



COURTESY OF CHRIS CARPENTER

A Przewalski's stallion leads a mare up a hill in Hustai National Park, Mongolia. Once nearly extinct, the only wild horse has been restored and once again roams free in Mongolia.



COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON III

A Mongolian university student wears a replica of a costume worn by noble women in ancient times.

WILD HORSES, VAST DESERT

Mongolia's cultural and natural history both unique on Earth

By Holmes Rolston III

For the Coloradoan

I reached the ridge top and there they were — the stallion out front and five mares, his harem, following.

I celebrated seeing the only wild horse, Przewalski's horse, once nearly extinct, now restored, again free in Hustai National Park, Mongolia.

Mongolians call this horse the takhi, which means a "spirited horse." No one was ever able to break, or tame, this horse. Domestic horses have been bred from other species.

The horses moved down the neighboring ridge, nicely profiled against the skyline. They were making their way down to drink. We followed.

Finding greener grass near the river, they paused to graze, which allowed us to get a closer view. Using binoculars, I examined each of



COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON III

Author Holmes Rolston III holds a golden eagle used for hunting by Mongolians.

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Mongolia

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the seven. The takhi is a stocky horse with short legs and looks somewhat like a coarse domestic pony. Their mane is stiff, erect, mohawk-like. There is no forelock.

When they lifted their heads to look around, I could see the massive head with long face and a big jaw. Their ears are long and stand up straight. Their eyes are set far back in the skull, giving a wide field of view.

These are in summer coat, short and smooth, beige, with yellowish white on the muzzle and belly. Their lower legs are dark. Sometimes their legs have stripes, but I couldn't see any.

Two mares were pregnant. That is further proof of this successful restoration of the oldest breed of horse today, the one surviving prehistoric horse. This horse has 66 chromosomes, two more than domestic horses.

The brink of extinction

Wild horses were dominant on landscapes in Asia and Europe in Pleistocene times. The zebra is the wild horse in Africa today, also never domesticated. Eurasian wild horses continued into human memory. In earlier centuries, the wild tarpan, now extinct, was present.

In 1226, Genghis Khan was startled when wild horses crossed the path ahead of him. His own horse reared and he was tossed to the ground.

Przewalski was a famous Russian naturalist who discovered this horse in 1879. Some ancient cave drawings suggest the Przewalski horse 20,000 years ago. Earlier travelers had reported seeing wild horses, but Przewalski brought them to the attention of the Western and scientific world.

The full-grown horses proved impossible to catch, but some foals were caught. They were sent to European zoos and, aggressive in captivity, proved difficult to keep alive.

Przewalski's horse ceased to exist in the wild in the 1960s. The last well-documented recorded sighting was a lone stallion in the

Dzungarian Gobi Desert by a Mongolian scientist in 1969.

The species survived because of the captive breeding of about a dozen founder animals, which were nearly lost during World War II. In 1969, the only horses were in a zoo in Munich and a zoo in Prague. But veterinarians persisted. Now there are some 2,000 in zoos around the world. The Denver Zoo has four.

Mongolia was Communist from 1921-90. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Mongolia became an independent democratic nation. Some Dutch conservationists saw an opportunity and found the new nation receptive.

Icon of Mongolia

I saw horses everywhere on the landscape, maybe 10,000 of them. Horses are historically a linchpin of their cultures. "A man without a horse is like a bird without wings," according to an old proverb.

Mongolians have traditionally depended on the five "snouts" or "muzzles" that include horses, camels, sheep, cattle or yaks, and goats. Horses are used for herding the 100,000 sheep and goats that I also saw. They also milk their horses. I drank some fermented mare's milk.

Mongolia today has 2 million horses and 3 million people. Since a million people live in the capital, Ulaanbaatur, in rural Mongolia, there are as many horses as people. So the Mongolians welcomed the return of its most charismatic species.

The Dutch conservationists created the Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of the Przewalski Horse. They worried about the narrow genetic base, created a stud book and selected the best to be released.

As I landed at the Ulaanbaatur airport, I recalled how hundreds of Mongolians waited for hours at the airfield on June 5, 1992, watching for an airplane to land and hoping to catch a glimpse of the crates, each of which contained a takhi to be returned to the wild.

Reintroducing these captive-born horses exposed them to climate extremes, water and food shortage, disease and predators. Wolves killed eight in one night, though healthy adult horses can defend themselves by

kicking and biting. A stallion also may bite and kick his mares to get them to do what he wishes.

As we were returning to camp, to our surprise, we found a second group of a half-dozen even closer. One mare had a foal, six weeks old, sticking close and trying to nurse. A lone stallion up the hill later joined the main group.

I left hoping wolves would not get this foal. Wolves prefer to take foals, and may take up to one-third of them, as happened in 2002-04, when they killed 36 foals. Mongolians hate wolves, which also prey on their livestock.

The horses I saw were all born wild. Only one old horse, now more than 20 years old, survives from a second group reintroduced, born in the Netherlands. There are 33 groups in the park totaling more than 220 animals.

In one of the villages, at what they call the Nadaam festival, we watched a horse race. Mongolians do not race around a track but over a distance course, in this case 25 kilometers. Children ride as soon as they walk, so before they reach their teens, they are excellent riders. These light youngsters are preferred as jockeys.

We saw dust in the distance, and a minute later, the winning horse came over the finish line, instantly followed by the second horse, which had no rider. The jockey had fallen off somewhere in the distance.

But this horse still placed second. We protested that it had no jockey. The reply was "We were racing horses, not people!"

I was lucky to see argali, the largest, most robust big-horn sheep. There were two rams, splendidly profiled on

the skyline, with their enormous corkscrew curved horns. A group of 11 climbed a saddle and disappeared.

Mongolians still hunt with trained raptors. I held a golden eagle they had captured as an eaglet and raised, now a huge bird with wingspan as wide as my 6-foot height.

Ninety percent of Mongolia is arid grassland steppe or desert. You can drive all day without seeing a tree, on unimproved roads that are only a track. The Gobi is the world's coldest, northernmost desert and is bleak, stony, vast, harsh and even extremely hot in summer.

Mongolia is the most thinly populated country in the world. Driving to our ger camp and back two days later, nearly five hours of driving across the thin, rocky grassland track, we did not meet a single oncoming vehicle.

The Gobi is where Roy Chapman Andrews, the famous paleontologist, found the first dinosaur eggs when a fellow researcher accidentally fell down a cliff face. We visited that area and saw a clutch of eggs in a museum, surprisingly small and not much bigger than a potato.

We were fortunate to find some university students who had researched ancient costumes. They made their own; the men's outfits were for horsemen soldiers, the women's for noble ladies. They were modeling them on Buddhist temple grounds for a television show.

I left convinced that Mongolia's cultural and natural history both are unique on Earth.

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