

## Expedition Report: Mongolia by Paul Bartlett



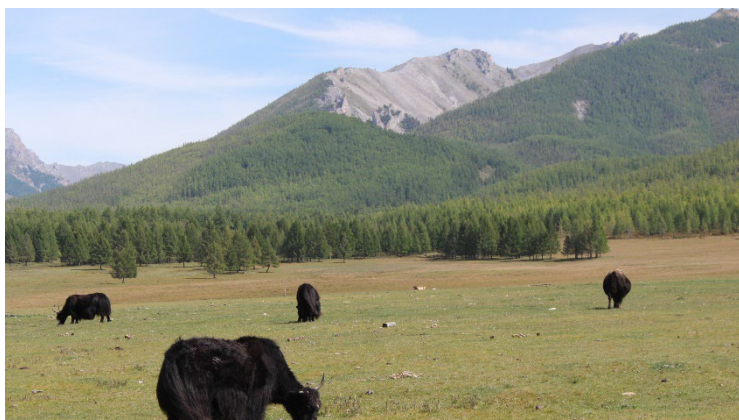
*Nomadic goat herding near Ulaan uul*

### Introduction

I manage Stone Lane Gardens, near Chagford, northeast Dartmoor, which is renowned for its national collections of birch trees and has recently been awarded 'Botanic Garden' status by the global charity Botanic Gardens Conservation International.

In August, I journeyed into the wilds of Mongolia in search of some unusual and little-known species.

Mongolia is a remote and mysterious country sandwiched between Russia and China. Covering an area of over 604,000 square miles, it is vast and sparsely populated. Travel can be difficult there, and so it was with some trepidation that I joined Polish dendrologist Marcin Kowalczyk to set off on our adventure.



*Yaks grazing near Ulaan uul*

## Gobi Desert

Teaming up with botanists from the National University of Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar (the capital) we travelled south to Dalanzadgad, on the edge of the Gobi Desert. I was delighted to find two species of birch growing in an isolated forest high in the hills of the Gobi Desert, a fragile remnant of once much larger wooded areas.



*A flower-rich valley in the mountains of the Gobi desert*

Climbing through steep and difficult terrain, miles from the nearest human settlement, was challenging but extremely rewarding. Negotiating waterfalls, narrow gorges and fighting their way through dense vegetation, me, Marcin and our botanist guide Choinom found a hidden world of plants. Witnessing and recording the flora in this isolated habitat gave us a much better understanding of these trees.

## Central steppes

On our return from the Gobi, Marcin and I travelled through the central steppes, a vast open landscape with few roads and an endless vista. Populated by herds of yaks and goats, tended by Mongolian families living in their nearby Gers (yurts). Here we found a very unusual population of *Betula microphylla*, a multi-stemmed



*Multi-stemmed birch in the sand dunes of Elsen Tasarkhai*

shrubby birch, growing between towering sand dunes. This unique habitat was fascinating to study, and something we had never witnessed before. At Stone Lane Gardens, trees are sometimes damaged by grazing deer, but here I discovered that the trees were mainly damaged by Mongolian two-humped camels!

## Mountains

The final area of study involved a flight to the mountainous far north of the country, close to the Russian border. Many hours of driving over rough grassland took us into the hills around Ulaan Uul, one of the few settlements in this area. A stunning landscape of limestone cliffs, wide, boulder-strewn rivers and dense coniferous forest, described by Wikipedia as ...'remote, even by Mongolian standards'. Trekking into this wilderness, we eventually discovered one isolated population of *Betula glandulosa*, a dwarf shrub birch that unbelievably also grows in Greenland, Canada and Siberia. The shrubs were found on just one sheltered stretch of river bank, and seemed to be limited to that niche habitat with no sign of other populations in that area.



*The Khoridol Saridag mountain range near Ulaan uul*

## Sharing knowledge

On our return to Ulaanbaatar we met with Professor Oyuntsetseg Batlai, the head of the Biology Department of the National University, to report on the success of the expedition and thank her for the crucial help given by the Mongolian botanists.

An important outcome was the opportunity given to their botanical student guide Choinom. By joining the expedition he had the chance to visit remote and difficult areas rarely visited by Mongolian botanists. We encouraged him to collect herbarium specimens for his own research, and provided the funding necessary for his participation in the expedition.



(L-R) Marcin, Prof. Batlai, Paul and Choinom at the National University of Mongolia

Data collected on this expedition will be shared with the National University of Mongolia, thereby adding to the knowledge of these species. Plants grown from seed collected will hopefully add interesting specimens to the National Collections held at Stone Lane Gardens as well as being distributed to other botanic gardens.

I was delighted with the outcome of the Mongolian expedition and would like to thank the John Muir Trust and Stanley Smith UK Horticultural Trust for their financial support.

### **Further information**

Stone Lane Gardens is one of just a handful of National Collections of Birch (Betula) trees in the UK, and Garden Manager Paul Bartlett has taken part in plant study expeditions to India, Georgia and Greenland - following in the footsteps of the garden's creator, the late Kenneth Ashburner. Kenneth travelled widely studying birch in the wild; bringing seed back to create the wonderful National Collections you can see at Stone Lane Gardens today.

Stone Lane Gardens is a charity holding National Collections of Birch and Alder trees and is open 5 days a week throughout the year. [www.stonelanegardens.com](http://www.stonelanegardens.com) tel 01647 231311. It also runs a nursery specialising in birch and alder trees.