

Rising from the ashes: The true Fire Horse



According to the Chinese zodiac, the rare, auspicious, and energetic Year of the Fire Horse has been underway since February 17, 2026 – the first time since 1966.

Back then, the wild Przewalski's horse went extinct. Sixty years later, this species – which narrowly escaped extinction – is once again roaming the wild steppes. What a sight!

Photo: © Cyril Ruoso

Let's protect the primordial wild horse and its habitat.



Reborn from just 12 wild-caught individuals, the takhi stands as a testament to the damage caused by human short-sightedness. But it also shows that, with good will, skill, perseverance, and a bit of luck, the seemingly impossible can become reality. All of these elements are still needed to ensure that the true Fire Horse has a future.

Dear friends of the wild horse

In 2026, some 60 million domesticated horses populate the globe. Our flagship species, the primordial wild horse, Przewalski's horse, or takhi, may therefore seem somewhat ordinary to some. Just a horse. But this impression is deceptive. For not only is this wild species – with fewer than 2,500 individuals worldwide and barely half of them living in the wild – about as rare as the giant panda, the quintessential symbol of species conservation. It is also more unique in evolutionary terms and more globally threatened. In fact, the Przewalski's horse, as the only surviving species of true wild horses, is an exceptionally precious species with a very high conservation priority.

On top of that, it is a keystone species, i.e. essential – like all other wild equids – for maintaining the health of their respective Asian and African steppe habitats.

The entire wild lineage of our domesticated horses is anything but ordinary. And it is under enormous pressure. Of the 7 species (the Przewalski's horse, 3 wild donkey species, and 3 zebra species), only two are not endangered. Let's harness the energy of the Year of the Fire Horse to safeguard the precious takhi and their wild relatives for the future. So they won't have to be rescued from the ashes again. Are you fired up about this too?

Dr. Reinhard Schnidrig, President, ITG



Photo: © Cyril Ruoso

Achieved a lot

Establishing a self-sustaining, wild takhi population was the foundation of our program, which has now been running for 34 years. The fact that this remains our central mission demonstrates just how much tenacity, perseverance, and patience are required to reintroduce a species that has been driven to extinction in the wild – especially a large mammal with high habitat requirements.

The visionary pioneers who conceived this bold idea and began to implement it with the help of enthusiastic patrons could hardly have imagined the scale and diversity of the tasks that they and subsequent generations of volunteers would have to shoulder to make this dream a reality.

They have achieved a lot. Without their dedication and the support of other donors, both large and small, this would have been impossible. It is only because of this that today, in the Great Gobi B Strictly Protected Area, one can see primordial wild horses galloping across the steppe just as our Stone Age ancestors did over 30,000 years ago, when they hunted and revered them.

The population of wild takhi in the reserve has rebounded, and the species' risk of extinction – as assessed according to IUCN criteria – has been gradually downgraded from “extinct in the wild” to “critically endangered” and then to “endangered.” An achievement that is truly unparalleled. What's more: through the very close monitoring of the animals – first those released into the wild, then those born in the wild – we have gained a great deal of knowledge about this species, which has enchanted us since time immemorial but has only recently been the subject of scientific research.

We are still a long way from our goal of 1,000 breeding-age takhi that can sustain themselves without human intervention. Currently, there are likely around 300 individuals living in the Great Gobi B Reserve.

It is clear that crucial challenges must be overcome for the continued success of our program. The most important one: In the face of climate change, the ecosystem must remain intact enough to allow key species – Stipa grasses and large herbivores such as the takhi, khulan, and goitered gazelle – to maintain nutrient cycles and thereby preserve the ecological balance, habitat structure, and biodiversity in one of the last large-scale, wild semi-deserts on Earth.

Adopt a foal for CHF/USD 100!
<https://savethewildhorse.org/en/donate/>

The primordial wild horse plays a key role in steppe habitats. As the only surviving true wild horse, it is a top conservation priority.

Become a member of the *Friends of the Wild Horse!*

- Foal membership (young people, students / apprentices) CHF/USD 20.-
- Wild horse member CHF/USD 50.-
- Takhi Harem (family or couple) CHF/USD 200.-
- Takhi patron CHF/USD 500.-

Suprises and Challenges

The fact that today's Przewalski's horses, descended from zoo takhis released into the wild, still show suprisingly little inclination to roam, even in the third generation, demonstrates just how significant the loss of inherited behaviors can be for a species that has gone extinct in the wild. In a semi-desert with sparse and seasonally fluctuating resources, roaming over vast areas is essential for survival in order to find optimal conditions.

Yet this instinctive knowledge, which remained intact in the goitered gazelle and the khulan, was lost due to the extermination of the takhi in the 19th and 20th centuries. How can we teach it to today's herds again? Through temporary salt licks or feeding stations? If the takhi are to survive in the future without human intervention, they must relearn to use their habitat more actively.

Free-roaming takhi are surprisingly long-lived. The legendary mare "Zur" gave birth to a healthy foal at the age of 26. But life in the Gobi, with its changing conditions, demands a high degree of adaptability. The climate has become noticeably drier, and extreme winters are more frequent now. A cashmere boom has intensified grazing competi-



Photo: © Great Gobi B

tion from goats. And the takhi's immobility exacerbates intraspecific competition, as it concentrates the majority of the population in the vicinity of the Khonin us oasis.



A group of khulan at a watering hole in the Great Gobi B Reserve. About 80% of the world's khulan live in the Mongolian Gobi. They need water every day and will even dig for it if necessary. This species does not live in harems, but in groups whose size varies greatly depending on conditions, with the only stable unit being a mare and her foal. Photo: © Camera trapping GGB 2025

Another difficult winter

By the end of 2025, the takhi in the reserve were in good condition. In February, however, heavy snow fell, and temperatures did not rise above -25°C during the day or -30°C at night for weeks on end. Many herders ran out of hay. Snowfall in March again created difficult conditions for wildlife and livestock. Working with the relevant environmental and agricultural authorities, the Great Gobi B team organized and delivered 900 bales of emergency hay for livestock, which were funded by the Gobi Altai District. During the last 10 days of March, the weather improved, and temperatures rose to between -2 and $+3^{\circ}\text{C}$.



Photo: © Great Gobi B

Goal: Self-sustaining takhi populations

The global wild takhi population remains fragile and highly fragmented. Most populations are neither large enough nor truly wild. Significant efforts are still needed to reintroduce this charismatic wildlife species into its original steppe habitats.

In the 18'000 km² Great Gobi B Reserve, the ranger team led by Oyunsaikhan Ganbaatar managed to individually monitor each of the nearly identical-looking takhi until 2022 – an extraordinary achievement. Each animal was individually identified and observed weekly throughout its entire life. By the summer of 2022, the population had grown to over 400 animals, making it impossible to continue the individual-based life history monitoring. Monitoring was shifted to the population level and now follows a theme-based seasonal plan. Data is collected on the umbrella species, other species, watering holes, mare pregnancy, foal births, winter feeding, etc. Some of this data is now recorded digitally via the SMART app.

The focus thus shifted from intensive monitoring of the umbrella species to a comprehensive assessment of the takhi population within the Great Gobi B ecosystem.

This also allows for better early detection of problems. How much precipitation is there in the reserve? What is the condition of the various pastures? Are the takhi in good physical condition? Do any show signs of illness? What are they dying of? Where are infection risks from livestock building up? Are there any takhi-/domestic horse hybrids emerging?

In collaboration with the Ulaanbaatar University of Veterinary Medicine, we are training rangers to promptly identify diseases and causes of death among takhi. In line with the One Health concept, we also support efforts to establish a vaccination program for local livestock. The healthier the livestock are, the healthier the nomads and wild animals that come into contact with them will be.

The Gobi has changed: the climate has become noticeably drier, extreme winters are more frequent, and there is greater grazing pressure from livestock.

Takhi monitoring was shifted to the population level and now follows a theme-based seasonal plan. Data is collected partly on paper and partly digitally via the SMART app.

Climate change as a risk



The very last wild takhi were sighted in the semi-desert region of what is now the Great Gobi B in the 1960s. However, they were not living in their ideal habitat, and this situation is being exacerbated by climate change.

Photo: © Camera trapping GGB 2025

In the past, takhi were not only heavily hunted but also increasingly driven out of their habitats by human activity, forcing them to change their diet, as hair analyses show¹. If given a choice, they prefer more nutrient-rich habitats². The Great Gobi B is now scientifically regarded as a rather suboptimal habitat for them³, particularly as it is regularly afflicted by dzuds (extreme winters).

Especially after a summer drought, a dzud can have fatal consequences for livestock and wild animals, as they enter winter already weakened. Such summer droughts are becoming more frequent due to climate change. The traditional nomadic use of the Great Gobi B (now a biosphere reserve) can exacerbate this food shortage when livestock numbers are high.

Taken together, these factors pose a risk that threatens the fragile and relatively immobile takhi population as a whole. Winter feeding of the takhi helps to reduce this risk. In the long term, however, the pressure on the ecosystem must be reduced to a sustainable level. To achieve this, nomadic households need alternative or better sources of income. If the preservation of the ecosystem is also a priority for them, they will help to ward off destructive

activities such as mining, which are incompatible with the fragile ecosystem.

To capitalise on synergies arising from efforts to rebuild wild takhi populations, the ITG is seeking to collaborate with other relevant stakeholders through the Przewalski's Horse Conservation Alliance, established in 2025. Together with partners, it is also exploring further, climatically less critical sites for reintroduction projects, such as in Altyn Dala (Kazakhstan).

In addition to establishing a self-sustaining, wild takhi population, the ITG is also working to ensure the sustainable use of the reserve's ecosystem, its monitoring and protection, as well as to inform and raise awareness among the local population regarding the conservation strategy. In doing so, we place great importance on professional, partnership-based project management both within Mongolia and out of Europe.

Species portrait: Dzungarian Racerunner



Photo: © Erdenetushig Pureev, Mongolian National University of Education

Small lizards in a hot, dry habitat – that's hardly surprising. But in the Gobi, it doesn't just get very hot; in winter, it also gets very, very cold. Easily -40°C for weeks on end. A problem for a cold-blooded animal. Nevertheless, *Eremias przewalskii*, a true lizard from the *Lacertidae* family, is endemic to Mongolia and neighbouring regions. In English, it is known as the Mongolian racerunner (was 'Przewalski's racerunner' too much of a tongue-twister?).

This small, lizard-sized species can indeed run at breakneck speed! As a diurnal hunter, it lives in extremely arid habitats such as deserts and steppes, where it seeks shelter in crevices, in the sand and amongst rocks, preying on small invertebrates.

Its striped or spotted pattern provides essential camouflage against numerous feathered and furry predators. As an adaptation to its extreme habitat, it is viviparous – laying eggs is not a viable strategy here, as they are too susceptible to dehydration.

On top, the racerunner is also capable of regulating a large part of its moisture balance through its skin. To do this, it seeks out hiding places that

are damp at ground level at night due to rapidly falling temperatures. During the cold months, this small reptile remains dormant.

The genus *Eremias* is not only highly successful but also species-rich, and somewhat confusing for taxonomists. To date, around 40 species are known, which differ considerably in appearance and can also be divided ecologically into 'rock and sand forms'.

However, a phylogenetic and morphological analysis in 2017 showed that the 'rock form' of *Eremias* from western Mongolia and eastern Kazakhstan represents a distinct mtDNA lineage, which also differs significantly, both morphologically and ecologically, from all other species within the *Eremias multiocellata* – *E. przewalskii* – species complex.

It appears that, alongside the "sand form" *Eremias przewalskii*, the Dzungarian Gobi is also home to a genetically and morphologically distinct "rock form", which the authors describe as a new species: *Eremias dzungarica* sp. nov.⁴

There you have it: the Dzungarian Gobi is something unique. Including its very own lizard!

¹ Kaczensky, P., Burnik Šturm, M., Sablin, M.V. et al. Stable isotopes reveal diet shift from pre-extinction to reintroduced Przewalski's horses. *Sci Rep* 7, 5950 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-017-05329-6>

² Kaczensky, P., Ganbaatar, O., von Wehrden, H., and Walzer, C. 2008. Resource selection by sympatric wild equids in the Mongolian Gobi. *Journal of Applied Ecology* 45: 1762–1769.

³ Kaczensky, P., Ganbaatar, O., Altansukh, N., Enkhsaikhan, N., Stauffer, C. and Walzer, C. 2011. The danger of having all your eggs in one basket – winter crash of the Przewalski's Horses in the Mongolian Gobi. *PLoS ONE* 6(12).

⁴ Orlova VF, Poyarkov NA, Chirikova MA, Nazarov RA, Munkhbaatar M, Munkhbayar K, Terbish K: MtDNA differentiation and taxonomy of Central Asian racerunners of *Eremias multiocellata*-*E. przewalskii* species complex (Squamata, Lacertidae). *Zootaxa* 2017, 4282 (1): 001–042. <https://doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.4282.1.1>

Let's secure the future of the wild horse together



“I've been fascinated by the animal world ever since I was a child. Here, I work in a unique ecosystem home to an umbrella species that is exceptional in ecological, evolutionary and cultural terms. Simply brilliant.”
Tsogtdelger Batsaikhan, Research Assistant, ITG Mongolia

Your donation has an impact – and every contribution counts!

Some examples of what your donation can achieve.

USD/CHF 50.-

Your contribution towards information materials for herders helps protect precious takhi genes from hybridisation with domestic horses.

USD/CHF 75.-

No patrol run can yet manage without (expensive!) petrol. You fill up the tank.

USD/CHF 100.-

Bats are keystone species. Which ones can be found in the Great Gobi B? You can tell us – by making a donation towards the purchase of two bat detectors.

USD/CHF 200.-

One Health for humans, wildlife and livestock! Your contribution towards the laboratory costs for early detection helps protect takhi from infections transmitted by livestock.



The Takhi Post is sponsored by 1wild Foundation.
www.1wild.org

Photo: © GGB 2025

The ITG Board works on a voluntary basis.
Every donation goes directly towards the protection of wild horses and their habitat.

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