

## Russia & Mongolia

From Altai Snowcocks to Henderson's Ground Jays!

No set departure

2018 Tour Price \$ 3.250,-

With Local Leader as leader



*This exciting tour takes us to the one of the most exciting mountain ranges in Central Asia; the Altai Mountains! Siberia is endowed with some of the most fabulous treasures of the natural world, an immense part of Russia which covers no less than 59% of the entire Russian territory and an amazingly 23% of the entire Asian landmass. The Altai Mountains are a mountain range in east Central Asia, where Russia, China, Mongolia and China come together. During this remarkable tour we will visit the southwest of Siberia into the famous Altai Republic and we extend the tour into Mongolia visiting the Mongolian steppes! We combine three amazing ecotypes to get a glimpse of some of the most sought after Central Asian species. We start with the rich farmlands of the South-Siberian lowlands. Going south we move into the rugged peaks of the Altai Mountains with their rare avifauna. Finally, we will reach the steppes of Mongolia. The unique location of the Altai region, as a meeting place of eastern and western Palearctic species, together with the great diversity of habitats created a startling avifaunal diversity.*

*There is a stunning list of very special breeding birds; Bar-headed Goose; Whooper Swan; White-winged Scoter; Red-breasted Merganser; Altai Snowcock; Daurian partridge; Willow Ptarmigan; Arctic Loon; Black Stork; Lammergeyer; Himalayan Griffon; Steppe Eagle; Imperial Eagle; Golden Eagle; Upland Buzzard; Demoiselle Crane; Greater Sand-Plover; Oriental Plover; Eurasian Dotterel; Long-toed Stint; Asian Dowitcher; Swinhoe's Snipe; Pin-tailed Snipe; Relict Gull; Pallas's Gull; Mongolian Gull; Pallas's Sandgrouse; Oriental Turtle-Dove; Oriental Cuckoo; Ural Owl; Pacific Swift; Lesser Kestrel; Saker Falcon; Isabelline Shrike; Turkestan Shrike; Brown Shrike; Mongolian Ground-Jay; Siberian Jay; Red-billed Chough; Yellow-billed Chough; Daurian Jackdaw; Oriental Crow; Mongolian Lark; Greater Short-toed Lark; Lesser Short-toed Lark; Horned lark; Pale Sand Martin; Eurasian Crag-Martin; Gray-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit); Azure Tit; Dusky Warbler; Yellow-browed Warbler; Hume's Warbler; Greenish Warbler; Sulfur-bellied Warbler; Booted Warbler; Paddyfield Warbler; Blyth's Reed Warbler; Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler; Lanceolated Warbler; Asian Desert Warbler; Red-flanked Bluetail; Taiga Flycatcher; Rufous-backed Redstart (Eversmann's Redstart); White-winged Redstart (Güldenstädt's Redstart); Eastern Black Redstart; Siberian Stonechat; Pied Wheatear; Desert Wheatear; Isabelline Wheatear; Black-Throated thrush; Red-throated Thrush; White's Thrush; Siberian Thrush; Rosy Starling; Himalayan Accentor; Brown Accentor; Black-throated Accentor; Mongolian Accentor; Citrine Wagtail; Masked White Wagtail; Richard's Pipit; Olive-backed Pipit; Pine Bunting; Godlewski's Bunting; Meadow Bunting; Grey-hooded Bunting; Yellow-breasted Bunting; Plain Mountain Finch; Asian Rosy Finch; Brandt's Mountain Finch; Mongolian Finch; Pine Grosbeak; Pallas's Rosefinch; Great Rosefinch; Long-tailed Rosefinch; Twite; Rock Petronia; White-winged Snowfinch; Pere David's Snowfinch; Not to mention some really interesting mammals like Siberian Ibex, Altai Argali, Daurian, Alpine and Pallas's Pika, Mongolian Gerbil, Stoat, lesser Weasel, Beech Marten!*

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◦ website [www.rubythroatbirding.com](http://www.rubythroatbirding.com) ◦ contact [machiel@rubythroatbirding.com](mailto:machiel@rubythroatbirding.com) ◦

THE LEADING BIRD TOUR OPERATOR FOR CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA

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*However, not so many birders have been here because of the wilderness of the area. RBT operated its first and highly successful tour to the Russian-Mongolian Altai in 2009 and now we invite you to join us again to this mighty region. We are sure that participants will be delighted with this extraordinary Altai Mountains experience.*

**June 15, Days 1: To Barnaul**

The tour starts with an international flight from home taking you firstly to the capital of Russia, Moscow, followed by a domestic flight which will bring you to Barnaul, the largest city in the Altai region. Clients need to be in Barnaul before June 16 - 8am! If you like to come in earlier please contact the RBT office this will gladly help you with extra hotel arrangements.

NIGHT: Day 0, on aircraft.

**June 16, Day 2: Barnaul to Seminskiy pass**

After arriving early morning on the Barnaul Airport you will meet up with your RBT tour-leader, Elena Shnayder, who will lead you during this birdwatching holiday. We will leave Barnaul and take a long drive over the Chuy Highway to the Seminsky pass (395 km). Seminsky pass is the highest point of the Chuy highway; it reaches 1717 meters above sea level. After arrival, we'll have an evening excursion at the slopes of mount Vershiina Tiyakhtii. We will get looks of the common species of the Siberian boreal coniferous forest such as: Ural Owl, Spotted Nutcracker, *brandtii* Common Jay, Eversmann's Redstart, Willow Tit, *sayanus* Siberian Tit, Crested-honey Buzzard, Swinhoe's and Pin-tailed Snipes, Olive-backed Pipit, Altai Accentor, Black-throated Accentor, Hume's and Dusky Warblers, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail and many lovely Black-throated Thrushes. The big target bird for Seminsky is one of the most illustrious rosefinches of Asia; the Pallas's Rosefinch!

NIGHT: Wooden lodges at Seminsky.

**June 17, Day 3: Seminskiy Pass to Tuyariik**

We start with some early birding before breakfast at Seminsky where we hope to see more of the previously mentioned species. After breakfast we will depart towards Tiid-Tujariik valley located in the Chuya Steppe. Birding en route we look out for: Hill Pigeon, Pale Sand Martin, Rosy Starling, Daurian Jackdaw, Isabelline Wheatear, Eastern Goldfinch, Godlewski's Bunting, Siberian Meadow Bunting, Saker and the gorgeous Demoiselle Crane. We will drive through Chicke-Taman pass (1295 m) with a stop at the observation point. Here we could hear the amazing song of the Siberian Blue Robin also sightings could include more Red-flanked Bluetail and Dusky warblers. Along the road, we will see several great cliffs inhabited by Eurasian Crag Martins and Lesser Kestrels. In the village Aqtash we will make a stop to get our permission to visit the border zones with Mongolia. As to quote Dostoevsky 'you get nowhere in Russia without documents'. We could also make short stops during the way to make it possible to watch different kinds of birds near the road including raptors perching on the telegraph poles (lots of Imperial and Steppe Eagles, Saker and Peregrine Falcons). At the evening we will arrive to the yurt camp near Tiid-Tujariik River.

NIGHT: Yurt camp in Tujariik.

#### **June 18, Day 4: Beltir**

Today we'll have a long drive through the Chuya Steppe to the ruins at Beltir village and further into the mountains. Along the road we will make stops at several areas to watch Booted and Barred Warblers, Greater Sand Plovers, Red-billed Choughs, Pied and Isabelline Wheatears, Horned and Greater Short-toed larks, Rock Petronias, Pere David's Snowfinches and Desert Wheatears. Lunch will be served in the fields near a colony of wise Pere David's Snowfinches. Beltir village is nearly abandoned after a disruptive earthquake in 2003, and a lot of birds inhabit empty barns and houses. This area is a good place for Eastern Black Redstart, Brown Accentor, Pied Wheatear, Twite and Red-billed Chough. Our destination point in the mountains is situated at the altitude of 2205 meters, which is 260 meters higher than Beltir. Target birds of this area are White-winged Snowfinch, Brown and Altai Accentors, Golden Eagles and Upland Buzzards. Today in the steppe areas we could also meet: Black Stork, Demoiselle Crane, Steppe Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Isabelline Shrike, Brown Shrike, Rosy Starling, Daurian Jackdaw, Alpine Chough, Pallas' Sandgrouse, Horned Lark, Richard's Pipit and unreal Mongolian Finches.

NIGHT: Yurt camp in Tujariik.

#### **June 19, Day 5: Tabozhok: in search of Altai Snowcocks**

Early in the morning we'll make drive to the mountain Tabozhok along the Tabozhok river valley. Here we could find White-winged Redstarts, Crag Martins, Brown and Himalayan Accentors, Plain and Brandt's Mountain Finches, Great Spotted Rosefinch and Lammergeyer could be easily seen. Altai Snowcocks could be also heard or even seen from the bottom of the valley. Those who are ready to climb higher could make a safe but long ascend to the top of the ridge to have a close look at the Snowcocks and other high-altitude species. The other slope of the valley covered in the Larch forest inhabited with Red-throated Thrushes, Rufous-backed Redstarts, Hume's and Greenish Warblers. In the afternoon we bird in the marshy areas in the former riverbed of the Chuya River not far from the campsite. Here we could find Whooper Swan, Smew, Goldeneye, Scops Owl, Rufous-Tailed Rock thrush, Azure Tit, Long-tailed Rosefinch and also White-crowned Penduline Tit.

NIGHT: Yurt camp in Tujariik.

#### **June 20, Day 6: Tujariik to Kindiiktiikul**

Today we transfer to the high-altitude lake Kindiiktiikul. In the morning, before we leave, we will do a survey of bushy area near the Tujariik River and swampy plains near Kosh-Agach. Here we could easily find Long-tailed Rosefinches, Azure Tits, Taiga Flycatcher, Yellow-browed Warbler and Blyth's Reed Warbler. Then we will move further to the lake. The translation of Kindiiktiikul in the Altai language means "lake with the navel"; the lake really possesses a small island in the middle full of nests of Mongolian Gulls and Willow Grouses. Here we could also find more Whooper Swans, Arctic Loons, Bar-headed Goose, White-winged Scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers, Yellow-billed Choughs, Horned Larks and Citrine Wagtails. Along the road we meet next to interesting raptors such as Lammergeyer, Black Vultures, Golden and Steppe Eagles, but also flock with Pallas's Sandgrouses. After attaining the lake, and setting up our first tent camp, we will have some birding in the neighboring area while our staff sets up our tent camp.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

### **June 21, Day 7: Nariin-Gol valley**

Today we'll have a walk along the Nariin-Gol River to the three lakes situated near the Bogutii Mountain range. Our aims for today are finches: Plain Mountain finch, Brandt's Mountain Finch, Asian Rosy Finch and *kobsensis* Spotted Great Rosefinch. We could also meet Rock Ptarmigan, Siberian Stonechat, Sulfur-bellied Warbler, Blyth's Pipit, Himalayan Accentor, Brown Accentor, Gldenstdt's Redstart and more Twite's. Even Altai Snowcock could cross our ways. At the evening we return to our camp and spend our last night in Russia before moving to Mongolia.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

### **June 22, Day 8: Border crossing to Mongolia**

Today we need to do our best to depart from Kindiiktiikul as early as possible to reach the border before the queue. However, the estimated time to cross the border is nearly 7 hours! There would be not so much time for birding today. However, while waiting for our turn we could do a bit of birding near the border which could yield us several common species such as Red-billed Choughs, Little Ringed Plovers, Hill Pigeons, Brown Accentors, Northern-, Pied- and Isabelline Wheatears and some raptors. After crossing we drive east towards Achit-Nuur. But the first night we would spend in the semi-desert rocky plains before the lake. These plains are perfect habitat for the illustrious Mongolian Ground Jay and the next morning would be fully devoted to this bird.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

### **June 23, Day 9: Henderson's Ground Jay and Achit-Nuur**

From the dawn on we are going to scan the surroundings for the Ground Jay. In the same area we could also see big flocks of Pallas's Sandgrouses, Daurian Partridges, Greater Short-toed Larks, Barred Warblers, Isabelline- and Brown Shrikes, Rock Petronias, Mongolian Finches. The difference in habitat really has its affect on the avifauna we encounter. After breakfast we continue the drive to the Lake Achit-Nuur. Here in the swampy areas thrilling amounts of waders and ducks are breeding. The most interesting among them are for sure stunning red Asian Dowitcher and elegant Long-toed Stint. Here we are also in search of the mighty Pallas's Sea Eagle, Little Crake, Pallas's Gull, and Lesser Short-toed Lark. The other side of the lake is covered with huge reed beds which are surrounded by rocky hills. Here we will place our camp to stay overnight. Our neighbors would be Savi's Warbler, Paddyfield Warblers, Great Reed Warblers, *halimodendri* Lesser Whitethroats, Bearded Reedlings, Thick-billed Reed Buntings, Pallas's Reed Buntings and Grey-necked Buntings.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

### **June 24, Day 10: Achit-Nuur – Khar-Us-Nuur**

After early birding at the lake Achit-Nuur we continue our journey after breakfast. Today we have to surmount 200 km of bad road and to cross the Shovergol River finally arriving in the evening at our destination at Lake Khar-Us-Nuur. "Khar-Us" in Mongolian means "black water", the water in fact is dark because of the presence of organic compounds and plankton in high amounts, therefore the lake is abundant with fish. While birding en route stopping at gorgeous lakes abundant with

waterfowl such as grebes, egrets and herons, swans, ducks and avocets. In the evening we arrive at Har-Us-Nuur lake. Here we could find our first Mongolian Larks!

NIGHT: Tent camp.

**June 25, Day 11: Round trip to the salty lake north from Khar-Us-Nuur**

We start with birding in the nearby hills finding Asian Desert Warblers, Isabelline Shrikes, Desert Wheatears, and the famous Kozlov's Accentor. Close to the water we could see Greater- and Lesser Sand Plovers, Terek Sandpipers and more Asian Dowitchers. On the lake itself Swan Goose, Bar-headed Goose, White-winged Scoter and the rare Relict Gulls are foraging. We also find great numbers of Pacific Swifts and Rose-coloured Starlings in the area. Another target is found not far from our camp; the dazzling Oriental Plover! At this perfect steppe habitat we could also find more Upland Buzzards, Kentish Plovers, Lesser Sand Plovers, Long-Toed Stints, Pallas's and Relict Gulls, Pallas's Sandgrouse, big flocks of Demoiselle Cranes and even more Henderson's Ground Jays. After birding at the salt lake we will drive back to the camp at Khar-Us-Nuur.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

**June 26, Day 12: Khar-Us-Nuur – Tsagaan-Nuur**

Today will be a day of driving back towards the Mongolian-Russian border. In the best case today we would reach lake Tsagaan-Nuur – the closest lake to the border. Here we could find Arctic Loon, Whooper Swan, different ducks, Terek Sandpiper and Red-Headed Bunting.

NIGHT: Tent camp.

**June 27, Day 13: Border crossing to Russia**

This day we have to do the border-crossing again. The idea is to line up at the customs as early as possible, but again it could take up to 7 hours. At the Russian side we will come back to the good old “Tujariik” yurt camping. There you can either have a rest or visit a lovely Poplar grove in the neighborhood for some birding. The famous Russian sauna is waiting for us after dinner.

NIGHT: Yurta camp

**June 28, Day 14: Aqtash village.**

We spend this day finding possible missed species during our previous visit. In other case we can do some birding near Uzunkyol Lake and Katu-Jariik pass where we can find Booted Eagle, Siberian Thrushes, Red-throated Thrushes and the mysterious Siberian Jay.

NIGHT: Wooden lodges near Aqtash

**June 29, Day 15: Back to Seminskiy**

Today we transfer back to Seminskiy pass. Our route would be the same as the one we took to get to the Chuja Steppe. On the way back we would spend more time birding at Belyi Bom looking again for Godlewski-, Meadow- and Pine Buntings, Pied Wheatear, Siberian Stonechat, and Goldfinches of the *subulata* race. And take a short walk at the Chike-Taman Pass searching for Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Blue Robin, Oriental Cuckoo, Greenish-, Hume's- and Blyth's Reed Warblers. During the drive we expect to see loads of raptors such as Lesser Kestrels, Upland Buzzards,

Imperial- and Steppe Eagles and Saker Falcons. We will also have enough time to make an evening birding in the coniferous forest on the slopes of Tiyakhtii Mountain at Seminskiy. Here we can go after a species like Pallas's Rosefinch once more. Also Swinhoe's Snipes are known to display on the fields nearby the lodges.

NIGHT: Wooden lodges at Seminsky.

**June 30, Day 16: Seminskiy to Barnaul.**

Here is the last day of our birdwatching adventure. After early morning departure from Seminskiy pass and 7-8 hours on road we will reach Barnaul in the late afternoon. Here in Barnaul we will make our last birding trip, to the flooded plains of the mighty River Ob to have a look at Oriental Turtle Dove and Yellow-breasted Bunting. Before saying goodbye tonight we enjoy a final dinner before flying back home to Europe.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel

**July 1, Day 17: Barnaul to home.**

In the morning we depart for the Barnaul airport where we say goodbye to each other and from where you fly home.

**\*\* The tour schedule depends closely on weather conditions, which may change the itinerary listed. If so, the itinerary will be altered, with all of the special regions still being visited.**