

Three hours out from Ulaanbaatar, the furgon (the ubiquitous Russian-made vans dating as far back as the 70's) finally careens to a stop in front of a ger camp (a collection of the traditional Mongolian circular tent dwellings). Since arriving at Chinggis Khaan International Airport, I've been carted around with 20-kilo bags of potatoes and onions, a keg of Chinggis draft beer, assorted groceries, toilet paper, what looks like a pile of sheepskin, and 6 other people over the series of ruts, washboards, and crevasses that constitute the main road. We've arrived at Hustai National Park's Tourist Resort, situated in a shallow valley of startling green cut by three dirt roads meandering into various hills and eventually, the main road. The tourist camp sits at Hustai's north gate, housing researchers, staff, students, tourists, and ecovolunteers interested in seeing the endangered *takhi*, or Przewalski's horses (the last true wild horses). Ten kilometres south, a squat concrete building known as the Research Center houses a few offices, a copier, and a ping-pong table. Other than these two sites and a smattering of gers owned by the park rangers, Hustai is 50 hectares of open steppe, sparse birch forest, and rocky mountain slopes sustaining a huge variety of threatened species including raptors, wolves, corsac foxes, takhi, marmots, mountain sheep, gazelles, and many others.

My research in Hustai focused on the Amur falcons, a raptor that spends its summer breeding season in Central to Eastern Mongolia before migrating to South Africa for the winter. While the project was set up with Professor Sundeв Gombobaatar at the National University of Mongolia, my direct supervisor was his PhD student, Usukhuu, a guide at Hustai. On a number of occasions, Professor Gomboo took time out of his busy fieldwork schedule to come to Hustai and check in on the progress of our work. During these visits, he would share his wealth of knowledge about not only falcon research, but also natural history of Amur falcons, other raptors, and birds in general. On a day-to-day basis, I collaborated with Tuvshin, one of

Professor Gomboo's Master's students. Tuvshin and I conducted research on a three-day rotation: behavioral observations, data analysis, and, my favorite, chick measurements.

This summer was an amazing opportunity because of the incredible independence that I found in Mongolia. Hustai is a beautifully open wilderness and I was able to explore that at my own choosing by hiking or on horseback. Furthermore, because of the remoteness of Hustai National Park, I was also free of the confines of technology. With phone service only available at the top of a few low mountains and no internet at all, I was cut off from the rest of the world, which was surprisingly liberating. I was able to focus on my current tasks and my local environment without constantly being at the summons of modern technology. In terms of legal constraints, Mongolia has not yet developed many laws and regulations concerning research. I had originally anticipated red tape and bureaucracy in order to get permits to study and handle the birds but I found that there were no such limitations. As an undergrad, I was permitted, and even expected, to go out and learn simply by doing. In the eight weeks that I was in Mongolia, I learned more by doing than I could have in years of reading about the proper handling of baby raptors, taking measurements, blood samples, parasite collections, and overcoming the unseen difficulties of fieldwork. On chick measurement days in the field, Tuvshin and I hiked out into EkhenUs Valley to check the 11 nests that we monitored. After climbing into the tree and removing the clawing and biting chicks from their nests, we would bring them down and take various measurements—wing length, weight, bill length, claw length, tarsus length, etc.—along with photographic documentation of each chick. Over the course of seven weeks, we were able to observe the remarkable growth of the Amur falcons from hatching to fledging.

This summer also afforded me a lot of independence through my work. Though, I had a PhD student and a Master's student working with me, I was completely in control of scheduling

and planning all of the work. Four years my senior, Tuvshin did not have as active a role in planning and managing our fieldwork schedule as I had originally expected. After just a few days, I realized he was very nonchalant about the whole project, which constituted his entire Master's thesis. For the first few weeks, this made everything very difficult while I scrambled to organize an entire project. However, planning our schedule, setting goals for data, and arranging our gear was a great opportunity for me to exercise my previously underused leadership and organizational abilities. Also, Usukhuu, while very knowledgeable and experienced about avian research, was not very helpful in terms of organization. In general, most of the Mongolian people I met approached life in a laid back and confident manner, but Usukhuu took it to an extreme. "Don't worry! T.I.M.- This Is Mongolia," he would say with progressively frustrating frequency. This constant challenge forced me to realize that being dependent on anyone, even a supervisor, can make a project impossible. Working effectively with Usukhuu necessitated taking initiative and pursuing things independently.

Though my work took up most of my time, I had time in the evenings to explore the park and interact with the people that worked and visited there. Hustai is remarkable not only for its biological diversity but also for the host of incredible people that it brought together. The park allowed me to interact with many local Mongolian people, both visitors and employees of the park. While Usukhuu, Tuvshin, and the other people I interacted with directly for my research spoke a fair amount of English, for the most part, people there spoke very limited English. The language barrier was overwhelming at first, but I overcame it by struggling through (and mangling) a few basic phrases of Mongolian I learned from a book. The people I imposed my Mongolian on must have appreciated my attempts at learning their language and we progressively built a makeshift language of scattered phrases and gestures. Eventually, as I

interacted with more and more people there, I began to understand why tourist books describe Mongolia as a country with an incredibly welcoming culture of good hospitality. As my first time abroad completely on my own, I really appreciated that I felt truly welcome and at home. My daily interactions with the kitchen staff, the drivers, and the rangers were subtly humorous, frequently poetically silent, and always managed to bridge the differences in language and culture.

Hustai, as a tourist destination, also attracted many English-speaking tourists and volunteers from around the world. During my time there, I met a Dutch Master's student, two veterinary students from Canada, a librarian from Arizona, a Belgian cardiologist, a Louis Vuitton salesperson from Singapore, and an Italian bass guitarist in an all-female symphonic goth band, among many others. Though we were all in Mongolia for different reasons and for different lengths of time, we ended up spending a great deal of time at meals together chatting about our work, discussing methodology in our research, and talking about our diverse backgrounds. Invariably, our conversations eventually turned towards our current experience in Mongolia; the daily challenges and curiosities that we were all constantly met with.

For all of us, our stay in Mongolia was a full immersion in a culture with customs so different from our own that sometimes, the simplest, most routine things struck us as absolutely bizarre and unexpected. On one of the chick measurement days, Tuvshin and I had gone out with two volunteers (the Singaporean salesperson and the Italian bass guitarist) who were interested in what we were doing and wanted to see the baby falcons. At this point in the summer, the chicks had started to fledge, which meant our measurement process included flushing the falcons out of the nest, and then running after the partially fledged birds through waist-deep nettles. After a very long (yet still rewarding) day in the field with the baby birds, the four of us returned to the

valley mouth where we were usually picked up by the furgon. Twenty minutes after the appointed time, there was still no lumbering vehicle in sight and we started to hike the eight kilometres back to camp, even though by then, we had no water left. Unbeknownst to us, the furgon had broken down again (an event so frequent that it should have been expected). Four kilometres into the hike, we saw a distant dust trail: Usukhuu on his red Honda motorbike. When he reached us, he stopped and we exchanged some pleasantries (the falcon chicks are good, thanks for asking) and then he told us that he was going to give the four of us a lift home. Well that's interesting. The two volunteers and I were doubtful, if not incredulous; Tuvshin was already very naturally gathering his stuff and ready to leave. Seeing our disbelief, Usukhuu launched into his speech: "Don't worry! Don't worry! T.I.M.- This Is Mongolia. It is so common in the countryside for whole families on motorbike. It is...ummm...possible." So, after fidgeting into a very close quarters sitting arrangement, the five of us precariously set off. Like so many other things that I experienced in Mongolia, riding with four other people on a motorbike meant for one didn't really make any sense but clearly it was possible. I had been doubtful and I had been proven wrong. The ride home was one of the most liberating experiences, once I got past the initial strangeness and terror and just enjoyed it. Though it was one brief event during my time in Mongolia, my ride back and the other extraordinary and novel adventures are what made my time there more than just an amazing field research season. These experiences gave me the chance to do something new, a bit strange, and definitely unexpected and also gave me the opportunity to step away from the familiar and try to understand an entirely different culture.