



{FIELDNOTES}  
TAKHI RETURNS TO CHINA  
{BY TONY FISHER, COLLECTIONS MANAGER}

A warm sunrise slowly broke over the black mountains in the east as I easily walked over the scant desert landscape, quickly covering a mile or more from the desert ranger station. I woke up early, eager to get outside on this rare windless morning. I had spent too many hours on long plane rides, bumpy cars, and extensive meetings. Some solo time in this cold and silent landscape was just what I needed to re-energize my body and soul. As my legs started to warm up from the welcomed exercise, I began to notice the rugged beauty of this dry wilderness area, half a world away from my home in Minnesota.

This is the Kalameili Nature Reserve in Xinjiang, China. It's one of the largest protected areas in China that lies within the Dzungarian Gobi and measures a whopping 5,405 square miles, which is roughly three times the size of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Kalameili means "Black Mountain" in Kazakh, which accurately describes the dark peaks that are commonly found within its borders. Vegetation is sparse here due to less than six inches of annual rainfall. Yet the kulan, goitered gazelle, red fox, grey wolf, and desert hare all have adapted to this harsh land and call it their home. It was also one of the last places to find the Asian wild horse before their eventual extinction in the wild during the 1960s.

But now the Asian wild horse or "Takhi" is back, running in harems and bachelor groups amongst the hills of this cold steppe environment just as they once did at least 20,000 years ago. Thanks to the conservation efforts of zoos throughout Europe and America, this species was saved from ultimate extinction and recently reintroduced into protected reserves of Mongolia and China. Kalameili now holds approximately 80 wild horses that are thriving in a small section of the park. Yet, there are a few problems that limit their expansion into the rest of the reserve.





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That's why I'm here, along with Minnesota Zoo's Conservation Biologist, Jeff Muntifer. With funding from the Ulysses S. Seal Conservation Grant program we've recently joined forces with the Smithsonian National Zoo to help solve some of these issues and allow the expansion of horse habitat throughout the rest of this huge preserve. Competition for grazing, water, and space are annual concerns among the Kazakh herdsman, who also utilize the reserve for wintering their sheep and goat herds. The workshops we attended with several of the local communities should help bring solutions to these conflicts and ultimately benefit both the wild horses and the Kazakh people as well.

I also experienced the rich and colorful culture of Kazakh life. Most families are nomadic, spending their summers in the high grasslands of the Altay Mountains and wintering in the nearby lowland plains of Kalameili. Because of this lifestyle, domestic horses are used extensively here for everything from driving sheep herds, transportation, pack animals, and eventually as food. Nothing is wasted in the Kazakh household, and every part of their livestock animals is eaten or traded. However, the best cuts of meat are saved for special occasions to be shared with their guests...like us.

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