

Horses of Mongolia, Part 2 Hustai National Park

Feeling just a little blitzed after my western Mongolian adventure, I spent the evening following my flight back from Hovd in my hotel room in Ulaanbaatar (UB) doing laundry and channel surfing my way through broadcasts from over a dozen countries, including Russia, Australia, Italy, Turkey, Japan, China and the USA's own ESPN (baseball and bull riding) and the National Geographic Channel Asia. I particularly liked the Mongolian version of MTV. Music videos have become a universal language. The next morning, my driver was waiting to take me to Hustai National Park, a less than two hour trip from UB.

This would be my second visit and I was anxious to see the difference in the park and the horses from my first one, which was in early May of 2005. Then, the horses were just shedding their winter coats and it was cold and windy with snow showers. Typical spring weather in Mongolia. Now it was late September, warm and sunny during the day and not too cold at night. As at Khomiin Tal, my goal was to come home with photos of the horses in great light and, with luck, doing something interesting.

The story of the takhi at Hustai begins with the formation of the Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of the Przewalski Horse (FPPH) by Jan and Inge Bouman, a Dutch couple, in 1979. Their goal was the reintroduction of the horses to Mongolia. They established what they called "semi-reserves" in the Netherlands and Germany with both breeding and bachelor groups of the horses to acclimate them to a more natural environment than would be found in a zoo. By 1992, a reserve in Mongolia called "Hustai Nuruu" (place of the birch trees) had been chosen, along with Takhin Tal in the Gobi Desert, as release sites. In the following years the reserve became a national park and a total of 84 takhi were flown in in five separate transport flights.

By the time I was there last fall, the population had grown to 191, with a goal of a self-sustaining herd of 300-500. The park has a research center which is the base for on-going studies of the horses and they even have an eco-volunteer program which lets non-scientists contribute by doing field observations of the horses. (www.owc.org.mn/macne/hustai/index.htm).

Hustai has excellent visitor facilities, so it wasn't quite the adventure that Khomiin Tal was. I had my own traditional Mongolian ger to stay in, modern bathrooms and three delicious, nutritious meals a day in the very pleasant dining room. They even had Chinggis Khan beer on tap! There is a quite interesting gift shop with a number of items made by the local people. One can arrange for horse treks or go hiking. There is one campground in the park. The park manager, by previous arrangement, provided me with a driver and guide for a morning and an afternoon drive each day, for which I paid by the kilometer.

I went out a total of five times; once in the late afternoon the day I arrived and then twice a day in the next two days. The main road to the valley where the horses can almost always be seen is about a twenty minute drive from the park headquarters and visitor ger camp at the entrance. And, sure enough, shortly after entering the valley I saw a harem of seven horses not far from the road. We encountered a couple of other park vehicles with visitors, but that was it. I pretty much had the place to myself every time I was in the park. It's quite a change from East Africa, where any interesting animal is likely to be surrounded by cars like lions on a kill.

I dragged my guide and driver out at 7:00 am the next morning in order to catch the first light, which is spectacular. Almost immediately, we saw a single stallion and mare right by the road. She was

meandering around and he kept an eye on us, not taking any chances on losing his harem of one. Driving on, there was a group of four horses at the base of a large hill and then a group of six. I was alternating shooting pictures of the horses and catching the great light on the surrounding area. Not bad so far. Then we came around a bend and there, by some pools of surface water were *two* groups of takhi! One harem of seven was drinking while a second one of nine stood a little above them on a bank, watching. We'd arrived in the middle of things, I think, so I never quite sorted out exactly what the interactions were, but I know a great potential painting when I see one and this definitely fit the bill. What looked like a possible confrontation ended suddenly when both groups turned and walked off in opposite directions.

As if this wasn't enough, a little further down the road was a harem of thirteen horses! Got some great shots of them and then we continued on toward the river, called the Tuul Gol. We came to a lovely glade of trees and immediately saw a group of domestic horses. They can breed with the takhi and produce fertile offspring even though the takhi have 66 chromosomes and the domestic horses 64. The hybrids have 65. This poses a real conservation challenge for the reintroduction of the takhi. Domestic horses are not allowed in the park and my driver was immediately on the radio reporting their presence. One didn't need to know Mongolian to guess what he was saying.

We drove across the steppe, stopping to photograph Mongolian gazelle, and after a walk along the riverside looking for birds, went back up to two herder gers which were set up on a bank overlooking the river valley. I suspect, from the conversations that followed in Mongolian, that our driver was "mentioning" the fact that we had seen our host's horses in the park. After a delicious mid-morning snack of crusted milk and clotted cream spread on fresh bread and the ubiquitous milk tea, we started back to the ger camp. Not far along, we passed a ranger on a motorbike herding the wandering horses back out of the park.

The evening "game drive" wasn't as eventful, but I was delighted to see a large herd of marel, what we would call elk. They are a different species from the ones in North America, but looked and acted the same, with the large bull keeping a close watch on his harem.

As I mentioned in the previous article, the takhi go up into the hills at night and come down to graze during the day. The next morning we were treated to the sight on a rocky hillside of marel and takhi within a hundred yards of each other. Another great painting idea, one that I'm not sure I would have thought of otherwise. The story of the morning, however, occurred a short time later when we came upon another takhi harem walking in single file, backlit in the morning light. I quickly noticed one foal lagging behind and limping badly. Possibly it had been attacked by wolves. An older foal seemed to be staying with it. The rest of the group was starting to hurry towards its morning destination and then two adult horses stopped, looked back, saw the two foals and went to them. One nudged and seemed to fuss over the injured foal and then the three of them escorted the younger one on to join the rest of the group. It was quite an extraordinary thing to see.

The evening drive, my last, was "just" the by now usual sightings of multiple groups of horses grazing. My guide and driver both asked me to take pictures of them in front of a harem of fourteen takhi, which I was glad to do. The horses were spread out on a slope in nice light, a perfect ending to a great visit.

Back in the studio, I now have the reference that I need to show the takhi at their best. I do charcoal drawings to try out different ideas. Just because the photo looks good doesn't mean that it will "draw well". I'd rather find that out in a quick study than on the canvas. When I do "the waterhole painting", I'll do all the design and composition work with drawings and also work out my value pattern. The

photos were taken at a couple of different angles, so the light changed. I'll do a color study to make the light consistent on all the horses. I also do small landscape studies to figure out what colors will give the effect I'm looking for. That's another problem that I don't generally want to have to solve while I'm painting, particularly if the subject is still new to me.

The final part of this three part series will be on the takhi's "cousins", the domestic horses who are the descendants of the ones Chinggis Khan and his Horde rode when they conquered most of the known world almost 800 years ago. Bayartai!