



Happy 850th, Genghis!

Posted by [Costas Christ](#) on November 14, 2012



Painting showing the extent of the Mongol empire under Genghis Khan surrounded by depictions of a Mongol cavalryman, arrowheads, and scenes from the field. (Illustration by William H. Bond, National Geographic)

The Eastern Steppe of [Mongolia](#) is nearly ten times the size of the [Serengeti](#), and the rest of the country consists mostly of rolling hills and big-sky plains.

All of that wide-open space makes Mongolia a paradise for birds of prey.

I recently spent ten days exploring the landlocked nation with conservationist and author [Peter Matthiessen](#), bird expert [Victor Emanuel](#), and a small group of adventure travelers on a special trip to celebrate the 20th anniversary of [Nomadic Expeditions](#) — Mongolia's pioneering ecotourism company — with the company's founder, Jalsa Urubshurow.

The country's diverse habitats, ranging from the [Gobi Desert](#) in the south to the [Altai Mountains](#) on the cusp of Russia in the far west, were as unexpected as they were beautiful (turns out the Gobi is not a stark dunescape but blanketed in a wild onion called *taana*, an important food source for traditional pastoralists' herds).

We attended the annual [Golden Eagle Festival](#) in the remote Bayan-Ölgii province, which honors the ancient tradition of hunting with birds of prey with competition and camaraderie. Some of the hunters rode on horseback for more than 100 miles to participate. Horseback remains the primary means of getting around for pastoralists and, when traversing the country's network of rutted roads (as I just did), you encounter more horses than cars.



A saker falcon with its chick. (Photograph courtesy Gombobaatar Sundev)

While we were there, preparations were underway for another important celebration: the 850th Birthday of Genghis Khan — or, to be more accurate, Chinggis Khaan as Mongolians officially spell and pronounce their legendary ancestor's name — on November 14.

Although the Mongolia of today is much smaller than the empire Chinggis and his sons presided over, Mongolians accept and revere him as the founder of their nation. And, like many modern-day Mongolians, Chinggis is said to have been fond of the country's majestic birds of prey — especially the [saker falcon](#).

Legend has it that he owed his marital happiness to the bird (a young Chinggis was introduced to his future wife after a saker falcon appeared in the dream of a wise man, who arranged a meeting). Later in life, the famed leader frequently called upon his soldiers to emulate the saker falcon — to be sharp-eyed and fast — in battle. And it was not uncommon for his son, Kublai Khan, to conduct important meetings with a saker falcon perched on each stakeholder's shoulder — a practice modern hunters continue today.

So what better way to celebrate the 850th birthday of Chinggis Khaan than to proclaim the saker falcon Mongolia's very first national bird, as the country has done? The move not only provides a fitting tribute to Mongolia's founding father, it will also help raise awareness about the importance of protecting the endangered species and launch Mongolia into the world of great bird-watching destinations.

I'm already planning my next trip to Mongolia — to the Flaming Cliffs where, in 1923, American explorer Roy Chapman Andrews discovered the first nest of dinosaur eggs and a treasure trove of dinosaur bones. Among the finds? A flightless, feathery carnivorous ancestor of modern birds of prey: the Velociraptor.

So, happy birthday, Genghis. May the nation you founded — and the birds of prey you came to love — flourish in the days to come.

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