

THE MONGOLIAN GOBI EXPEDITION 2011

INTERIM REPORT

A Scientific Exploration Society supported expedition to Mongolia's Gobi has discovered the remains of two dinosaurs, carried out botanical and zoological studies and given valuable medical and dental aid to the nomads of this remote area.

The 40 strong international team also assisted in setting up a vital well.

Riding double humped Bactrian camels and using Russian 4 wheel drive vehicles, the team operated under extreme weather, sometimes it was boiling hot and at other times extremely cold with gale force winds and even a sand storm and a torrential downpour.

The terrain varied from almost featureless desert to rocky hills and at Khongoryu Els, giant sand dunes rising up to 200 metres and known locally as the "singing dunes".

Working with palaeontologists from the Mongolian National University, they combed rugged sandstone cliffs for the bones of ancient creatures that lived here in prehistoric times. Indeed the Gobi is a virtual dinosaur cemetery. A high point of the expedition was the discovery of a complete skull of a 73 million year old plant eating horned dinosaur known as a Protoceratops and the remains of a 70 million year old carnivorous Velociraptor. A skull of a rat, also 70 million years old, was found by Richard Weeks, a kitchen/bathroom fitter of Yeovil. These valuable remains have been taken to Ulaanbaatar for further research.

Studies of the botany and wildlife also produced important finds. Rare flowers and birds, including Golden Eagle, mammals and reptiles were located in the arid conditions. An unusual plant was spotted by John Blashford-Snell but alas before he could take a photograph his camel ate it. A venomous viper was collected in the camp near the ladies toilet one evening.

The Przewalski horse or Takhi, the only extant wild ancestor of the modern horse was also studied. These robust creatures are stockier than their domestic cousins. Their colour varies from pale to dark brown which blends in with the terrain. They have a short haired erect mane and no forelock. Often one sees faint zebra-like stripes around their knees and fetlocks. In winter the Takhi grow a thick, shaggy coat. Having become extinct in the wild, 50 years ago they were reintroduced from world zoos in 1992.

A well to give clean water was drilled at the site of a future community centre for up to 3000 nomads thanks to funding from the travel company Beds and Bars through the charity Just a Drop. Members of the expedition with engineer and plumbing experience were led by Lt Col Mike Law, Royal Engineers, on this project and built a fine pump and generator house. The group was lucky to have Steve Clarkson, an expert stonewall builder from New Zealand in the team.

The logistics for the project and the collection of material was headed by Flight Lieutenant Jack Holt RAF who has just returned from Afghanistan.

Medical aid was given to the local people by Dr Hazel Dobinson of Australia and Surgeon Commander Lindsay Falla, Royal Navy extracted over 40 teeth from nomads in need of

dentistry. Used reading glasses collected from all over the South West were distributed and greatly appreciated by the Mongolian desert dwellers.

The expedition ended with the traditional Burns Supper with Stahlys fine haggis being served by moonlight and Scottish reeling accompanied by howls of distant wolves!

“This was one of the most worthwhile expeditions I have been involved with in recent years” said Colonel John Blashford-Snell who led it.

Now a team is being recruited to continue the study of giant elephants in Nepal next April. “Elephants are much more comfortable to ride than camels” he commented. For fuller details of the Nepal Elephant Quest please contact Anne Gilby on 01747 854456 or by email to jbs@ses-explore.org.