

# MONGOLIA

## HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK

2<sup>nd</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> May & 15-21<sup>st</sup> June 2016

*Ben Macdonald*



***Sunset over the seemingly endless folded steppes of Hustai National Park, home of the largest population of wild horses on Earth. Visited as part of a filming trip for Netflix's 'Our Planet (2019).***

### I. INTRODUCTION

Mongolia is, both in terms of its nomadic way of living and its landscapes, perhaps one of the least touched and most depopulated countries in the world. The first part of John Aitchison and I's filming trip took us to some of its most pristine steppe: Hustai National Park. Here, wild Takhi, or Przewalski's Horses, have been rewilded here with spectacular success, and the entire ecosystem has, with this original grazing system restored, been restored. The area is home to a thriving population of grey wolves, marmots, herds of enormous red deer and a staggering abundance of eagles and vultures. This is Mongolian steppe at its most pristine and unforgettable. Hustai can easily be reached via a 2 hour drive from Ulan Bator. For more advice on how best to visit Hustai, they be contacted via their website or via excellent international fixers and guides Panoramic Journeys (01608 676 821), but this is an easy tourist destination for enjoying some of the very best steppe wildlife in Mongolia.

### II. SPECIES NOTES

#### **Daurian Partridge** *Perdix dauurica*

This low-density species was seen once in Hustai, in early June, in a steep grassland valley with some scattered trees and birch scrub. Daurian Partridge 'picks up' from Grey Partridge and extends its range eastwards into the steppe.

#### **Swan Goose** *Anser cygnoides*

Seen only on the road from Ulan-Bator to Hustai National Park, flying over lightly grazed, wet steppe adjacent to a village. It is described as preferring steppe and taiga near freshwater.

#### **Bar-headed Goose** *Anser indicus*

One pair seen flying and calling over the Bayan Valley (47.688642, 105.888127) in Hustai. The species breeds on isolated pond islands in the steppe but can commute large distances during and before breeding. We did not find evidence of nesting within the park.

### **Ruddy Shelduck** *Tardorna ferruginea*

A common bird of the Hustai Steppe, where it appeared to be nesting in marmot burrows. The season was very late due to an exceptionally late, cold winter, and the birds were still believed to be prospecting nest sites across May and into June.

### **Falcated Duck** *Anas falcata*

One pair seen flying over the Bayan Valley in Hustai National Park, in late May, was the only sighting.

### **Black-eared Kite** *Milvus (migrans) lineatus*

This distinctive subspecies (and perhaps future species split) of Black Kite was one of the common scavenging birds over the Hustai steppes and seen on most days of our trip.

### **Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus*

A maximum of one pair and a juvenile were seen in the national park. The birds here are believed to specialize in the marrow from the many carcasses of wild horses (old, sick and foals) and red deer that are left on the hills.

### **Himalayan Griffon Vulture** *Gyps himalayensis*

A maximum of 3 birds were seen at any one time, with perhaps 2-3 pairs breeding in the central park. Close to the Bayan Valley, an active nest was observed atop one of relatively few rocky promontories on the otherwise rolling steppe.

### **Cinereous Vulture** *Aegypius monachus*

A maximum of 10 birds observed in Hustai, with two active nests seen, one on a tree and one on a cliff. Interestingly, on one day in early June, a sudden 'migration' of ten birds overhead heralded the death of a young horse foal, later found by rangers.

### **Upland Buzzard** *Buteo hemilasius*

Seen only on the approach road to Hustai National Park (c. 47.874718, 105.867625), in arid flat steppe with some light agriculture.

### **Amur Falcon** *Falco amurensis*

Seen after its late arrival, in late May, around the Bayan Valley in Hustai. The first bird we noted spectacularly caught a lark in flight. The pair we saw often were in a valley with some birch trees, where they frequented the crow nest in one of the trees.

### **Steppe Merlin** *Falco columbaris pallidus*

One male seen mobbing a golden eagle in flight over the Bayan Valley in Hustai.

### **Saker Falcon** *Falco cherrug*

Pair afforded superb views on telegraph wires, on approach road to Hustai, and also seen carrying food here.

### **Demoiselle Crane** *Grus virgo*

These cranes do not seem to breed in the hilly steppe of Hustai National Park but were seen flying over, and prospecting breeding valleys, on several occasions. Pairs were seen on the approach road, in flat agricultural steppe.

### **Eagle Owl** *Bubo bubo*

A feather of an adult found in the Bayan Valley, close to several rocky outcrops very suitable for nesting.

### **White-backed Woodpecker** *Dendropocus leucotus*

Male watched drumming in upland birch steppe above Bayan Valley, Hustai National Park (47.693104, 105.854418).

### **Daurian Shrike** *Lanius isabellinus*

Seen after 20 May by John A in a small rocky gully in Bayan Valley in Hustai National Park.

### **Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

It was lovely to see choughs enacted their 'early Holocene' roles at Hustai, following the wild horses closely and probing in the ground they had disturbed, and fertilized for insects. We also saw magpies taking fur from the horses to line their nests.

### **Asian Short-toed Lark** *Calandrella cheleensis*

This fairly unassuming bird was seen on a few occasions within a kilometre of the camp, headed towards the Bayan Valley. It seemed to favour very short, cropped grassland with bare soil areas.

### **Mongolian Lark** *Melanocorypha mongolica*

The first thing about this lark that strikes you is its incredibly loud song and enormous size; it superficially resembles a Calandra Lark on steroids. This endemic was present in good numbers at Hustai, favouring open grassy slopes with flowers.

### **Steppe Horned Lark** *Eremophila alpestris brandti*

This very distinctive species was found just into the park from the HQ/lodge, and a female watched settling back on her nest with eggs just as the snow began to fall. The nest was later found abandoned after a few days of continuous blizzard.

### **Scaly Thrush** *Zoothera dauma*

One was seen migrating through the park on 3 May, probably headed for its more wooded breeding grounds in northern Mongolia.

### **Variable (Eastern Pied) Wheatear** *Oenanthe picata*

By late May, a fairly common bird in Hustai, favouring rocky slopes with boulders and some low dwarf vegetation and birch trees.

### **Richard's Pipit** *Anthus novaseelandiae*

Breeds alongside Blyth's Pipit in a different niche, favouring broken trees adjoining the steppe. Seen in the Bayan Valley in Hustai including in the gardens of the ranger staff.

### **Blyth's Pipit** *Anthus godlewskii*

The common pipit of treeless steppe in Hustai, appears to replace the niche of meadow pipit in short grassland habitats without trees.

### **Pine Bunting** *Emberiza leucocephalos*

Males were present at singing at higher elevations in Hustai with scattered birch trees, shrub vegetation and rocky areas.

### **Meadow Bunting** *Emberiza cioides*

A specialist of largely treeless, higher slopes with boulders and flowery areas – a very smart species and common in Hustai.

### **Pallas's Reed Bunting** *Emberiza pallasi*

Seen only once, in a steppe river valley flanked by dense patches of rush/sedge, near the Bayan Valley in Hustai.

## **III. LARGE MAMMALS**



### **Takhi (Przewalski's Horse)** *Equus ferus przewalski*

A wonderful conservation success story, almost 300 wild horses now populate Hustai, with a worldwide population in the wild of little more than 1000 individuals. The horses are readily seen on most trips to the park, but best before 9am, after coming to drink and socialising, whereupon they often, in the summer months especially, disperse into the hills. The conservation story of the horses is absolutely fascinating, their being re-bred back into the wild from just 13 extant individuals left at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As well as being beautiful and magnificent creatures to spend time with, they have also played a cornerstone role in restoring the steppe to its original form.

### **Red Deer** *Cervus elaphus*

Mongolia's Red Deer are said to be the largest in the world and whilst difficult to prove, they are extraordinarily impressive animals, often dominating the steppe skyline and even forming herds that roam, in reasonable harmony, alongside the wild horses – a sight perhaps last seen in Britain 8000 years ago. There are large herds in the park and they are a prime target for wolves, being easier than horses to take down. Indeed, wolves rarely if ever attempt on adult horses, and have on occasion been killed by a kick to the head.

### **Grey Wolf** *Canis lupus*

At least three packs of wolves, numbering around 17 individuals, haunt the steppes around Hustai. We were fortunate enough to have superb views of a ragged-looking female, which watched us from a ridge-top with far less fear than wolves show in most part (they have not been hunted here for 20 years, or 2 generations). We also heard wolves howling from the hills on a few occasions. During our visit, "Orgna", a local ecologist, was studying the wolves. He was able to call them up – and one evening, one answered him from the opposite hillside.

#### IV. SPECIES LIST

1	Daurian Partridge	<i>Perdix dauurica</i>
2	Swan Goose	<i>Anser cygnoides</i>
3	Bar-headed Goose	<i>Anser indicus</i>
4	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
5	Falcated Duck	<i>Anas falcata</i>
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
7	Black-eared Kite	<i>Milvus [migrans] lineatus</i>
8	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
9	Himalayan Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
10	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
11	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
12	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo [rufinus] hemilasius</i>
13	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
14	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
15	Amur Falcon	<i>Falco [vespertinus] amurensis</i>
16	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
17	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>
18	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
19	Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo [bubo] bubo</i>
20	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
21	Daurian Shrike	<i>Lanius [isabellinus] isabellinus</i>
22	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
23	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
24	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
25	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus [corone] corone</i>
26	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
27	Asian Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella cheleensis</i>
28	Mongolian Lark	<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>
29	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
30	Scaly Thrush	<i>Zoothera dauma</i>
31	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
32	Pied Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>
33	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
34	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
35	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
36	Richard's Pipit	<i>Anthus novaseelandiae</i>
37	Blyth's Pipit	<i>Anthus godlewskii</i>
38	Pine Bunting	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>
39	Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
40	Pallas's Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza pallasii</i>