

# The Przewalski Horse



JANUARY 2004

## SUBSCRIBERS' MEETING

All summer long we had been blessed with beautiful weather, so looking forward to the subscribers' meeting we anticipated upon an equally sun-drenched August 30th. Fortunately, the bad weather could not stop anybody from coming. In the end the weather gods decided to display their benevolence. In the afternoon it brightened up and our

*The Przewalski horses have never seen so many people on the Goudplaat*



guests and we could enjoy a nice walk at the Goudplaat.

The meeting was to be held in a large farmyard barn, which had been transformed into a comfortable auditorium.

After everyone was settled, suited with a hot cup of coffee or tea, the meeting was opened with some informal speeches, elucidated with topical slides, by the chairman of the Foundation Inge Bouman, the leader of the biodiversity project

Piet Wit and a representative of the Forestry, Mr Mollenberg.

Inge spoke about the successful return of the Przewalski horses to their original habitat. She, however, warned her audience not to rejoice too early, because although 150 freely roaming Przewalski's at Hustai National Park might seem a quite impressive number at the moment, the future survival of this particular population can only be safely guaranteed when its number has risen to at least 500. It will take a long time before this point is reached.

With the generous help of its subscribers the Foundation hopes to carry on with its annual grant toward the Park. This could take on the shape of financing the construction of a new watering source for the takhi or even a contribution toward the costs of maintaining a well-trained protection staff of wardens and rangers. Every year the management of Hustai National Park will get the chance - based on a substantiated proposal - to call on the Foundation for a financial contribution.

Meet the Przewalski Horse on the internet: <http://www.treemail.nl/takh>

From January 1st 2004 onward the Dutch ministry of international co-operation will for a period of two years subsidise part of the Park's maintenance costs. The affirmation of this agreement will be a matter between the Ministry and the Trust in which the Foundation has no role to play. The privatisation of Hustai National Park and the conclusion of the biodiversity project gradually

*Therefore, the Foundation wants to stay permanently involved in the protection of Hustai's wild horses and in the continuation of the employed research activities.*

makes direct involvement of the Foundation obsolete. As a consequence the Foundation's executives will less frequently visit Hustai and the Przewalski horses. It will therefore be much more difficult to obtain first-hand information about the horses, which can be shared with our subscribers in 'Przewalski Horse' magazine. An annual newsletter that will also appear on the Foundation's web-site will replace the biannual magazine.

Piet Wit spoke about the latest developments in Hustai National Park and the problems that occur in the surrounding buffer zone. Due to overgrazing and the absence of a consistently carried through pasture management policy, the quality of the grasslands around Hustai has declined in an alarming fashion during the past ten years. Evidently the critical droughts of recent years and the overburden caused by the movement of people and livestock from the west of the country to the capital Ulaanbaatar did not contribute toward the solution of the problem. Local herdsman and authorities now want to take the control over water and pasture resources in their own hands. The gravity of the situ-

ation forces them to come to mutual arrangements. The local authorities want the national government to support them in their effort to eliminate the problems of overgrazing caused by newcomers. In short, everything seemed to be ready for a new initiative: the buffer zone project. The Dutch government will support the project through the subsidisation of the training and coaching program-

me set up to help local herdsman groups to work out an efficient pasture management policy and to acquire marketing skills.

A vital factor in this will be the synergy with Hustai National Park, because in and around the National Park the ultimate objective will be the preservation of the unique steppe ecosystem in and around Hustai. Just before lunch Mr Mollenberg was

*In the hooded cart to the Goudplaat, a real adventure*



able to tell us some interesting facts about the origins and development of the Goudplaat peninsula.

After lunch we went for a walk to the Goudplaat, which is situated two kilometres from where the meeting was held. Some went on foot, by car or even took a seat on Ina de Kok's hooded cart that was being pulled by a set of gleaming sturdy Fjords. In several groups we walked to where the Przewalski stallions live. Such an invasion of trespassers they had never encountered on their territory! However, they must have quickly realised that nobody wanted to do them any harm, for they calmly kept on watching us from the distance. We had been with too many to ramble straight across the terrain, but the stroll along the water-side was good enough to get an overall impression of the peninsula with its mosaic patches of gorse.

After the walk we all returned to the barn for a final chat. Some subscribers tipped us about travel agencies with an interest in Mongolia and about potential funds. It has been a good day. ■

## HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK TRUST: AN INDEPENDENT NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION.

In October 2003 the privatisation of Hustai National Park became an accomplished fact through the official establishment of the Hustai National Park Trust.

Hustai' staff had some premonitions about the Park's future after funding from the Dutch government would end. In Mongolia all national parks are under the control of the MNE, that also bears full responsibility for

tion and other attractive wildlife, Hustai National Park has the potential of becoming a major tourist attraction. The revenues can be reinvested in the Park. However, the staff feared that after the ending of the Dutch subsidy the Ministry would cash this money and in return would hand out a rather meagre annual allowance. At present our Mongolian counterpart, MACNE is also in financially dire straits.

*The Board of the Foundation shared the staff's concern and had a significant part in the process of Hustai's privatisation.*

the financial side. Unfortunately the Ministry has rather scarce means, which has to be equally allocated to all parks alike.

Hustai National Park is regarded as being the most efficiently protected and organised of all national parks in the country. Very big parks enclosing some 1 to 2 million hectares have much smaller staffs and are often unable to pay salaries.

Thanks to its favourable geographical position not too far from the capital Ulaanbaatar, its beautiful scenery, and of course its biggest asset, the wild roaming Przewalski popula-

The outstanding support by the Dutch Embassy was also of vital significance.

In the Netherlands national parks have been controlled by independent organisations for some time now. A good example is the Nationaal Park Hoge Veluwe. In Mongolia, however, an independently operating national park is a totally new concept. Many obstacles had to be levelled before the idea of a privatised Hustai National Park was generally accepted and the shared principles could be drafted.

In January 2003 jurist and FRPH board member Norbert de Munnik spent a whole week in Mongolia consulting with his Mongolian conferees and officials from MNE about the precise text of the new trust's constitution in conformity with the country's legislation. The difficult discussion about the ownership of the buildings and furnishing had to be postponed until later. When the partial Dutch subsidy of the maintenance costs has ended the negotiations on this subject will resume.

The initial meeting of the Trust's Board took place in November 2003. The three founding organisations (MACNE, Buffer Zone Council and Foundation Reserves for the Przewalski Horse) had each been able to appoint a member from their own ranks. The fourth participant, the Ministry for Nature and Environment also appointed a member.

Everyone agreed with the appointment of an independent chairman, who has plenty of experience in nature conservation issues and politics as well.

The FRPH asked Ir Piet Wit to be on the board as her representative. His consultancy firm has the final responsibility over the buffer zone project (financed by the Dutch government), so he has the opportunity to visit Mongolia regularly. ■

## CHIEF CARETAKER GERRIT BAIJENSE RETIRES FROM NATURE PARK LEYSTAD

On November 21st 2003 a farewell party was held for Gerrit Baijense who after 27 years of dedicated service retired from Nature Park Lelystad. Many laudatory words were spoken on his behalf; he was highly praised for his contributions to the realization of the Nature Park, his phenomenable memory and

commitment to the animals. Yet, his heart went out to the Przewalski horses. He had an excellent understanding of horse behaviour, founded on his long experience with Fjords.

Gerrit took an interest to all Przewalski horses – in Lelystad as

"Tractable takhi for Gerrit Baijense"



well as to those living in the other semi-reserves and in Hustai National Park. He kept accurate record of all events, the growth of the population in Hustai and made himself familiar with the Foundation's breeding plan.

With its large area of enclosures, quarantine stables and very dedicated staff Nature Park Lelystad was the centre of all activity during the biennial transports to Mongolia. Here all the selected Przewalski's were collected from the other semi-reserves and prepared for the journey to Mongolia. In

this stage of preparation the young horses got the chance to become acquainted with each other. Fitting transportation crates were made and each animal was applied with a written identification of its outer appearance. Meetings between all helpers and the participating veterinarians were arranged to discuss the necessary preliminary actions.

Evidently Gerrit Baijense was - with his proverbial scrupulousness, sharp eye for detail and as provider of many useful tips - indispensable.

His 2000 journey to Hustai National Park was the epitome of his career. Now he saw with his own eyes the animals, that he had seen come into maturity at Lelystad, happy roaming about in their natural environment. He fully enjoyed it.

In his retirement he will certainly have moments when he longs back for the Park and 'his' Przewalski horses. To ease his pains our Board surprised him with a bronze statue of two prancing stallions. We all wish him the best of times, which he now can dedicate to his many other hobbies. ■

## PRZEWALSKI HORSES IN THE DZUNGARIAN GOBI

Back in 1996 the then project leader Jan Vegter wrote an article for Przewalski Horse about his journey to Tachyn Tal in the Dzungarian Gobi. Lately we received a report by Petra Kascenzky and Chris Walzer with actual data on the Przewalski population at Tachyn Tal.

The Tachyn Tal and Hustain Nuruu reintroduction projects had almost simultaneous beginnings in 1992. Only a day after the arrival of the first group at Hustai (June 5th ) Tachyn Tal received its first takhi.

Tachyn Tal is situated in the Honin-Usny Gobi - watering place for sheep, Gobi meaning desert. It is close to the Chinese border and only some tens of kilometres away from the Tachyn Schar Nuur mountain range to which the last takhi had retreated before their ultimate disappearance from the wild.

### ***How many Przewalski horses are there in Tachyn Tal?***

At the moment there are 63 Przewalski horses in the Gobi.

Fortunately the last winter has - by Mongolian standards - been a rather mild one, so most of the horses survived.

In the spring of 2003 there were four free roaming groups: three harems and a bachelor stallion group.

In May 2003 the two groups that had arrived the year before were released from their acclimatisation areas into the wider area. One harem, Jiguur's with six adult mares, a yearling and two foals has yet to be released. There are now four free roaming harem groups and one bachelor stallion group, because the recently released stallions all joined the bachelor group.

The encounters between the free living takhi and those recently released from the acclimatisation areas often led to conflict. The senior stallion of the free living bachelors, Tayan, soon got the opportunity to conquer mares. He often took off on his own and gradually joined the group of the recently released Khuuchit. The latter tolerated the

newcomer as second stallion in his group, but this would not last long. Soon the two were entangled in a fierce competition for the mares. Within three months Tayan had robbed his opponent of almost all of his mares and at the beginning of August Khuuchit was ousted away from the group. Due to the many skirmishes between these two adversaries the mares had gone slightly astray, a chance for the three other harem stallions Pas, Mundol and Tuulai to seize each one of these mares for themselves. It is not uncommon that during such vehement fighting innocent bystanders get hurt or worse: a young mare broke her leg and died.

With his seven full-grown mares, five yearlings and four foals the stallion Pas, who arrived in 1993 from Askania Nova (Ukraine), is leading the biggest harem in Tachyn Tal. The two other harems are being led by seven-year and six-year old Tuulai and Mundol. Both were born in Tachyn Tal. Their harems are slightly smaller than that of Pas. The newly formed harem of Tayan counts five mares.

### **Constructive developments in Tachyn Tal**

The steady growth of the takhi population in Tachyn Tal is an encouraging sign. In the early years of the reintroduction programme many horses perished.

Immediately after arrival the horses are released into five fenced-in acclimatisation enclosures. These areas are directly linked up to each other. According to Jan Vegter (1996) this leads to much stress, frustration and accidents. Even the ultimate release of the takhi into the wider area would sometimes be rather trouble-

collaboration Tachyn Tal's Przewalski horses represent a much wider genetic variation than during the first five years of the project.

In recent years Dr Chris Walzer, a veterinarian affiliated with Salzburg Zoo, has been the leading man with regard to the research and medical supervision of the Przewalski horses in the acclimatisation areas. It came about that many of the deceased horses had been suffering from a disease called piroplasmosis which affects the bile and is transmitted by ticks. As a consequence all horses

1200 meters above sea level. Its centre region, which covers the greater part of the area, is desert (Gobi). Arid steppes can mostly be found at mountain slopes and on the moisture rich terrain around the water sources. Annual precipitation varies between 100 and 200 millimetres. In the middle of the desert there are some water sources: Takhin Us, Honin Us, Ghajrkhan Us, Todchijn Us en Gun Tamga. Unlike the latter, which is also the biggest, most of them will dry up in summer. There is plenty of wildlife: hundreds of kulans (a species of wild asses) and gazelles.

In this extensive terrain it is very difficult to keep track of the Przewalski groups, especially in relationship with the rather limited human resources. The Ministry of Nature and Environment, which officially runs the reintroduction programme at Tachyn Tal, has very limited financial means. Therefore, the project relies much on the input from its original initiators, Mr Oswald, the Stamm family (Switzerland) and ITG. Not infrequently they had to help the Ministry out with the back payment of salaries.

In 2002 satellite transmitters were acquired. Seven takhi wear them in a collar around their necks. By means of the received signal the exact loca-

*Under the aegis of the International Takhi Group (ITG) and Salzburg Zoo funds are being raised to enable future reintroductions at Tachyn Tal.*

some. For instance, the stallion Perun and his harem remained close to his former acclimatisation area into which he was finally admitted. Fortunately the process of dawdling at the enclosures has come to an end, because nowadays the released groups tend to move much farther away.

Although the number of takhi that were introduced from the participating zoos still outnumbers that of the horses actually alive at Tachyn Tal, proliferation is making steady progress. Fifty-eight percent of the adult mares (four years and older) - with the exception of those that arrived in 2002 - brought forth foals. Ten of the twelve foals that were born in 2003 are still living.

Last year they managed to bring again a group of fourteen to the Gobi. The European committee, which is involved with captive breeding of endangered wildlife species - EEP -, assists the ITG with the selection of genetically suitable Przewalski horses. Thanks to this

leaving the acclimatisation areas are now inoculated against ticks. This measure has lowered the mortality rate among the Przewalski horses considerably.

### **What is known about the Przewalski horses in Tachyn Tal?**

A huge range of mountains encompasses the 900,000 ha large area which is known as the Dzungarian Gobi. It is a vast tableland, about

Przewalski horses in Tachyn Tal



tion of the takhi can be probed. It gives the staff an indication how the takhi use their habitat. For instance, Pas and his group sporadically come back to their former enclosures, but will mostly frequent the areas around the Honin Us and Gun Tamga sources. However, during summer the groups of Tuulai, Khuuchit and Tayan stayed close to the acclimatisation areas. Let's hope that this is about to change rather soon, because in spring and autumn the local nomadic herdsmen are coming down from the mountains to guide their multitudinous herds of livestock into the Gobi. The animals are watered in a stream at close distance of the takhi acclimatisation areas. It is not unrealistic to fear for the contamination of the takhi through domestic horses.

#### **Wolf research**

In 1998 the former studbook-keeper Jiri Volf visited Tachyn Tal. He was

very worried about the impact of wolves on the still fragile free roaming Przewalski population. Wolves are their only natural enemies. Wolf studies are of great significance. During the extremely cold winter of 2000 a number of takhi fell victim to the wolves. The harshness of the climate had worsened their condition, which made them too feeble to withstand an onslaught. Since 2003 some endeavours were made to catch as many wolves as possible and to equip them with radio transmitters. However, capturing wolves is no sinecure as we meanwhile could experience in Hustai. Until now only an ageing she-wolf, that was attracted by a domestic foal carrier, could be captured. She seems to belong to a pack which range of action overlaps the home ranges of all free roaming Przewalski horses. Let's hope that the efforts to provide a greater number of wolves with transmitters will succeed.

#### **Wildlife counts**

In order to get a good understanding of the amount of wildlife and domestic stock, that seasonally migrates through the area, counting began in 2003. At the beginning of each month the rangers will cross a fixed trajectory – transect – by car and register each animal they encounter, taking notice of its behaviour and whereabouts. The first experience is that the herdsmen and their livestock leave the area around the beginning of July, making way for the returning kulans.

It is very gratifying to learn about the growing interaction between the staff of Tachyn Tal and Hustai National Park. Both can help each other through their individually acquired knowledge and experience. Sharing the outcome of takhi and wolf research seems to be of vital importance. ■

## **NEWS ABOUT THE PRZEWALSKI HORSES IN HUSTAI NATIONAL PARK**

In Mongolia a wet summer is regarded to be a good summer. Fortunately the summer of 2003 was a good one with lush green grasses and a lavishly flowering steppe. Yet the first heavy rainfall – which came down all at once in July – caused much trouble. Thick mud streams wound their way through the Park, causing much havoc. The ger camp and the water-tower got severely damaged. However, in August everything was restored to its original state, which was fortunate, because Hustai was about to play host to UNESCO conference on a 'Man and Biosphere Reserves'. It turned out to be a fruitful meeting during which the staff was able to prove that their Park is truly

worthy of the title 'Man and Biosphere Reserve.'

#### ***The number of Przewalski horses***

In 2003 a total of 28 foals was born in Hustai. Over 50% were born in May. In April, June and August respectively three, nine and one foals were born. The height of the Mongolian birth season occurs a

Unfortunately thirteen foals did not survive, eleven of them were killed by wolves. The death rate among foals had never reached such extreme heights, as has been the case in 2003 (42%). Why? Presumably the number of wolves had increased, while the smaller prey animals had decreased in number. Maybe the latter had not awoken from hibernation which started followed the very dry summer of 2002 that had weakened their condition.

In the buffer zone around the Park the

*The wolves, in order to compensate for the shortage in complementary nutrition, began to focus their attention on Przewalski foals and young deer.*

month after the peak in Europe, which is proof of their successful adaptation to the harshness of the Mongolian climate.

herdsmen fanatically persecute the fanged enemy of their livestock, but inside the Park hunting is strictly forbidden.

Due to the high death toll among foals the population growth seems to stagnate: at the end of 2002 there were 135 takhi, a year later not more than 137.

Hustai's staff is very worried and especially at this essential stage in the development of the takhi population it is rather keen on taking appropriate action to reduce the number of wolves.

*Recognising and following mother: essential for the survival of a foal*



Experts advise to get rid of some of the newborn cubs next spring. The one or two remaining cubs will be enough to guarantee the ongoing existence of the pack. However, it will be far from easy to put this in practice, for the wolf is a shy and cunning creature. As soon as they scent danger they will pick up their young and drag them away to a safer place.

### ***The most hazardous moments in the life of a foal***

During the first days immediately following birth a foal is the most vulnerable to wolves. Nine out of ten killed foals did die within the first ten days. Biologist Enkhtur twice witnessed the birth of a foal in the open field. A Przewalski birth is not only for a biologist an interesting event, it also arouses the curiosity of the other group members. Enkhtur

discovered that 92% of the pregnant mares was about to deliver within 20 to 36 days after the initial swelling of the udder. He says: 'Nine days before she was about to give birth to her foal, Koshin's (Amar's harem) udder began to swell. Before that I had seen her lactating. On the actual morning of the delivery I had the chance to observe the events at close range. A glance at my watch told me that it was 04.30 a.m. First I saw the water breaking; the mare

raised her tail, spread her legs as if she was about to urinate, and calmly withdrew from the others. Stallion Amar immediately went after her, trying to force her back to the group, but she fiercely hit out in defence. He turned away, back to his other mares. He herded them towards the labouring mare. An hour later the foal was born." By keeping his group together they were able to ward off a sudden onslaught by wolves on the foal.

However, it is not only an attack by wolves that may endanger the vulnerable foal. Agitated mares can also be of risk. Enkhtur: "The stallion Bayan was quietly watching from the distance how Delgerekh was about to foal. She tried not to avoid him. The mare was restless: lied down, stood up and lied down again. This she would repeat six

times. The contractions were clearly visible. Suddenly the water broke. The foal appears at 5.30 a.m. As it tumbled down on the ground it immediately began to kick itself free from the amnion. Soon the head appeared. Delgerekh got up again and began to lick her foal. When the latter had finally freed himself, he made a failed attempt to stand on all fours. Meanwhile the rest of the mares drew nearer and nearer. They wanted to smell the foal. Delgerekh strongly protested by kicking and biting. Yet, one of the mares, Badma, eventually got the chance to get between mother and child. Accidentally she kicked the foal down, just at the moment when he had raised himself with some success. Apparently the foal did not suffer much from this blow, for he stood up again to make his first tottering steps just 34 minutes after his arrival into this world. After 26 minutes he had found the tense nipple and began to suckle its first drops of milk. After two or three hours he was already able to follow his mother. Who, in order to protect him against the obtrusive curiosity of her fellow-mares, secluded herself and her scion from the rest of the group." From this observation by Enkhtur it becomes clear that a mare would often leave the group to establish a tight bond between herself and her foal and also to secure him from the aggressiveness of other group members. Alas, seclusion will also reduce a foal's chance to survive an attack by wolves unscathed. Mares that rank low in the social hierarchy will have more trouble securing themselves and their foals from the obtrusiveness of the others. Sometimes a more experienced mare will snatch a foal away from its biological mother. This happened in the semi-reserves and also at a single occasion in the semi-reserves.

## 'THE TAKH – BACK TO MONGOLIA', A MUST-HAVE!

Micaela van Rijckevorsel's beautiful award-winning documentary – The Takhi – Back in Mongolia – is now available on video (PAL-VHS). There are two versions: the 50-minute broadcast version and the original 68-minute version (with subtitles in English).

The film highlights on how Mongolian people perceive the return of the Przewalski horses to their country. The film begins when the aeroplane with on board the Przewalski horses is just about to disembark at Ulaanbaatar airport. One can tell the anxiety from the faces of the crowd that awaits them. After the plane with its valuable con-

tent has safely landed and the first crates are being unloaded everybody is eager to touch them.

Thanks to the delicious soundtrack and the breathtaking images you will soon imagine yourself on the wide open steppe amidst the free

*Why not treat yourself or someone else  
to an armchair journey to Mongolia?*

roaming Przewalski horses. Young and old Mongolians each in their own way pay homage to 'their' takhi. Amazing archive material sup-

ports their accounts.

Micaela did a lot of preliminary research on the first foal captures around 1900 and the history of zoo breeding. The film contains interesting archive material, completed with images from the zoology museums of St. Petersburg and London. It can truly be regarded as a valuable historic document. At the Riga Film Festival the film was highly apprai-

sed on behalf of its artistic merits. The film – also with English subtitles – costs 12.50 euro (exl. posting) and can be ordered from our address. ■

## RENEWED WEBSITE

Hundreds of people from all over the world visit the Website of the Foundation annually. It was developed in 1998 and urgently needed to be renewed. Since 1998 much has happened and many new developments occurred. The new version of the Website can be expected at the beginning of February. The information on the Przewalski horses, the Foundation and Hustai National Park has been extended considerably. Much more detailed information can be read about the social behaviour and

organisation of the free living Przewalski horses, their distribution and habitat use. The Foundation daily receives many questions from pupils, students, guest researchers and tourists. It may be simple questions about the characteristics of the Przewalski horse and how Hustai National Park can be contacted, but it also may concern more complex issues like the buffer zone development of the Park, sponsoring or appropriate literature. In the new website we tried to give an answer on the most common questions as well.

The webmaster takes care for a

good overview and easy accessibility of the pile of information. We hope you also will try to meet the Website! Please don't hesitate to send us your comments.

### Colophon

"Przewalski-Horse" is a joint issue of the Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of the Przewalski Horse and the Foundation Reserves Przewalski Horse.  
Boomdijk 43, 3286 LD KLAASWAAL

Tel.: 31-186-574493  
Fax: 31-186-574869  
E-mail: [frph@antenna.nl](mailto:frph@antenna.nl)  
Postbank: 3808754  
ABN/AMRO: 50.23.26.131

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Text:  
Inge Bouman

Editors:  
A.M. Groeneveld  
P.G.W. Klandermans

Translated by:  
P.G.W. Klandermans

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