it’s a true adventure, an experience to savour for a lifetime.

We will be operating this trip in conjunction with an experienced ground agent who operates out of Ulan Bator (headed by a Swedish man living in Mongolia) and who have been organising tourist holidays to Mongolia for many years. Several other British bird tour companies also use their services. This will ensure that we are well looked after and their local staff will remain with us throughout, so we are fully escorted and supported on our epic journey.

Most bird tours visit Mongolia in spring, to tap into the rush of northward bound Siberian migrants. We have chosen to visit in autumn, when birds are also plentiful but when the weather is more amenable. Mongolia really is the ‘Land of the Blue Sky’, Ulan Bator enjoying more days of blue sky (260) than any other capital city in the world. August and early September are considered to be a very pleasant time to visit, especially the Gobi, and we should enjoy much sunshine, though cool crisp early mornings are the norm. Autumn also brings a mix of colours to the riparian forests, the leaves turning red and orange, reminiscent of scenes from New England in the fall. Yes Mongolia can be remote and barren, but with help from dedicated ground staff, it is a perfectly safe and easy country to visit. This is a chance to experience nature in a variety of settings, and a chance to meet friendly Mongolian people who will welcome you into their customs, habits and culture.

**MAMMALS:** Well represented with good chances for Argali Sheep, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Siberian Ibex, Mongolian Gazelle, Corsac Fox, Red Fox, Grey Wolf, Przewalski’s Horse (Takhi), Eurasian Badger, Wild Boar plus a whole host of small hamsters, pikas and gerbils.
PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: Mongolia presents an ever changing landscape from mountains to sand deserts, from dry steppe to freshwater lakes, from taiga forest with alpine vistas to rare Saxual forests. All this combines to create an amazing backdrop to this tour. Then of course there is the nomadic culture of its people, a wide variety of birds and wildlife so photographers amongst the group will be more than content.

ACCOMMODATION & FOOD: In Ulan Bator, we stay in a modern, en suite, city hotel with all the facilities you would expect. Outside Ulan Bator we sample the life of the nomad, in ger camps especially designed with the tourist in mind. So, whilst we are still under canvas (actually a type of thick felt and fully water proofed), each ger has divan twin-beds and simple but clean washing facilities. Toilets and shower rooms with a supply of warm water for bathing are usually separate. Our rooms will be kept warm by wood fired stove heaters with lighting and electricity provided from generators. Some ger camps, such as that at Gun Galuut, have specially built brick shower blocks and restaurant, though we still sleep in traditional gers. The food is actually very good, with cooked breakfasts, picnic style lunches, and cooked evening meals. Our hosts even managed to find stocks of beer and wine so we can enjoy an evening drink in the camp restaurant or perhaps around the camp fire whilst completing the day's bird and wildlife log.

EASE & PACE: Mongolia is a big country so there is by necessity, a reasonable amount of travelling on this tour. For the most part this is slow progress rather than big distances and since the majority are dirt roads, we do these at a gentle pace, enabling us to take in the splendour of it all. We are likely to use a spacious bus with 22 seats, giving us plenty of space to stretch out and carry all the luggage. We will have both a driver and an interpreter with us throughout the trip. An indication of the more lengthy travel times is given in the itinerary section (no individual drives will be longer than four hours however).
PRICE: Our ground agent will provide their costs in US dollars. Given the volatility of exchange markets and the dates of the tour still being over 21 months away, we are unable to provide an exact price at this stage. The price in 2015 was £2400, which included internal flights to the Gobi, all transport in Mongolia, accommodation as described above, all food (breakfast, lunch and evening meal) with fresh drinking water supplied by our hosts. All entrance fees to national parks and monuments are included. The international airfare is not included and will be serviced at cost once the best schedule is found. Any additional drinks (yes believe it or not some alcohol is purchasable even out here) are not included.

VISA REQUIREMENTS: Those travelling to Mongolia with us will require a single entry-exit visa. The process changes occasionally, but two years ago and you could purchase the visa on arrival for about £40. Our ground agent will ensure that we are kept up to date on current regulations.

DRAFT ITINERARY:

Day 1 - August 24: DEPART UK

Day 2 - August 25: ARRIVE IN MONGOLIA – HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK

We arrive in Ulaanbaatar, probably having flown overnight from London via Moscow. We will be met by our ground agent hosts and then have breakfast before driving on to Altanbulag Soum along the Tuul River birding en-route and later enter the Hustai National Park, where we will have lunch and rest up a while at our ger camp accommodation. Later in the afternoon, we will take a game drive to see the rare Przewalski’s Horses with some birding too in a gentle stroll in the surrounding habitat. Roadside sightings might include Daurian Partridge, Black-eared Kite, Cinereous Vulture, Demoiselle Crane, Hoopoe, Red-billed Chough, Horned Lark and many others. An evening lecture on the conservation programme for the Przewalski’s Horses takes place at the camp.
**Day 3 - August 26: HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK**

Today we enjoy a full day exploring the Hustai National Park, beginning with a walk along a trail through aspen and birch groves, home to the stunning Azure Tit. Our vehicles will meet us so we don’t have to walk all the way back and we return to camp for lunch via the Tuul River. We get another chance to observe the exceedingly rare Takhi, or Przewalski’s Horse as it is more commonly known. This is the last remaining wild horse in the world, the forerunner of the domestic variety. These are not merely horses that have become wild, but are a genetically distinct species, and we will have good chances of spotting them. They actually became extinct in the wild in 1969, but after assistance from international environment agencies, a controlled breeding programme has successfully reintroduced them into three national parks in Mongolia. There are also populations of deer and gazelle, and even Wolf and Lynx are around. Typical birds should include Cinereous Vulture, Upland Buzzard, Saker Falcon, Amur Falcon, Eurasian Hobby, Mongolian Lark, Horned Lark and Isabelline Wheatear.

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**Day 4 – August 27: BAYANNUR TO ULAN BATOR**

Today we will drive west via Lun (Tuul River) to Bayannur lake, a journey of just over three hours. Bayannur is a large steppe lake edged with grass, reeds and mudflats. We can expect birds such as Whooper Swan, Ruddy Shelduck, Swan Goose, Citrine and various races of Eastern Yellow Wagtail, whilst the reed fringed water margins could yield Baillon’s and Spotted Crakes, Eastern Water Rail, Paddyfield Warbler, Oriental Reed Warbler and Pallas’s Grasshopper Warbler. Over our picnic lunch we can scan the water’s edge where waders frequently congregate and when they do so, an impressive spectacle awaits. Temminck’s Stint, Red-necked Stint and Pacific Golden Plover collect in three figure counts with the exciting possibility of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Long-toed Stint and Little Whimbrel all adding to a great variety seen on our last visit. After a few hours we must contemplate our three hour return to Ulan Bator, but we can make some birding stops, notably at the Tuul river near Lun. Here Black Storks patrol the river valley whilst Cinereous Vultures and Steppe Eagles glide overhead.

Our overnight stay will be at the Bayangol hotel, a modern western style hotel in the capital.
Day 5 – August 28: To BAYANZAG, SOUTH GOBI.

Our schedule today is dependant upon the flight times to the Gobi Desert. If our flight south to Dalanzadgad is in the morning, then we will have additional birding time when we arrive in the Gobi. Our ger camp is close to the famous ‘Flaming Cliffs’ of Bayanzag (described below), where the amazing vista is accompanied by groups of Pallas’s Sandgrouse which are frequently seen in the area. Nearby, there is an agricultural plot a few acres in extent where vegetables are grown for local ger camps. With rocky desert all around this small irrigated plot forms an oasis for passing birds and likely species include Two-barred Greenish, Arctic and Thick-billed Warblers and Brown and Taiga Flycatchers.
An afternoon flight gives us time to bird watch near Ulan Bator along the Tuul River marshes and then have lunch near Tsagaan Shonkhor. In this instance, birds would include the resident Azure Tit which nests along the Tuul River valley and we may be fortunate to catch the last of the summer visiting Yellow-breasted Buntings before they depart south. We will keep a watchful eye open for passage Arctic and Two-barred Greenish Warblers, as well as Daurian Redstarts which breed nearby. After lunch we transfer to the airport and fly south for one and a half hours to Dalanzadgad, gateway to the ‘green’ Gobi. Once there we will check any tree lined avenues in town for migrant birds whilst we stock up with drinks and nibbles from the local market. Moving on, open gravel plains near to Dalanzadgad often attract Oriental Plovers which breed in this area. Many smaller species of mammal dash about on the desert surface including gerbils, pikas (a small relative of the rabbit), marmots and Siberian Chipmunk. Our ger camp accommodation is at Bayanzag.

Day 6 - August 29: To Khongor Els
The ‘Flaming Cliffs’ of Bayanzag glow red in the evening sun and it was from here that in the 1920’s newspapers brought news that Roy Chapman Andrews, an American palaeontologist had discovered the fossilized eggs of Oviraptor. He subsequently unearthed over 100 dinosaurs here, making it one of the most famous localities for dinosaurs on earth. His discoveries included several Velociraptors, later made famous by the film Jurassic Park. Birding is usually productive at the nearby Saxual groves, where Asian Desert Warblers flit between bushes and Saxual (Steppe Grey) Shrikes are on the look-out for prey. However we start with an early morning return to the nearby irrigated agricultural plot. Here the array of migrant species changes daily, and affords us the chance to get up close to some Siberian species much sought after as rarities in the UK. After lunch we will drive to Khongor Els, a four hour journey which takes us across the Gobi steppes. Wild Camels, Wild Asses and Black-tailed Gazelles roam the desert landscapes managing to survive despite the rigours of the climate and lack of water. En route we cross low mountain ridges with their flocks of Mongolian Finch, before reaching the spectacular setting of Khongor Els, a place of amazing beauty and spectacular colour as the sun goes down. Here are the largest sand dunes in the Gobi, up to 300 metres high and 12 km wide, and you can climb them if you
like, offering wonderful views from the top and then slide back down if you have a plastic bag handy! Our overnight accommodation will be at a ger camp affording panoramic views of the sand dunes.

Day 7 – August 30: Khongor Els
We enjoy a full day at Khongor Els, admiring the view and bird watching as we go along. Amongst the dunes and associated Saxual forest, a freshwater river acts as a magnet to migrating birds. Waders include Pintail Snipe and both Red-necked and Temminck’s Stints, whilst Pallas’s Reed Bunting and flocks of Citrine Wagtails forage quietly underfoot. Pallas’s Sandgrouse come to drink and the marshes at the base of the dunes offer shelter to Siberian migrants such as Lanceolated, Pallas’s Grasshopper and Thick-billed Warblers, Richards and Blyth’s Pipits, whilst the localised Saxual Sparrow breed in the dunes. Hill Pigeons accompany the more common Rock Doves. Later we can search a nearby stony ridge for Henderson’s (Mongolian) Ground-jay, a quick moving species that can be difficult to spot. Overnight ger camp at Khongor Els.
**Day 8 – August 31: To YOL VALLEY AREA**

Today we sit back and relax for a full day’s drive back east across the Gobi. We will see herders galloping bare back across open steppe to watch over their livestock, often a mix of sheep, horses, goats and Yaks. Birding stops en-route should produce many Mongolian Larks and their smaller cousins Asian Short-toed Larks as well as numerous Isabelline, Pied and Desert Wheatears and Mongolian Finches as well as abundant small rodent species scuttling over the stony ground back to their burrows to avoid the ever watchful Sakers which swoop in from nowhere. We will make a short evening excursion to the so-called Little Yolyn Am valley, a gorge which holds White-winged Snowfinch and Eastern Black Redstarts, whilst any damp area yields Citrine Wagtail and Pallas’s Reed Bunting. We stay overnight at a ger camp near Yolyn Am.
Day 9 – September 01: YOLYN AM
Our day is taken up exploring the Yolyn Am area, known locally as the ‘Valley of the Lammergeier’, in the Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park. This dramatic gorge is in complete contrast to all around; a valley in the Gobi desert that amazingly holds a glacier all year round! Avian targets here are manifold. The high craggy slopes hold Altai Snowcock, easier to hear than actually see, and it is whilst scoping for these that the shy Siberian Ibex can be spotted scrambling amongst the crags. The peaks are full of raptors, with Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon and Cinereous Vultures, Saker and Golden Eagle all likely, whilst Pacific Swifts dash overhead. Lower down, the valley slopes are home to the endemic Koslov’s Accentor and other members of that family of birds include Alpine and Brown Accentors. Stunted junipers harbour Chinese Beautiful Rosefinches whilst Godlewski’s and Grey-necked Buntings and White-winged Snowfinches can sometimes be spotted drinking in the mountain streams. In the narrowest part of the gorge itself, the overhead butterfly flight of the Wallcreeper betrays their presence. This spectacular valley provides valuable vegetation for migrant passerines such as Bluethroat, Siberian Stonechat, both Red-throated and Water Pipits and possibly Yellow-breasted Bunting. We would be very fortunate indeed to spot a Snow Leopard or Gobi Bear, both of which are here amongst their favoured habitat. The botanists amongst the group will find plenty to keep them interested with a mixed alpine and desert flora. Over 150 Mongolian plants are listed as endemic species. Mountain species that are adapted for short growth periods are typical and we will look out for saxifrages, rock jasmines and gentians. We would have to count ourselves extremely fortunate to stumble across the rare and mythical Vansemberuu flower (or Snow Lotus), much sought after by locals for its mysterious healing properties and believed by them to make wishes come true. After a truly spectacular day we will all be sad to retrace our steps for about one hour to overnight at the nearby ger camp.
Day 1 – September 02: To ULAN BATOR
We explore further areas around the Juulchin area, where a line of poplars within the camp can produce many rare and migrant birds such as Siberian Thrush and Asian Brown and Taiga Flycatchers seeking a resting place to break their journey south across the Gobi region. Flights of migrating Oriental Honey Buzzard may be passing overhead so we will keep a watchful eye skyward for these and any other raptors. By early evening we transfer to Dalanzadgad for the internal flight back to Ulan Bator and check-in to our city centre hotel.

Day 11 to 13 – September 03 to 05: TO GUN GALUUT
This morning we drive three hours east to the picturesque Gun Galuut nature reserve, set amongst stunning alpine meadows, within the valley of the crystal clear Herlen river. En-route, meadows support a variety of corvids and amongst the ubiquitous Red-billed Chough, we should see flocks of Daurian Jackdaws, Eastern Rooks and Oriental Crows at the sides of the road. Our accommodation for the next three nights is at the Steppe Nomads ger camp. This newly built and comfortable camp is located within a mix of prime habitats which provide a variety of wildlife. The park’s most famous avian inhabitant is the endangered White-naped Crane, and we should soon see a family group of these most elegant of birds. Just a few kilometres away a series of small shallow wetlands can hold impressive numbers of wildfowl and waders; Swan and Taiga Bean Geese are possible, Pacific Golden Plovers are likely, with excellent chances of Buff-bellied and Red throated Pipits, Little and Pallas’s Reed Buntings skulking in the margins, where even a Siberian Rubythroat or two can be found! Whilst enjoying our breakfast from the restaurant veranda, we may be lucky and spot, as we did in both 2008 and 2015, an Argali, a huge and endangered form of long-horned mountain sheep, standing proud against the skyline of a nearby peak. Whilst traversing the wide open steppe we need to be on the look-out for the White-tailed or Mongolian Gazelle, whilst Tolai Hare is another distinct possibility.
We spend all day in a leisurely exploration of the fabulous Gun Galuut area. In truth we could spend a week here alone; we will walk amongst the alpine meadows, watching for a passing group of Amur Falcons, stroll streamside picking out Siberian migrants flitting in the dwarf willows or perhaps scan the various lakes here for yet more birds. Overnight at the Steppe Nomads ger camp.
Day 14 – September 06: TO JALMAN MEADOWS
We will rise early for a final look around the riverside scrub where overnight arrivals of migrants are likely. Perhaps a Yellow-breasted Bunting or Pallas’s Grasshopper Warbler might appear and it is likely a few Little Buntings will be on the move. Moving on our morning drive takes us across the flat plains before we rise into hilly forested country and a landscape reminiscent of the lower reaches of the European Alps. We will pause at a coll above the Upper Tuul river valley where a short walk leads into a forested hillside rich in birds. Here we may encounter the shy Hazel Hen, the secretive Red-flanked Bluetail and the range restricted Black-billed Capercaillie, whilst a close Ural Owl dazzled on our last visit here. Moving down slope we pass isolated trees amongst meadows where ‘Siberian’ Northern Shrikes can be found. Onwards into the Khan Khentii Special Protected Area, before we arrive at our ger camp base at Jalman Meadows. The hills are well watered so forested slopes of Siberian Larch abound and wild flowers bloom in the valley bottoms. Martigan lilies and wild clematis are found, while orchids like the delicate pink-slipper variety appear close to the ground. Lowland fens and meadows are ideal habitat for meadow flowers and delphiniums, primulas, anemones and the hardy species of edelweiss give the impression that Mongolian soil is richer than it actually is. Overnight at Jalman Meadows.

Day 15 - September 07: Jalman Meadows all day
We are likely to encounter Black Grouse, Richard’s and Olive-backed Pipits and Pine Buntings around our accommodation, whilst overhead Steppe Eagles, Black-eared Kites and Cinereous Vultures are on the lookout for marmots and sousliks which abound in the valley grasslands. Nearby riparian woodlands hold resident Three-toed, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers as well as Azure Tits. By this date migrant passerines will be keen to get a move on with the Mongolian autumn fast approaching bringing plummeting temperatures later in the month. Pallas’s Warblers, Red-flanked Bluetails and Daurian Redstarts descend from the forested slopes to the valley floor where Dusky, Arctic and Yellow-browed Warblers move through the tangles of low scrub bordering narrow streams. Siberian Rubythroats are
skulking by nature but with patience they can reveal their gorgeous colours, whilst both Black-faced Bunting and Little Buntings flit amongst the riverine scrub, a favourite habitat for the fine looking Long-tailed Rosefinches as well. Wooded slopes host both Asian Marsh and Willow Tits with abundant Olive-backed Pipits, whilst mammal interest comes from Siberian Chipmunk and Long-tailed Ground Squirrels. At dusk it’s perfectly possible to hear Eagle Owls calling as we doze off to sleep. Overnight at Jalman Meadows.
Day 16 - September 08: To ULAN BATOR
This is our last morning amongst the stunning mountain scenery and no doubt we will sit outside our gers in the alpine sunshine admiring the views and relaxing over a tea or coffee, letting the birds come to us. Passage over the valley could include a variety of raptors or perhaps a Lapland Longspur a species which will have just started to move south and could easily drop in to the grassland alongside our camp, where groups of Richard’s Pipits pause to feed. During the afternoon we drive back to Ulan Bator, stopping to visit the gigantean silver memorial statue of Genghis Khan which towers above the plains en route. No doubt we will contemplate, with admiration and respect, how the local people and their animals cope with the onset of a long winter ahead in what is one of the coldest places on earth. We will stay in our modern city hotel for our final overnight stop.

Day 17 - September 9: DEPARTURE – UB MONGOLIA to LHR UK
It’s an early start for us today, as we transfer to the airport and fly out of Ulan Bator at 08:10, first to Moscow and then transfer for our flight back to London Heathrow.