

A BIG TAIMEN,
READY TO BE
RELEASED



FISHING IN MONGOLIA

From the land of Ghengis Khan
come empire-sized fish BY BERN JOHNSON

PHOTO COURTESY DEREK JOHNSON

Mongolia is a distant, wild place. Visiting there, you can still feel the spirit of Ghengis Khan, who ruled Mongolia in the 13th century and launched the Mongol Empire, which grew to become the largest contiguous empire in history.

I traveled to Mongolia to find big fish that also reflect Khan's spirit. Taimen (*hucho hucho taimen*) are the world's largest salmonids. They grow to more than five feet long, and they hunt prey in packs. They are known as "river wolves" and they make short work of mice unlucky enough to fall into their waters.

Today, when you fly into Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city, you land at an airport named after Ghengis. (Mongolians call him *Chinggis Khaan*.) Streets are named after him, his likeness graces public buildings and people still search for his burial site. Wedged between Russia to the north and China to the east, south and west, Mongolia has probably needed some of Khan's spirit to remain independent. Mongolians are proud, strong people, and they hold Khan's memory close.

University of Oregon School of Law graduate, Mark Johnstad has built a unique enterprise in Mongolia that aims to protect taimen and the rivers that support them. His company, Mongolia River Outfitters (mongoliarivers.com), calls itself "The Guides for Ghengis Khan's Home Waters." He has partnered with the World Wildlife Fund, Rare (a conservation nonprofit) and local communities to

build support for protecting the fish, partly by creating a catch-and-release sport fishery.

I flew into Ulaanbaatar and spent a short night in that gritty city before flying out to land on the dirt airstrip in Dadal in northeastern Mongolia. I shared the plane with the other anglers in my party, coming from the U.S., France, Germany and New Zealand.

Flying low to stay below the clouds, we saw a lot of wide-open country and not many people. Mongolia is slightly larger than Alaska and is the least densely populated country in the world. The Mongolian steppes vaguely resemble open spaces of northeastern Oregon.

Many Mongolians still live as traditional herders, and we saw sheep, cattle and horses tended by people on horseback. Driving from Dadal to a tributary of the Amur River, we saw no gas stations, but plenty of horses working to gather hay.

Arriving at the river, we were greeted by the familiar sight of Clackamas drift boats, made in Oregon. Johnstad bought them here, shipped them to Mongolia in containers and hauled them to the river on specially built trailers. Piloting the boats were Chilean fishing guides, who work Mongolia during Chile's off-season.

The river we floated is big and powerful, about the size of Oregon's lower Deschutes. It flows northeast out of Mongolia into Siberia, where it eventually joins the Amur and flows into the Pacific. We floated downstream for seven days, seeing almost no sign of humans. Even the skies were clear — no airplanes or contrails. The stars seemed bright enough to touch.

Young Mongolian apprentice guides steered rafts downstream, carrying the camp crew and cooking gear. We stayed one night in *gers*, the traditional circular felt homes of Mongolia's nomadic herders. Other nights, we slept in comfortable tents.

The water was high and the catching slow, but we caught enough taimen, lenok, Amur trout and Amur pike to keep us happy. We fished with barbless hooks and released all the fish. Taimen are truly impressive creatures — it is almost scary when one erupts out of the water to engulf the artificial mouse on your line. I caught them up to 36 inches long, and a much larger one drifted up from the depths to eye my mouse. I can still see that fish, which I called "the telephone pole."

As we neared the end of our float, we could see Russian watchtowers on distant hilltops, surveying the border region. We opted not to float on to the border and instead climbed into ancient vans that took us to meet the plane back to Ulaanbaatar. When the vans pulled onto a level piece of steppe, we climbed out and erected a windsock to create an airstrip. When the plane was ready to leave, a Mongolian arrived on horseback to chase his horses off the runway and we headed back to industrialized civilization. ■

Bern Johnson directs the work of the U.S. office of the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW) and develops initiatives to protect the environment and human rights through law and science. In addition to Mongolia, he has traveled to Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the South Pacific, the Caribbean, and Central and South America to work with ELAW partners. Two environmental lawyers from Mongolia traveled to Oregon to work with ELAW early in 2012, and ELAW looks forward to more collaboration with partners in Mongolia.

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