



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,  
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865  
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: [jason.woolgar@btinternet.com](mailto:jason.woolgar@btinternet.com)  
Website: [www.wildglobetours.com](http://www.wildglobetours.com)



## MONGOLIA

**Date - July 2017**

**Duration - 17 Days**

### **Destinations**

Ulaanbaatar - Hustai National Park - Altai - Sharga Nature Reserve - Mother Mountain - Great Gobi A -  
Khairkhan - Gobi Gurvansaikhon National Park - Khongoryn Els - Yolyn Am - Khurmen

## Trip Overview

Having celebrated the remarkable achievements of one of the two historical figures I most admire on my previous tour, when we remembered the decisive role that Mahatma Gandhi played during the struggle for Indian independence, it was now time to follow in the footsteps of the other, an illiterate Mongolian nomad called Temujin, who would become better known to the world as Genghis Khan. For those who may think it strange that two of my heroes are such contrasting characters, I could easily make a case that they share many traits, as they were both men of absolute iron will and almost unimaginable vision and they both freed their people from the yoke of oppression. However, any attempt to concentrate on their similarities would do both men a disservice, as in truth Gandhi epitomised peaceful resistance and Genghis Khan, among many other qualities, was simply the greatest military commander of all time. Whereas the tenacious activist Gandhi almost singlehandedly defied the largest empire ever assembled, Temujin personally ripped the earth from beneath his enemies and fashioned the vastest contiguous land empire in history. In terms of the known world at the time, the domain that the Great Khan presided over was even larger than the British Empire that Gandhi would help dismantle and it was all taken bloody mile by bloody mile in an age of conquest and carnage. This is a hugely important distinction, as over the centuries Genghis has become a byword for evil, but, unlike the British who subjugated largely civilians or forces weaker than their own in supposedly more enlightened times, the Mongolian warlord was born amidst the harsh reality of the Middle Ages in a land ruled not by Mongolians, but by the Chinese in the form of the Jin dynasty. Mongolia itself was torn asunder by warring tribes and the Chinese had long since encouraged these local conflicts as a means to divide and rule the entire territory. When Temujin was just twelve his father was murdered by the Tatars, a collection of fierce clans that you could describe as loyal to the Chinese if the concept of loyalty really existed in these merciless times, and for several years he lived in hiding as his enemies searched for him and his family. Eventually Temujin was captured by the Tayichiuds and although he staged a daring escape and returned to his own people, his young bride Borte was later kidnaped and given as a prize to a warrior of the Merkit clan following yet another murderous incursion from which Temujin and his brothers barely escaped. Such raids, and an eternal cycle of revenge attacks, were commonplace among Mongolia's rival tribes and Temujin understood that his people would never rid themselves of Chinese tyranny whilst they continued to make war on each other. Having rescued Borte and exacted a heavy price on the Merkit raiders, Temujin instigated an unparalleled campaign that would last more than two decades and ultimately produce a united Mongolia and an army that would strike terror across the heart of the continent. Through a combination of brilliant military strategy and inspired political manoeuvring, persuasion and intimidation in equal measure, unprecedented loyalty, unquestionable courage and an unadulterated ferocity in battle, a hitherto disparate collection of feuding nomads were transformed into an empire of astonishing scale and sophistication.

*'A man's greatest joy is crushing his enemies.'*

Appointed Supreme Ruler in 1206, Genghis Khan, which loosely and rather appropriately translates as fierce or strong ruler, would not live to see the full extent of his vision, but over the course of almost five decades of barely uninterrupted conflict, the last 21 years of which were spent in sole charge of his burgeoning dynasty, he established a reputation as the finest military commander of all time, eclipsing even the ability, success and daring of Alexander the Great, Hannibal and Julius Caesar. This tactical ingenuity was no doubt emboldened by the skill of his warriors, as Genghis clearly understood that, deployed appropriately, his fearsome horse archers were more or less invincible and he fully exploited not only their unrivalled talent for warfare, but the dread that they began to instil in





enemies following a succession of crushing victories. As a nomadic people, Mongols relied upon their horses and were said to be able to ride by the age of three. They did so with their legs only, to leave their arms free for combat, and learned at a young age to release their arrows at the exact point when all four of their horse's hooves left the ground, purely to avoid the possibility of a misplaced arrow as hooves thundered against the rough terrain. They would fire when their mount was at full gallop and its head was low, as this presented a clear field of vision, and each warrior would carry two different bows, one for short range combat and a heavier version for more distant targets. According to Frank McLynn in his superb *'Genghis Khan The Man Who Conquered The World'*, the long range weapon had a draw weight of 166lbs and one shot at an archery tournament in 1225 was apparently recorded at a staggering 550 yards, which equates to more than 500 metres or about five standard football pitches.

*'One arrow alone can be easily broken but many arrows are indestructible.'*

Genghis and his almost equally gifted generals unleashed this supreme combination of horsemanship and marksmanship to devastating effect across an unwitting and ill prepared continent that was simply unable to resist. Historical enemies and new foes alike were swept aside and when the Mongol archers were not loosing clouds of arrows that darkened the sky and scattered entire armies, they were sniping at the flanks of their heavier and slower adversaries and retreating before they could suffer a single casualty. This was another key element of Mongol domination, the speed with which they could engage and disengage an enemy, allied with



the previously inconceivable mobility of an entire war machine that required no base or supply line. Mongol horses, on size we would refer to them as ponies, were incredibly robust animals, ideally suited to the rugged terrain of the Mongolian steppe. They were not the fastest animals, although this rarely mattered given that the vast majority of Mongolian cavalry were lightly armoured and could easily evade opposition forces, but they did possess incredible stamina and on one occasion were said to have carried their nimble riders 100 miles in a single day, another feat of arms that would have been unheard of at that time. One verified account reveals that a horseman could cover 600 miles in nine straight days on just one mount and all warriors owned a minimum of six horses and usually far more. Most were mares, as individual riders could be entirely self-sufficient for days at a time by drinking the milk of the mares and occasionally a small amount of blood in more extreme situations. The Mongolian army was equally independent when necessary and did not rely on the crucial supply lines that have hindered, and in some cases destroyed, large isolated armies throughout the ages. With no cities to defend, the nomadic Mongols could move at will and following their soldiers was just an ordinary way of life for a people that simply moved between pastures for their animals and according to the changing seasons. Given their relatively moderate numbers, Genghis rarely commanded the largest force in the field and hated wasting the lives of his men. Hand to hand combat was avoided whenever possible and instead the Mongols relied on the tactical genius of their leader and his handpicked commanders. He possessed an extraordinary aptitude for selecting and promoting the most astute and courageous generals and every

Mongol triumph was based on these leadership qualities and the exceptionally disciplined warriors that Genghis knew would never fail him. Every conceivable strategy was utilised to reduce casualties, including the aforementioned hit and run tactic employed by the horse archers to significantly weaken the strength of a numerically superior force and the encircling or outflanking of enemy positions that would often ultimately result in a final decisive assault from several directions simultaneously. When the situation demanded, armoured cavalry would attack in relentless waves and commanders would in some cases spend weeks manoeuvring a hostile army to catch their rear against a surging river, where they could be cut down to man, or a mountain, where troops would be concealed in secret passes to attack the enemy from behind. With no apparent weaknesses opposing generals were all faced with the same question...how do you defeat an enemy that you cannot even see, let alone catch, until, that is, they are suddenly overrunning your bewildered forces and your supposedly elite troops are scattering across the barren plains like seeds in the wind? One of the Great Khan's most astounding outflanking manoeuvres took place in the campaign against the Khwarezmia Empire in Central Asia, after Shah Muhammad II had ordered the slaughter of hundreds of Muslim merchants and their Mongolian military escort at Otrar in latter-day Kazakhstan. A personal envoy to the Mongol leader was also killed and although Genghis showed remarkable restraint by







sending more ambassadors in an attempt to calm the situation and avoid war, when one of these was also beheaded and two more were returned home in shame with their hair and beards shaved off, the die was cast. Within approximately two years, hundreds of thousands had perished and the fledgling Khwarezmia dynasty no longer existed. The scene of the original outrage Otrar was the first to fall and in order to take the key cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, Genghis divided his troops, a typical Mongolian tactic practiced in multiple campaigns, and stationed armies to the north, east and south, supposedly leaving the west free for the shah to exploit if necessary. In a breathtakingly audacious move that generations of military historians have studied in admiration, Genghis then personally led some 40,000 warriors across the heart of the inhospitable Kyzyl Kum Desert to close that same gap and leave shah Muhammad surrounded and his cities at the mercy of thousands of implacable Mongols. The rest of the tale was of course written in blood and whilst this particular engagement clearly demonstrates a war leader of supreme confidence, instinct and ability, it also reveals another aspect of the Great Khan's military and administrative genius, his use of what we would today call military intelligence. Genghis created an extensive network of scouts and spies and although there was nothing new in attempting to discover an enemy's strengths and weaknesses, the Mongols went a great deal further and learned as much as possible about their society, culture, religion and even superstitions. Highly accomplished scouts would spend months assessing the geography of an area in order to carefully plan attacks and ambushes and these same scouts were responsible for finding the waterholes and wells that sustained Genghis and his army as they crossed Kyzyl Kum to both confront and confound shah Muhammad. Spies were placed in every city



and major town and the loyalty or otherwise of the general populace and even significant individuals, was known to Genghis and his commanders before battle commenced and in some cases before the enemy were even aware that they actually were the enemy. Campaigns were planned with absolute precision and although there was not a force on earth that could improvise as rapidly or as effectively as a Mongol army, basic logistics were never overlooked and a pragmatic approach was taken at an annual gathering to determine strategy and objectives for an impending conflict. To Mongols winning was everything and when it came to defeating an enemy, they would do so as efficiently as possible with as little risk as necessary. There were no codes or ethics except victory. Victory was honour, defeat was shame and there was nothing in between. Mongolian armies would deliberately take thousands of prisoners from one town, purely to use as human shields when it was time to ransack the next. The helpless and unarmed captives were driven forward in great numbers to either break the defensive ranks of the host or be cut down from behind and small civilian populations were routinely sacked in order to overburden larger cities with helpless refugees and drain their resources, as well as their morale.

*'An action committed in anger is an action doomed to failure.'*

Deception was all part of the process and Mongolians were masters at misleading and confusing enemies. Their elaborately staged feigned retreats were legendary and could last for several days as they conjured a panicked retreat, during which even gold and silver would apparently be discarded in haste, and slowly drew the pursuing army into the inevitable and equally lethal ambush. As they generally faced superior numbers, to give the impression of a hugely inflated host, individual warriors would set several camp fires at night and brushwood would be tied to the tail of their horses to create great clouds of dust and again the illusion of a vast horde. Female camp followers or straw dummies were often placed on horseback to do much the same, but conversely, Genghis decreed that units should always march separately to confuse opponents regarding their full strength. Other basic tenets also never changed, including the fact the Mongols would never fight on two fronts, an elementary principle perhaps, but one that countless ensuing commanders should have no doubt taken into account. In addition to siege tactics, which Genghis and his generals absorbed quickly



and soon became adept in, the final element of what would quickly become an irresistible force, was the psychological terror that the Mongols struck at the heart of their enemies, particularly in terms of the chilling demand to 'surrender or die' that was made to almost every besieged town or city. Whilst many leaders doomed perhaps millions of their own citizens by persuading them that they would be slaughtered if they did throw down their arms, this was actually a genuine offer, as the Mongol generals were so obsessed with preserving the lives of their esteemed warriors, they would gladly accept the plunder of a city without having to fight for it. Only the most hated of enemies were not given this opportunity to save themselves and it was extremely rare for a commander to renege on this fundamental agreement, as, above anything, Genghis was an immensely practical ruler and this form of treachery would have simply prevented other enemies from opening their productive cities to his armies. Apart from the tributes that had to be paid in terms of wealth and supplies, the vast majority of cities that chose to pay homage to Genghis were left relatively untouched, but those that resisted were dealt with in the ruthless manner on which his pitiless reputation is based. Entire populations were put to the sword, with just a few survivors allowed to 'escape' and further spread the infamy of Mongols as ferocious inhuman warriors and of their unrestrained retribution and wrath if resisted. In reality, young men who had not taken up arms, and sometimes even soldiers who had, were often spared and assimilated into the Mongol forces and Genghis, with his uncanny knack of recognising talent, was also known to integrate the best of opposition warriors and even vanquished commanders into his army. On one memorable occasion before his people were united, a member of the Besud clan shot the future Khan in the neck with a poisoned arrow and for several days he lingered on the brink of death. As you would expect, his soldiers had carried the day in the field despite the severe wound inflicted on their leader and when it became clear that he would survive, Genghis asked his men to check if his assailant had survived the battle and was being held among the prisoners. As fate would have it, he had and when questioned by Genghis he answered that it was his duty to fight for his tribe, but that if his life was spared, he would serve him and his Mongol brethren with the same fierce loyalty. This greatly impressed Genghis, for whom loyalty was valued above all things, and the archer was given command of his own troop of warriors and the Mongol name of Jebe, which of course means arrow. It was another stroke of genius from the astonishingly perceptive Khan, as Jebe was destined to become one of the greatest of all Mongol generals and would play a significant role in the destruction of the Jin dynasty and many other notable victories.

*'If you're afraid, don't do it, if you're doing it, don't be afraid.'*

This remarkable instinct and vision, this ability to see a clearer enduring picture beyond the constraints of his own immediate situation, would serve Genghis throughout his life and ultimately result in literally dozens of almost inconceivable victories against often vastly superior forces. After years of submission and humiliation, he would free the Mongol people from the scourge of Chinese rule and build an empire the like of which the world had never seen. However, for all his undoubted gifts, spectacular victories and magnificent achievements, the fact remains that to the majority of people, Genghis Khan remains the second most infamous representation of evil after Adolf Hitler. This obviously has a great deal to do with the number of people that died at the hands of the





Mongols and whilst no two sources can agree on the exact figures, unquestionably millions were killed during the rise and reign of Genghis Khan and millions more in the century or so following his death in 1227, as his progeny continued to expand towards the east. Then again, history is littered with accounts of bloody conflict, mass slaughter and genocide and in my previous Madagascar trip report, I described how the Belgian king Leopold II murdered between two and fifteen million defenceless natives in little more than twenty years in the Congo Free State. These crimes, and crimes they unquestionably were, were committed by a European monarch over 600 years after Genghis had risked everything to unite his people and inspire them to freedom. Via a policy of annihilation and rampant disease, Spanish conquistadors wiped out anywhere from 40 to 60 million indigenous people during the conquest of the Americas, for conquest perhaps read annihilation of basically unarmed natives by religious zealots with firearms, and that unholy triumvirate of Mao Tse-tung, or Chairman Mao as he was known, Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, were directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of up to 200 million people, the majority of whom were citizens of the countries these madmen actually ruled. So if the Great Khan's diabolical reputation is not entirely a matter of numbers, it must relate, in part at least, to the way in



which the Mongols fought and conquered, much of which I have already described. This is where I would disagree with some of the assessments that I have read, as there is very little evidence to suggest that Genghis relished barbarity or indulged in it purely for the sake of it, as so many other rulers have before and since. Certainly Genghis Khan could be cruel, but these were cruel times, when the strongest ruled and the weakest served and the only way to avoid being the latter was by somehow finding the strength to become the former. Conquest was a game that everyone was playing, or had at least dabbled in, and you can hardly blame Genghis Khan for being better at it than his rivals.

*'It is not sufficient that I succeed, all others must fail.'*

Before he was even fifteen, the boy Temujin had endured the murder of his father and had killed his own half-brother Begter, ostensibly for stealing rations when Genghis and his family were living as outcasts in the wilderness with barely enough food to survive. By sixteen or possibly seventeen, he had been captured and enslaved by a rival clan and within perhaps a year his wife had been abducted and had conceived a child at the hands of the warrior to whom she had been given as a prize. Mongols made war on each other almost for sport and all of these horrors occurred against a backdrop of Chinese oppression and persecution. Given this beginning in life, it would be easy to suggest that it is hardly surprising that Genghis grew to become the ruthless monster that the world would learn to fear, but although all of these and many more events would have undoubtedly affected him to some degree, the reality is far more complex, as Genghis was as pragmatic as he was resourceful and almost every action or decision was made for a specific purpose. If cruelty or spite helped to advance his cause, he would adopt either characteristic without hesitation, but it is equally the case that he had no wish to rule over the ashes of the world and that he generally preferred people kneeling at his feet than lying slaughtered beneath them. Corpses did not produce the wealth and goods necessary to sustain a vast empire and whilst many foes were certainly massacred without mercy or remorse, particularly those who refused to yield or were perceived to have insulted Genghis in some way, it rarely suited him to lay waste to the lands he had occupied. As one adviser explained at the time: *'The basis of the state is the people. If, when a country has been conquered, the population is then murdered, what advantage does the state have?'* Mongols seldom engaged in torture, which was incredibly unusual during these brutal times, as there was no profit in delaying the killing of a man that needed to be killed and Genghis displayed a religious tolerance, another characteristic shared with Gandhi, that was equally rare. I understand many would dispute this last claim, as Mongol invaders were responsible for the deaths of millions of Muslims and Christians alike. However, that is the point exactly, Genghis targeted disobedience and a failure to accept Mongol rule



in whatever guise, rather than the actual religion itself. People were generally free to worship in whichever way they wanted, as long as they paid tribute to the Great Khan and accepted his laws. The rules of hospitality were also sacred to Genghis and all envoys were treated with respect and guaranteed safe passage. He expected his own representatives to be afforded the same courtesy and became incandescent with rage when his emissaries were killed or humiliated, as Shah Muhammad II and many other unwise rulers discovered to their great cost.

*'There is no value in anything until it is finished.'*

Whilst I cannot possibly do justice to all of his legal and administrative achievements in this format, Genghis completely transformed Mongolian society and the way in which his army and fledgling government were organised. He introduced an innovative legal code known as the 'Great Yasa' and a lasting peace that his people had never experienced among themselves. No doubt reflecting upon the treatment of his own wife Borte, the abduction and rape of Mongolian women was punishable by death and slavery was also strictly prohibited among Mongols. Soldiers were not allowed to pillage unless given specific permission to do so by their commanding officers, although in truth this basic military right was rarely denied, and all religions were to be treated equally and without preference. Taxes were not imposed on religious leaders, scholars or physicians and Genghis introduced a more sustainable hunting process by establishing a fixed hunting season in order to allow animals to breed and raise young undisturbed. Women fared better in



Mongolian society than probably anywhere else during the Middle Ages and although they did not enjoy full equality in every area, they were able to hold positions of authority and even become warriors. For the first time women were able to choose whether they married or not and could not be bought or sold as common chattel. Divorce was legalised and whilst adultery still carried a death sentence, as did a multitude of crimes from treason and murder to theft and lying, now both parties were executed and not only the woman. Trade was encouraged and positively flourished along the ancient arteries of a 'Silk Road' that had connected Asia and





Europe for well over a thousand years and merchants of all nationalities and religions were afforded almost the same rights and protection as official ambassadors. Some six hundred years before the celebrated 'Pony Express' was traversing the wilds of the American West, Genghis was also responsible for the introduction of an innovative method of relaying military intelligence with the use of a network of horsemen and rest stations, where his swiftest riders would exchange messages or move on with fresh mounts. Subsequent Mongol leaders further developed the scheme into an extensive and sophisticated postal system, ultimately involving tens of thousands of horses and hundreds of heavily guarded outposts.

*'The strength of walls depends on the courage of those who guard them.'*

If any of this reads as if I am trying to excuse the undoubted excesses of Genghis Khan's rule, I am genuinely not, as I simply do not believe there is anything to excuse when you consider the ruthless nature of the period that I am depicting and the litany of atrocities committed over the centuries by representatives of a vast array of nations, governments, ethnic groups and faiths. Of course one outrage does not excuse another, but the real question is whether historical figures and acts should be judged by the morality with which we live today? Such a philosophical issue is very much a matter of opinion and although it would no doubt be reassuring if we could just select a single date before which all human rights violations could be either ignored or excused as belonging to a bygone age, what date could we ever choose as a barometer for our constantly shifting moral code? Similarly, there is very little point



attempting to place modern ethical terms on either people or societies so far beyond their time and it is only recent generations that have endeavoured to sanitise the horror of war and somehow legislate the means by which people are allowed to be slaughtered. The various treaties and protocols of the 'Geneva Conventions' would have been totally meaningless to a Mongol warrior and the farcical code of 'chivalry' that the European aristocracy was developing during exactly the same period that Genghis Khan was uniting his barbarian hordes, would have been considered so ludicrous that for once Europe's elite may have actually had a chance of winning a battle, as the perplexed Mongols looked on in abject confusion, like a surreal scene out of a Monty Python movie. The reality was very different when the two cultures ultimately clashed in the field, as the heavily armoured and tactically inept Christian knights were simply no match for the faster and battle hardened Mongol forces and were routed in a succession of catastrophic defeats. Nation



after nation succumbed as the Mongols cut swathes through modern day Russia, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria and a relatively small raiding party, designed in part to test the strength of Europe's nobility, was repelled within a few miles of Vienna. It was only the death of Ogedai, who had succeeded his father Genghis as Great Khan, and subsequent recall of his generals to elect a new leader, that saved feudal Europe from certain annihilation, as the Mongol Empire was eventually divided into four distinct kingdoms under disparate rule and would never seriously challenge that far east again. For those interested in learning more about what I consider to be a fascinating historical period, I would heartily recommend the Frank McLynn biography that I have already mentioned, as well as *'Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World'* by Jack Weatherford. The latter is an excellent introduction to the subject matter, but in truth there are many fine works immortalising Genghis Khan and his successors and generals, including several by Stephen Turnbull, John Man and Timothy May. On a slightly different note, but the same subject, the five *'Conqueror'* books by Conn Iggulden are tremendous fun. As novels they are not factually accurate, but much of what Iggulden invents is entirely plausible and few authors can match his historical verve and thrilling battle scenes. For the record, the five works are: *'Wolf of the Plains'*, *'Lords of the Bow'*, *'Bones of the Hill'*, *'Empire of Silver'* and *'Conqueror'*, which ends the series with the rise of Kublai Khan, Genghis Khan's grandson. All of the quotes that appear individually are attributed to Genghis himself and I finish this first section of a trip report come travelogue, with the words that must have struck dread into the heart of anyone who heard them echoing across the empty plains.

*'All who surrender will be spared; whoever does not surrender but  
opposes with struggle and dissension, shall be annihilated.'*

Raised in an age of bloodshed and conquest, to me Genghis Khan was the ultimate warrior lord and I am certain that if I had lived in those times, I too would have followed him to the end of the world. In fact, it has always been my intention to do more or less exactly that and ride from one end of Mongolia to the other in the Great Khan's shadow. Whether you choose a four-wheel drive, a camel or a horse, and they are all options, Mongolia is one of the last great wilderness tours, where you journey through an epic landscape of sprawling vistas and vast skies in search of some of the rarest and most compelling wildlife on earth. It is a land of breathtaking, often desolate beauty and if you love the desert as I do, there can be few more tranquil or magical destinations. I would again be travelling with my son James, who has become my own trusted general and will be sorely missed when he disappears to university. Although he





shares my passion for horse riding and is already a technically superior horseman, there would be no opportunity to ride on what for me was a relatively short research tour. No matter, as I ultimately want to do that special adventure justice and to spend long days in the saddle and nights sleeping under a magnificent canvas of shimmering stars. Most of this tour would take place within the arid regions of central and southern Mongolia, in and around the enthralling and dazzling beautiful Gobi Desert. As such, we were already aware of the main species that we were likely to encounter and of an initial list of twenty mammals that I quickly scribbled down when I first started planning the tour, we would eventually discover nineteen. The majority were animals specifically adapted to a harsh desert environment, but, as you would expect from a country sandwiched between the immense realms of China to the south

and Russia to the north, in a way Mongolia acts as a biological bridge between Europe and Asia and the diversity of habitat and wildlife very much reflects this. To the north and extreme west, the seemingly infinite steppe finally gives way to boreal forest, alpine meadow and mountain tundra and as the scenery changes, so does the wildlife. An array of creatures more commonly associated with Europe than Mongolia all occur beyond the temperate grasslands, including reindeer, moose, wild boar, red squirrel, wolverine, brown bear, Eurasian otter, American mink and Eurasian lynx, which is enormously adaptable and can also be found in the arid regions that we would be exploring. In addition to the list of twenty animals that I was expecting to see, or at least hopeful of seeing, I had a supplementary and far shorter mental list of just three rare carnivores that I also knew we had a chance of encountering, albeit an improbable one. The lynx was one, the brown bear was another, but in the form of the Gobi brown bear subspecies, and the last was a snow leopard, which was probably the most likely of the three given the healthy population in Mongolia and the fact that they are now being observed here more regularly. Other mammals largely beyond our range included five Siberian exotics, roe and musk deer, flying squirrel, chipmunk and weasel, as well as sable, a particularly striking mustelid, hog badger and raccoon dog, the real Asian variety and not the European colonist that has been sweeping west ever since it was introduced to the Soviet Union for its fur in the 1920s. If we would almost certainly have to wait for another trip to see most of these remote possibilities, I was prepared to go to



improbable one. The lynx was one, the brown bear was another, but in the form of the Gobi brown bear subspecies, and the last was a snow leopard, which was probably the most likely of the three given the healthy population in Mongolia and the fact that they are now being observed here more regularly. Other mammals largely beyond our range included five Siberian exotics, roe and musk deer, flying squirrel, chipmunk and weasel, as well as sable, a particularly striking mustelid, hog badger and raccoon dog, the real Asian variety and not the European colonist that has been sweeping west ever since it was introduced to the Soviet Union for its fur in the 1920s. If we would almost certainly have to wait for another trip to see most of these remote possibilities, I was prepared to go to



almost any lengths to track down our main target, as camels are one of the animals that captivated me as a young child and on this tour I had a first realistic and totally thrilling opportunity to see one in the wild. There are three camel species in all, the domesticated dromedary, which has one hump and is by far the most common and well recognised type across the globe, and domestic and wild versions of the Bactrian camel, both of which have two humps. The wild variety, *camelus ferus*, is critically endangered and only around a thousand remain in small isolated regions of Mongolia and China. Contrary to popular belief, wild Bactrian camels are not animals that have escaped domesticity and are living a feral existence. This was always thought to be the case, but DNA testing as recently as 2008 established, once and for all, that they are a completely separate species and urgently require protection. We would



be visiting a breeding project on this trip and for those who require additional information or would like to make a donation to help these magnificent creatures, please visit the Wild Camel Protection Foundation website at [www.wildcamels.com](http://www.wildcamels.com). I am already a member of this tremendously significant organisation and the pioneering primatologist and conservationist Jane Goodall is the Honorary Life Patron. For years I was unsure whether it would ever be possible to see a Bactrian camel in the wild, as they were so few in number and you are having to search an immense area for an incredibly skittish animal that will literally start running as soon as it sees or hears anything that even slightly disturbs it, including vehicles of course. When you consider that they can detect your



engine before you can get close enough to see them, the chances never looked promising and over the years I have considered almost every feasible option, including an extended horseback or camel campaign in an attempt to get close without being detected. I have even looked at the possibility of hiring a helicopter and making aerial sweeps, but I decided that this would be far too invasive for such a nervous animal and that even an expedition of several weeks would not guarantee success. I had more or less abandoned the project for a few years, until I was informed of tour groups beginning to see wild camels at great distance with the assistance of spotting scopes. Although I was never particularly interested in scope views from several kilometres and the sightings themselves sounded fairly ordinary, the breakthrough had occurred and I was instantly aware that it was now only a matter of time before visitors could get close enough to see these amazing beasts fairly well and perhaps even take some long-range photographs. This has now been achieved and with local guides learning all the time where and exactly how to search, the situation will no doubt continue to evolve, particularly as the camels grow accustomed to vehicles and become slightly calmer. Hopefully, given the numbers involved



and the remote location, the vast majority of wild camels will never come into contact with people, as no one should want to see the few remaining wild populations habituated or tamed. However, it could do a great deal of good if a few small groups were slightly less skittish, as that would be sufficient to generate and sustain the wildlife tours that would pretty much guarantee their continued survival, in much the same way that snow leopards are now being protected as a direct result of ecotourism. The signs at this stage are promising and although the camels continue to run, vehicles are getting close enough for reasonable views, which was what I was desperately hoping would occur on our tour. I intended to devote several days to the search, but we had an almost entirely flexible itinerary and I was certainly prepared to dedicate additional time to the cause if necessary. Meanwhile, we had other species to search for and whilst I do not intend to produce a daily account of our progress, which can become as repetitive and tedious to read as it is to write, I would like to begin at our first destination Hustai National Park, as we thoroughly enjoyed our short stay and it very much set the tone for the rest of an exceptional tour. Hustai is probably the easiest place to see przewalski's horse, an animal that was previously extinct in the wild and has been reintroduced at a number of sites in Mongolia and China, as well as in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a restricted area of high radiation along the shared borders of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia following the 1986 explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. I first saw these majestic horses at Port Lympne Reserve in Kent, which, along with its more famous sister park Howletts, was founded by the gambler, playboy and conservationist John Aspinall. Both zoological collections were among the first in the UK to adopt natural enclosures, to the benefit of the animals, as opposed to the viewing public, and have since established an impressive breeding programme that has enjoyed remarkable success in terms of breeding a variety of endangered animals. Run now as the Aspinall Foundation, which is another conservation initiative supported by Wild Globe, Damian Aspinall has taken his father's legacy a stage further and initiated a farsighted and ambitious reintroduction programme that has seen hundreds of animals bred in captivity introduced to the wild, including black rhinos, western lowland gorillas and przewalski's horses, eleven of which were released in China in the 1990s. For further details and to directly support the magnificent work of the foundation, including first class days out at Howletts and Port Lympne, you can access their website at [www.aspinallfoundation.org](http://www.aspinallfoundation.org). Having watched these beautiful animals in Kent as a child, it was a wonderful moment to come across a first herd in their natural



habitat and a special thrill to see a once extinct species thriving in the wild once more. We were to spend a great deal of time with several different herds and on our final evening sat quietly as around twenty horses grazed around us and the sun slipped away on a really perfect day. It had not started quite as well, as an early morning hike to look for wolves produced only a few brief glimpses of startled tolai hares and our long vigil in the valley where they are usually spotted, proved to be equally unproductive. However, our guide took us on to see the only red deer of the tour, as well as some distant Mongolian gazelles and our first Siberian marmots, including one animal that, instead of running as we approached, decided its best chance of survival was to lie completely flat in the shortest and barest patch of grass imaginable. As survival techniques go, this was particularly poor and in the end I got so close that I



decided to back off before I was tempted to stroke the pathetic and clearly delusional creature. Our spectacular horses and this mesmerized marmot aside, the real consolation for missing the wolves appeared in the form of an endearing female steppe polecat and her pair of highly curious and correspondingly timid offspring. One of the local guides showed us her den and we devoted every spare moment to this industrious mother and the entertaining antics of her troublesome young. As the female foraged, probably for ground squirrels away from the den, they spent much of the day either playing or hiding in a nearby rubbish tip, depending on our movements to some degree and whether they were aware of our presence, at which point they became far more circumspect. With some 22 species of carnivore occurring in Mongolia, only eight of which are cats and dogs, I was hoping that this would be a good tour for small carnivore sightings and the steppe polecat was one of two polecats that I thought we would probably encounter. The second was the marbled polecat, but as fortunate as we undoubtedly were throughout the trip, this distinctive and striking mustelid would ultimately elude us and was sadly the missing mammal in terms of my hastily scrawled list of twenty anticipated species. Largely because James had never seen one before, this was probably the single biggest disappointment of the entire expedition, which not only highlights how successful we eventually were, but also the

vagaries of wildlife viewing, where you can never really guarantee what you are going to see, certainly not in true wilderness conditions. As if to prove exactly that point, the day after leaving Hustai we noticed some activity around a complex of burrows at the side of the road and pulled over to investigate what turned out to be a least weasel hunting voles. This sleek and voracious little killer is one of my favourite predators, but I would never consider including it on a list of animals that I was expecting to observe, as seeing them is always a matter of chance and they cannot be searched for, at least not with a great deal of confidence. We spent more than an hour with this gorgeous animal, which paid absolutely no attention to us and was more or less running over our feet as it moved from burrow to burrow with deadly intent. Voles scattered in all directions and it was impossible not to feel desperately sorry for them, particularly the young, which had no idea what to do as soon as they had been driven to the surface. The weasel did not actually kill any above ground, but when it did not reappear for perhaps fifteen minutes, we guessed that it was probably feeding and reluctantly left it to indulge. If our least weasel was an unexpected and delightful bonus, a saiga encounter was very much a requirement and I had arranged to spend at least a couple of days in the best areas to ensure that we did not miss this fascinating but ill-fated antelope. Although there is only one species of saiga, the two subspecies, *saiga tatarica* to the west and *saiga mongolica* to the east in Mongolia, share basically the same habitat and both populations are susceptible to the mass mortality or 'die off' events that this animal is tragically famous for. Throughout my lifetime there have been numerous instances of thousands of saiga dying for no apparent reason and in the spring of 2015 this phenomenon reached unimaginable levels when over 200,000 western saigas died in a single horrific occurrence, which was believed to be almost two thirds of the global population at the time. The cause was eventually





identified to be *Pasteurella multocida*, a generally harmless bacteria that scientists believe multiplied to fatal levels due to a deadly combination of unusually high temperatures and excessive humidity. Bacteria thrives in wet and warm conditions and when the burgeoning microorganisms began invading the bloodstream, thousands of animals died of blood poisoning in less than four weeks, which is of particular concern when you consider the implications of global warming and that this is unlikely to be an isolated event. In addition, although saiga reproduce rapidly and have historically been able to recover from these horrendous events, so many have been poached since the breakup of the Soviet Union, they are now extremely vulnerable to further catastrophic episodes and are

consequently considered to be critically endangered, despite a current population in excess of 100,000. If this is perhaps surprising, it is easier to understand when you reflect that as recently as 1993, so basically within 25 years, saiga numbers totalled approximately 1.1 million. Taking into account how fast they breed, millions have been killed illegally during the intervening years, both for their meat and, in the case of males, for their horns, which are highly prized in the monstrously backward traditional Chinese medicine industry. The Mongolian population is much smaller and in late 2016 suffered its own mass deaths when 2,500 animals, which represents around a quarter of the saigas in the country, were killed by a virus found in goats and other livestock. They are also poached here, as we could instantly tell when we attempted to approach our first herd and they stampeded into a disappearing cloud of dust before we could even stop the vehicle. It was the same story elsewhere, and sadly for every species of antelope throughout the trip, as they were all extremely nervous and it was impossible to get close, even on foot. At one stage we did manage to get within approximately 80 metres or so of a small herd, but they quickly dispersed and the vast majority were invariably running by the time that we spotted them and not slowly by any means. On one memorable occasion, when we



were transferring between destinations and not searching specifically for anything, I spotted a saiga running almost parallel to our vehicle. Although it was clearly the closest animal we had encountered to date, it was actually accelerating away and when I looked at the speedo, we were doing 60 kph. We were on a main road and would not follow an animal at that speed of course, but I doubt that we would have caught it over rough terrain in any case, as saiga have been recorded at speeds of up to 80 kph, which equates to 50 mph and makes them one of the fastest mammals on earth. They were certainly too quick for us and whilst I was able to take a few





reference shots, most of them involve disappearing hindquarters and a great deal of dust. Ironically, these were actually the type of shots that I was hoping I would get of the wild Bactrian camels, as even terrible photographs would mean that we had enjoyed good views of the animal itself, which is always the priority. I was also aware that our visit to the camel breeding centre would provide an opportunity to get some decent pictures, as there are usually a few wild camels hanging around the centre itself or one of the nearby natural springs. These camels are the wild variety, but they have been raised at the centre and are therefore used to people and vehicles, which enabled me to get some very nice shots, if not satisfy myself that I had encountered truly wild Bactrian camels in the purest sense of the word. Technically I could have counted them, as the wild and domestic versions are dissimilar in a variety of respects and it would be almost impossible to confuse the two. For a start, the humps of the wild variety are much smaller, they have flat heads with no ridge, their legs are much longer and thinner and they are almost platinum blonde in colour, as opposed to mousy brown. The animals I photographed were therefore certainly the wild species, but they were just as certainly habituated and now our search would have to begin in earnest. Mongolians say that the camel is made up of one part of each of the twelve animals of the



Chinese zodiac and although I cannot remember exactly which parts relate to which animals, I do know that they are meant to have the heart of a rabbit, which is why they are always running. Despite this fainthearted reputation, Bactrian camels are actually incredibly resilient creatures and survive in one of the harshest environments on earth. The seasonal temperatures in the Gobi can vary between punishing extremes of 50°C and -40°C and at times these robust animals have to survive by eating snow or drinking a brackish slush with a higher salt content than seawater, which neither the domestic version or any other mammal could survive on. Fat is stored in their humps and released as energy when food is scarce and they are able to withstand a loss of more than 30% of their bodyweight in fluids, when such severe levels of dehydration would again prove fatal to most mammals. They are as fascinating as they are remarkable and I cannot remember the last time I felt as excited or tense about the prospect of either finding or, and I hated to



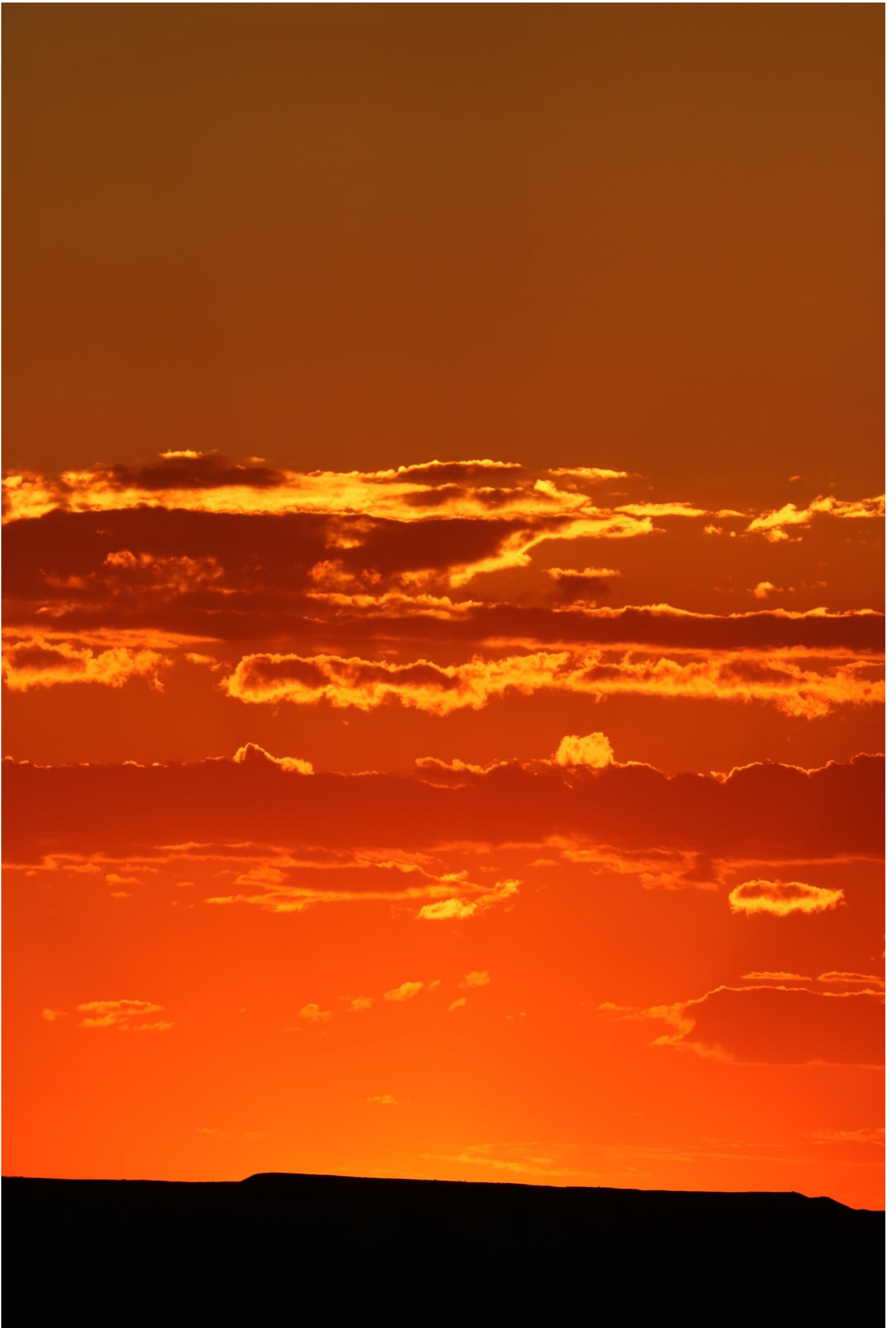
accept that it was even a possibility, missing a new species. Having read that we only failed to see the marbled polecat on my original 'wish list', or by having glanced down quickly at our final mammal total, you will already know that we were successful and that after so many years, I was able to fulfil a childhood dream and see these incredible beasts in their natural habitat and not in a zoo. Although it did take several days in all, we ultimately enjoyed three tremendous sightings, all of which were a minimum of two hundred miles from the strays around the breeding centre. The closest we got was probably about 120 to 150 metres away, which is almost the equivalent of throwing a blanket over one and riding off on it in terms of any previous expectations, but that small group ran almost instantly and our best view was of a herd of eight that were slightly further away. With amazing good fortune we had taken them by



surprise as we negotiated yet another hill and whilst they all looked up in unison the moment we appeared, and we all thought for certain that they must bolt, they hesitated for just long enough for us to all savour an exceptional and extraordinarily rare encounter. I was even able to take a few photographs before they finally decided, again in unison, that they probably should live up to their reputation as rabbits and disappear. They are not great shots, but they did not have to be, as it was an immense privilege to watch these iconic creatures in such a spectacular setting and an absolute highlight of my life. It was always going to be difficult to follow an experience of this magnitude, but in a way we had an outside chance, as our next destination would provide an opportunity to observe an almost mythical animal that very few westerners have heard of, let alone seen. The Gobi bear is presently classified as a subspecies of the brown bear and many experts believe that it will eventually be considered a unique species. Given that there are currently thought to be less than 35 Gobi bears clinging to the edge of existence, with none at all in captivity, this revised assessment cannot really

come quickly enough, as a subspecies of an animal that is not endangered will receive little or no significant protection. Quite absurdly when you consider the urgency of the situation, the best hope for this bear is to be declared a distinct species and for the world to suddenly cry out in dismay and disgust that such an important animal is about to be lost forever, as opposed to turning a blind eye to the fact that an insignificant subspecies has disappeared in the same way that the northern white rhino subspecies is now doomed to extinction following the death of the last male in Kenya. Whilst a simple scientific label may decide the fate of an entire species, thankfully real conservation efforts are being made on the ground and I would urge everyone who reads this report to please







take a look at the Gobi Bear Project website at [www.gobibearproject.org](http://www.gobibearproject.org) and see if you can help in any way. This is another project that I am now supporting and it would be difficult to think of a better cause than the critical plight of these isolated and threatened bears. Admittedly there are worthy causes across the globe, literally thousands in fact and I have mentioned three in just this one report. The vast majority are as important as each other and if you are consequently finding it difficult to choose which organisation to support, my advice would be, please just support something, regardless of whether it is well known or high profile or appears trivial to others. All contributions, including in many cases your time or your voice to a cause, make an enormous difference to the people working desperately hard to save species and habitat or to change the world that destroys them in the first place. As I have stated on so



many occasions, unless you are part of the solution, you are part of the problem and, as most genuine wildlife enthusiasts already appreciate, it is no longer sufficient to support these creatures from a moral perspective and we all now need to make a meaningful contribution to their continued survival. The work at the Gobi Bear Project includes feeding bears at certain times of the year, which I would never normally agree with regarding a large predator. However, the small number of feeding stations that they operate in the Gobi are not for the benefit of tourists sitting in hides with cameras, they are an emergency measure to ensure that bears survive hibernation and are able to breed. Normally you would let nature take its course in extreme environments where wild populations have always fluctuated with the changing conditions, but these bears have been hunted with such ruthlessness, that this is no longer possible and in these exceptional circumstances, I cannot argue with this form of critical intervention. The bears are fed a minimum amount and at different periods to avoid habituation, as this really is a last ditch effort to ensure that additional bears are not lost to starvation or cannot reproduce because they are not sufficiently healthy. We visited two of these feeding sites and camped near one, where we were incredibly excited to find extremely fresh bear scat that had clearly been deposited no more than a few hours before our arrival and certainly on that same day. We suddenly all knew that we had at least a chance of observing one of the rarest animals on the planet and should have probably departed the site at that point without exploring or invading further. As it was, we drove into the centre of the observation area, where our guides collected water from one of the springs to use at camp, and by the time that we settled down to begin our vigil, I believe that the site was probably already compromised to some degree. We still climbed the adjacent mountainside with serious intent and reasonable optimism, as the plan was to spend the night silently on top and observe any bear activity that evening or early next morning. Both the fresh scat and one of the main springs were in direct sight and we had an outstanding field of vision covering a large and highly promising area. Sadly it was not to be and while sleeping on the mountain and watching the sun rise was a glorious experience in itself, there were no bears and the only animals we observed were a few argalis coming down from the surrounding slopes to drink. When I return to Mongolia, which will hopefully be very soon, I intend to make



the Gobi bear a priority and will visit with a deliberate plan and for a longer period. Although our initial intrusion would not have helped our prospects, in reality we needed much longer here and to visit earlier in the year, directly after hibernation when the bears are famished and using the feeding stations more regularly. We tried different areas the next day and evening with the same



unproductive result and our guide offered to set some traps for the long-eared hedgehogs that are known to live in this region. We declined of course and our continued refusal to employ such invasive methods was rewarded with a superb natural sighting of two splendidly silly hedgehogs, an adult and what appeared to be its young. It was certainly not fully grown, but you could already see that it was going to develop the magnificent ears of its parent. Talking of magnificent ears, our next stop had been included purely to search for a long-eared jerboa, a wonderful desert rodent with truly ludicrous ears that are out of all proportion to its diminutive body. If you think that Siberian and other jerboa species have big ears, you should really make the effort to look for this absurdly distinctive and similarly endearing mammal, which, I believe, is one of twelve jerboa species that occur in Mongolia. With the help of our local guides, my photographs, my trusty field guide and some expert assistance back in the UK, we were eventually able to identify and confirm a creditable seven separate species and my only real

disappointment was my failure to take an entirely unrestricted shot of any of the four long-eared jerboas we encountered. My pictures are good enough to illustrate the species clearly, including their wonderfully exaggerated appendages, but it would have been nice to have achieved a better view and the one downside of refusing to trap small mammals, is that they can be almost impossible to identify from images alone. That said, I hate looking at photographs of rats or other animals dangling by the scruff of the neck after being trapped and would not swap one authentic wild sighting for a thousand animals trapped in this primitive and outrageously invasive



manner. We definitely saw additional species on this trip that I was not able to identify, probably six to eight in all including voles and hamsters, but all of our sightings occurred with a minimum of disruption to the animals involved and certainly without causing them any harm. We took an entire day initially searching for and then attempting to get close to, a healthy herd of Asiatic wild ass, which once ranged across almost the whole of Central Asia and the Middle East from Mongolia and northern China as far west as Turkey,





Syria and Israel. There are currently believed to be five subspecies, although one of these is extinct, including the Indian wild ass observed at the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat. Again I would have preferred better photographs, but by this stage I had realised that almost no large mammals were going to allow us to approach and I did not want to spook a peaceful herd by pushing too hard. Instead we drove to another area for a long spotlighting session, which proved to be an inspired decision, as we were instantly rewarded with our first corsac fox sighting of the tour, having already seen several red foxes, as well as the opportunity to spend a night in a luxurious ger with running hot water and an actual toilet. After almost two weeks in tents this was an unexpected treat and in the morning we discovered another bonus, that our toilet came with its very own lesser white-toothed shrew, which I found fighting for its life in the cold water. I have no idea how long it had been trapped, but the poor creature had no way of escaping the bowl and appeared to be suffering from hypothermia. It was certainly very sluggish and only began to revive after I spent half an hour or so holding it in the early morning sunlight. I took a few quick photographs when I was certain that it was going to survive and happily it



scuttled off when I released it in more appropriate habitat. Another pleasant surprise was a pit viper, which have the most beautiful markings and was the snake that provided the venom that Mongol warriors would apply to their arrows. This one was coiled in traditional fashion, but was so well camouflaged, it was almost indistinguishable from the desert terrain and unfortunately we disturbed it before we even realised it was there. We were to encounter several snakes throughout the tour and, as you would expect in these arid conditions, a large number of lizards, including one gecko, the delightfully named przewalski's wonder gecko, that caused havoc during a spotlighting session due to its extremely bright eyeshine. Of course where you find so many lizards, you automatically see a lot of birds of prey and every journey involved a procession of falcons, hawks and buzzards, as well as several magnificent golden and steppe eagles and a large number of vultures. The raptors aside, one of the most impressive birds was the demoiselle





crane, which breeds in Mongolia and the surrounding regions during the summer months before facing the arduous migration south across the Himalayas to winter in the warmer climes of India. We would be moving in the other direction soon, north back to Ulaanbaatar, as we only had a few days left now and were hoping to end the tour with a number of memorable predator sightings at our final destination. I say final, but actually the last three nights would be split over more than one site and in combination would provide a spectacular and almost unimaginable finale. However, before we could even think about the nights, I wanted to look for Siberian ibex at one reliable location, as we had seen them previously, but not well and I was keen to try for a much improved view of what to me are just the most imposing of animals. We were successful at least in terms of spotting another small group, but they were high on a cliff face and still too far away for the view that I was looking for. By climbing we would obviously push them even higher, so we took the only other option available and James and I began clambering up the opposite cliff. This worked reasonably well, as the males that I was concentrating on took relatively little notice of us and, after a fairly steep ascent with our equipment, we were eventually both able to find a ledge to perch on as we looked across at the increasingly curious ibex, which just happened to be the last major mammals we would observe during daylight. They were a fine species to end on and whilst we still hiked and explored during the day, our main focus now switched to our three remaining nights and the opportunity to conclude the tour in outstanding fashion. In truth, the first was somewhat underwhelming, which is probably unfair when you consider that we saw our first stone marten of the trip, albeit briefly as it dashed up a hill, two more steppe polecats and several red foxes. To some extent our expectations were the





problem, as we all knew that by this stage we were looking for apex predators and that snow leopards, wolves and even Eurasian lynx were a real possibility. We had already tried several sites during the day for snow leopard, but probably not with sufficient determination or real expectation and when I return, I will make this another species that I concentrate on and devote more time to. We did actually spend several days searching in good areas, but without a real plan and again we disturbed one of the best sites, where snow leopards have been observed consistently, when I would have preferred to stake it out and watch from a distance. Next time we will need to establish and work to a consistent and patient strategy at the best locations, as finding a reliable site for snow leopards in the warm summer months will completely change the way in which these animals are searched for and will afford far more people the

precious opportunity to see these gorgeous cats. Currently Ladakh in northern India represents the best chance of encountering snow leopards, but in this part of the Himalayas you are regularly hiking at altitudes exceeding 4,000 metres, in often freezing temperatures, and many general tourists would find it difficult to cope with the frequently extreme conditions. The uphill hikes can be extremely tough in the cold weather and although you can visit at a more hospitable time of year, the optimum period is winter, when the snow leopards follow their prey down from the mountain peaks and are far easier to spot. In complete contrast, in Mongolia you would be hiking at far lower altitudes in generally moderate temperatures and there even appears to be the possibility of viewing snow leopards from a vehicle, which will again open up this wonderful animal to a variety of different travellers, all of whom can help in its conservation. Of course the key will be to establish regular sightings and, in order to do so, a network of local guides and spotters, all committed to protecting and monitoring individual cats, which has already commenced to some degree. Whilst they regularly predate on their livestock, particularly sheep and goats, many herdsmen have already stopped killing snow leopards and I am genuinely hopeful that others may follow now and that other animals will also receive greater protection, including wolves, which are still actively hunted and killed. We had not seen a wolf throughout the entire tour and I was beginning to doubt that we would until I picked a lone animal up on the side of a hill during our penultimate spotlighting session. One of our guides initially identified the eyeshine as a Eurasian lynx, which, if you know me or read these reports regularly, really got my heart fluttering, but I had already seen a long tail and within seconds the wolf had loped clearly into view. Although a lynx would have been the highlight of this or any other trip, I could never be disappointed to see a wolf and within about twenty



precious opportunity to see these gorgeous cats. Currently Ladakh in northern India represents the best chance of encountering snow leopards, but in this part of the Himalayas you are regularly hiking at altitudes exceeding 4,000 metres, in often freezing temperatures, and many general tourists would find it difficult to cope with the frequently extreme conditions. The uphill hikes can be extremely tough in the cold weather and although you can visit at a more hospitable time of year, the optimum period is winter, when the snow leopards follow their prey down from the mountain peaks and are far easier to spot. In complete contrast, in Mongolia you would be hiking at far lower altitudes in generally moderate temperatures and there even appears to be the possibility of viewing snow leopards from a vehicle, which will again open up this wonderful animal to a variety of different travellers, all of whom can help in its conservation. Of course the key will be to establish regular sightings and, in order to do so, a network of local guides and spotters, all committed to protecting and monitoring individual cats, which has already commenced to some degree. Whilst they regularly predate on their livestock, particularly sheep and goats, many herdsmen have already stopped killing snow leopards and I am genuinely hopeful that others may follow now and that other animals will also receive greater protection, including wolves, which are still actively hunted and killed. We had not seen a wolf throughout the entire tour and I was beginning to doubt that we would until I picked a lone animal up on the side of a hill during our penultimate spotlighting session. One of our guides initially identified the eyeshine as a Eurasian lynx, which, if you know me or read these reports regularly, really got my heart fluttering, but I had already seen a long tail and within seconds the wolf had loped clearly into view. Although a lynx would have been the highlight of this or any other trip, I could never be disappointed to see a wolf and within about twenty





minutes any vague semblance of regret had completely disappeared as James and I stood watching a pair of snow leopards. It was difficult to believe in a way, as all of my snow leopard sightings have been during the day and they are just not an animal that you expect to find with a spotlight, until now that is. They were initially apart and I did not spot the second animal until the first, that I was following in my spotlight, walked calmly down the mountainside and joined its partner or young. They were not particularly low, but we had a splendid view in our binoculars and I could tell that they were approximately the same size. They would not have been a mating pair at this time of the year, so I guess that they were probably siblings or an adult with an older cub that had not yet left the area it had been raised in. Whatever the relationship, the two cats were clearly comfortable with each other and provided us with a magical and unforgettable experience. We left them in the end, as they had tolerated our attention for over twenty minutes, which is more than enough when you consider the powerful lights you are having to use. That is the one downside of spotlighting, for although it is far easier to find rare and elusive wildlife with a light, you ultimately have a responsibility to leave an animal that you would try to spend as long as possible with during daylight. I often use a red filter to minimise any disturbance to small sensitive mammals,





particularly if I want or need to spend longer with them, but they do not work as well at distance and I therefore always limit my time with any individual creature, as well as always avoiding shining directly into their eyes once they have been found. Often when you have experienced a sensational event of this kind, it can be surprisingly difficult to regain concentration and you can easily squander the remainder of the activity reliving what just occurred. That was very much the case on this occasion, when a series of red and corsac foxes passed in almost a blur and we were only brought to our senses by a female stone marten, that was exploring the side of a rock face as her three desperate young watched and called frantically from the top. It was a highly amusing way to end a superb evening and we headed back to camp in extremely good spirits. James and I continued to spotlight, but it was late and we had no real expectation of seeing much until I suddenly spotted another snow leopard. I was not 100% certain at first, largely because our guides drove back a great deal faster and it was difficult to check animals at speed. However, as soon as I had managed to convey the urgency of the situation and the desperate need for us to desist and pull over, albeit in slightly different language, I was able to



confirm that we were indeed watching a third snow leopard of the night. That it was far higher than the previous two and disappeared fairly quickly over a ridge, was of almost no concern, as we saw it well enough and were all simply overjoyed, and perhaps a little shocked, to have encountered three of these majestic cats within less than two hours. We returned to camp elated and I reflected later that it was one of the most enjoyable spotlighting sessions that I had ever been involved in and I had not taken a single photograph or even tried shots at those distances in artificial light. A lesson to be learned perhaps and I have recently contemplated how nice it would be to revert to the days when I did not even carry a camera and just took pleasure from the sightings themselves. James had taken a few short films for reference purposes and as we prepared for our final night drive, we had to decide whether to return to the



same area or to move on to a different location that was better for pallas's cat, one of two species we were still missing. The other was marbled polecat, which could be found at either destination, so it was really a straight choice between the big ferocious fluffy cat or the little, significantly less ferocious fluffy cat, although of course, as we had already established, more or less anything could appear anywhere. We ultimately decided to try the new area, not so much for the pallas's cat, but because it was our final night and we thought that it made sense to explore somewhere different. There is no way of knowing whether we would have seen the snow leopards again, which is the real beauty of wildlife watching, and we were ultimately delighted with the way our last night unfolded. In addition to another steppe polecat and a long-eared hedgehog, we encountered several red foxes and a seventh and final corsac fox. The previous six had all fled before you could even say the word camera and when this one went to do the same, I started making loud squeaking noises and it immediately turned and ran directly towards us to investigate. This trick often works with small carnivores and is particularly effective with weasels and other mustelids, that automatically think a prey animal may be injured and run to explore the chance of an easy meal. Sadly for this slightly confused fox, there really was no such thing as a free lunch and as soon as it realised, it turned on its heels and disappeared into the night. After a long and at times fairly demanding tour, we would have been happy enough with this as a finale, as we had achieved more or less everything that we set out to and would leave the country far better prepared for our eventual return. However, we were not quite done and it was left to James to conclude a stunningly successful trip by spotting what we thought at first was another fox, but that actually turned out to be a pallas's cat. Having made the decision to swap areas, it would have been hard to invent a more fitting conclusion and we watched our significantly less ferocious fluffy cat hunting for about fifteen minutes or so before it went to ground and it was time for us to do the same. It had been an unforgettable tour in an unforgettable land and for a boy who grew up in London, one of the busiest cities on earth, the sense of space and freedom here is unimaginable and completely intoxicating. Barely three million people live in a realm more than six times the size of the United Kingdom and evidently Mongolia is officially the most sparsely populated country in the world. Of course this does not mean that there are no major problems and although the population is low, the people are outnumbered almost 24 to 1 by their livestock and over 70 million cattle and sheep are doing almost as much damage as that many people would. Animal numbers are unregulated and consequently severe overgrazing is occurring and habitat is being destroyed, much of it irreversibly. Wild animals are being replaced by their domestic cousins and around 70% of the grasslands in Mongolia have been degraded by livestock or other agricultural use. As we could clearly determine for ourselves whenever we attempted to approach an animal, poaching is another significant issue and mining for gold, copper and coal, legally or otherwise, has increased massively in recent years. It is tempting to write that the country is poised at an ecological crossroads and if that sounds like a cliché that applies to most of the globe, it sadly does not make it any less true. For now, Mongolia remains an exceptional wildlife destination and, on a more personal level, a compelling, evocative land steeped in ancient mystery and adventure. One of the old Mongolian gods Tengri is said to take the form of the eternal blue sky and when you contemplate the immense landscapes and never ending horizons, it is easy to understand how people can believe in something so overwhelming. It is almost impossible not to get swept away by the sheer vastness of the steppe or the enthralling solitude of the desert and all the while a shadow of the Great Khan lingers, a barely perceptible echo reverberating across time. No one knows where Genghis Khan is buried and legend dictates that the soldiers who carried his body to its final resting place, killed anyone they encountered to ensure that he would lie forever undisturbed. According to some, they too were killed and when the wind blows the timeless desert sands, so Genghis leads his invincible warriors across the plains in a cloud of dust. It is easy to conjure the Conqueror riding hard once more and when I return, it will be to the same thunder of horse's hooves across the steppe, with the same wind on my face under the same eternal blue sky.

*'With Heaven's aid I have conquered for you a huge empire. But my life was too short to achieve the conquest of the world. That task is left for you.'*















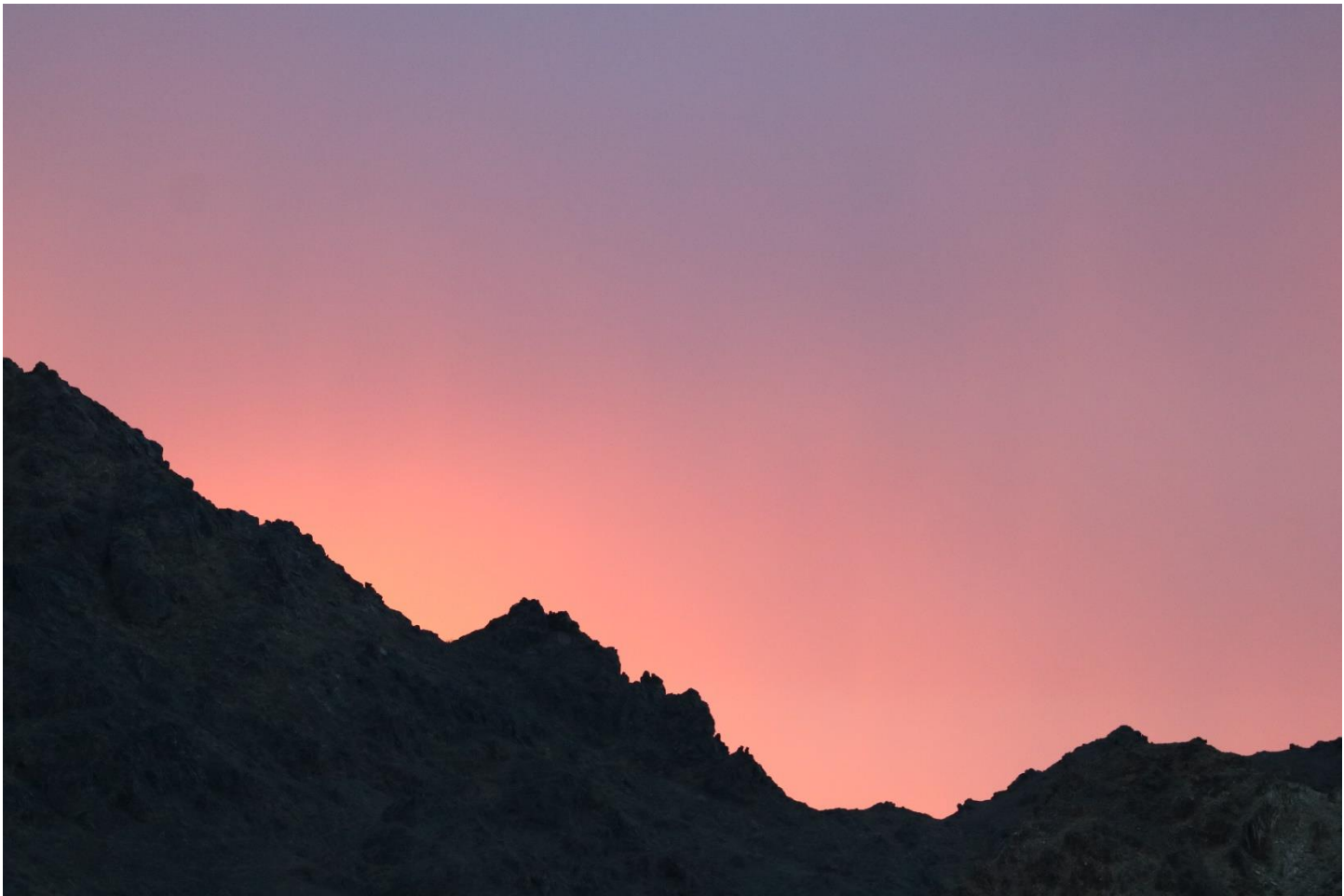
No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Three snow leopards, a pair and one individual in separate areas on one night drive.
2	Pallas's Cat	<i>Otocolobus manul</i>	An extended view of one sitting and walking at distance whilst spotlighting.
3	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Lone animal walking up the side of a hill at night.
4	Corsac Fox	<i>Vulpes corsac</i>	Seven individuals, all at night.
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Several at various destinations.
6	Stone Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	Five in total, one individual running and an adult climbing on rocks with three young watching from the top.
7	Steppe Polecat	<i>Mustela eversmanii</i>	Four different sightings including an adult with two young during the day.
8	Least Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>	An extended view of one hunting at close quarters.
9	Wapiti	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>	Easily observed at Hustai National Park.
10	Saiga	<i>Saiga tatarica</i>	Probably in excess of 200 at two main areas, but most at distance and generally running.
11	Goitered Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>	The most commonly observed ungulate, but usually at distance.
12	Mongolian Gazelle	<i>Procapra gutturosa</i>	Several healthy herds at two locations, but again at distance.
13	Siberian Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>	Several sightings of low numbers at two sites.
14	Argali	<i>Ovis ammon</i>	First observed whilst scanning for the Gobi brown bear subspecies.
15	Przewalski's Horse	<i>Equus ferus</i>	Several herds at Hustai National Park.
16	Asiatic Wild Ass	<i>Equus hemionus</i>	A herd of around 40 after searching one specific area.
17	Bactrian Camel	<i>Camelus ferus</i>	Three separate sightings of sixteen animals in total.
18	Long-eared Hedgehog	<i>Hemiechinus auritus</i>	Adult and young at one destination and two individuals at two further locations.
19	Tolai Hare	<i>Lepus tolai</i>	Routinely encountered in several areas.
20	Daurian Pika	<i>Ochotona dauurica</i>	Observed in good numbers at a number of locations.



21	Pallas's Pika	<i>Ochotona pallasi</i>	Common at several destinations with some apparent overlap with Daurian Pika.
22	Lesser White-toothed Shrew	<i>Crocidura suaveolens</i>	One animal rescued from our toilet and released.
23	Siberian Marmot	<i>Marmota sibirica</i>	Abundant at Hustai and common in other areas.
24	Alashan Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus alashanicus</i>	Common at several areas in and around Gobi Gurvansaikhon National Park.
25	Daurian Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus dauricus</i>	Small population just beyond Hustai National Park.
26	Red-cheeked Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus erythrogenys</i>	Low numbers at one site only.
27	Pallid Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus pallidicauda</i>	Observed at several locations.
28	Long-tailed Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus undulatus</i>	High numbers at Hustai National Park.
29	Balikun Jerboa	<i>Allactaga balikun</i>	Extremely similar in appearance to the Gobi Jerboa and only two positively identified.
30	Gobi Jerboa	<i>Allactaga bullata</i>	Moderately common and identified on at least three night drives.
31	Siberian Jerboa	<i>Allactaga sibirica</i>	Encountered at several locations at night.
32	Northern Three-toed Jerboa	<i>Dipus sagitta</i>	Commonly observed on numerous night drives and walks.
33	Long-eared Jerboa	<i>Euchoreutes naso</i>	Four individuals in one small area.
34	Thick-tailed Pygmy Jerboa	<i>Salpingotus crassicauda</i>	Identified at one site and not recorded again.
35	Andrew's Three-toed Jerboa	<i>Stylodipus andrewsi</i>	Several sightings on three or four night drives.
36	Great Gerbil	<i>Rhombomys opimus</i>	Low numbers at three different locations.
37	Mid-day Gerbil	<i>Meriones meridianus</i>	Routinely encountered at several destinations.
38	Mongolian Gerbil	<i>Meriones unguiculatus</i>	First observed at Hustai National Park and common in two further areas.
39	Mongolian Hamster	<i>Allocricetulus curtatus</i>	Diurnal and nocturnal views.
40	Grey Dwarf Hamster	<i>Cricetulus migratorius</i>	Daylight views of between six and eight animals at one location and unconfirmed nocturnal encounters.
41	Campbell's Hamster	<i>Phodopus campbelli</i>	One confirmed nocturnal sighting only.
42	Desert Hamster	<i>Phodopus roborovskii</i>	Several nocturnal views.
43	Brandt's Vole	<i>Lasiopodomys brandtii</i>	Extremely common in a number of areas and the only vole species we were able to identify.















14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,  
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865  
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: [jason.woolgar@btinternet.com](mailto:jason.woolgar@btinternet.com)  
Website: [www.wildglobetours.com](http://www.wildglobetours.com)

