

ARGALI ON THE ROCKS

(My Adventure in Mongolia)

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MONGOLIA: Home to the world's only surviving species of wild horse, the takhi (Przewalski's horse) and the largest species of wild sheep, the endangered argali. A place where 13% of the total land area has been set aside for protection and conservation. A country where, other than along either side of the single railway line, there are no fences at all. A land where they have still not forgotten their most famous leader, Chinggis Khan.

This is a short account of my trip to Mongolia in April-May of 2005 during which I participated in a Mongolian Argali study sponsored by the Earthwatch Institute and then traveled to one of three locations in Mongolia that is home to reintroduced wild takhi horses.

The argali study is located in the Ikh Nartiin Chuluu Nature Reserve, Dornogobi Aimag (county). It was organized and is supervised by Dr. Richard Reading, the Director of Conservation Biology of the Denver Zoological Foundation. I was one of a team of eight Earthwatch volunteers who helped with a variety of research tasks focused on learning enough about argali sheep ecology to develop a long-term management plan for the species. While there, I learned the basics of tracking animals with radio telemetry, how to navigate and mark important locations with a GPS, record continuous direct behavioral observations, and also a straight line method of doing an argali population survey. This involved teams of two or three walking 4km in a straight line, regardless of terrain, and noting the location, with a compass bearing, of any of the target species spotted with the unaided eye. Binoculars were used for confirmation and to check numbers, gender and age class. Since the ground had many rocky outcroppings, some 30-40 ft. or more in height, rock clambering skills came in handy too. Participants only went around if it was really, absolutely impossible to go over.

The reserve protects 108,080 acres of rock outcrops and is located about a four hour drive south of the Mongolian capital, Ulaanbaatar (UB). The research site is currently located in a valley with a spring. Local herders use it to water their cattle, horses, flocks of sheep and cashmere goats. We were all treated to an almost daily parade of livestock, including, on the first day, six bactrian camels! The scientists, staff and volunteers sleep, dine, work and hang out in traditional Mongolian gers (or, in Russian, yurts). These are very comfortable and perfectly adapted for the extreme climate. The weather in Mongolia ranges from -40F in the winter to 80F in the short two month summer. Spring brings strong winds. The daytime temperature during the project rarely rose above the high 50sF. Nights were down in the low 30sF.

Argali sheep (*Ovis ammon*) prefer cold, arid grasslands, steppe covered valleys and rocky outcroppings. A ram can weigh over 400 pounds and carry heavy spiraling horns over 64 inches in length. Preliminary data indicates that the basic social unit is a ewe and her lamb. Lambs are born over a relatively short time span in late April and early May. Rams and ewes form temporary mixed groups ranging from three or four up to a herds of over 100 animals. I personally saw groups of up to eighteen sheep at a time, but four to eight seemed more common. The argali population is known to be declining and a major purpose of the study is to understand the reasons why. Predation by domestic dogs appears to be a (not previously anticipated) factor, along with poaching and competition for forage by domestic livestock. There are currently approximately 600 argali in the study area and around 10,000 livestock.

On one memorable day, which was to include a visit to a herder's ger and a genuine Mongolian BBQ (the so-called ones in this country are a Chinese marketing gimmick), I did the 4km argali survey with Dr. Reading in the morning. We had to walk most of the way back to camp when the project vehicle wasn't at the rendezvous point. En route, Dr. Reading pointed out a layer of white on the horizon and noted that it was an oncoming dust storm. By the time we arrived back in camp, white dust was swirling around in stiff winds. As I and the rest of the team was resting in our ger, which doubled as the project dining room, suddenly the white visible through the clear panels in the top of the ger turned orange and, as though a flip had been switched, the ger went dark, although it was only 3:55 in the afternoon. Peeking out through the door, we saw that the whole world had gone orange amid howling winds. Before we could even wonder what the rest of the day would bring, the Mongolian staff came piling through the door with salads, vegetables and a whole roast goat in a metal container. The BBQ was on! As the cooks cut up the meat and heaped it onto platters, the hot rocks which helped cook it were passed around for good health in the traditional manner. After everyone had eaten their fill, each nationality took turns singing songs, an Earthwatch argali team tradition. There were Mongolians, Americans and one Englishman. After three rounds, the party was over and the wind and dust had died down enough for the permanent staff to return to the other gers and for anyone who needed to find the privies, which had been invisible for a number of hours. When I asked him the next morning how he would rate the dust storm on a scale of 1 to 5, Dr. Reading gave it a 3. A 5 would have meant sand instead of dust and hurricane force winds.

I was able to spend the final two days of the project on my own doing behavioral observations and immersing myself in the environment of the northern Gobi as preparation for the paintings I plan to do. I was able to photograph many argali and document their habitat. Other species I saw and/or photographed included ibex, Mongolian gazelle, red fox, golden eagle, cinereous vulture and black-eared kite.

After I returned to Ulaanbaatar after the end of the project, I went out for a short expedition to Hustai National Park, which is located about 100km southwest of UB. Boojum Expeditions of Bozeman, Montana handled the arrangements and provided an excellent guide and driver. Once again, my accommodation was a ger, this time at the tourist camp adjacent to the park headquarters. During my drives through the park, I saw many takhi, including a young foal, maral or red deer (similar to American elk), bobek marmots and a variety of birds.

The takhi (as the Mongolians call them; it means "spirit") or Przewalski's Horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii*) is the only surviving species of wild horse (equids like American mustangs and the Chincoteague ponies are domestic horses gone feral). In prehistoric times their range probably included central Asia, China and Central Europe. They were named after Colonel Nikolai Przewalski, who was presented with a skull and hide during one of his exploratory expeditions in central Asia in the late 1800's. He never saw a live takhi. Between 1897 and 1902, four expeditions captured quite a few foals, fifty-three of whom survived the journey to the west. The last confirmed sighting of a wild takhi was of a stallion in 1969 in the Dzungarian Gobi area of Mongolia. Many of the descendants of the captured animals reside today in zoos and on private reserves. I have seen and sketched the group that lives at the Tiergarten in Berlin. They were the impetus for me to make the effort to see takhi in their natural habitat in Mongolia.

The current total population of approximately 1200 animals is descended from only 13 horses, so intensive genetic tracking has been required to avoid health problems associated with inbreeding. Organizations in a number of countries, including Germany, the Netherlands and France are dedicated to their survival, breeding and reintroduction. The International Takhi Group was established in 1999 to reintroduce them in accordance with IUCN (The World Conservation Union) guidelines. Bringing the takhi back to their historic home in Mongolia began in 1992 with releases at Takhin Tal, near the boundary of Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area, and Hustai National Park. In September of 2004, 12 horses were released in the Khomiin Tal area of western Mongolia, near Khar Us Nuur National Park.

The takhi are very important to the Mongolians and it means a lot to them to have the horses back in their country. The population in general is highly supportive of efforts to conserve the natural environment of their country.

There are currently fifteen takhi harems in Hustai. A harem is a group of mares and their offspring held together by a dominant stallion. I saw 5-6 of the harems on my visit in a variety of picturesque locations.

I also had a very special opportunity to visit a nomad herder's ger and was treated to soft goat cheese and delicious salted butter tea. The photograph I had taken with the father is one of my most treasured images from my trip. My last day was spent with a tour of a ger factory in UB and a quick drive into the mountains of Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, which is just to the north-east of UB. The impressive rocky scenery was cloaked in a mild snow storm, but it was sunny and warm when I arrived back in town.

Mongolia has a long history as a place where art and craft are practiced and valued. I was able to make a short visit to the Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery and was very impressed by the quality and variety of the work on display. Small, nicely done original watercolor paintings of Mongolian landscapes and other subjects are available at very reasonable prices in most gift and souvenir shops. Leather and felt are used to make a variety of products for visitors, including miniature gers. One can also get a complete traditional outfit of del (the outer garment), sash, boots and hat. Some of the best cashmere in the world comes from Mongolia although most of it is currently processed into finished goods in China. However, Gobi Cashmere in Ulaanbaatar makes a variety of sweaters, scarves, gloves, blankets and other goods out of cashmere, camel and yak wool. I couldn't resist bringing home a soft, feather light cashmere scarf and a yak wool blanket.

I found Mongolia to be a fascinating and worthwhile destination for a nature artist. Plein air painters would find compelling landscapes with amazing light. The land and animals are unique and the people were friendly and interesting. I'm already looking forward to my next journey to the "Land of Blue Skies".