

WILD CAMELS (*Camelus ferus*)

and John Hare of the Wild Camel Protection Foundation

Wild camels (*Camelus ferus*) are genetically distinct from the domesticated Bactrian camel. They have smaller humps and are more slender than the domesticated Bactrian camel. Wild camels do not live longer than twenty years because of their hard conditions. Led



by a single male and found in herds of six to up to thirty-five related individuals, groups congregate near watering holes and migrate long distances in search of food and water. Wild camels are the only land mammals capable of drinking salty or brackish water if there is no fresh water available. All ancestors looked like today's wild camels. In the embryonic stage, one humped camels have a small second hump that does not develop.

Wild camels were fairly widespread until 1920 but since 2002 they have been classified as critically endangered. In 2004 there were only about 600 wild Bactrian camels living in China and 450 in Mongolia, in comparison to over two million domesticated Bactrian Camels living in all of Central Asia.

In Mongolia and China, wild camels are threatened by hybridization with domestic camels, wolf predation, human competition due to mining and industry, and forced competition with domestic livestock for food and water. Due to the latter reason, when they wander out of protected areas, farmers hunt them. Twenty five to thirty animals may die yearly so it is expected that by the year 2033, there may be an over 80% reduction in the population. Domestic grazing alongside their wild relatives are also a cause for concern due to interbreeding and hybridisation that will subsequently cause a breakdown of the genetically distinct wild camel.

Wild camels live in four areas: the largest population lives in the Gashun Gobi (Lop Nur) Desert in Xinjiang Province – the place used for the testing of nuclear weapons for 45 years, and now designated as the Lop Nur Wild Camel Nature Reserve. There are also herds to be found in the Annanba Reserve in Gansu whose western border runs contiguous with the Lop Nur Reserve and in the Taklamakan desert in Xinjiang. In Mongolia, the species is found in the Trans Altai Gobi Desert, the foothills of the Edrengin Nuruu range to Shiveet Ulaan and the Hukh Tomortei Range to the state border. This area comprises the Great Gobi Reserve Specially Protected Area 'A'.

In 1993, John Hare took advantage of a chance offer from a Russian scientific team to research the status of the wild camel in Mongolia – the 8th most endangered large mammal in the world. Presenting his research findings in 1994 at an international conference in Ulaan Baator, he eventually received, in 1995, permission to enter the former nuclear test site of China where the wild Bactrian camel survives. No foreigner had been allowed to enter this vast salt water desert for 45 years. It is here that the wild camel, having survived 43 atmospheric nuclear tests, is also able to tolerate salt water with a higher salt content than sea water.

In 1995 and 1996 John Hare became the first foreigner to cross the Gashun Gobi Desert in China from north to south and to reach the ancient city of Lou Lan from the east. Hare's team discovered a hitherto undiscovered outpost of Lou Lan called Tu-ying on the Middle Silk Road. In 1999, on another expedition mounted on camels, John Hare's team discovered two unmapped valleys deep in the Gobi sand dunes, which contained wildlife that had never seen or experienced man.

In 1997, John Hare founded the [Wild Camel Protection Foundation](http://www.wildcamels.com) (WCPF), a UK registered charity – Dr. Jane Goodall DBE is the Life Patron – and having raised funding, put forward proposals with the WCPF co-managing trustee, Kathryn Rae, for the establishment of the Lop Nur Wild Camel National Nature Reserve in Xinjiang Province in the former nuclear test site, to which the Chinese government agreed. Measuring 155,000 square kilometres and almost the size of Bulgaria or Texas, the WCPF became responsible for helping the Chinese to establish one of the largest nature reserves in the world, protecting not only the wild Bactrian camel, but many other IUCN Red Book listed endangered fauna and flora.

John Hare is the sole international consultant for the Reserve.

www.wildcamels.com

www.johnhare.org.uk