

BirdingASIA

Number 6 • December 2006



BirdingASIA—Bulletin of the Oriental Bird Club

PIONEERS OF ASIAN ORNITHOLOGY

Nikolay Przhevalskiy (1839–1888)

EUGENE POTAPOV & ROALD POTAPOV

Early years and some genealogical remarks

Most people first hear of Przhevalskiy because of the wild horse that bears his name and which has been the subject of major conservation work as the only subspecies of horse never to have been domesticated (see King 2006). But birders soon discover that the man was associated with many interesting bird taxa, too. So who was this explorer with the unpronounceable (and unspellable) name?

Nikolay Mikhailovich Przhevalskiy (commonly also written Przewalski and Przevalsky—this latter is how he commonly signed his name—but with other permutations) was a deeply charismatic figure (1.98 m tall and 140 kg at the time he was made a colonel in the Russian Army). He went to the most remote and then totally unexplored regions of Asia primarily as a military man, and quickly achieved recognition for his bravery, zeal, knowledge and hard work. But it was as a zoologist, botanist, climatologist, geologist, geographer, cartographer and writer that he returned in triumph from all but the last of his journeys.

He was born on 31 March (12 April by the Julian calendar) 1839 in the village of Kimborovo, Smolensk district, Russia. His father, Mikhail Kuzmich Przhevalskiy, was a retired army officer. The family name originated from the cossack Karnila Anisimovich Parovalskiy, who went into Polish military service and adapted his surname to Przhevalskiy: *przhe* in Polish means “through”, and *valit’* means “to fight”. Karnila Anisimovich was indeed a fearless soldier and in 1561 even managed to become a member of Polish nobility. The Polish King Stephan Batory granted him a crest of arms for his bravery in battles against the Russians at Polotsk and Velikie Luki. According to the Protocols of the Vitebsk Dvoryanskoe Sobranie (Aristocracy Club), given to Nikolay Przhevalskiy’s father on 8 March 1823, this crest of arms had a red background with a cocked bow with an arrow aimed up, and three ostrich feathers.

Karnila Przhevalskiy fathered two sons, Bogdan and Gavriil. Gavriil had a son Grigoriy who married a woman of the Russian Orthodox Church. Their three sons each inherited large estates in the Bitesk Voevodstvo on condition that they stayed in the Russian Orthodox Church. One, Lavrentiy, himself had three sons, one of whom, Foma, had a son called Kazimir. Over this time the border between Poland and Russia was constantly changing, and the estates were changing countries. At one point



Plate 1. Portrait of Major-General N. Przhevalskiy engraved from a photo taken before his departure to his last expedition in 1888.

the Przhevalskiys lost their Orthodox affiliation, and Kazimir (Nikolay’s grandfather) was sent to a Jesuit school in Polotsk, now in Belarus. He ran away, converted to Russian Orthodoxy and took the Russian name Kuzma Fomich. When he was living on the Skuratovo estate (one of the three original Przhevalskiy estates) he married a woman called Krasovskaya. Their only son, Mikhail, served in the Russian Army and fought “Polish insurgents” (the first so-called Polish Uprising 1830–1831), but retired in 1835 because of deteriorating health. Initially he lived with his father, who was manager of a large estate belonging to a Mr. Palibin. Not far away there was a small village called Kimborovo, bought for 29,000 roubles by one A. S. Karetnikov. The census of 1859 listed the village’s total human population as 16 souls (serfs). Karetnikov, himself born a serf in Tula, was a social climber, and at the peak of his career became a member of the tsar’s court and oversaw one of the customs terminals in St Petersburg. He did not like hunting, but loved birds and monkeys and was very clever and popular amongst local people. His younger daughter married Mikhail Przhevalskiy.

The couple first lived in a small house in the village “Sloboda” (in 1964 renamed to Przhevalskoe) (55°30'N 31°50'W), 1.5 km outside Kimborovo. After the estate was rebuilt in 1843, it was named “Otradnoe” (from the Russian word “otrada” – joy). This estate was home to Nikolay Przhevalskiy for his entire life. The house was rebuilt in 1887, and stood until it was burnt down by the Nazis in 1941. It was restored close to the original in 1977 and is now open to the public as a museum. It displays books and artifacts belonged to Nikolay Przhevalskiy, as well as maps and photographs. Also restored was the famous “Przhevalskiy hut”, a small gatehouse, the sacred place he used as a study. The estate still treasures an aspen tree which was there in Przhevalskiy’s day, and has four poplar trees planted on his orders.

Nikolay Przhevalskiy was only seven when his father died. The boy was brought up by his mother and uncle, who was a passionate hunter and fisherman. Young Nikolay spend almost all his spare time hunting and fishing—the commonest occupation for a youth at the time. In 1849–1855 he attended a gymnasium in Smolensk (now school N7 or Przhevalskiy Gimnasium, Lenina Street 4). Although he had a unique capacity to memorise any text read only once, he was not the best student, and spent much of his time playing sports. His experiences there were not great either: he always remembered a sadistic school inspector who meted out corporal punishments “for his own pleasure”. After graduating, Przhevalskiy became a cadet and served as a junior officer for five years. In 1860 he asked for a transfer to the Amur River in the Russian Far East. The result was three days of detention for “dreaming too much”—a response typical of the Russian Army. This did not stop him. In the same year he applied for a course at the Nikolaevskaya Academy of the Russian Army Headquarters. It was necessary to pass a very difficult entrance exam to get into this highly prestigious educational institution. Nikolay prepared for the exam on his own, without extra tuition—quite a challenge for a serving officer. At the exam he demonstrated his phenomenal memory and a notable ability to think independently. He matriculated at the Academy of the Headquarters in 1861, and graduated in 1863 with the rank of “poruchik” (lieutenant). Soon afterwards he published his first book, *Memories of sportsmen*, and started his military career in Poland at the time of the second Polish uprising of 1863–1864. During this tour of duty he immersed himself in the study of natural history—his most beloved books were Humboldt’s *Pictures of nature* and Richter’s *Asia*—and compiled a scientific review “Military-statistical survey of the Amur

Region”. Although at the time he had never visited the region himself, the review was so accurate that it sparked a tremendous interest among specialists in the area. As a result, the 24-year-old Przhevalskiy was elected to the Russian Geographical Society on 5 February 1864.

That year he took up a position at the cadet school in Warsaw. He proved a charismatic teacher, loving his cadets as his own children. He also built a wide network of educated friends, such as Wladyslaw Taczanowski, the father of Polish ornithology. Besides normal classes he gave public lectures on natural history and travel. He also tried to get a position at the General Headquarters. Initially his Polish surname was an obstacle, especially in the aftermath of the uprising, but his powerful friends, including General Chernitskiy, a commander of the Polish division, helped him: in November 1866 Przhevalskiy joined the Headquarters.

Ussuri trip

Przhevalskiy was immediately sent to the Russian Far East: to Irkutsk and the Ussuri Region (part of the Siberian Military District), where he studied the area’s natural history. In 1869 he was promoted to adjunct officer of the headquarters of the Amur division, where he developed a reputation as a brave officer and avid gambler. Fellow officers recalled one of his card games when he amassed 10,000 roubles for “his future Asian travels”. In 1870, on his return to St Petersburg, Przhevalskiy, using his own funds, published his *Travels in Ussuriland in 1867–1869*, an encyclopaedic description of the natural history of the Russian Far

Plate 2. Type specimen of Kessler’s Thrush *Turdus kessleri* Przhevalskiy, 1876 (the specimen is a part of the bird exhibit at the Zoological Museum, St Petersburg).



East with masses of new information useful even today. The book made him an instant celebrity. Scientists in St Petersburg such as Sevenov-Tian-Shanskiy and Pleske became firm friends. He was only the third ornithologist to visit the Ussuri area after L. I. von Schrenk in 1854–1856 and R. K. Maak in 1859. His expedition furnished St Petersburg's Academy of Sciences with extensive collections of animals and plants, including more than 300 specimens of birds and several hundred eggs, and he was the first to describe Lake Khanka as a key staging area for migratory waterfowl. The section on birds in this book is a major contribution, listing 224 bird species and subspecies, including 36 species new for the region. Among these new species were Red-crowned Crane *Grus japonensis* and Crested Ibis *Nipponia nippon*, which later became locally extinct.

First expedition

On his return to St Petersburg in 1869 Przhevalskiy began laying plans for a journey to the remote regions of Central Asia unvisited by Europeans since Marco Polo. The Russian Army Headquarters gave its blessing, and financial backing came in equal parts from the Military Headquarters (not least because this was the time of the Great Game between Russia and Britain, when the two Old World superpowers sought for strategic supremacy in Asia), the Russian Geographical Society, Przhevalskiy's private funds and the Botanical Garden (now Institute) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The expedition set off on 24 February 1871 and returned on 9 October 1873. Although this coincided with the Moslem uprising against Chinese rule in Gansu and Qinghai provinces, the expedition produced some astonishing results. It covered a total of 11,300 verst (12,055 km) on caravan routes out of which 5,300 verst (5,654 km) were mapped, and it surveyed the sources of the Huan-he River, Quaidam Depression, Koko-Nor

Lake, Ordos Plateau, and eastern Mongolia. Four times a day the travellers recorded air and soil temperature and humidity. They recorded the customs of local people. They collected 1,000 specimens of birds of 238 species and subspecies, 130 skins of mammals of 42 species, 11 species of fish, about 3,000 insects and 4,000 herbarium sheets with 400 species of plants. While en route they lost 24 horses and 55 camels. Total expenditure was 19,000 roubles.

On his return Przhevalskiy wrote a two-volume report entitled *Mongolia and the country of Tangut* (Tanguts are the people of Mongolian origin living in the Koko-Nor area) published by the Russian Geographic Society and translated into German and English in 1876. The report contains accounts of 289 species of birds which the expedition observed and/or procured, including 12 taxa new for science. The latter included such remarkable species as Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*, Chinese Grouse *Tetrastes sewerzowi*, Tibetan Partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae sifanica*, Przhevalskiy's (Rust-neckclaced) Partridge *Alectoris magna*, and Pink-tailed Bunting or Przhevalskiy's Rosefinch *Urocynchramus pylzowi*. The report tabulated the distribution of species within the territory and the expedition's records of spring and autumn migrant birds in Central Asia.

The whole zoological collection was purchased by the Treasury for the sum of 10,000 roubles and deposited at the Zoological Museum in the Imperial Academy of Sciences, where it remains. Przhevalskiy spent the money wisely. He paid small sums to some of his trip companions who contributed to the collection, but he set aside the rest for his next trip to Central Asia.

Second expedition

The expedition started on 12 August 1876 from the Russian Military outpost of Kulja (now Yinin, Xinjan, China). The plan was to survey the Tarim basin and the mysterious Lob-Nor Lake, then to cover the north-eastern part of the Tibetan plateau and to travel further to Lhasa and the Himalayan range. Three years were allowed for this work, but the initial funding was sought for only two years. The plan was accepted by the Russian Geographical Society, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and military authorities. The Ministry of Finance agreed to back the venture with 24,000 roubles. The Military Headquarters offered Przhevalskiy a photcamera with accessories to take for his journey. However, he declined the offer since the set weighed 16 puds (262 kg) and hence was not transportable in the caravan (A. I. Andreev, pers. comm.).

The expedition managed to fulfil only the first part of the planned surveys: it covered the Tarim

Plate 3. Przhevalskiy's Partridge *Alectoris magna*, Chaka Desert, Qinghai, China, July 2002.



JOHN HOLMES



Plate 4. Ala Shan Redstart *Phoenicurus alaschanicus*, Matisi, Zhangye, Gansu, China, 4 May 2005.

basin and mapped Lob-Nor Lake and the Altyn-Tag mountain range separating Qaidam from Kashgaria, now Xinjan Province. Then it was interrupted owing to political tensions between Russia and China, and returned on 31 March 1878. There was another reason for abandoning the expedition: Przhevalskiy had received sad news of the death of his mother, and rushed back to Smolensk. Nevertheless the expedition brought back considerable material, including a large bird collection. The mammal collection contained the best prize: the famous Przhevalskiy Horse. The animal material again went to the Zoological Museum in St Petersburg, and the Imperial Academy of Sciences elected Przhevalskiy an Honorary Member. The book of the expedition, *From Kulja, across the Tien Shan to Lob-Nor*, another great hit, was almost instantly translated into several languages, including English.

Third expedition

This was perhaps the most successful of all of Przhevalskiy's expeditions. It began on 21 March 1879 with the aim of trekking across the Tibetan Plateau to Lhasa, and mapping the mountain ranges in the plateau and surrounding areas. It covered 7,200 verst (7,681 km) of caravan routes in the

remote areas beyond the borders of Russia. There were 13 members, with a support team mainly consisting of soldiers of the Russian Army, and a Buryatian man interpreted Mongolian and Russian. As a result of the expedition's dependence on Mongolian-speaking local guides, almost all of the geographical names given in the diaries are Mongolian, not Chinese or Tibetan. Przhevalskiy went as far south as 32°N, and had a full-blown battle with thugs immediately after crossing the Tang-la Pass, but Tibetan officials delegated by the Lhasa authorities denied him entry, citing religious reasons, just 65 km from Nagchy, at the border between the Tibetan and Xinjin administrative districts. Consequently letters from the Russian tsar to the Dalai Lama were not delivered and the episode soured political relations between Russia and Tibet for years to come. However, the expedition brought back a vast zoological collection, with a major bird component. Unfortunately there is no complete inventory of it, so the total number of specimens is unknown. The new species list included Crested Tit Warbler *Leptopoecile elegans*. The expedition returned on 19 October 1880 and its results were published in 1883. It became an instant legend, and Przhevalskiy a household name in educated circles all across the world.

Table 1. Some species of bird and mammal described by Nikolay Przhevalskiy or named for him.

Birds	
<i>Alectoris magna</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Przhevalskiy's Partridge
<i>Grus nigricollis</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Black-necked Crane
<i>Prunella koslowi</i> Przhevalskiy, 1887	Mongolian (Kozlov's) Accentor
<i>Turdus kessleri</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Kessler's Thrush
<i>Phoenicurus alaschanicus</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Ala Shan Redstart
<i>Leptopoeile elegans</i> Przhevalskiy, 1887	Crested Tit-Warbler
<i>Paradoxornis przewalskii</i> Berezowski & Bianchi, 1891	Rusty-throated Parrotbill
<i>Parus (Poecile) superciliosus</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	White-browed Tit
<i>Carpodacus rubicilloides</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Streaked Rosefinch
<i>Montifringilla taczanowskii</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	White-rumped Snowfinch
<i>Urocynchramus pylzowi</i> Przhevalskiy, 1876	Przhevalskiy's Rosefinch (Pylstov's Bunting) (Pink-tailed Rosefinch)
<i>Carpodacus roborowskii</i> Przhevalskiy, 1887	Tibetan Rosefinch
Mammals	
<i>Equus (caballus) przewalskii</i> Poliakov, 1881	Przhevalskiy's Horse
<i>Cervus albirostris</i> Przhevalskiy, 1883	Thorold's (White-lipped) Deer
<i>Brachiones przewalskii</i> Büchner, 1889	Przhevalskiy's Gerbil
<i>Eolagurus przewalskii</i> Büchner, 1889	Przhevalskiy's Steppe Lemming
<i>Procapra przewalskii</i> Büchner, 1891	Przhevalskiy's Gazelle

Fourth expedition

This expedition started on 21 October 1883 and covered the northern plains of Tibet and the southern part of the Quaidam depression, surveying lakes in the upper basin of the Huan-he River and the watershed between the Huan-he and Yangtze Rivers. For the first time on his Central Asian explorations Przhevalskiy had a camera with him. It was operated by V. I. Roborovskiy, his follower (he was on the third expedition) and fellow officer. However, the fate of the photographs remains unknown. As before, Przhevalskiy himself made numbers of sketches to illustrate the reports. The party returned on 29 October 1885 and, as usual, brought back extensive museum material. The results were published in 1888. The book contained the first description of the Mongolian Accentor *Prunella koslowi* from the Gobi plains, and of the endemic Tibetan Rosefinch *Carpodacus (Kozlowia) roborowskii*, a high-altitude species which occurs in elevations above 4,700 m (evidently Przhevalskiy regarded his photographer highly, even if the photographs have yet to be produced!).

Fifth (and last) expedition

With the publication of the 1888 book, Przhevalskiy, now holding the rank of general, set off for what proved to be his last expedition to Central Asia. There was something strange about the pace of Przhevalskiy in this trip and his remarks. Eyewitnesses recalled the moment right at the start when he boarded the train and shouted to F. D. Pleske, a leading ornithologist at the Zoological

Table 2. Key references concerning Nikolay Przhevalskiy.

Books/paper about Przhevalskiy

- Dubrovin, N. F. (1890) *Nikolai Mikhailovich Przheval'skii: biograficheskii ocherk* [Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalskii: biographical sketch]. St Petersburg: Berezovskiy.
- Kozlov, I. V. (1985) *Velikii putesthestvennik: zhizn' i deiatel'nost' N. M. Przheval'skogo, pervogo issledovatel'ia prirody Tsentral'noi Azii* [The great traveller: life and activities of N. M. Przhevalskiy, first explorer of Central Asian nature]. Moscow: Mysl'.
- King, S. R. B. (2006) Extinct in the Wild to Endangered: the history of Przhevalskiy's Horse (*Equus ferus przewalskii*) and its future conservation. *Mongolian J. Biol. Sci.* 3(2): 37–41.

Books by Przhevalskiy

- Przhevalskiy, N. M. (1870) *Travels in Ussuriland*. St Petersburg: Russian Geographical Society. (In Russian; reprinted in 1947, 1990).
- Przhevalskiy, N. M. (1876) *Mongolia, the Tangut country, and the solitudes of northern Tibet, being a narrative of three years' travel in eastern high Asia*. By Lieut.-Colonel N. Prejevalsky ... Translated by E. Delmar Morgan ... with introduction and notes by Colonel Henry Yule. London, S. Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington (Russian Edition 1876, reprinted in 1948).
- Przhevalskiy, N. M. (1879) *From Kulja, across the Tian Shan to Lob-Nor, including notices of the lakes of Central Asia*. The book was translated by E. Delmar Morgan, with an introduction by Sir T. Douglas Forsyth. London, S. Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington. (Russian Edition 1879 reprinted 1948).
- Przhevalskiy, N. M. (1883) *From Zaysan through Khami into Tibet and to the upper stream of the Yellow River: third journey in Central Asia*. St Petersburg.
- Przhevalskiy, N. M. (1888) *From Kyakhta to the sources of the Yellow River: a study of the northern outskirts of Tibet and a route from Lob-Nor along the Tarim basin*. St Petersburg 1888. 536 pp. In Russian.

Museum, "If I don't come back, please process all my birds!". At Karakol he fell ill and soon afterwards died, on 20 October (1 November) 1888, at the age of 49. He is buried on the high shore of Lake Issyk-kul in what is now Kirgizstan. Such was the significance of his death that on the orders of Tsar Alexander II Karakol was renamed Przhevalsk, although when Kirgizstan gained independence it reverted to Karakol.

Cause of death was officially declared to be typhus. Rumours multiplied as a result, because nobody on the expedition had any signs of such infection, or any evidence of it elsewhere. Lithographs made from Roborovskiy's photographs, widely published in newspapers and magazines, offered no evidence of any measure to prevent the spread of typhus from the deceased. At any rate, Przhevalskiy had had enough time to order his own burial place. Now the grave is one of the landmarks along the coast of Lake Issyk-kul. Sadly the gravestone, with a carved eagle (symbol of power and nobility) carrying an olive branch (symbol of thought), has vanished into the mists of time, probably stolen by vandals.

From early in his explorer's career, Przhevalskiy achieved many public honours. A selection of them

are: Golden Medal of the Paris Geographical Society 1876, Humboldt Medal of the Berlin Geographical Society 1878, Medal of the Royal Geographical Society 1879, Honorary Citizen of St Petersburg and Smolensk 1881, Honorary Member of the Hungarian Geographical Society 1884, Vega Medal of the Stockholm Geographical Society 1884, and Gold Medal of the Italian Geographical Society 1885. Of course he left a number of apprentices, such as Roborovskiy, Kozlov and Pyltsov, who in turn carried out their own expeditions to Central Asia. His legacy, however, is in his own discoveries (see Table 1) and in his writings (see Table 2). That he lives on in the names of so many animals and indeed plants is testimony to his remarkable energy and mind.

*Eugene Potapov,
School of Science and Medicine,
Philadelphia University, Philadelphia 19144, USA.
Email: Eugenepotapov@gmail.com*

*Roald Potapov,
Zoological Museum, Universitetskaya Nab. 1.
St Petersburg 199034, Russia.
Email: museum@zin.ru*

www.birdquest.co.uk

Birdquest – the natural choice in Asia ***with unrivalled experience, small group*** ***sizes and remarkable leaders!***

Turkey • Oman & Bahrain • Iran • Turkestan • Siberia
Mongolia • Japan • China • Taiwan • Pakistan
India • Sri Lanka • Nepal • Bhutan • Burma
Thailand • Vietnam • Cambodia • Malaysia
Borneo • The Philippines • Indonesia

All included in our extensive programme
of more than 150 tours worldwide!

Varied Tit in Japan

To learn more about 'The Ultimate in Birding', please visit
our website. Alternatively, call us on +44 (0)1254 826317
or E-mail: birders@birdquest.co.uk and request a brochure



Contents



Cover photo:

Palawan Peacock Pheasant
Polyplectron emphanum,
St Paul's Subterranean River
National Park, Palawan,
Philippines, February 2006
by Ian Merrill

- 2 **Chairman's letter**
- 3 **BirdingASIA briefings**
- 7 **OBC in Action**
Conservation Fund
Bertram Smythies Fund
- 11 **Letters to the Editors**
- 13 **Reviews**
- 17 **Erratum**
- 18 **SPECIAL REPORT** Aberrant behaviour of a pair of female Great and Rhinoceros Hornbills in Singapore
Y. C. WEE & R. SUBARAJ
- 23 **SPECIAL REPORT** A nest of the Black Eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis* in Sri Lanka
KITHSIRI GUNAWARDENA
- 28 **ASIAN ENIGMAS** Two strange parrots in the genus *Tanygnathus*
N. J. COLLAR
- 34 **ID FORUM** Chinese Crested Tern: observations on juveniles in the Matsu Archipelago of Taiwan
E. PETER M. CANDIDO
- 36 **LITTLE-KNOWN AREA** Birds of an unexplored forest along the Sino-Vietnam border in Jingxi county, south-west Guangxi province, China
CHAN BOSCO PUI LOK & LEE KWOK SHING
- 45 **ID FORUM** Comments on the purported first record of Long-billed Plover for Singapore
PAUL J. LEADER
- 48 **ID FORUM** The identification of Long-billed Plover
NICK LETHABY
- 55 **PHILIPPINES PHOTOSPOT SPECIAL**
- 68 **ASIAN BIRD: NEW DISCOVERY** Sri Lanka's Serendib Scops Owl
DEEPA WARAKAGODA
- 72 **ASIAN BIRD: NEW DISCOVERY** New *Iiocichla* found in India at Arunachal Pradesh's Eaglenest Sanctuary
B. R. SYKES
- 73 **LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD** Black-crowned Barwing *Actinodura sodangorum*
JÁNOS OLÁH
- 75 **NOTEBOOK** Finding the Malayan Whistling Thrush
AMILA SALGADO
- 78 **NOTEBOOK** Further new bird records for Hainan Island from the Yinggeling mountain range
LEE KWOK SHING & CHAN BOSCO PUI LOK
- 81 **NOTEBOOK** First Chinese breeding record of Pleske's Warbler *Locustella pleskei*, from a small island off Qingdao, Shandong province
QIAO YI-LIN, LIU YANG, GUO DONG-SHENG, ZENG XIAO-QI & ZHANG-ER
- 83 **NOTEBOOK** Nesting record of Burmese Yuhina *Yuhina humilis* in Mae Wong National Park, Thailand
T. EDELSTEN
- 84 **NOTEBOOK** Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* on the coast of Bangladesh
M. MONIRUL H. KHAN
- 86 **PIONEERS OF ASIAN ORNITHOLOGY** Nikolay Przhevalskiy (1839–1888)
EUGENE POTAPOV & ROALD POTAPOV
- 92 **From the field**