PALLAS'S CAT KITTENQUEST TOUR REPORT 2026

2 - 11 July 2026

by Mark Beaman

We had enjoyed many encounters with Pallas's Cat during our autumn, winter and spring tours in the Himalayas, China and Mongolia, but we were greatly looking forward to our inaugural visit to eastern Mongolia in summer in order to see and photograph Pallas's Cats with their delightful kittens. We were not to be disappointed!

Our group assembled in Ulaanbaatar, and after a pleasant overnight stay at a good hotel, we started out on the long journey to the Khalzan region of eastern Mongolia. The journey through the mostly empty landscapes of steppes, hills and winding rivers took us much of the day. It was fascinating to see the Mongolian steppes in their bright green 'summer clothing', with lush grass (knee-high in places) and a myriad of wildflowers. How very different from the short yellowish grass of autumn and the snowy scenes of winter! Summer is much the wettest time of year in largely dry Mongolia, and indeed it rained for much of the day, moderating the summer heat.

Eventually we reached our base, the Steppe Wildlife Conservation & Research Centre founded by Otgonbayar Baatargal and his wife Buyandelger Suuri (Ogii and Buyanaa for short), the two leading experts on Pallas's Cats in Mongolia. In spite of the accommodation being in simple gers (ger is Mongolian for yurt), identical to those still used to this day by Mongol nomads but with fancier beds, the camp is quite comfortable. There was a large, well-equipped 'dining ger', complete with a filter coffee maker, and a modern toilet and shower block with ample hot water. The pit toilets and simple wash basins are now a thing of the past.

During the summer months, the cats and their kittens are most active from the pre-dawn to a couple of hours after sunrise and again from a couple of hours before sunset until post-dusk. So, our daily regime was set to match theirs to a large degree, although obviously avoiding darkness. We would leave our base in the dark and then return for breakfast, take a long break in the often hot middle of the day (lunch was optional for those preferring to sleep) and then head out again before returning for a late dinner.

We headed out on our first morning with mounting excitement. Would the kittens perform well for us? We were to visit a den with no fewer than six kittens! How hard could it be to get great shots? So began the most frustrating and least rewarding of our six full days at Khalzan!

Hide (or blind) photography for Pallas's Cat kittens involves sitting behind a portable screen of black nylon material with holes cut for lenses, supported by metal poles and guy cords. We were soon to realise why this kind of hide is vital at this season. The kittens get moved from den to den by their mothers, mostly because she soon runs out of vole and gerbil prey around each den site, so it is more efficient to move the kittens to another of the many rock piles that dot the steppe than travel further afield, never mind the higher risk of leaving the kittens for long periods. The foxes and eagles are always on the lookout.

We arrived at the den site before sunrise and sat behind our screen and waited, and waited. Had the kittens moved? Adding to the frustration, we could see another den about 500 metres away where four kittens were climbing on the rocks, jumping off them, stalking and chasing each other, etcetera etcetera! Finally, after what seemed an age, a first tiny kitten appeared in a rock crevice, peering out at us and displaying the blue-green eyes that only very young kittens show. What a relief! Gradually its siblings appeared, but they were clearly nervous and not willing to risk playing around. Eventually they retreated to sleep in the interior of their rocky fortress, and we left for camp feeling that kitten photography was going to be much more of a challenge than we expected.

Ogii was keen to return to the same den, as six kittens is not something commonplace with Pallas's Cats, but sadly the afternoon session at the same den was even less rewarding. It took over two hours for a single kitten, or perhaps two different individuals, to appear on either side of the rock pile, and only briefly. What an unexpected introduction!

Well, after that kind of start, I requested that we go to the den with the four topsy-turvy active kittens the next morning, and that changed our fortunes. The whole morning session was amazing, with kittens zooming around, climbing, fighting, tumbling, jumping at annoyingly hovering wheatears, or just peering fearlessly at our hide from the top of the rocks. Even their mother turned up to feed them. What a

difference a day makes, as they say!

Ogii suggested that we try out a new den, also with six kittens, in a different area in the late afternoon, and this time it proved a great choice. The kittens at this den were a bit older and braver and put on a superb show for us, with all six visible simultaneously on top of their rocky pile. In the course of a single day, we had gone from almost zero good shots to hundreds!

After this we never looked back, apart from the next morning when overnight rain had rendered the dirt tracks too slippery to negotiate. Even then things had dried out by lunchtime and our afternoon kitten session was splendid. On no day of the expedition did we record under four Pallas's Cats, whether kittens or adults, and on some days we recorded eleven individuals.

We particularly enjoyed watching the older kittens that had lost their fear of leaving the immediate den site and were busy learning how to stalk prey in the grassy steppe or ambush each other. The 'kitten zooming' was a joy to watch as the mock battles continued apace, and sometimes they came just a few metres from us.

Watching the mothers bring prey to the hungry kittens, or groom or suckle them at the dens was another delight. It was noticeable how unconcerned they were. The mother cats always knew we were there and kept an eye on the screen, but they were generally relaxed about our presence, and we enjoyed some memorable encounters with them and their families.

Summer trips into the eastern Mongolian steppes are rightly dominated by Pallas's Cat encounters, but there was plenty of other wildlife to see. Corsac Foxes were everywhere. We could even see double figures in a day, and sometimes they would stop and watch us rather than race off. The ones around the camp were especially inquisitive and almost fearless. At night, by using a thermal imager, we could watch them hunting cute little Siberian Jerboas and Campbell's Dwarf Hamsters.

The two main prey species for the Pallas's Cats are Brandt's Vole and Mongolian Gerbil, both of which are exceedingly common in the Khalzan region. Not only the cats but also Steppe Eagles, Upland Buzzards, Saker Falcons and Corsac Foxes feast on these easy pickings during summer. The camp itself was alive with Brandt's Voles, which popped into their many holes when we walked about the area, or raced away to some safer spot. Gerbils were less numerous but equally sweet to watch, sometimes 'kissing' each other.

On one occasion we stopped at a rocky gulley where a pair of huge Eurasian Eagle-Owls were nesting. They gave us some great photographic opportunities as they peered at us balefully or flew from rock to rock. At the other end of the scale were the tiny Little Owls that inhabited the same types of rock pile as the Pallas's Cats.

The steppe was home to many larks, including the big Mongolian Lark and the smaller Mongolian Short-toed Lark, while sandy areas with rodent holes provided nesting places for smart little Pere David's Snowfinches.

Wetlands were decidedly limited in the Khalzan area, but damper grasslands were home to elegant black, white and silver-grey Demoiselle Cranes while short grass plains held the uncommon and beautiful Oriental Plover, some of which had tiny, long-legged chicks.

Eventually our week at Khalzan was over, but we returned to Ulaanbaatar more than satisfied and with thousands of images of the kittens, their mothers and other wildlife. That frustrating first day was all but forgotten!

Most of our stay had seen pleasant sunny weather, and our run back to the city was no exception. So we managed to make a stop at the Gun Galuut wetlands where, in addition to the beautiful White-naped Cranes that nest there, we came across no fewer than eleven magnificent oversummering Siberian Cranes and even an unexpected Hooded Crane. At the shores of the main lagoon, where numerous Ruddy Shelducks were showing off their finery, we came across a mixed flock of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Curlew Sandpipers still showing off their chestnut and russet breeding plumage.

Our final stop before a good dinner and our last evening together was at the gigantic Chinggis (Genghis) Khaan statue to the east of the city. A mix of impressive and hideous, the statue towers above the steppes where the Mongol nation came into being and made its mark on history. In the Khalzan steppes, some two hundred generations of Pallas's Cats have walked the land since those glory days...

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' for some other reason.

MAMMALS

Pallas's Cat (Manul) ◊ ***Otocolobus manul***

Corsac Fox ◊ ***Vulpes corsac***

Mongolian Gazelle ◊ ***Procapra gutturosa***

Siberian (or Mongolian Five-toed) Jerboa ◊ ***Orientallactaga sibirica***

Brandt's Vole ***Lasiopodomys brandtii***

Campbell's Dwarf Hamster ◊ ***Phodopus campbelli***

Mongolian Jird (or Mongolian Gerbil) ***Meriones unguiculatus***

BIRDS

Common Shelduck ***Tadorna tadorna***

Ruddy Shelduck ***Tadorna ferruginea***

Common Goldeneye ***Bucephala clangula***

Common Pochard ***Aythya ferina***

Tufted Duck ***Aythya fuligula***

Northern Shoveler ***Spatula clypeata***

Gadwall ***Mareca strepera***

Eurasian Wigeon ***Mareca penelope***

Mallard ***Anas platyrhynchos***

Green-winged Teal ***Anas crecca***

Hill Pigeon ◊ ***Columba rupestris***

Rock Dove (Rock Pigeon) (feral) ***Columba livia***

Eurasian Coot ***Fulica atra***

Siberian Crane ◊ ***Leucogeranus leucogeranus***

White-naped Crane ◊ ***Antigone vipio***

Demoiselle Crane ◊ ***Grus virgo***

Common Crane ***Grus grus***

Hooded Crane ◊ ***Grus monacha***

Black-winged Stilt ***Himantopus himantopus***

Northern Lapwing ***Vanellus vanellus***

Oriental Plover ◊ ***Anarhychus veredus***

Black-tailed Godwit ◊ [Eastern Black-tailed Godwit] ***Limosa [limosa] melanuroides***

Green Sandpiper ***Tringa ochropus***

Wood Sandpiper ***Tringa glareola***

Common Redshank ***Tringa totanus***

Sharp-tailed Sandpipier ◊ ***Calidris acuminata***

Curlew Sandpiper ***Calidris ferruginea***

Gull-billed Tern ***Gelochelidon nilotica***

Black-headed Gull ***Chroicocephalus ridibundus***

Mongolian Gull ◊ ***Larus mongolicus***

Black Stork ***Ciconia nigra***

Fork-tailed Swift ***Apus pacificus***

Common Swift ***Apus apus***

Little Owl ***Athene noctua***

Eurasian Eagle-Owl ***Bubo bubo***

Cinereous (or Eurasian Black) Vulture ***Aegypius monachus***

Steppe Eagle ***Aquila nipalensis***

Golden Eagle ***Aquila chrysaetos***

Black Kite [Black-eared Kite] ***Milvus [migrans] lineatus***

Upland Buzzard ◊ ***Buteo hemilasius***

Common (or Eurasian) Hoopoe ***Upupa epops***

Common Kestrel ***Falco tinnunculus***

Saker Falcon ◊ ***Falco cherrug***

Isabelline Shrike ***Lanius isabellinus***

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

Eurasian Magpie ***Pica pica***

Daurian Jackdaw ◊ ***Coloeus dauuricus***

Rook ◊ [Oriental Rook] ***Corvus [frugilegus] pastinator***

Northern (or Common) Raven ***Corvus corax***

Eurasian Skylark ***Alauda arvensis***

Horned Lark [Mongolian Horned Lark] ◊ ***Eremophila [alpestris] brandti***

Mongolian Short-toed Lark ◊ *Calandrella dukhunensis*

Mongolian Lark ◊ *Melanocorypha mongolica*

Asian Short-toed Lark ◊ *Alaudala cheleensis*

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Siberian House Martin *Delichon lagopodum*

White-cheeked Starling ◊ *Spodiopsar cineraceus*

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

Rock Sparrow (or Rock Petronia) *Petronia petronia*

Pere David's (or Small) Snowfinch ◊ *Pyrgilauda davidiana*

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Blyth's Pipit ◊ *Anthus godlewskii*

Twite *Linaria flavirostris*

Pallas's Reed Bunting ◊ *Emberiza pallasi*