

# A true birding adventure in the Eastern steppe lakes & grassland Mongolia

*May 14 – June 12, 2024 (23 + 7 days)*



East Asian buntings © Bolormunkh

## INTRODUCTION

Sandwiched between Russia and China, Mongolia is the second largest landlocked country after Kazakhstan. With a territory four times as large as Germany but only 3 million inhabitants, it is considered the least densely populated country in the world. Mongolia is situated within a unique ecological transition zone where the Siberian taiga forests of the North merge into the Central Asian steppe and arid desert in the South.

Mongolia is the country of adventure, the land of steppe nomads with a great history behind it. Our country is vast, uninhabited and remote, it has another meaning from the rest of the world.

During this tour, we will explore the far eastern Mongolian grassland and eastern steppe landscape. The Mongolian steppe is possibly the last and largest continuous expanse of unspoiled and relatively undisturbed temperate steppe ecosystem that once covered a large part of the Eurasian continent.

Situated along the East-Asian and Australian flyway the region offers an opportunity to see a great number of bird species during their migration at some key stop over and staging sites. Out of almost 1000 bird species recorded in East Asia, 360 species are found in Eastern Mongolia. Of which 44 are waders.

Our time in the steppe will be focused on both birding and mammal watching with a strong focus on observing spring bird migration.

Although Mongolia isn't known for its abundance of species, the great diversity of habitats provides an exciting array of specialized birds, encompassing a mixture from Siberia and Central Asia, some of which are unique to Mongolia and its immediate surroundings. Marvelous birding and travel through wide-open spaces with very few people make for an unforgettable and adventurous experience.

The high elevation of Mongolia creates unusually clear air and starry nights year round. It is an overwhelming visual experience of emptiness and vastness to ride into the great Mongolian void. The silent, treeless steppe is completely devoid of any fences. Stretching away into the distance: no trace of human activity except for the nomadic pastoralists and their herds.

We are privileged to have you with us and show you some spectacular landscapes, rich flora and fauna of our beautiful country.

Famous for its wild nature, nomadic culture, hospitable people and rich history, we guarantee that you will have a most enjoyable time during this trip.

## TOUR DETAILS

**Tour dates: May 14 – June 05, 2024 (23 days trip to Eastern Mongolia)**

**June 06 – 12, 2024 (7 days extension to the Gobi desert)**

About May 10 – 30 is the peak of the spring migration. Earlier in the mentioned period buntings, thrushes and raptors migration peak. Leaf and grasshopper warblers, flycatchers and finches pass through Mongolia towards the end of it.

**Tour size:** Max 8 participants

**Participants:**

**Total distance:** About 1700 miles to eastern Mongolia + 1000 miles to the Gobi desert Ulaanbaatar <-> Buir lake – 590 miles (420 miles on asphalt and 170 miles on dirt road)

<b>Price:</b>	<b>Size:</b>	<b>Tour price:</b>
	6 - 8 pax	\$5500 (main tour) + \$1400 (extension)
<b>Ground crew:</b>	<b>Local guide</b>	1
	<b>Driver</b>	3
	<b>Chef</b>	1
	<b>Assistant</b>	1

### WHAT'S INCLUDED IN THE PRICE OF THIS TOUR:

- Ground transportation in Russian vans (including airport transfers) and fuel cost
- 1 Local guide
- 1 chef
- Assistants to set up camp and cooking
- Camping gear (tents, sleeping bags, mattresses, chairs, tables, etc.)
- All accommodations (hotel stays in the city and camping out in tents)
- All meals – 3 meals a day and snacks
- Protected area entry fee
- Farewell dinner

### NOT INCLUDED:

- Round-trip airfare from your home country to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
- Travel insurance

## THE ITINERARY SUMMARY

Daily itinerary order is not fixed and subject to change due to migration intensity and conditions at each site.

**Day 1. May 14.** Arrive in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia in the morning. The hotel is located 30 miles from the airport in the riparian forest of Tuul river on the outskirts of the city. Birding around the hotel area and checking a few small lakes to find early spring migrants.

This time of the year is the peak of thrush migration. So we usually see good number of Red-throated, Black-throated, Dusky, Naumann's, Eye-browed and White's Thrushes.

**Day 2. May 15.** Transfer to the Taiga forest.

In the afternoon birding in the forest and familiarizing ourselves with some common species that are around.

**Day 3. May 16. Taiga forest of the Khentii mountain.**

The next two days will be spent searching for some of the taiga specialist fauna. Taiga is the world's largest land biome, making up 24% of the world's forest cover. The largest area in Canada and Russia, 3/5 of the taiga extension is in Eurasia.

Mongolia's northern part is covered by approximately 11 million ha of taiga forest, forming the southern extension of the Siberian taiga forest. The biggest chunk of taiga in Mongolia is called Khentii Mountains (northeastern Mongolia), where the Siberian forest belt borders the Central Asian expansive steppe grassland, representing a unique and greatly untouched ecosystem.

The mountainous areas of Terelj national park are located at the southern end of the Khentii Mountains, covered mostly in larch, pine and birch forests, narrow valleys and green meadows bisected by wild, rugged rivers.

**Day 4. May 17. Taiga forest of the Khentii mountain.**

[Resident species](#) such as Black-billed Capercaillie, Hazel grouse, Ural Owl, Siberian Jay, Spotted Nutcracker, Eurasian Jay, rather common tits such as Siberian Tit, Coal Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Willow Tit and woodpeckers such as White-backed, Grey-headed, Eurasian Three-toed and Lesser Spotted, Black Woodpeckers to be searched.

Also summer visitors such as Japanese Sparrowhawk, Olive-backed Pipit, Daurian Redstart, Oriental Turtle Dove should be observed etc..

**Day 5. May 18. Drive to Choibalsan via Toson Hulstai nature reserve.** The nature reserve protects a chunk of the steppe ecosystem that sprawls across two of the eastern provinces. Altogether, it covers nearly 480 thousand hectares area of enormous stretches of grassland. The nature reserve is famed for its huge herds of Mongolian Gazelle. It was originally established to conserve the extensive grasslands of eastern Mongolia and its biodiversity.

A large number of Lapland Longspur, Mongolian Short-toed lark, Asian Short-toed lark, Mongolian Lark, Pere David's Snowfinch, Eurasian Skylark, Blyth's and Richard's Pipit.

**Day 6. May 19. Drive from Choibalsan to Buir lake.** Finally, we reach the great Mongolian-Manchurian grassland, possibly the last and largest expanse of unspoiled and pristine prairie ecosystem not only in Asia but also in the world.

<p>Arrival in the evening. On the way, see raptors such as Upland Buzzard, Steppe Eagle, Saker Falcon and other migrants.</p>
<p><b>Day 7. May 20. Buir lake, a Ramsar site.</b> The 13 miles by 24 miles freshwater Buir Lake is the 5th largest lake in Mongolia covering 240 sq. miles of surface area. It is located in a relatively low-lying steppe on the border of Mongolia and China. Full day birding at Buir lake. A large number of waders and waterfowl should be present. Swan Goose, Greylag Goose, Stejneger's Scoter, Falcated Duck, Little Curlew, Asian Dowitcher, Eastern Black-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden Plover, Red-necked Stint, Long-toed Stint, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Pin-tailed and Swinhoe's Snipe.</p>
<p><b>Day 8. May 21. Buir lake.</b> Search passerines in narrow willow groves along the lake shore. Eurasian Siskin, Common Rosefinch, Buff-bellied Pipit, Tristram's, Yellow-browed, Yellow-breasted, Chestnut, Black-faced, Pallas's Reed and Little buntings.</p>
<p><b>Day 9. May 22. Buir lake.</b> Relict Gull, Mongolian Gull, Great-crested Grebe, Eurasian Bittern, White-winged Tern, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Citrine Wagtail,</p>
<p><b>Day 10. May 23.</b> Visit small lakes along the southern shore of Buir lake.</p>
<p><b>Day 11. May 24. Khalkh gol river.</b> The extensive willow and poplar riparian forest of the Khalkh river, wet meadows and oxbow lakes are ideal places for observing migratory and breeding birds. Grey-headed Lapwing, Common Pheasant, Daurian Partridge, Azure Tit, Long-tailed Rosefinch, White-crowned Penduline Tit, Azure-winged Magpie.</p>
<p><b>Day 12. May 25. Khalkh gol river.</b> Chinese Grey Shrike, Little Owl, Amur Falcon, Daurian Jackdaw.</p>
<p><b>Day 13. May 26. Tashgai lakes.</b> Series of shallow lakes of Tashgai and adjacent wetlands have extensive reed beds that host some iconic East Asian species such as Eastern Marsh Harrier, Pied Harrier, Japanese Reed Bunting, Marsh Grassbird, Northern Parrotbill and more.</p>
<p><b>Day 14. May 27. Tashgai lakes.</b> A large number of geese (mostly Swan and Bean) and ducks congregate in the lakes.</p>
<p><b>Day 15. May 28. Drive to Jankowski's Bunting site.</b> This recently discovered dry and low steppe mountain is one of the last strongholds for endangered Jankowski in east Asia. Previously widespread across much of north-east China, including Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang and Jilin, Jankowski's Bunting has declined alarmingly and is now vastly depleted, remaining at only a handful of widely spread sites. Key target species are Jankowski's and Meadow Bunting, Oriental Greenfinch, Siberian Thrush.</p>
<p><b>Day 16. May 29. Jankowski's Bunting site.</b> Migrating eastern Palearctic warblers such as Siberian Chiffchaff, Dusky, Two-barred, Arctic, Yellow-browed, Radde's, Pallas's Leaf Warblers.</p>
<p><b>Day 17. May 30. Elm tree valley.</b> Siberian Blue Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Brown shrike, Isabelline Shrike, Taiga Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped Flycatcher,</p>

Dark-sided Flycatcher, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Japanese Sparrowhawk, White's Thrush etc.
<b>Day 18. May 31. Full day of birding in the Elm Tree valley.</b> Oriental Plover, Oriental Honey Buzzard, White-throated Rock Thrush, Hawfinch, Orange-flanked Bluetail.
<b>Day 19. June 01. After some morning birding drive to Khar yamaat nature reserve.</b>
<b>Day 20. June 02. After morning birding in the mountain valleys, drive to Khurkh river valley.</b>
<b>Day 21. June 03. Khurkh river valley, a North-East Asian Crane Network Site and Ramsar site.</b> Search series of steppe lakes and wetlands for cranes such as White-naped, Hooded, Siberian and Common Cranes.
<b>Day 22. June 04. Khurkh river valley.</b> Eastern Great Bustard, Amur Falcon, Japanese Quail, Brown-cheeked Rail, Grey Nightjar, Yellow-breasted Bunting, Chestnut-eared Bunting, Thick-billed Warbler and Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Chinese Bush Warbler and waterfowl.
<b>Day 23. June 05. Return to Ulaanbaatar.</b>
<b>Optional a week extension to the Gobi desert</b>
<b>Day 24. June 06. Drive to Dalanzadgad in the Gobi desert for 8 hours (360 miles).</b> Early June is the best time for birding in the Gobi because all the summer breeders will be arrived to their breeding ground and resident species raise their offspring.
<b>Day 25. June 07.</b> Transfer to Zuun saikhan mountain in Gobi gurvan saikhan national park. Full day exploration of Yolyn am gorge. Many resident and summer breeding birds such as Himalayan Griffon, Bearded Vulture, Golden Eagle, Chukar, Beautiful Rosefinch, Mongolian Accentor, Wallcreeper, White-winged Snowfinch, Barred and Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Godlewski's and Grey-necked Bunting to be seen here.
<b>Day 26. June 08.</b> Driving through the Gobi plateau and check out number of tree plantations as every tree and bush act as a magnet to tired migrating passerines that passing through this arid land. Search for Oriental Plover.
<b>Day 27. June 09.</b> Long drive through stunning desert scenery to Baga Bogd mountain. On the way birding in the Saxaul forest, search amygdalus bushes for Mongolian Groundjay, Long-legged Buzzard, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Steppe Grey Shrike, Asian Desert Warbler, Hill Pigeon, Lesser Kestrel etc.
<b>Day 28. June 10.</b> Baga Bogd mountain. Spend the day searching for Altai Snowcock.
<b>Day 29. June 11.</b> Drive to Sangiin dalai lake. Asian Dowitcher, Bar-headed Goose and Swan Goose.
<b>Day 30. June 12.</b> Morning birding around Sangiin dalai lake and have lunch by Takhilt lake. In the afternoon return to Ulaanbaatar.
<b>Departure from Ulaanbaatar.</b>

## TOUR INFORMATION

**ACCOMMODATION:** Throughout the trip, we primarily camp out in tents. Eastern Mongolia is a highly underdeveloped region. So our only accommodation option is camping out. Mongolia offers the best and most suitable camping experience due to its unoccupied and vast landscape. Because of that we are allowed to wander and set up our own camp wherever we want.

Tents are also the most suitable for a birdwatching tour because we are able to spend the night nearby, or exactly at the bird watching hot spots.

Therefore, we can start birding early the following morning, without wasting time on travel. It is a genuine natural experience that allows people to connect with the environment.

The clients will be provided with a warm quality sleeping bag, tent, self-inflatable sleeping mattress and pillow. We use high-quality spacious North Face Summit series tents (2 person tent - 390L x 270W x 130H) which are most suitable for the windy conditions of the spring and Coleman sleeping bags (-10°C).



**Picture 1. Tents**

Mongolian traditional spacious marquee style tent (the blue one) will be set up for dining. It provides good insulation against heat during the day and protection in the evening when mosquitoes come out.



**Picture 2. Camp set up**

Table and chairs are set up in the big tent, and a professional and experienced cook accompanies us and prepares delicious European and traditional cuisine for dinner, lunch and breakfast.





**SHOWER:** In the hotels, hot showers are available. Other times we will use a portable shower. When camping in the remote regions, our crew will erect a toilet tent, a simple earth toilet that consists of a hole in the ground, and 'flushing' with a spade and earth.

**TRANSPORTATION:** Vehicle options for passengers are UAZ-2206 Russian minivan. Russian vans are used to transport camping and cooking equipment. Especially when we use a big dining tent, folding chairs, tables and carry a lot of groceries, this vehicle is most suitable.

In order to reach the various habitats and birds of the vast country, there will be a fair amount of driving. After driving on a paved road between Ulaanbaatar - Choibalsan city, we are unlikely to travel on anything other than dirt roads for most of the tour.

Often we will follow steppe tracks, which are usually smooth but slow. We will be wandering around fairly flat open landscapes, making plenty of stops for birds. Most of the time we will be around 600 meters above sea level.

When we set up our own camps, our ground crew first help the cook set up, then erect the group's tents while we go birding nearby. On those days when we are camping the daily routine to some extent will revolve around the need to set and break camp.

Most days will consist of an optional early morning walk before breakfast. We will spend a substantial amount of time in the car when we drive to Buir lake and on our return from the east to Ulaanbaatar.



**Picture 4. Russian van**

**TEMPERATURE:** The continental weather of Mongolia in the spring is unpredictable. Generally, it will be warm during the day but can be cold at night and in the early mornings at the beginning of the trip. The weather in May is dry with a low amount

of precipitation. However, temporary downpours and strong winds are also possible at almost any time.

In eastern Mongolia where we spend most of our trip, the temperature averages 35 - 50°F at night, 64 - 78°F during the day and the warmest 86°F in May. The weather should be stable and pleasantly warm throughout the trip.

**VISA:** In connection with the announcement by the Government of Mongolia of 2023-2025 as the Year of Visiting Mongolia, the decision to exempt 34 foreign nationals (mostly European nations) from visa requirements up to 30 days was decided by the Government on 04 Jan 2023.

In total 62 countries citizens are allowed to visit Mongolia without VISA. All necessary information is found at <https://evisa.mn/main> website.

**American citizens are allowed to visit Mongolia without Visa for up to 90 days.**

**FLIGHT:** Mongolian airlines [MIAT](#) operates regular direct flights to Incheon international airport. From the USA, flying via Incheon or Beijing is the most reliable way to travel to Mongolia.

**ELECTRICITY:** When we are away from regular mains electricity, in the car, we will use a 12v to 220v inverter to allow us to charge any batteries/smartphones/cameras. We also carry a portable generator that charges all types of electronic devices.

**CLOTHING:** Waterproof and windproof clothing such as long-sleeved shirts, and long pants and hiking boots will be needed when we go out birding. Stout shoes or boots would be better for any walking and wet vegetation. Fleeces and sweaters will come in handy for cooler nights and mornings. In the middle of the day, lighter clothing will be more comfortable.

#### **Recommended travel kit:**

- Head torch for camping
- Waterproof rubber boots / Wellingtons for wet areas
- Beanies, buff and gloves in cold temperature
- Backpack, sun hat, sun cream, lip balm, sunglasses in hot areas/hiking/dry conditions
- Binoculars, spotting scope (if you have one), earplugs, water bottle and towel
- **First aid kit:** Although we carry first aid kits with basic supplies, it is strongly advisable to bring your own. The entirety of the tour we will be in remote areas with no medical facilities or hospitals. Please ensure that you have all the necessary medication that you require for the duration of the tour.
- Sandals and shorts will be comfortable while on long drives in the car.
- Sealable (ziploc) plastic bag to protect your documents, money, camera, binoculars, and other items from rain.

**FITNESS:** In general, this tour does not require a high level of fitness, but most of the birding will be done on foot and may require walking for several hours at a time. The walking effort throughout the tour is mostly easy to moderate, although there will be several optional strenuous hikes in the Khentii Mountains in search of taiga species.