

The Horses of Mongolia  
Part 1: Khomiin Tal Takhi  
Susan Fox

I saw a dream come true in Mongolia. On a ridge in spectacular morning light that made everything in sight look like it was bathed in the glowing embers of a fire, a lone takhi stallion stood watching us. He was one of twenty-two who, in 2004-2005, had been transported by air half way around the world from a mountain reserve in France. Now, nine stallions and thirteen mares live in a river valley refuge called Khomiin Tal in western Mongolia. They represent thirty years of effort and planning.

I visited them in September of 2006. "Visited" sounds so simple. But doing so ended up being a real old-fashioned adventure.

Like many horse-crazy kids, I had heard of the Przewalski's Horse (takhi) and knew that they were extinct in the wild, surviving only in zoos and private reserves. But that was about it. Fast forward to the fall of 2004. Now working as a wildlife/nature artist after many years as a graphic designer, I was in Berlin spending a couple of days at the Tiergarten (literally "animal garden" or zoo) while my husband was in business meetings. Making my way back into the farthest reaches of the zoo, I unexpectedly came upon a group of seven Przewalski's Horses. Enchanted, I watched, photographed and sketched them, knowing I wanted to paint them.

Back home, the latest issue of Wildlife Conservation arrived and there, on the inside cover, was a big color photo of a Przewalski's Horse. A biologist named Claudia Feh had won a Rolex Award for Enterprise for the establishment of a learning center in support of her planned reintroduction of the world's only true wild horse back into an area of Mongolia called Khomiin Tal. It was a major "Aha!" moment because I was already in the midst of my preparations for my first trip to Mongolia to participate in an Earthwatch Institute project studying argali sheep.

Further research turned up the fact that there had already been two reintroductions in 1992; one by a German group at a very remote location in the Gobi Desert and a second by the Dutch in a park only 100 miles from the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar. How could I go all that way and not see these horses in the wild? So I found a travel company who would get me to Hustai National Park for a couple of days after the Earthwatch project. I survived the Mongolian spring with daytime highs in the low 40's with freezing wind and occasional snow showers, got some decent photos and knew that I had to come back, especially since I had learned that a third release had just happened at a site in the west...at Khomiin Tal.

On September 17, 2006, I was on my way back to Mongolia. After a day in Ulaanbaatar (UB), I flew to Hovd, over 1,000 miles to the west, not far from the border of Kazakhstan. My guide, Oktyabr Vasha, met me at the airport with his new Russian van, and a short time later we were on our way. I found out that we had a 300km (over 130 mi) drive ahead of us. After the first couple of hours, the paved road abruptly ended and we continued on dirt tracks with no road signs of any kind. Endless open steppe and distant mountains. We camped by a river that night and traveled across the Great Mongolian Desert the next day, once getting momentarily stuck in an area of loose sand.

Early that afternoon we came to a fence with a simple wire "gate"- the entrance to Khomiin Tal. The road was on a shallow slope, so I had no idea what lay beyond. Driving up the dirt track and over a rise, suddenly we saw some ibex, a species of wild goat. Then, to our utter delight and surprise, a short distance from the road was a small group of takhi. And shortly thereafter we saw a single stallion. My Mongolian guides and driver were really excited, as was I. Continuing on, we dropped down into an enormous river valley ringed by snow-capped mountains, where the research camp was set up in traditional Mongolian gers (what we call "yurts"). The white gers set against the mountains with fluffy white clouds in the famous "Blue Skies" of Mongolia had a romantic, storybook quality. And then it got interesting. It turned out that nobody knew I was coming. The WWF (World Wildlife Fund, one of the project sponsors) office in UB had apparently not made contact with the research camp. Claudia was informed of our presence and, after a conference with her staff, told me that Munkhtuya, one

of the project scientists, had offered to take me with her that evening and the next morning while she and one of the rangers did their routine observations of the horses. Whew!

We only had to drive out a few miles before we encountered a group of takhi. Even staying near the van, they were only 20 to 50 feet away. We watched them for two hours. The next morning we left camp in time to catch the incredible sunrise. After some hilltop searching by the ranger, we located the same group from the evening before and I was able to spend another two to three hours with them. Since I'd left early with no breakfast, the ranger offered to share his with me, a large, flat piece of dried milk, which the Mongols call "araal". The first bite was weirdly tangy, but by the third bite, my palate had adjusted and I happily ate the rest, carefully breaking it off with my teeth since araal is really, really hard!

As a wildlife/nature artist, I don't paint what I haven't seen, preferably in its own habitat. A captive wild animal can be different in many ways from its wild brethren. Seeing and photographing the takhi in great light in more than one location was the major goal of this trip. As far as I have been able to find out, I am currently the only American artist who has seen and is painting the takhi in their native habitat. I hope that will change in the future.

I greatly prefer to let my paintings do the talking about what it was like to see an animal, but I'll try to put it into words. Standing on a grassy field in Mongolia watching animals who look like 20,000 year old cave paintings come to life was one of the most satisfying and pleasurable experiences of my life. I was just smiling inside the whole time. I have found the takhi to be captivating subjects. They are physically so interesting, with their roman noses, stiff upright manes and white muzzles. Their bodies have a sturdiness that has been selected by nature, not humans. Often they have stripes on their legs. I always try to paint an individual, not a generic representation of a species, so seeing as many animals as possible to understand the range of variation in their appearance is very important.

In the evening, the takhi move up to higher ground away from the colder valleys so, in the warm early morning light of Mongolia, you can see them making their way down the hill for their morning graze. Their society is built on harems presided over by a dominant stallion. Takhi have 66 chromosomes. Domestic horses have 64. Although they are considered distinct species, they can interbreed and produce fertile offspring, which have 65 chromosomes. This is one of the conservation challenges facing those who are reintroducing the takhi into areas that also have domestic horses.

I take a lot of pictures when I am in the field, especially since I switched to digital equipment (two Nikon D-70 bodies with 2gb memory cards). During my afternoon and morning with the takhi, around five hours, I shot over 300 images. I love field sketching live animals too, but in this instance, due to lack of time and the extremely cold weather, I had to content myself with lots of photos.

As an artist, I am interested in presenting a look into the life of a subject in its own world, not in relation to humans. So I am always watching for the revealing details of behavior that the casual viewer might miss. I was treated to a wonderful variety of mutual grooming sessions between the mares, including one horse using the back of another for a good chin scratching.

After my morning viewing, Claudia was kind enough to invite me to her ger for coffee. We finalized an agreement in which I will be donating 5% of the proceeds from the sales of any paintings or prints using reference that I shot at Khomiin Tal to her reintroduction work. Supporting the conservation of these marvelous animals will be a real privilege.

All too soon, my time with the takhi of Khomiin Tal was over. The trip back included ger visits, an impromptu ride on a bactrian camel, and lunch at a soum center (county seat) where I had authentic steamed mutton dumplings (buuz). My next stop was Hustai National Park and that will be part two of this three part series.