

Nr. 6 | April 2017

Understanding the Mongolian Steppe.

In the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area, the future of endangered species – such as the takhi and the saxaul bush – is linked closely to that of the nomads using the same habitat with their domestic camels, sheep and goats. Many questions about steppe ecology are still awaiting valid answers.



Protect the Wild Horse
and its Habitat.

25 years
of reintroduction

Photo: Václav Silha, © Prague Zoo, 2016

Dear friends of the Wild Horse



This year marks the 25th anniversary of the return of the Wild Horse (mongol. Takhi) to its final home! Over this past quarter of a century, thaki were at the centre of the efforts of the "International Takhi Group". To rescue a big game species right before its definitive extinction and then reintroduce it successfully in its original habitat is a spectacular, unparalleled achievement of conservation. We take great pride in it – and as a supporter of our efforts, we trust you feel the same way.

But it's about more than conserving one species. We would like to understand and document the interdependencies of the Gobi ecosystem. Over the past 20 years, wildlife biologists and our rangers have shed a lot of light onto the Mongolian steppe ecology. Countless hours they spent in all kinds of weather using scientific methods, patient observation and meticulous monitoring. Would you have believed that our rangers, using just their binoculars, are able to identify by name each Takhi in the park? Their great commitment is indispensable to investigate and protect the ecosystem.

Many practical questions related to the reintroduction of the Takhi, never before answered, were researched in this way – including anaesthesia and safe transportation of Wild Horses, their social structure in the wild, feeding ecology, spatial use, reproductive success,

diseases and parasites. Other species were also investigated, notably the Khulan (Asian wild ass), the extremely shy wolves, rodents and raptors, as well as the seasonal use of the park by nomads and their herds. A vegetation map was another requirement, and the entire reserve was digitally mapped for the first time.

However, countless questions remain unanswered – including quite basic ones, e.g. the seasonal use of springs by various game species and the quality of the water there; or how Goitered Gazelles live; the intensity of competition for scanty pastures between growing herds of domestic animals and game; and how climate change affects the Mongolian steppe.

To answer such questions, we have to keep the entire system in mind and must not forget the local population either. And we have to continue conducting research, for effective conservation must be fact-based, and research projects with committed scientists and their infrastructure decisively support the overall development of our project. That's why we stay at it. Will you help us to find the answers?

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Reinhard Schnidrig".

Dr. Reinhard Schnidrig, President of the ITG



Photo: © Chris Walzer

25 years of Takhi rebirth



The cultural history of mankind without horses? Unthinkable. The history of Mongols without armies on horseback? Likewise. Still, the archetype of our domestic horses was exterminated, and a single species of Wild Horse has survived – just barely – until now: the Takhi. Yet it took a few determined visionaries to spare us this irrevocable loss – and the shame of having wiped out each and every ancestor of our most important companion in cultural history.

Today, hopefully, we have understood better that the Wild Horse belongs with us. Not only for the Mongols, this charismatic, wild creature embodies the untamable “steppe spirit” without which the Gobi would no longer be the Gobi. For 30 long years it was but a memory. Yet since a quarter century – one generation – Takhi again gallop through their former home. They are a gift to mankind, but also an exhortation on how fast species can be lost forever, and how costly it is to save them at the last minute.

This year we celebrate 25 years of return of the Takhi to the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area. For the jubilee, the famous Mongolian rock band HURD was inspired to write a beautiful ballad about the return of the Takhi into the vast spaces of Mongolia. Fredy Naef, Head of Chinggis Brewery in Ulaanbaatar and a long-term engaged donor of ITG, contracted the song. At Blue Moon Gallery in Ulaanbaatar we will display the beauty and natural wealth of Mongolia from Friday 14th to Thursday 20th April 2017. Documentaries about the reintroduction and the best pictures from 25 years of conservation work in Takhin Tal will illustrate the importance of preserving this unique heritage for coming generations.

ITG feels honoured to welcome at the opening ceremony on 14 April, at 17:00, the Mongolian Minister of Environment, Tourism and Green Development, H.E. Dalamsuren Oyunkhorol, and the Consul General of Switzerland, Gabriella Spirli.

The pictures, which subsequently will be shown in further Mongolian cities, can be purchased. The proceeds will contribute to connecting the new well in Takhin Tal with the ranger camp. Blue Moon Gallery is opened daily from 08:00 am - 11:00 pm.

Photo Exhibition

Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the return of the Takhi to Great Gobi B SPA

Blue Moon Gallery (Blue Mon Building)

Opening Ceremony Fri. 14.4.2017, 17:00

Opening speeches by:

H.E. Dalamsuren Oyunkhorol

Minister of Environment, Tourism and Green Development

Gabriella Spirli

Consul General of Switzerland

Exhibition Sat 15 - Thu 20 April 2017

Open daily 08:00 am - 11:00 pm

„Work you like is never hard!“

Interview with a conservationist: Senior Ranger G. Nisehhuu*

(*pronounce: Neeshu)

By Mirjam Wuersch, lic. phil. nat.

Senior Ranger Nisehhuu (52) has been working in the Great Gobi B SPA since 1994. He is responsible for the western part of the Strictly Protected Area, including the western Takhi population around Takhin Us.

ITG: Nisehhuu, what is your daily work as Senior Ranger in the western part of the Great Gobi B SPA?

Nisehhuu: I have two main duties. One is conservation work, which means to check the area and look out for illegal hunters and Ninjas searching for gold. I note the rules they broke, calculate the ecological damage they did to wildlife, and explain the rules to them. Then I lead them out of the park and send the notes to the police.

Then there are the Takhi! I go out into the park 2-3 times a week and sometimes stay overnight. I fill in a list with all the Takhi I see and take notes of their behaviour, their home range and harem structures. Especially in springtime, there is a lot going on in the groups, and I have to carefully watch all the movements. Then this list is sent to the deputy director Agi who does all the analytical work. After that the director of the Great Gobi B SPA, Ganbaatar, writes reports to ITG, researchers and the ministry.

ITG: It must be a hard job, going out into the steppe in winter, when the temperature drops below -30°C, in summer, when it is hot, or in late spring, the horsefly season.

Nisehhuu: No! Absolutely not. I love my horses and when you do like your work, it is never hard. I love my job and I am proud to be part of the Great Gobi B team who does such valuable work.

ITG: How did you become a ranger?

Nisehhuu: After high school I decided not to go to university but to join the army of Mongolia. Music has always played an important role in my family, therefore I got a job as musician in the army. After three years of serving, they would not let me go, so I continued as an army musician and music teacher.

After the collapse of the Sovjet Union and the economical breakdown in 1989, it was really difficult to get a job in Mongolia. My parents advised me to come home to Altai of Khovd. I then worked as a herder with my family with our own livestock for two years, additionally supporting locals with nature conservation work as a volunteer ranger. In 1994, I heard about a job vacancy in the Great Gobi B SPA, and ever since I have been working as a ranger. I have worked for the state of Mongolia for 34 years, 22 of which I spent in the Great Gobi B.

ITG: I heard you singing and playing the flute – it is always an honour to listen to you. Did you take lessons? I even heard that you once built your own flute.

Nisehhuu: Yes, I started playing instruments when I was in third class, and this helped me to be an army musician later on, where I improved it a lot more.

The flute I built was just for fun. When ITG built the National Park house I took a piece of PVC tube for the cables and started to drill holes into it. It worked out quite fine, so that I took the chance to play the self-made instrument to give a concert at the following conference.



Photo: © Enksaikhan Namtar

ITG: Have there been lots of changes since you started working as a ranger in 1994?

Nisehhuu: When I started, there were only a few horses in the fences at Takhin Tal, and the National Park Centre was in a railway wagon. Back then I was not much involved in Takhi work, except helping out during transports. My work completely changed when the first horses arrived in the western part of the Great Gobi B in 2005 – I started my second job as a Takhi Ranger, and I was collaborating a lot more with researchers and international groups. I also had to organize the wildlife monitoring in the western part of the SPA. At first I defined the survey roads because I knew this area best. In 1994, I used a motorbike for this work, and only in 2005 I received my first jeep. We also built the ranger cabin at Takhin Us, which allows us to stay more easily overnight in the steppe.

ITG: You had some very bad winters in the past, how did this change your work?

Nisehhuu: Yes, there was lots of work during those Dzud¹ winters in 1997/98, 2000/01, 2009/10. In 2009/10 we had to bring out hay for the animals and check them daily. Fortunately, the western Takhi population was not affected so much by the last, really strong Dzud, so we only lost one horse. We are very thankful to the international help from ITG and other donors which we were receiving during those days. It allowed us to react fast and support the Takhi population well. Although it was tough times, we learned a lot about taking care of the horses, and this will help us in our future work.

In contrast, we keep facing problems with financing cars, gasoline, infrastructure and equipment, but we really do the job with our heart, so this can't stop us.

¹ Dzud = very severe winter, often claiming the lives of millions of domestic animals

ITG: What do the locals think about the Takhi?

Nisehhuu: When in 2005 the first Takhi were brought to Takhin Us, I went to places like the school, Sum² administration, cultural centre, hospital and Sum kindergarten to tell them the big news. „Hey, there will be Takhi coming back to our area, we can be very proud of that.“

² Sum = District, County

Most of the locals were very positive towards the Takhi and wanted to help wherever they could. Some wanted to see the Takhi and give names to the new-borns, so I had the opportunity to go out with them in their cars, using their gasoline at times in which we were quite short of these things. This promotion also brought us some local sponsors like the Audit company of Tserenchimed and Hurs company represented by Gantulga and many others. We named one Takhi „Audit“ after the respective sponsor. During the winter of 2009/10 they provided us with gasoline and trucks to bring hay and gasoline to the region – an essential support for us and a gratifying experience.

ITG: When we drive into Gobi B with you, it always impresses me how you can spot Takhi where we don't see any animal. Does this come from your experience as a herder or did you have to learn it?

Nisehhuu: Well, that is learning by doing. I really cannot explain you how I find them, it must be the result of 20 years of experience. During the first year I had to get to know their behaviour and watch them carefully. By now, I know where I have to go when I don't find a group in the expected place. It is kind of trying to feel like the horses. But this is a skill a lot of herders have. The difference for us is that we have really good equipment like spotting scopes, cars and GPS donated by ITG, Prague zoo and other generous donors like the Jean-Pierre and Sonja Siegfried foundation, for example.

ITG: There are now 167 Takhi in the Gobi B area. Is there a Takhi which you like most?

Nisehhuu: Oh yes – and you had chosen its picture for the front page of the penultimate Takhi Post. It is Zur, the lead mare of a Takhin Us harem group. During the Dzud winter of 2009/10 I tried to feed the Takhi with hay to help them survive in these harsh conditions. But we were not able to drive close to the Takhi because there was too much snow. So I grabbed some hay and tried to get near them on foot. Zur was watching me and slowly approached but then stopped. So I showed her the hay, put it on the ground, and she approached again and finally started to eat it. If the lead mare does something, the others will follow – it's always good to be good friends with the lead mare! This way she helped me to support her group through that winter. I would say, she is my very best collaborator!

ITG: What wish or vision do you have for the future of the Takhi and for yourself?

Nisehhuu: After I retire, I imagine myself driving out to the steppe with my grandchildren and their own children and showing them the great nature and hundreds, maybe thousands of Takhi roaming the Great Gobi B, like the Khulan do. And then I will tell them: „I was part of this quest, I was involved in the reintroduction of this precious horse to its home country“. And I will be a very proud man!

All given names in Mongolia have a special meaning

Nisehhuu's mother was a famous singer of the Khovd aimag. When she was due to give birth to him, she was on her way back from a concert in Ulaanbaatar. Shortly before arriving at Khovd airport, Nisehhuu did not want to wait longer – he was born in the plane just before landing. Thus, his parents named him Nisehhuu: „born in the air“. His friends in Takhin Tal even sometimes call him „spaceboy“.

Research to protect

Without the facts, conservation cannot be effective. An optimal management of protected areas requires reliable data and a comprehensive, long-term perspective. However, for many questions answers are missing. To identify the most urgent issues, representatives of the International Takhi Group (ITG), the Great Gobi B SPA and Mongolian as well as European Wildlife Research convened in Switzerland in late February. They met to discuss and prioritise research proposals for the coming years, as research remains a key mission of ITG.

Prof. Chris Walzer and Dr. Petra Kaczensky of the Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology (FIWI) of Vienna University presented a wealth of insights gained by their teams over the past 20 years.

Thereafter, the participants presented no less than 53 research ideas, from which they picked those dedicated to the most urgent and critical questions. This includes themes such as camera trap based analysis of the fauna's seasonal use of water points in the park; basic research on the little studied Mongolian Goitered or Yarkand Gazelle; investigations of the gene flow in the Takhi population; and a socio-economic study of the local population facing a profound cultural transition.

The participants finally agreed on 9 research topics which shall be studied over the next few years. Following a preliminary discussion of research questions, responsibilities and potential funding sources, project details now have to be defined.

The participants also decided to form an ITG Research Council, which under the chairmanship of Dr. Kaczensky shall advise the implementation of research projects in the Great Gobi B SPA.



Photo: Anita Fahrni

The working party discussing research proposals.

Species portrait: Five to Twelve for the Siberian Marmot

Marmots are familiar to Swiss readers of Takhi Post, as they are common in the Alps. Marmot families habituated to tourists are favourite photo subjects for their cute looks and behaviour. The sister species *Marmota sibirica* – ‚Mongolian Marmot‘ would seem more fitting, as it primarily occurs in Mongolia – is a bit blonder. It, too, is most popular – albeit as meal and fur-bearer. Its populations in Mongolia have diminished by over 70% (!) in just 10 years¹ and continue to dwindle rapidly – despite the species being protected. Since factually no effective protection measures have been taken, it is enlisted as Endangered on IUCN's Red List, both in Mongolia and in Russia.

The reason for its population crash is uncontrolled, excessive poaching using precise, far-ranging guns. Today's legal hunting quota is exceeded more than threefold. In Mongolia, marmot meat is considered a gourmet food. Yet live marmots could be much more valuable than their meat, even economically, as they could be prime tourist attractions. Ecologically, the devastating poaching is catastrophic, as marmots are a keystone species of the steppes, semi-deserts and mountain pastures they inhabit. Their extermination thus also hits the carnivore and raptor populations hard.

As a grazer and browser, the marmot shapes mountain pastures and steppes. September to April it spends hibernating in family groups. Its body temperature drops to 5-6°C. Yet every two weeks, all individuals in the den's nesting chamber simultaneously arouse, warming up to 36°C and consuming huge amounts of energy in the process. If there are young in the den, their parents and elder siblings maintain a body temperature elevated by another 4°C, keep the young in the middle and warm them through extra arousals². Without this mutual warming, the young stand no chance of surviving winter. Therefore, killing parents commonly kills the entire family, too.

The uncontrolled overhunting shows that protecting a species in isolation is not enough. An ecosystem is more than its most conspicuous representatives: exterminating key-stone species destroys entire communities of life forms. More research on the Siberian Marmot's population trends is urgently needed. Communities should protect its denning sites, and poaching should be outlawed. Already, relocations and reintroductions should be considered. For the clock tolls five to twelve for the Siberian Marmot. Who is watching it, as did the saviours of the Takhi?

¹Batbold 2002, ²Arnold W, Heldmaier G 1992



The Siberian Marmot, which occurs mainly in Mongolia, is being poached so heavily that its headcount has dropped by more than 70% (!) in just 10 years – despite its protected status on paper. It is now enlisted as Endangered on the IUCN's Red List. This marmot in the Great Gobi B national park is being observed by ranger Alaa.



Mongolia Trip 16th August – 2nd September 2017

Visit the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area and other thrilling places in Mongolia! Your guide will be Mirjam Wuersch, M. Sc., biologist and Member of the ITG Board. For information and booking please contact **Kira Reisen**, Schwimmbadstrasse 1, CH-5210 Windisch, Switzerland.
Tel. (+41) (0)56 200 19 00 (09:00-18:00 non-stop), info [at] kiratravel.ch.

A teacher in Takhin Tal: On volunteer's mission for ITG

The retired Swiss teacher Uli Rutz spent four weeks, from 13 Mai to 18 June 2016, in the Great Gobi B national park centre located in Takhin Tal, offering an English language course to rangers and schoolchildren. It was an unforgettable experience for both sides. Uli Rutz explains how it all came about.

By Uli Rutz

An acquaintance's note with Anita Fahrni's¹ address was the starting point. Something new: Mongolia, English teaching instead of being a mere tourist, experiencing the remote steppe, having time for different activities as a retired teacher. These might be reasons why I'm here in Takhin Tal. To be honest, I don't really know why, it somehow just happened.

My stay in Takhin Tal was marvellous. Ganbaa² and his team really took care of me. I could rely on them from the very beginning, from being picked up at the airport in Ulaanbaatar by Saikhanaa³, then by a ranger in the province's capital Khovd, and finally in Altai village by Altansukh 'Agii' Nanjid⁴, one of the two persons who beside Ganbaatar could communicate in English. Friendly people, partly extra food prepared by cook Tungaa, my own ger: all this made me feel very wonderful and welcome.

It took too long to start my English lessons at the ranger camp, which was a bit disappointing. However, with the many lessons given in the last week I'm absolutely happy and satisfied. The rangers were very interested and studied with zeal. In addition, I could teach all the classes at the school in the district's principal town, Bugat, for 2½ days. The weather in Bugat was bitterly cold, the dormitory the same, but the contact to the students gave me all warmth I missed.

The rangers invited me to participate in their regular work: observing and counting horses of the wild harems, counting foals and trying to determine their sex. Every observation is meticulously written down. I was impressed by their patience in observing the harems. Several times we returned to the camp late in the evening. Several times stallions or mares ran off into unprotected areas. Once we had to chase a mare back to the park over a distance of more than ten kilometres. Once we had to catch one which had joined a domestic harem near the Chinese border.

A special task was building a fence in Takhin Us, a hard job because of the hot weather and the many mosquitoes and horseflies. Life in Takhin Us was very basic. The rangers slept on the roof of the tiny cabin, which was kitchen and dining room at the same time. They worked hard but also had a lot of fun together. Their attitude to life is different. Inconveniences, a broken-down car or getting stuck, a broken hammer or drill: those problems never changed their optimistic mood. Is it a fatalistic view or do they just know that life can only be planned to a certain extent? Program changes were as natural as their tea with the daily meals.

Ganbaa again and again took time for a chat with me. This was important as I couldn't understand the conversation. Mongolian is extremely difficult. I'm still not able to distinguish the different sounds created, the words are very long and I couldn't rely on written guidance. Learning this language would have been beyond my ability.

But getting to know the rangers' families confirmed what I had read about Mongolian hospitality: it's unbeatable. Life in Takhin Tal is basic, but after the short stay in even more remote Takhin Us, the ranger camp in Takhin Tal was luxury to me, like coming home. I enjoyed my time and my teaching there completely.



Photo: © Uli Rutz

Top: Uli Rutz (standing) gives an English lesson.

Bottom: Break snack at the field camp following hard fencing work.

¹ Member of the ITG Board

² Oyunsaikhan Ganbaatar, Director of the Great Gobi B SPA

³ Enksaikhan Namtar, Director of the ITG Office in Mongolia

⁴ Senior ranger and Deputy Director of the Great Gobi B SPA

What we need your help for

Conservation work is not always spectacular. However, routine jobs in the background make a project successful. Our examples show how much you can achieve with your contribution. Each donation is valuable and most welcome.



Photo: Peter Kistler

CHF 20.-

You pay a ranger his daily salary and for the use of his material.



Photo: Peter Kistler

CHF 60.-

You fill the gasoline tank of a patrol vehicle.



Photo: © Mirjam Wuersch

CHF 100.-

You contribute to the maintenance and repair of heavily strained patrol vehicles.



Photo: Václav Silha, © Prague Zoo

CHF 150.-

You contribute to building the tubing of the new drill hole and connecting it to the Takhin Tal park centre.



Photo: © Uli Rutz

CHF 250.-

You enable the replacement of defunct fencing of accommodation enclosures.



Photo: © Petra Kaczinsky

CHF 500.-

You make an important contribution to monitoring headcounts of Khulan and goitered/Yarkand gazelle.

ITG works in an honorary capacity. Each donation is used directly for protecting the primordial Wild Horse.

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- Membership for private persons **CHF 50.-**
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