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# A NOTE ON THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS AND THE KAZAKH EAGLE HUNTERS

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**Sailukhand with his hunting Golden Eagle**



**Mongolia lies between Russia to the north and China on the south. The eastern tip of Kazakhstan, shown just above center on the left hand edge of this view, reaches to within 30km/20 mi of Mongolia. Map from Google Earth; a view from a height of 1523 km.**

## **A NOTE ON THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS AND THE KAZAKH EAGLE HUNTERS**

We awoke to stillness - no wind stirring and no morning bird chorus. Then the faint bleat of a goat penetrated the felt walls of our ger followed by the muffled snort of a yak, all sounds expected when camping among Kazakh pastoralists at 2650m/8700ft on the north side of Tsengal KhayrKhab (3943m/12,936') in the Altai Mountains. As a zoologist-naturalist, I was here with a group of nine friends to learn about the natural history of the Altai and to visit with the Kazakh "Eagle People."



**Tsengel peak rises to 3943m/12,936ft in the Mongolian Altai. The very small white dots in the valley below the mountain are the gers of seasonal pastoralists.**

The Mongolian Altai, the highest part of the Altai Mountains, more or less outlines the border between extreme southwest Mongolia and China and is inhabited by resilient Kazakhs and others. At the extreme western tip of Mongolia, where China, Russia and Mongolia meet, and Kazakhstan is only 42km/26mi away, the ridges rise to Tavan Bogd Uul, 4374m/14,350'. From here the Mongolian Altai joins with mountainous terrain in Russia and links, through the Tannu Ola range in southern Tuva, to the highlands around Lake Hovsgol in central north Mongolia.

The lower part of the Altai system, the Gobi Altai, lies in southern Mongolia southeast of the Mongolian Altai; peaks here rise in a disjunct pattern, often creating upland islands surrounded by flat desert. Not many people live in this part of the Altai.



**A *Potentilla* sp. between granite and gneiss at 2740m/8990ft, 23 June 2005.**

By the time we emerged from our gers on the morning of 26th June 2005, the slanting rays of the sun already highlighted our round, white dwellings and the small granite rocks studding the surrounding meadow. Once again we noticed the quiet. No birds sang, no snowcocks called, and no



**Gers near our campsite with sheep, goats, and yaks about. Note solar panel to the left of the far ger. 23 June 2005.**

mountain pigeons flew by. Then the soft, short warble of a Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) drifted across the slope followed by the chirp of a Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*). Little else broke the stillness save the sounds of humans and their domestic animals. This lack of bird activity in late June at our 2650m/8700ft elevation was puzzling; we would have expected at least a mountain finch (*Leucosticte*), or perhaps a few rose finches (*Carpodacus*), or certainly an accentor (*Prunella*). But nothing. Perhaps we were too early in the season or perhaps climatic conditions prevented the necessary food sources from flourishing.

While the avian fauna around camp was disappointing, there were birds in the lower Altai valleys through which we passed on our day's drive from the administrative hub of Ulgii. At one place a male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) hopped about on the ground, feeding, and at another site a female Eurasian Snow Finch (*Montifringilla nivallis*) crammed insects into her beak and flew up the slope, presumably to feed nestlings. In a valley with steep, rocky sides, we spotted two adult Rough-legged Hawks (*Buteo lagopus*) standing guard above a cliff face that held

a nest which looked to harbor at least one chick.

Curiously, even though our camp was at a moderate elevation and not that far north (GPS reading: 48° 40.187' N and 89° 13.122' E), there were no trees around. For that matter, we saw few trees anywhere on our Altai

visit except for varieties cultivated around some settlements. Typical above-the-treeline vegetation, though, covered the ground and early alpine wildflowers were already in bloom including a white phlox, each petal with a notched tip. Also thriving on these slopes were an *Androsace*, the flowers white with a pink flush, a small, yellow *Potentilla*, a pink legume with relatively large flowers, and mats of blue *Myosotis* Forget-Me-Nots. Plants often clustered near the bases of boulders, as the latter likely collected heat and gave protection from the wind. In addition, in this relatively dry region, run-off might concentrate around a boulder's edge where the boulder's shade would assist in soil moisture retention. While we enjoyed seeing the color of the wildflowers, the edible plants of the area, as expected, appeared severely nibbled by the livestock.

Interestingly, only 520km/312mi due south of our camp site and at a latitude of 43° 53' N, the slopes around Tianchi, Xinjiang's Heavenly Lake, are covered with dense stands of spruce that give way to lush carpets of wild flowers at higher elevations. The lake lies on the northern flanks of Bogda Feng at a height of 1910m/6266ft. Nothing like the vegetation of Bogda occurs in the Altai as apparently little moisture reaches here from the south and the high western peaks block precipitation arriving from that direction.

While Bogda is charmingly green and hosts Kazakh-owned herds in summer pastures, it does not harbor folk who hunt with Golden Eagles. In fact, the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), a wide ranging Holarctic bird, is rarely used for hunting outside of the Kazakh terrain of Mongolia and over in adjoining Kazakhstan and Tuva. Besides noting aspects of Altai natural history, we were anxious to learn about eagles.

Using birds of prey for hunting is a time-honored sport that has been practiced for centuries in Asia and was well known in medieval Europe. The activity is also popular among enthusiasts in North America where the falconry "community" may number some 2,500 people (see Bodio, p. 32).



Employing eagles for hunting, though, is exceedingly rare as these birds are heavy and strong and difficult to maintain. Moreover, with their sharp talons and incredible strength in their feet, they can be dangerous to the inattentive.

After poking about the slopes near camp we were welcomed into a nearby ger by pastoralists Sailukhand, his wife, and several of their children. The family and their herd stay in high pastures for most of the summer but otherwise winter down near Saksay Village. Mrs Sailukhand received a medal from the government after the births of her fifth and eighth child.

After hearing about the family while enjoying delicious, yak yogurt, Sailukhand told us about the eagles. Hunting with golden eagles used to be a



**Sailukhand's female Golden Eagle sitting on his arm.**

prestigious way of supplementing one's diet and obtaining fox and other useful mammal skins but today the birds are kept primarily for the honor that comes with owning eagles. Sailukhand told us that these days there

are perhaps 400 eagle hunters in Bayan-Ulgii Province. Birds are taken from nests or net-trapped and female eagles are selected as they are bigger than males and better hunters. Eagles molt in the summer so hunting with them is a winter activity. An eagle is released back into the wild after being with a family for up to ten years. Knowledge of the sport passes from father to son. Sailukhand also kept a Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*), a powerful raptor considerably bigger than a Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) that apparently was used mostly for decoration. However, the bird did afford youngsters a change to handle a raptor lighter than an eagle. In the Altai, hunting with falcons is almost unheard of as it confers little status.



**Sailukhand's grandson with Saker Falcon, *Falco cherrug*.**

After learning about the techniques of raising eagles and hunting with them, we ventured outside and walked over to a partly walled rock



**Sailukhand's eagle in its outdoor "enclosure" where a stone wall partially blocks the wind that blows upslope and from the west.**

enclosure where their eagle sat (when too cold, the eagle is lodged inside the ger) and then watched Sailukhand handle his bird. While with him, we asked whether or not he still saw eagles in the area. He answered that he did and moreover quite frequently. A few moments later, a fully adult Golden appeared from the east, flew overhead, and disappeared towards the west. Later we saw two others and were told that wild eagles around these highest summits feast on many things including the young of both domestic and wild herds, supplemented by hare, marmots and Altai Snowcocks. Pikas (*Ochotona*), a favorite of the Saker, would seem a bit small.

Eagles also live to the east, in the Gobi Altai, and on a previous visit in September, we were intrigued by the sight by a young Golden flying towards us, up a rather narrow valley in the western part of the Yol National Park. When the eagle was almost overhead, a brown blur

launched from the cliffs on our right and swiftly closed on the young bird. The latter squealed in apparent distress, turned swiftly, and shot back down the valley, continuing to shriek, with its nemesis in full pursuit. What might deliberately attack a young eagle? The “menace” turned out to be a fully adult Golden that might have been a parent no longer tolerating offspring within the older bird’s territory. The eagles of the Gobi Altai would appear to have more wild food resources than the Mongolian Altai as both Ibex (*Capra ibex*) and Argali Sheep (*Ovis ammon*) are widespread in these mountains, and thus eagles might be more abundant here than the Mongolian Altai. Golden Eagle densities will be determined by future censuses.

We were unable to reach the famous, high-altitude lakes in this western corner of Mongolia but after leaving our high camp, we did visit beautiful Lake Tolbo at 2074m/6800ft, at the northern base of the range. The lake and its shoreline offered habitat for a number of water-associated birds including Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*), Yellow-legged Gulls (*Larus cachinnans*), and Pallas’s Gulls (*Larus ichthyaetus*). In addition, two Swans (likely *Cygnus cygnus*) on a distant spit fussed with something that we assumed was their nest.



**A Black-throated Loon (*Gavia arctica*) on nest located some 30m/98ft from the shore of Lake Tolbo. 24 June 2005.**



**Lake Tolbo at 2074m/6800ft at the northern base of the Mongolian Altai. Black-throated Loon nest was located some 100m to the right of this view.**

Meanwhile, we were so busy watching two Black-throated Loons (*Gavia arctica*) intermittently diving and surfacing in the choppy, wind-swept water that we paid little attention to a low sand island that rose some 30m/98ft off shore, and did not notice the dark blob of vegetation near the island's left end. Thus we were completely surprised when one of the birds swam towards us, eased onto the island and then onto its nest, all while we watched from relatively close by.

We also found a large marshy delta at the outlet of the lake. This was most unusual as marshes usually form around a lake's inlet. It turned out that another stream, one flowing from the southwest, reaches the main valley just at the lake's outlet and creates the marsh. In addition, one could suggest, that high water in the lake might augment a seasonal marsh effect. We expected to see Demoiselle Cranes in this type of habitat but could not locate any, even with a scope. Later, two cranes drew our attention as they flew along the edge of the green. But that was all.

However, some 10km/6mi north and downstream from the lake, we found nineteen cranes in a area where the braided stream ran slowly through the widened valley.

The Altai Mountains, rising amid wide, dry plains, exhibits a variety of habitats from lakes to dry, rock cliffs, and flower-studded upland meadows that reach to permanent snowfields and these zones create conditions for species that would not otherwise occur in this part of Asia. Besides the wonderful landscapes and the presence of special plants and animals, there are stone pillars, stone burial mounds, and petroglyphs scattered throughout the area that point to a long pre-Mongol history. These features combine to offer considerable ecotourism potential and companies in Ulgii already provide camping arrangements with guides, transport, and ger or tent accommodations. Spending time amid such interesting features, all the while visiting with the eagle people and other Kazakhs, will surely rate high on any list of memorable travels.

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Bodio, Stephen. 2003. *Eagle Dreams: Searching for legends in Wild Mongolia*. Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut. vii+216pp.



**Three distant cranes in the valley downstream from Lake Tolbo.**