

ITG INTERNATIONAL TAKHI GROUP

Association for the re-introduction and conservation of the Przewalski's horse (takhi) in Central Asia



Annual Report 2024

International Takhi Group ITG

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The President's Preface

Endless steppe? That was once upon a time. Large parts of the Eurasian steppe belt, which stretched over 7,000 kilometres from Hungary to Manchuria, were turned into agricultural and industrial land. Today, there are only a few intact, large steppe areas in which the original biodiversity has been preserved. One of the most important is the 18,000 square kilometre Great Gobi B strictly protected area in south-western Mongolia. It is home to around 300 wild horses (takhi), several thousand Asiatic wild asses (khulan) and goitered gazelles, Argali wild sheep, ibex, snow leopards and a large number of other endangered steppe and mountain wildlife species. In the winter months, nomadic herders join them with their herds of small livestock.

Utilising this unique ecosystem so carefully that it survives - the ITG has been dedicated to this tricky task for almost 30 years. We have succeeded in saving the wild horse, which was already extinct in the wild half a century ago, and reintroducing it to its last refuge. A spectacular success for species conservation! But what does success mean here? When is a species threatened with extinction saved? Only when its survival as a wild animal is more likely in the long term than its extinction.

You need long, very long breath for that. Especially for a species that has only survived in zoos and has lost vital knowledge. A few harsh winters, a severe drought exacerbated by too much competition from domestic livestock, a rampant virus, even the corruption of their genetic material by free-range domestic horses are enough to jeopardise this hard-won success.

But with enough prudence and tenacity, it can be achieved. In 2024, we have once again achieved a great deal, thanks to the help of foundations that support us and many donations from private individuals. I firmly believe that the last true wild horse on our planet has a future if we build on the achievements of recent years and keep at it.



The Takhi in the UNESCO biosphere reserve of the Great Gobi in Mongolia

Takhi-Population:

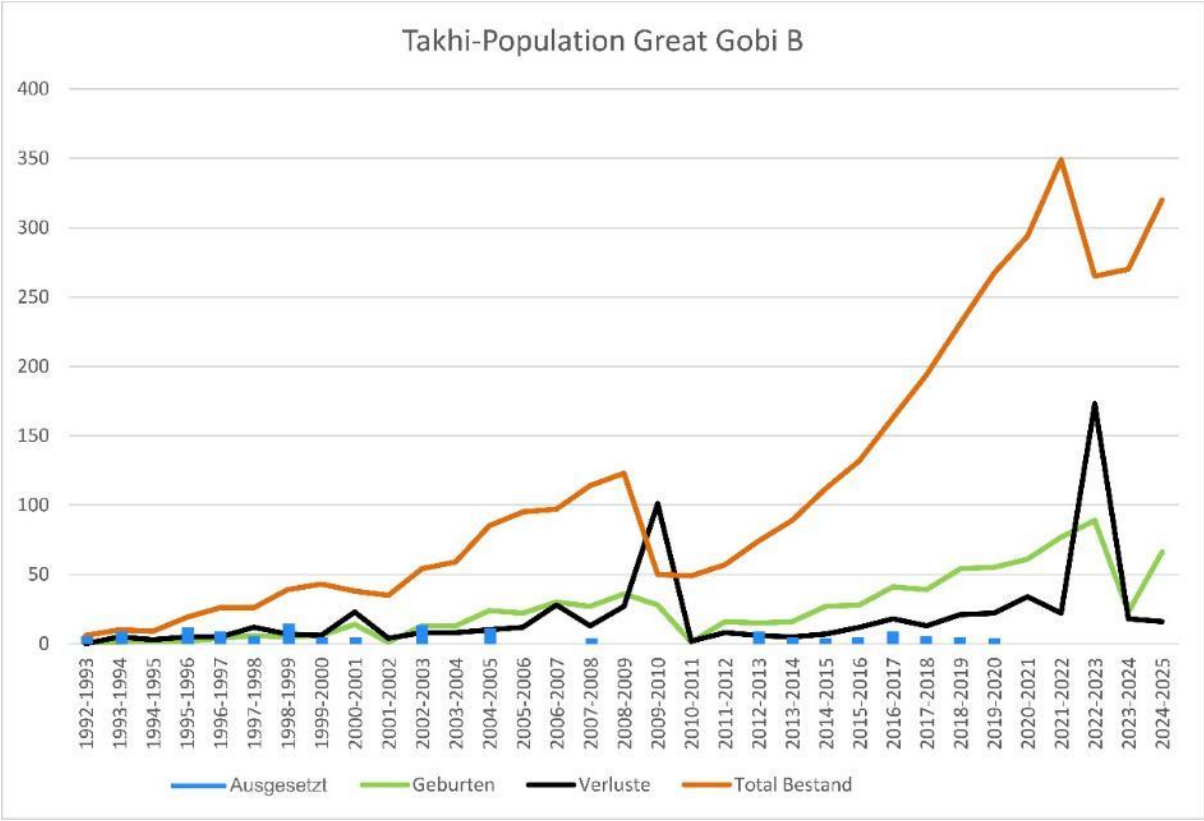


The takhi got through the first half of winter 2023/2024 well thanks to early hay feeding. A newly purchased lorry facilitates winter feeding and the work of the rangers. Past years have shown that weather conditions towards the end of winter can have a major impact on the takhi population. If it gets very cold again or a lot of snow falls, the takhi have to be very resilient. Depending on the physical condition of the animals, additional hay may have to be fed beyond March.

After the severe losses in the previous winter, the population trend in 2024 was positive again. However, the vegetation cover is being overexploited by excessive numbers of small livestock. At least 60,000 goats, sheep and domestic horses roam the reserve during the winter months, which is almost four times as many as all 5,000 khulans (Asiatic wild asses), 11,000 goitered gazelles and 300 takhi. The overexploitation of the fragile ecosystem, most likely exacerbated by climate change, is the central problem of the Great Gobi B Biosphere Reserve.



Population development of the Takhi in the Great Gobi B strictly protected area 1992-2024: (Population within the biological takhi year from 1st of May – 30th of April)



Births, deaths and total number of takhi in the Great Gobi B reserve. In contrast to the deaths (black curve) and births (green curve), the orange curve does not show the actual fluctuation of the total population, but the number of takhi as at 30 April (survivors after the winter). The previous peak of the population before the extreme winter (Dzud) of 2022/2023 was approx. 400 individuals. In the dzud of winter 2022/2023, around 180 animals died, including foals. At the end of 2024, the takhi population numbered just over 300 animals, including 50 foals. The winter mortality rate for 2024/2025 is expected to be known in early summer 2025.

Cooperation with politics and research, priorities 2024

Management of the extended protected area

The central management tool for protected area management is the ‘management plan’, based on an analysis of the natural values and challenges. The definition of site-specific and time-specific objectives as well as the activities required to achieve the objectives, the responsibilities and the required budget should help to prioritise what is important and do what is feasible. In 2024, the park administration, with the support of experts from the Mongolian Ministry of Environment & Climate Change and the ITG, evaluated the 2019-2023 management plan and developed the new 2025-2035 management plan on this basis.

Takhi and wildlife monitoring is a central element of the management plan. Thanks to the appointment of Ankhzaya Nasantogtokh as a junior takhi scientist, we were able to strengthen our human resources in this area. She works partly in Ulaanbaatar and partly in the Great Gobi B,

is studying zoology and is writing her master's thesis on the takhi. Ankhzaya's focus is on switching from individual monitoring of the takhi to group observation. In the reporting year, the former park director, Ganbaatar Oyunsaikhan, supported Ankhzaya intensively in monitoring the takhi and shared his extensive knowledge of the wild horses with her. This close collaboration will continue twice a year in the future.

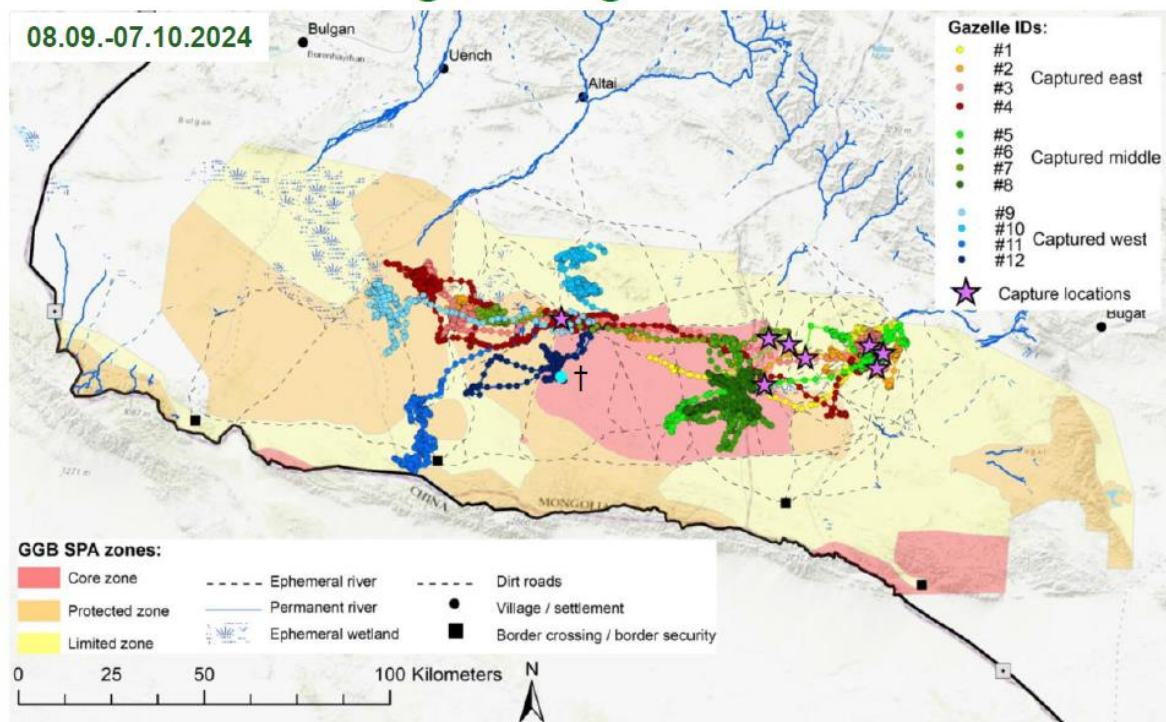
SMART software is increasingly being used for both takhi and wildlife monitoring. The rangers were trained accordingly in several training sessions. These training sessions also led to improvements in the software, with new species being added and area maps being displayed in greater detail.

Water is the source of life for all living creatures; even more so in the sometimes very dry Dzungarian Gobi! In order to protect existing springs and preserve them for wildlife, two springs and the solar well near Takhi Us were restored in 2024.

Study on the goitered gazelle

Knowledge about this species is scarce and the study aims to provide information about the habitat use and migration patterns of gazelles in the Dzungarian Gobi. To this end, 12 gazelles were captured in just 3 days in September 2024 and fitted with GPS collars. Initial records show that the animals migrate far and in all directions, sometimes even out of the protected area. The study will run for 5 years, with the capture of further animals planned for September 2025.

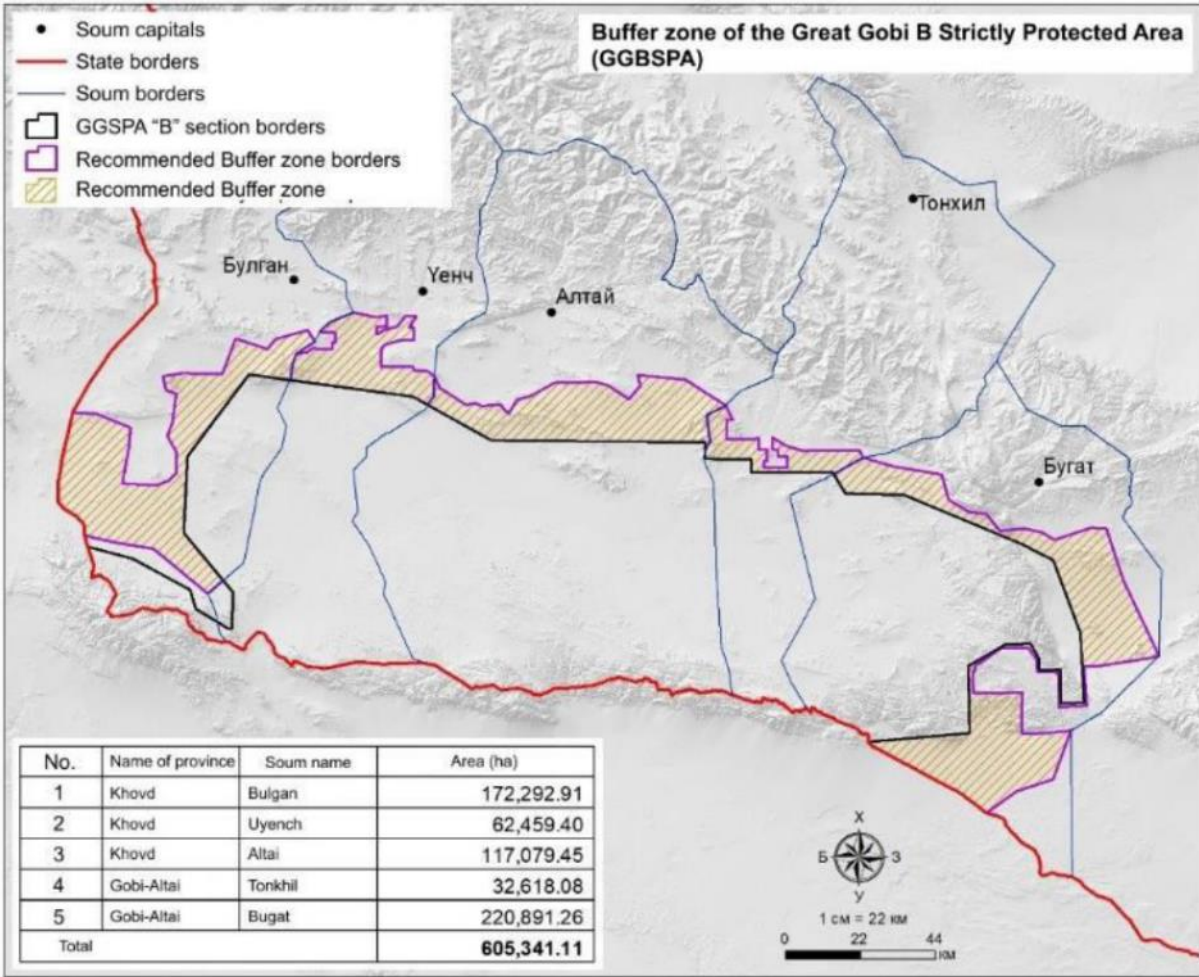
First movements of goitered gazelles in Great Gobi B SPA



The map shows the zoning of the protected area, with the core zone (red), the protected zone (orange) and the restricted zone (yellow). The different coloured dots each show the movement patterns of 12 tracked goitered gazelles.

New buffer zone for the extended protected area

The establishment of the buffer zone of the extended protected area in 2024 marked the completion of a major piece of work that is crucial for the coexistence of wild animals and nomads. In countless discussions with the representatives of the five districts in which the protected area is located, the boundaries and utilisation regulations were defined. The talks also increased understanding of each other's needs.



The map shows the national border (red), the border of the protected area (black), the buffer zone border (purple), the buffer zone (hatched) and the district borders (blue).

Socio-economic projects

ITG is continuing to invest in socio-economic programmes in order to show the nomadic families in the area surrounding the reserve how higher added value from cashmere and camel wool and quality eco-tourism can generate additional income - and subsequently reduce competition for grazing in the wildlife reserve with small livestock herds. The projects are gaining a foothold and are progressing well. Products made from camel wool were produced and sold for the first time in 2024. The revenue surplus from ecotourism of over USD 19,000 shows that this business, if run properly, has a lot of potential for development.

New park centre in Altai of Khovd

Preparations for the construction of the new park centre in Altai of Khovd are progressing well. The interior design is currently being planned and all those involved are awaiting the start of construction. At the same time, the ITG has started the planning work for the conception and realization of an exhibition about the takhi reintroduction project as well as the ecosystem and the nomadic culture of the Gobi.

Application for the establishment of a UNESCO World Heritage Site

The ITG participated in the elaborate preparation of Mongolia's application, which was submitted to the UNESCO Secretariat in Paris at the end of January 2025. The aim is to register the Gobi protected areas Great Gobi A and B, Small Gobi A and B and two mountain protected areas as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, the impending construction of a road for mining transport through the Great Gobi A reserve is hardly compatible with this. At the Naran Sevstei border crossing, the road would even run through the middle of the roaming areas of the last 30 Gobi brown bears. A fundamental decision by the authorities is pending here. To enable the political authorities to assess the natural values of the Great Gobi and the risks of mining in a protected area when making their decision, the ITG has been involved in analysing and disseminating the relevant facts.

Development of an international network of Takhi experts

At a workshop in Hustai National Park (Mongolia) at the end of September 2024, the largely separate programmes with wild and semi-wild takhi populations in 10 countries decided to improve communication, cooperation and data exchange. The ITG is actively helping to institutionalise this network of experts.



Information for the public

Our website (www.savethewildhorse.org), information brochures, Facebook & Instagram and the Takhi-Post provide information about the activities of the ITG association in German, English, Mongolian and French. In addition, ITG board members, the managing director of the ITG office in Switzerland and project manager for the socio-economic project, Lena Michler, former board member Mirjam Würsch and the director of the ITG office in Ulaanbaatar, Batsukh Jamiyandorj, regularly answer questions from journalists from newspapers, magazines, radio and television as well as in lectures.

The first issue of Takhi-Post in spring 2024 focused on the topic of ‘Success requires staying power’. The second issue at the end of the year focussed on the conservation of the Eurasian cold steppe.



The ITG Association

At the end of 2024, the ITG Association consists of five organisations (Zurich Langenberg Wilderness Park; Bruderhaus Winterthur Wildlife Park; Prague Zoo; Nuremberg Zoo; Berlin Zoo) and ten natural persons, who also form the Board of Directors (Reinhard Schnidrig, President; Christian Stauffer, Vice President; Rebekka Blumer, Treasurer; Ruth Baumgartner, Actuary; Sven Hoffmann, Legal Advisor; Anita Fahrni, Assessor; Miroslav Bobek, representative of Prague Zoo; Jaroslav Simek, representative of Prague Zoo; Karin Hindenlang, representative of Zurich

Wilderness Park. The ITG Honorary President, Thomas Pfisterer, is invited to all Board meetings as a guest.

Lena Michler has headed the ITG Switzerland office on a 50% basis since June 2024. She is also responsible for the socio-economic project and is working on her dissertation. The ITG office in Ulaanbaatar is headed by Batsukh Jamiyandorj. Batsukh is supported in administrative areas by Dugarjav Munkhjargal and Ankhzaya Nasantogtokh as a research assistant. In Takhin tal, Buyantogtokh Dorjbat works as project coordinator and Altantsetseg Erdenebayar as project assistant for the socio-economic project.

The ITG is financially supported by the 'Friends of the Wild Horse' association. A loyal group of around 250 members and supporters have made the ITG's constant work possible for 25 years with their donations. All board members of the ITG and the Friends Association work on a voluntary basis.

At the end of January, the ITG once again organised the ITG workshop, which has already become a fixed annual event. The workshop took place at the Wild Park Bruderhaus in Winterthur (Switzerland) and was very well attended by participants from Mongolia and partner organisations. The main concrete outcomes were the evaluation of the 2019-2023 management plan and takhi mortality in the Dzud winter of 2022-2023, joint deliberations on strategic challenges and the business plan for the new park centre in Altai/Khovd, as well as discussion of the next steps in the socio-economic projects and the preparation of the application to nominate the Mongolian Gobi as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



During a workshop, three meetings and various working group meetings, the 2024 Board dealt with the following topics, among others:

- Cooperation with the political authorities and the relevant institutions of the state, the Gobi-Altai and Khovd aimags and the five park communities in Mongolia;
- Strategic management and further development of the ITG office in Ulaanbaatar and establishment of an ITG office in Switzerland;
- Development of a new management plan 2025-2035 for the Gobi B SPA;
- Monitoring of the free-ranging takhi population in the Gobi;
- Implementation of the National Takhi Programme in Mongolia;
- Research priorities and research support, in particular in the areas of wildlife/ livestock health monitoring, avifauna and gazelle ecology;
- Socio-economic projects with the nomads in the vicinity of the protected area with the development of the supply chain for sustainably produced cashmere and camel wool and ecotourism offers;
- Co-operation with other Takhi resettlement projects in Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan;
- Collaboration in the development of a Takhi expert network;
- Planning work for the construction of the new park centre in Altai/Khovd;
- Delineation of the new buffer zone to the extended protected area;
- Application to nominate the Mongolian Gobi as a UNESCO World Heritage Site;
- Development of know-how and capacities among the staff of the protected area, including the establishment of a student exchange programme with local universities;
- Information campaign among the population and in schools on the enlarged protected area and on species and nature conservation in general: continuation of the 'Young Researchers / We are gamekeepers!' programme;



Finances

Contributions from members, donations and support from foundations generated income of CHF 358,000 in the reporting year. We owe substantial contributions to the Jean-Pierre and Sonja Siegfried Foundation, the Boguth-Jonak Foundation, the Lovioz Foundation, the Fondation OptisomAs and a foundation in Zurich. The Friends of the Wild Horse Association also made a substantial contribution once again.

Funds were invested in the management of the protected area, the monitoring of the Takhi, research, the socio-economic project 'Co-existence of wild animals and nomads' and the further development of the infrastructure. The ITG association closed the year with a profit of CHF 56,462. As at 31 December 2024, the association's assets amounted to CHF 219,669, of which cash and cash equivalents totalled CHF 168,828.

The annual financial statements can be viewed here: <https://savethewildhorse.org/en/medias/>

Reinhard Schnidrig, President

