

Mongolia: Wildlife and Wilderness

While Mongolia may not be the first country that comes to mind as a comparison for wildlife practices with those of Colorado, it turns out that Mongolia aspires to emulate conservation methods that Mongolian land managers observed on a recent trip here.

Sheelagh Williams, who traveled in Mongolia, mostly by horseback, in July, 2009, will provide a first hand account of Mongolia's wildlife, or absence thereof, in the next *Living with Wildlife* session, "Mongolia: Wildlife and Wilderness," Thursday, May 13, 7 p.m., Ridgway Community Center, Railroad Avenue. She will also contrast what's happening in Mongolia with how wildlife and habitat are managed in Ouray County.

Williams traveled with her daughter, Jenny, and Ouray County resident, Karin Stanley, to Ulan Baatar, Mongolia's capital city, then westward to Uliaste, the capital city of the state of Zavkhan, home to national parks and Mongolia's nomadic herdsman. There they spent nearly two weeks on horseback, exploring the hills and valleys, keeping their eyes open for birds and animals, and observing how Mongolians live and use the land.

Sh. Ganbat, Director of Nature, Environment and Tourism in Mongolia's Dornod Province in eastern Mongolia was part of a delegation of Mongolia land managers touring Colorado to observe our land management practices, according to a report in *The Pueblo Chieftain*, December 13, 2009. He apparently felt that there were many similarities between Mongolia and Colorado. The report went on to say, "Mongolia, which is roughly six times the size of Colorado with half the population, has embarked on an ambitious conservation program that would bring up to one-third of the arid country into a system of preserves and parks." Williams notes, "The standard of land management in Mongolia has a long way to go before it meets our USFS standard."

Mongolia is home to Przewalski's Horse. The Przewalski's Horse is considered the only remaining truly wild "horse" in the world and may be the closest living wild relative of the domesticated horse. Once extinct in the wild, Przewalski's Horse has been reintroduced to its native habitat in Mongolia at the Khustai Nuruu National Park. Williams visited the preserve and felt lucky to see several small herds. One of the management issues for preservation of Przewalski's Horse is interbreeding with the domestic Mongolian horses, which have unfettered access to the preserve.

"It was fascinating to see how a very old culture of nomads is adjusting to population growth, lower child mortality, and the resulting impact on the environment," said Williams. Unlike Ouray County, where land is owned by individuals or corporations, enormous areas in Mongolia are public commons. Families have places that they've traditionally used for grazing in their short

summer and long winter. A family's wealth lies in its herds of yaks, horses, and sheep with the occasional camel. With larger numbers of surviving children, those traditional grazing areas are now more crowded, leading to overgrazing and desertification. Williams was surprised to learn that girls are often better educated than boys. The girls are sent to get an education in the cities while the boys stay home to help with the horse, yak, and sheep herds. Another issue associated with a rapidly expanding population is over hunting. While Williams saw hundreds of marmot holes (and thanked her horse for mostly avoiding them), most were empty. Marmots have been hunted almost to extinction in Zavkhan.

According to the World Bank, Mongolia has a state road network of just over 6,700 miles, of which only about 900 miles are paved, less than 870 miles have a gravel surface, and about 800 miles have an improved earth surface. Over 4,000 miles are just earth tracks. "Unlike roads in our national forests, roads in Mongolia proliferate like gnats in the spring," said Williams. When a dirt road becomes impassable because of deep sand or mud, repairs are not made. Drivers simply create a new one. So valleys are covered in intertwining ribbons of road. The scars of old roads are everywhere.

Like much of the developing world, deforestation is a major problem. While Mongolian herders do use yak dung for heating and cooking, they also cut trees, even those in national forests. Tourism is not yet driving preservation as it has done in the US.

"Would I go back to Mongolia again? The land is beautiful, the people are incredibly welcoming, and the horses are wonderful. But it is not the unspoiled wilderness that I'd hoped to encounter. But maybe there are other even more remote areas in Mongolia where bears still exist and marmots are still digging holes."

For a three-minute overview of Williams' horse trek in Mongolia, view Jenny Williams' "Mongolia With Mom" at Lonely Planet TV.

<http://www.lonelyplanet.tv/Clip.aspx?key=BCBF9357791C9A08>

SJCC (www.sanjuancorridors.org) is a volunteer group whose goal is the protection of wildlife habitat and corridors in the northwest San Juan region. SJCC offers free monthly sessions on Living with Wildlife. This presentation is this season's final session. Presentations will resume in September on the second Thursday of each month.

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