



## EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2008

By Andy Stronach

23 June

Hi folks

I'm Andrew Stronach and will be your expedition leader for the Altai. During the last few days, I've been preparing for the expedition, by watching You Tube videos of snow leopard, wolf, argali, siberian ibex, wolverine, etc. so that I'm not only familiar with what they look like ;), but more importantly, with the way they move – a very useful skill in the identification of these animals. I have also packed all my equipment and was trying to remember our mantra last year when packing for a day in the mountains; “sunscreen, waterproofs, fleece and ice-cream” - I'm sure that's was what it was. Anyway, I've got everything for the weather there which is generally absolutely beautiful, but occasionally also very wet and very cold!

Yesterday, I travelled from my home in Aberdeen, Scotland to Biosphere Expeditions HQ in Norwich, England. Today was spent in the office collecting a few missing bits of equipment and formulating plans for the surveys we will be doing. There are areas we have not surveyed before, but that have been predicted to be good for snow leopard by Volodya, our scientist, after he completed an analysis of the area looking at altitude, annual maximum and minimum temperatures and a whole host of other variables. So, we need to jump into our trusty Land Lovers and go and check these areas out as well as re-surveying other areas. Involving more local people and telling them about what we are up to will also be a focus for this year. Anyway, I can't wait and look forward to seeing you very soon and getting stuck in.

I'll be waiting in the lobby of Hotel Sibir at 20:00 on 29 June for anyone from the first slot who is up for an informal meeting before we kick off for real the next morning (and this pattern will be the same for all four slots). Anyone who would like to join in is welcome to do so.

Safe travels and see you in good old Novosibirsk

Andy

P.S. All things being well, my mobile number in Russia should be +7 913 4540878. Remember this is for emergency purposes only - such as if you are late for assembly.

23 June

Travelled from Norwich to Moscow.

Arrived at Domodedovo airport which, with its squadrons of busses and tractors racing around the airfield amongst the aircraft, was a little different (!) from the Heathrow I had left. There were aircraft from so many different airlines, almost all of which I had never heard of before, my favourite being “Bashkortostan Airlines”; there will be a prize for the first person to tell me where that is! [Ed. Wikipedia says that Air Bashkortostan, LLC «Авиакомпания «Башкортостан» is an airline based in Ufa, Bashkortostan, Russia]. For anyone who is missing any equipment for the expedition, there is a pseudo-camping shop on the top floor of departures where you can buy a few bits and pieces such as socks, mugs etc; however please view this shop as a back-up if you have forgotten something, rather than banking to get things there!

24 June

Travelled from Moscow to Novosibirsk.

If you get an overnight flight to Novosibirsk and if you sit by a window on the left side of the aircraft and if the weather is good, then you, as I was, may be treated to a fantastic sunrise on the way to Novosibirsk. At 0330 (Novosibirsk time) the sky was spectacular; aflame with deep reds and oranges, a wonderful welcome to Siberia. On our final approach, the sky was clear, the land was flat from horizon to horizon and mist rose from lakes and from patches of trees. Small streams, normally easily missed, were marked out by their ribbon of mist drifting gently on the morning breeze.

My welcome at Novosibirsk was less heavenly, but certainly not short of enthusiasm or friendliness. Vasili from Land Rover / Jaguar met me at the airport and drove me into town, the 10 km taking approximately two minutes and fourteen point six seconds; I did think that 140 kph through the streets of Novosibirsk was a little excessive. Not content with trying to scare me to death, he then had a go at re-arranging my internal organs, playing his music at full blast – that woke me up properly!

I should point out that this expedition is very much your expedition and I will be asking you what kind of work you feel up to doing, which surveys you feel comfortable doing, etc., etc. However, driving style and technique does not fall into the realm of discussion as it has the potential for serious accidents and as such I will be dictating how the driving is done and banning from driving, anyone who drives dangerously so that we all stay safe and have a great expedition. ;-)

26 June

Most of today was spent sorting out our vehicles. Due to Land Rover's generous sponsorship, we have three brand new Land Rover Discoveries and one almost new Land Rover Defender 110, they look great! Oh, and will get us wherever we need to go too ;o)

Novosibirsk is a city in party mood; Sunday 29th is Novosibirsk's birthday and seating is being prepared in Lenin square for entertainment on the big day. In the central park, there were buskers performing some excellent drumming, full of energy and passion, whilst others were break dancing. Now, I'm not a world authority on break dancing, but this looked like very Russian break dancing to me. One guy in particular was clearly a very skilled horse gymnast, demonstrating incredible strength and precision as he moved from arm to arm, legs spinning to the side, overhead and everywhere else in between!

In Lenin Square by the Opera House, in front of Lenin's massive statue, a large group of people gathered, painted in Russian colours, waving flags, whilst big motorbikes did wheelies the length of the square (at around 100 kph of course). Some cars were completely painted in Russian colours whilst almost all had flags. When the cars passed the crowds, some honked their horns and the crowd screamed back, when a bus honked, they went wild. I've no idea what it was all about, but it could have something to do with the football and I was fully expecting a conquering army of Russian heroes to march into the square at any moment.

On the steps of the Opera House, Novosibirsk's Music Academy Orchestra (if my translation is correct!) played to an open air audience; Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Wagner, Rimsky Korsakov, Prokofiev. [Excuse me a minute. Sorry about the break; as I was writing this, there were fireworks going off by the river Ob and I've got a great view from my hotel window so had to watch them – fantastic]. The Orchestra were accompanied by swifts in the hot evening air above, catching insects and adding even more to the already wonderful ambiance. The grand finale was Verdi, sung by some penguin suit clad gentlemen and some soprano princesses dressed in satin; when it was all over, the crowd got to their feet, waved their Russian flags and gave the orchestra a standing ovation.....quite right too.

28 June

Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me. Well, I have to say, I'm overwhelmed by the generosity of the Russians on my birthday; from Avtoland, I got a silver Land Rover Defender 110 and three, yes three, brand new Discoveries (I would have been happy, even with just one). If you team members are good, I might let you have a go with them ;o)

On getting back to Hotel Sibir with a pocket full of keys I thought I'd go and get some key fobs so we could easily tell which key was for which car. In my room on my desk, were a little black box and a red card, the card read: "Dear Mr Stronach, thought we'd forgot?... Never! Happy birthday to you! Hotel Sibir" And inside the little black box? Yes, you guessed it a key fob! :o)

Well, if that wasn't enough, the Ukrainians, in the form of Volodya our splendid expedition scientist got in on the act too. From out of nowhere, he produced the finest birthday cake I've ever had; a selection of wonderful dried fruit (dates, apricots and banana) surrounded by fine quality chocolate and all very artistically arranged. None of that icing sugar nonsense or sponge, who on earth would put sponge in something that's supposed to taste good?

29 June - Novosibirsk

Happy birthday to Novosibirsk, happy birthday to Novosibirsk etc. etc. Lenin square and much of the centre of Novosibirsk closed off today for Novosibirsk's birthday celebrations. The police were out in force with pressed uniforms, shiny vehicles and unfeasibly large hats. Two rows of 30 spotless police vehicles were lined up in the square with military precision as their drivers stood to attention at the side. Volodya and myself spent the day getting some equipment for the vehicles: emergency boxes; tow ropes and the like, finishing off our preparations for the expedition.

At 20:00, in Hotel Sibir's lobby, I met with most of the team and after briefing them on the plan for the next couple of days, we went to a local restaurant for dinner; it was great to finally meet the team and have a good blether.. Back at the hotel later on, the fireworks started and from my 12th floor room, I had a fantastic view of them as they lit up the city below.

30 June - Novosibirsk to Anoz

In the morning, everyone was there and having packed the vehicles and eaten breakfast, we set off on our adventure, heading for a blank space on the map in search of mountain ghosts ;o)

The 500 km to Anoz where we spent the night was broken by a stop at the honey market where we had lunch and at Gorno Altaisk, Altai's capital, where we registered with the authorities.

1 July

A beautiful hot sunny day. Departed Anoz at 07:00 and drove through beautiful tree-filled valleys with lively rivers and streams with their bridges built entirely from logs. Had lunch at the Tuvan restaurant; no idea why everyone calls it that because its name (in big letters above the door) is "Chuy-oozi", which means the end of the Oozi, the river that joins the mighty Katun nearby. The food has always been good here, but today it was excellent; the cabbage soup that didn't sound very inspiring was full of flavour, the spicy, meaty noodle soup was delicious, the plov filled a big empty stomach and the goulash was particularly goulashy. After lunch, we had a look at some ancient petroglyphs nearby, beautiful images of deer, hunters, boar and horses. Volodya thought they were about 8 years old.

Next stop was Aktash where we attended to more paperwork, hopefully the last, getting permission to work in the area near the Mongolian border where our camp is located.

We have been swapping drivers frequently during the journey and everyone has now driven both a Defender and a Discovery; competently and safely I might add :-)

I plan to stop in Kosh Agash, the last town before base camp and e-mail this diary. If you are reading this today, then I guess I was successful. If you are reading this yesterday then I guess that time machine I've been working on wasn't such a waste of time after all :o)

Next instalment may be some time, perhaps the end of this slot, so please be patient.

## 2 July

First full day at basecamp and first day of training. Volodya spent the whole day training the team in the survey methodology we will be using during the expedition. Everyone in the team is now fully aware of where to find all the best scat (crap); pine trees for example are a great place to look for wolf scat and rocky outcrop for ibex scat. But it's not all pooh-pooh here. We talked about tracks too, how to identify them and the best places to look for them; big herbivores such as deer, ibex having two cleaves, whereas wolf has five pads and claws, etc. In the afternoon, practical application of the lessons involved a beautiful walk through a Siberian larch forest, the ground covered with fragrant artemesia, asters, vetches, buttercups and even more fragrant and exciting wolf scat. The far point of the walk was a steep craggy ridge that had on it a huge eagle nest, an imperial eagle was spotted in the area, but nothing at the nest.

Whilst heading back to camp, Jourdan was rather surprised, and suspected I'd been at the vodka again, when I called him on the radio asking if he'd seen any camels; quite a straightforward question I thought. Thankfully, before he had managed to arrange for the men in white coats to come and take me away, another in his group spotted the 16 camels which were just out of sight to myself, Mike, Sharon and Slava. Jourdan directed us to where the camels were resting; 200 meters in our 11 o'clock, off we went, 1.7 km later we got there....

Back, eventually, in camp, we rounded off the day with our first ibex sighting, six by manul rock; two adults, two yearling and two babies :-)

## 3 July

Training day two. All the drivers did the off-road driving course with myself. We went up and down very steep slopes, through rivers (OK, streams!) and over boulder fields; all very competently and most importantly safely, so now we're ready for action – the Land Rovers always were anyway. In the meantime, Volodya took the non-drivers up the hill by base camp for a wee walk. The effort was rewarded with views across the steppe and even as far as China. Someone thought it would be a good idea to descend a 700 m scree slope. Sharon brought up the rear on the way down and the rest of the team were entertained by her fine impersonation of a Tourettes sufferer, her flailing of arms and cries of unspeakable things as she attempted to smite the swarms of mosquitoes she encountered on the way down. Claire wins the 'dedication to the cause of conservation' prize for trying to save the horn she found, offering it out to Brian saying 'take it' as she went sliding away down the hill towards the river, rather than trying to save herself. Everyone made it back, but I'm not so sure about the 'in one piece' bit, a tough walk.

## 4 July

First full survey day. Claire, Sharon and Hilary went up the valley from the winter station with Volodya, while everyone else went to the glacial lakes with me. Both teams meandered up their respective valleys under blue skies and hot sun, finding lots of sign of many different animals. However, just as both teams were reaching the high point of the survey, the weather changed a little. The hot sun and blue skies were replaced within about five minutes by black skies, very strong winds, very heavy rain and biting hail; handy things waterproofs! Brian said 'didn't think I'd need my gloves' as he rubbed his hands together trying to warm them up a bit. The glacial lake was spectacular under the blue sky that appeared a bit later and the endemic Altai accentors we saw nearby were a great record.

Back at base camp, after a mountain of delicious Pilau rice, we whiled away the evening playing Uno and partaking of a few 'delicate' 'little' vodkas.....

## 5 July

Volodya took most of the team up what used to be known as Koshalyu, but is now variously known as Mt Ickers; Ickbal making it to the top first and \*\*\*\*\* steep \*\*\*\*\* scree \*\*\*\*\* next time I see \*\*\*\*\* Andy I'll\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* the \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* , by Sharon who found the going a little tiring.

Meanwhile, Claire, Hilary, Brian and myself had a lovely relaxing day; a lovely scenic drive to Kosh Agash via bird lakes, seeing two new species for the expedition – whooper swan and barbary falcon amongst many other birds. We had planned to post the expedition diary, but the internet was down, so that didn't work; we were very successful in our ice-cream hunting mission though ;o)

## 6 July - Survey of bird lakes and Kamtitigem

Volodya took Kurt, Sharon, Brian, Mike to the small lakes in the middle of the steppe to carry out a bird survey. Meantime, Iqbal, Claire, Sian, Hilary, Brian, Stacie, Jane and Jourdan came with me to Kamtitigem to survey there. On arrival, we split into the hard walk group - Iqbal, Brian, Stacie, Jane and Jourdan, and the easy walk group - Claire, Sian, Hilary and myself. The plan was to have a leisurely amble around and to see what wildlife was around the vicinity of the vehicles, however, that plan was fairly comprehensively wrecked by Claire (it's all her fault) when she spotted an eagle's eyrie (= nest). We wanted to see into the eyrie to see if anyone was at home, so decided to walk a little upstream before climbing up the hill to near to where the eyrie was located. After an 'interesting' 'eventful' 'demanding' 'little' walk, we arrived at the top and had lunch and a little nap, OK, we were all exhausted and collapsed in a heap unable to move!

Finally got into a position where we could see what was in the eyrie, and looking back at us was a great big fluffy ball of beak and talons, a week old eagle chick ;o) that made it all worthwhile. Got back to the Land Rovers where the others who had been on the hard walk were fresh and ready for action, we collapsed into the cars and vowed never to look for eagles again. Shortly after getting back to base camp, Kurt spotted an unusual bird, on checking, I saw it was a booted eagle; a first record for the expedition – oh well.

## 7 July - Tapduair overnigher

Everyone loaded up the vehicles with food, tents and sleeping bags for a trip to survey Tapduair; a 3500 m mountain where we have seen snow leopard before. After a long drive of about two hours, we reached the end of the track and set up camp. Iqbal, Jane, Jourdan, Sian and myself had planned to bivvy high on Tapduair overnight and then walk to Sailugiem and back to base camp, over the whole mountain range. However, the weather was very changeable, windy and very wet, so that plan was abandoned. We did, however, see a couple of argali which was a great record of these endangered animals. Volodya had found information about old Turkic carved standing stones in the Barburgazi river valley, which was close to our site, so we set off to try to locate these as well as to do some yurt interviews (an integral part of the expedition study) if the opportunity presented itself. We stopped at a yurt by the river and Brian was straight into a conversation with the herders, loving every minute of it. Iqbal wanted to take a few photos, so asked the women, but they suggested he take some photos of the men instead as they were apparently not dressed for it; it's all the same, the world over!

Meanwhile Sharon made friends with one of the dogs belonging to the herders and was fascinated to observe how closely its behavior was to that of a wolf; there's probably a reason for that....

Back at camp, we had dinner and then Iqbal, Jane, Jourdan and Sian, not wanting to be deprived of their bivvy experience, headed over the ridge a little way from camp to spend the night where argali had been seen earlier.

## 8 July - Tapduair survey, return to base camp

Waking in the back of one of the Discoveries in the morning, I wiped the condensation from the window to see out, it didn't seem to make any difference, so I wiped it again, only then realizing that the view outside was actually pretty similar to that of a condensation covered window – yes it was winter wonderland time at Tapduair advanced research camp with a beautiful covering of about 1 cm of snow! I was delighted with this as it is perfect for finding tracks of animals yet not deep enough to be a problem. Our expert wildlife spotter Kurt was already up and had spotted three argali; very rare wild sheep listed as endangered in the Red Data Book; what a great start to the day. When the bivvy team returned, they brought with them, stories of dare and do as well as of argali spying on Jane as she went to the loo! After breakfast, we split into various teams and headed off to survey the various valleys and ridges of Tapduair. Sharon was in particularly high spirits, loving every minute of the snow showers and planning to take some home with her to Australia; I didn't have the heart to tell her. My goal was a beautiful valley with three glacial lakes; as soon as we arrived at the first, we heard rocks falling from a nearby steep slope, on inspection we saw that the rock fall was caused by – you guessed it – yet more or more precisely two argali – fantastic! The two animals then ran off up the hill, and joined another group, making a total of six adults and six juveniles; I've only seen a total of two argali in two seasons here before, so I was delighted ;o)

All three lakes were very beautiful, but by general consensus, it was agreed that the final one, at the head of the valley and surrounded by steep scree slopes and jagged cliffs, was the most beautiful. The drive back to base camp was uneventful; just the usual stunning views over the border to the glacier clad mountains of Mongolia, yurts located by a river in the middle of nowhere and a herd of Bactrian camels minding their own business trying their best to look aloof.. Pretty dull, really.

## 9 July - Reconnaissance of new area

Around 100 km to the south east of base camp, near the border with Mongolia, is an area of mountains that look promising for snow leopard. Last year, Biosphere's director, Matthias, headed off to check out the area, but got no further than the first checkpoint where he was promptly arrested for not having the right bit of permissions paperwork, despite being confident that he did. None of the current team have been arrested recently, so we thought we would give it a go too and see how far we got.

We passed Kosh Agach and then the seemingly endless flat stony steppe beyond it, before entering the hills at its far side and arriving at the checkpoint; cue the dark dramatic organ music! Eventually someone in camouflage uniform appeared and collected our passports, taking them away inside the building – never a good feeling being separated from your passport in a foreign land..... There was a selection of sounds coming from inside the building, variously imagined to be; the old rusty shackles being dusted down for use, Kalashnikov toting reinforcements leaping into action and large Alsatian war dogs braying for action. None of these materialized though and 15 minutes later we had our passports back and were off past the checkpoint heading for mountains new. See how it's done Matthias!

On the drive down the valley, we looked for access routes into the mountains, which would be good for us to gain access, but might also indicate human presence which would reduce the chances of us finding sign of snow leopard. A group of 12 rare cinereous vultures were seen, a great record of this rare bird and the first this year.

The Tara river valley was the most beautiful area we saw with scattered pines on its slopes leading to rocky and glaciated summits; it looked great snow leopard habitat.

On the way back we made a small detour to Lake Karakul; it was not far, but turned out to be a test for our Land Rovers. First, we crossed a small river, next, it was up an increasingly steep and increasingly loose and rocky slope, next down a steep, loose rocky slope and finally over some soft grassy ground to the lake. Both the drivers and the Land Rovers handled the challenging terrain with panache getting us where we needed to be safely. It was worth the effort, as we saw four rare black-bellied sand grouse, only the second time on an expedition.

## 10 July - Day off ☺

Sharon, Sian, Hilary and Kurt took a drive across the steppe to see Marat, a long standing friend of the expedition. Marat has some of the finest horses in the area and the girls and Kurt hired them for a fantastic gallop across the steppe.

Iqbal, Brian, Brian, Jourdan and Jane needed one last fix of mountaineering, so climbed the mountain by base camp to wonderful views across the steppe and a nice snooze on a high level flower filled alpine meadow.

Claire, Stacie, Volodia, Uri and myself set off in search of Volodya's fabled carved stones. First stop was the new and only shop in Kokorya for an ice cream ;-). On the steppe, a falcon swooped across the front of the car and landed on top of a fence post nearby where it ate a small rodent it had in its talons. This was a hobby and the first recorded by the expedition; we all sat mesmerized by this beautiful bird as it ate its meal so close by – wow! As we approached a stone circle, we were suddenly in the middle of a large flock of beautiful rosy starlings. The birds were catching crickets that were being disturbed by our passing; catching them, knocking off their legs and wings and then eating them or taking them away. After departing the stone circles that were meeting places for the tribes millennia ago, we visited an area of rocky outcrops where Volodya knew of some petroglyphs; an ibex and a wolf. After looking around, we found far more; deer with fantastical antlers, ibex with shapely rather than stylized features, finely carved ibex; it's amazing to look around for just 30 min and find so many beautiful and ancient artworks, what a place! Having crossed the Barburgazi river, we stopped for lunch at a burial site with a few carved standing stones. Volodya likes to share good times with those who have passed before us; we were a Russian, Ukranian, English, American and Scottish and we shared our food, vodka (except for me as I was driving!) and tales. We all had a wonderful, joy filled, peaceful time full of friendship and fun; I hope those below us did too.

Heading back, I wondered if we could get some ice-creams to base camp for the others to enjoy; it's a long drive from Kokorya to base camp and I wasn't sure, but gave it a go. On getting back, the long talked about cricket match was underway, I drove up and parked between the wickets to a torrent of abuse; I unloaded the ice-creams and was instantly elevated to the status of hero. We finished the ice-creams and then the cricket, had a lovely last dinner courtesy of Nina, drank some vodka, played some music, danced a little and then slept under the stars of the steppe for the last time.

## 11 July - Base camp to Anoz

Having had breakfast and packed, we got off to a flying stop when one of the vehicles had a puncture. Re-surfacing works on the main road with loose gravel and a lunatic speeding lorry driver showered all three of our vehicles in stones and resulted in two cracked windscreens :-)

The rest of the journey was uneventful, lunch at the Tuvan restaurant and arriving at Anoz for dinner, a banya (sauna) and dip in the mighty Katun river before a sleep in a bed without any rocks in it ;-)

## 12 July - Anoz to Novosibirsk

Woke to light rain and beautiful mist clad cliffs overlooking our cozy wooden house. The 500 km drive to Novosibirsk we broke with a stop at the honey market for raspberry and cherry blinis and later, a stop for dinner of shashliks (kebabs) for the carnivores and salad for the weirdos.

All back safely now. Thank you so much to slot 1 and looking forward to meeting up with slot 2 Sunday night or Monday morning!

## 13 July - Novosibirsk

Spent the day getting some bits and bobs such as batteries, a new mobile phone to replace the one that was broken, etc.

Met those remaining team members from slot one for a last blether at 7pm before meeting the new team members of slot 2 at 8pm.

After giving an initial briefing covering the next two days and completing all the very exciting paperwork, we went to Jelly Belly restaurant for some fine food and congenial conversation; it's lovely to meet the new team and start getting to know them.

## 14 July - Novosibirsk to Anoz

Having managed to successfully escape the clutches of rush hour in Novosibirsk, a pall of smoke came into view on the horizon of the dead flat land we were traversing. The dead straight road led us directly to the pall, but it took a long time; such is the difficulty of judging distances here. When eventually we did reach it, many vehicles had stopped at the side of the road by what was a vehicle that had left the road and burst into flames, actually a fireball, that totally engulfed it and anyone unlucky enough to be in it.

## 15 July - Anoz to Base Camp

Spent a lovely quiet night at Anoz and woke to find hawfinches on a bird cherry tree outside, the first time I've seen these lovely birds. After breakfast and blowing up a slightly flat tyre, we were off. Then we went back to Anoz. Brian got his sun spex and we were off, again ;o) With Axinja at the wheel, sporting her snow leopard necklace she bought at silver springs yesterday, we crossed first the Seminsky pass and then the Chike Taman. This second pass lies on the boundary between two sub-biogeographical zones, and the differences to be seen are remarkably clear. To the west, the land is generally green and lush whilst to the east, the land is brown, dry and rocky. The people too are noticeably different; European features to the west and Asian to the east. At Aktash, we stopped at the FSB office and got our permission to work around base camp, though this did take a bit longer than usual. Past Kosh Agash the last town and then Kokoria, the last village we crossed the steppe for about an hour. I stopped and asked the others in the convoy if they had a map as I thought I'd taken a wrong turning some way back; my acting skills must be improving as there was much rummaging around looking for one ;o) At base camp 5 minutes later, we were greeted by Nina, Egor, Volodya and beautiful evening light across the steppe showing off the mountains to their best; it's great to be home ;o)

## 16 July - Base camp training

Started the day with the risk assessment and then left the team in Volodya's hands for the science training and how to identify the sign left by various animals. Tim and I went to Marrat's to see about hiring horses, but no-one was at home, so continued to Kosh Agash. First stop was the puncture repair men who pulled a big pointy stone out of one of our tyres that had gone all the way through; a quick and competent repair and we were off again. Next stop was the internet café to post the diary; not sure why I keep trying as again, it was not working. Back at base camp, as reward for a good day's training, I took the team to a nearby eagle's eyrie where we were very lucky to see an adult eagle and two little fluffy white chicks. We got great views of them with the telescope and left without disturbing them ;o) As our stream had retreated uphill a little from camp, we had to walk a little to chill our beer and chocolate for dinner; it's a hard life!

## 17 July - Base camp & Happy Birthday to Mareike! (oh, and some training)

A beautiful flower (and champagne bottle) bedecked breakfast table greeted Mareike for her 30th birthday. The morning was spent on GPS, map and compass training; the afternoon on off-road driving. Didn't lose anyone, nor did we have any crashes, so must have been successful at some sort of level ;- ) We finished the off-road driving with a bit of on-the-job training when Mareike, Axinja, Axel, Tim and myself went to Marrat's isle again to see if we could hire horses for a foray into an otherwise inaccessible area. Marrat's son, Gena was at home, and after pointing at various pointy things at the map and more importantly sorting out the menu, we had a cunning plan and were ready to go the next day, way too easily organized, must have forgotten something.

Nina worked her magic in her tiny kitchen tent and produced a lovely meal for Mareike's birthday, the piece de resistance being the 'black mountain cake'; black, chocolate (didn't know you could get vodka flavoured chocolate) and covered with purple asters and edelweiss.

Later in the evening, datasheets were filled in (as usual) but never has it been so much fun; with Peter at the helm for the bird tick list, there were some interesting vodka/champagne creations such as wheateaters and twits.

## 18 July

Today, I split the team in two, most staying with Volodya, but Axinja and Mareike came with me for a three day horse riding expedition. Having packed, we drove across the steppe to meet Gena and our horses. We headed off up a very beautiful valley with a small river, gorge and scattered Siberian larch. One side of the valley was dominated by a huge cliff, red with lichen and home to an eagle nest. Stopped for a snack in a lovely meadow with lots of wild flowers; I was going to tie up my horse, but Gena said it was not necessary, so I just let it go and it got stuck into the flowers. Further up the valley, we crossed the river, some more tentatively than others (can't remember the last time I was on a horse!) as we went further and started to gain height, the trees thinned, the vegetation shortened and the hill tops became rocky. We passed an isle (a wooden hut where herders stay) where there were hundreds of sheep and goats – not good for snow leopard. Still further there were sarlik (yak cow crosses) and cows, again not good for snow leopard because of the disturbance and threat posed by humans and their animals. After about five hours, we reached our camp site at around 3000 m near the top of the ridge. Having set up the tents, and had some food, Axinja and myself went up to the ridge where we found fresh ibex tracks; an encouraging sign. As the sun set and the light faded, we could see four lightning storms around us but could not hear any thunder, despite being quiet; such was the distance to the lightning and the enormous distance of the views all around us, quite spectacular. I managed to make a few photos of the lightning :o) before we headed back to the tents.

## 19 July - Tokpok

After breakfast Mareike, Axinja and myself headed off along the top of the ridge looking for sign of snow leopard and other animals whilst Gena went off in search of firewood. Along the length of the ridge, there were valleys heading off to the sides; we stopped at each of these in turn scanning them with our binoculars looking for animals. These valleys were very dramatic with cliffs at the head, boulder or scree strewn slopes, a stream or small river at their base and scattered Siberian larch at their end. Unfortunately we did not see any animals, but in one valley, we did hear Altai snowcock, an endemic game bird that birdwatchers get very excited about. The call from these birds is surreal; a cross between a bald eagle and a donkey..... weird. At our furthest point on the ridge, was a wooden triangulation point from where we could see far to the north west, along another ridge where Volodya, our scientist, wanted to survey. Near to where we were, we could see many domestic animals and herders yurts so that area would be useless for snow leopard; however further on, were mountains with massive cliffs, glaciers and no access roads :o) much better.



On finding a lovely patch of soft mud I checked it, as always, for tracks. There were none; it seemed such a waste, so I thought I'd just do the right thing and make some tracks; snow leopard to be precise ;o) The photos were later received with great enthusiasm; perhaps a career in forgery...

Back at camp, dinner was pasta with beans in the rain – never tasted so good. We fed Gena's dog with cheese, friends for life now, whereas before, he wasn't too sure of us.

20 July

After an enormous breakfast of buckwheat for 12 (between 4 of us!), we went south east along the ridge with Gena; at the first valley, at the base of the cliffs, we were lucky enough to see two juvenile Siberian ibex ;o) as well as a cinereous vulture ;o) Having packed up, we headed off on the horses. We stopped at the beautiful flower meadow again for a break; us eating chocolate, the horses, flowers. Then it was time to go, Marieke and Axinja got on their horses and I was about to get on mine, but my horse was a bit ahead of the game and set off on its own, at an impressive pace..... A little inconvenient. All of a sudden, our little group had grown, not quite sure how; from four to six people, from four to five horses, from one to three dogs and most disturbingly, from nil to one car :-)

Back at Gena's isle, we unloaded the horses, got in the Land Rover and all regretted bitterly our return to civilization, such was the wonderful time we had shared :o)

Back at base camp, everyone regaled us with tales of wonderful carved standing stones, petroglyphs and stelae that they had been to see earlier in the day on their day off; obviously a very poor attempt to make us jealous – no chance.

21 July - Travel to Tara river valley

Breakfasted, packed up, packed the vehicles and then we all headed off to the Tara River valley - a four day expedition and the first time Biosphere Expeditions set off to survey that area, which looks great for snow leopard judging by the map. First and most important duty of the day was the ice-cream stop at Kosh Agash (also failed to send the diary because the internet was down, again and bought a nice big pile of food to take with us). We drove over the Kosh Agash steppe and into small dry rocky hills at the far side before arriving at the Solonshenskaya checkpoint. Unusually the guard checked all our passports and photos against people in the cars; hmm..... The guard then disappeared inside, only re-appearing after 30 minutes asking why everyone listed on our permission paperwork was not present; we explained that not everyone who had signed up for the expedition had turned up; off he went again..... Various other people came and went, passing the checkpoint with ease. Then the guard appeared and gave us our passports back, opened the barrier and we were on our way!

Mountains, rivers and trees heralded our way, and we stopped by a river for lunch. The road was unsurfaced and rocky and the drivers had to concentrate to avoid holes. Eventually we arrived at the Tara river and we left the good quality road behind. Our first little obstacle was a muddy track; I straddled the ruts and passed easily; Peter who was next decided to drive in the muddy ruts and did not pass with ease; he was rather discombobulated. Pulled him out and we were on our way again. Small river crossings, huge eroded stream beds with interesting entries and exits, rock crawls, etc., etc. entertained us all the way to our camp site near the highest point of the Tara river valley where I finally called a halt to our progress before we tried to do something silly with the vehicles.

22 July - Tara river valley, surveying.

We split into three teams to start our survey of the valley and surrounding mountains. Gundula, Axinja, Brian and myself headed for a high mountain, complete with glacier and apparently a glacial lake (according to our less than wonderful map). After following the Tara river and passing a huge herd of sarlik, we headed up into a side valley and onto terminal moraines (I think!). On a patch of snow in the distance, I could see with my binoculars, what looked like fresh tracks. When we had a close look we could see they were of a large carnivore; Axinja was determined they should be of snow leopard, unfortunately, however, we could see claw marks so that made them wolf, which I was highly delighted with ;o) As we progressed up the valley, at a further two patches of snow, we found more fresh wolf tracks, wonderful. Lunch was with a view; a huge glacier at the head of the main valley, split into three and covered a massive area, behind was a razor sharp ridge of impregnable turrets, occasionally raining down a barrage of rocks on anything stupid enough to approach. After lunch we went up a safe side valley; however, the ascent of its slope required some effort.....

One step forward and two back as the scree slid downhill. Eventually we approached the summit ridge where I noticed one of the many furry rocks that you see, this one compete with ears, then the rock ran off – it was a wolf, I was over the moon and shouted to the others, Axinja and Brian saw it, but unfortunately not Gundula.

At the top of the ridge, the views were OK. On the Chinese border, we could see massive mountains totally covered in snow and ice, to the east, Mongolia and to the west Kazakhstan. To the north-west were Altai's highest mountains including Belucha; we were all blown away by the views and the wolf; definitely the high point of the expedition so far.

We descended by a rocky ridge, where we found sign of a bear; only the second record ever for the expedition, the day just kept on getting better; wonderful experiences and great scientific data.

23 July - Tara river valley, surveying.

After yesterday's initial surveys, we set off to 'fill in the holes'. Axinja, Brian, Peter and myself headed up a side valley opposite where we had been yesterday. There was some sign of ibex and possibly argali as well as of a small mustelid (possibly Altai weasel) which I am particularly fond of. After a few kilometers, the valley turned left, we were confronted by a massive wall of terminal moraine, which we climbed and then had a great view of a glacier perhaps three kilometers long snaking up the valley. A heavy hail shower passed and was followed by a longer spell of heavy rain. We made our way back to camp, had dinner round the fire, completed our last datasheets, and then had a celebratory vodka, or was it two? three?

24 July - Tara river valley to base Camp

Woke in the morning to very heavy rain. Got everything packed, including soaking tents and headed off. Mareike, Axinja, Brian and Axel did a fine job of driving us out of the valley when we then drove the long road back to base camp. Nina had done a great job of preparing our last meal, along with a truly mountainous cake, which was delicious. Vodka and tall tales into the night drew a close to slot two :-/ All good things come to an end.

25 July

Rain again this morning when I will say farewell to all the team members of slot two. Volodya will accompany the team to Novosibirsk (and meet slot three team members) there, whilst I will stay at base camp. If you get this, then Volodya and the team have made it back safely to Novosibirsk. Goodbye slot 2, welcome slot 3!

10 August - Novosibirsk

Met the team members of the fourth and last slot and went for a meal together in the evening; it's always great to meet a new team as we always somehow manage to get a great team of diverse and very interesting people ;-)

11 August - Novosibirsk to Anoz

We loaded up our two vehicles – Defender and Discovery and set off for Anoz for the last time.

12 August - Anoz to basecamp

Fuelled up the Land Rovers and set off for base camp. Stopped at Chu Ozi restaurant for lunch, then stopped at Aktash to get our permission to work near the Mongolian border from the FSB office.

13 August - Training

Spent the morning on the risk assessment, the use of GPS (Global Positioning Satellite System), map and compass and the science of the expedition whilst the afternoon was spent training our drivers to drive off road – up and down steep hills, through rivers and over boulders .

## 14 August - Reconnaissance of Kurai ridge, survey to glacial lakes

I went with Jens, Graham and Marina into the Kurai ridge mountains by Kosh Agach. Volodya's DIVA-GIS computer study predicts this area to be highly suitable for snow leopard, so we are very keen to get there. The first section was across steppe, the next was through a spectacular narrow valley, crowned with craggy sentinels where steppe eagles soared. We followed a dry river bed for a few km before heading up a narrow track cut into the side of a steep hillside; the views were amazing. From the top of the hill and at the high point of our drive, we could look north towards the Bashkaus river; our objective for the day. The descent of the hill was a little 'interesting' but posed no great difficulties or dangers; driving along the valley at the bottom of the hill towards the Bashkaus was a bit different; there were continual difficulties, boulders, muddy areas, muddy streams and large expanses of wet and soft vegetated ground. One of the lessons learned this year is that if somewhere is easy to get to, then human disturbance or persecution of wildlife will probably be great; to get somewhere with significant numbers of large wild mammals requires some effort and good off road vehicles. We had great off road vehicles in our Land Rovers and had put in lots of effort, but we had run out of time as our progress had been slow along the non-existent road so we turned back about 4 km from the Bashkaus river.

In the meantime, Volodya had taken everyone else on a survey to the glacial lakes near base camp. Eden was delighted to have seen two of the three endemic Altai birds he wanted to see; the Altai accentor and the Altai falcon, only leaving the Altai snowcock.

## 15 August - Survey of Koshalu & Border Guards Presentation

We all headed off in the morning to survey the west side of Koshalu. The eagle eyrie near our start point appeared to be empty; we had seen fully feathered young in the nest about two weeks before, so we headed up to have a look at it. As we moved round and got closer, we could see it was not in fact empty, but had two young steppe eagles, we were very lucky to see those wonderful birds so close.

Back at basecamp, the spectre of crime reared its ugly head when John's very posh down-filled airbed disappeared in suspicious circumstances. Eventually the perpetrator was discovered and a bit of 'an eye for an eye' justice was administered as John pinched Eden's clothes as he showered.

Volodya and myself had pre-arranged with the Border Guards to go to Kosh Agash to give a presentation about Biosphere Expeditions and the work we are doing in Altai; the aim of this being to inform the Border Guards so that they knew why we were in Altai. We arrived on schedule and spoke to the base commander who told us that they were busy and maybe we should try next week..... At least as I was in Kosh Agach I had the opportunity to get an ice-cream ;-)

## 16 August - Travel to Irbestu – snow Leopard Valley

After breakfast we packed our world (and a big heap of food) into the back of the Land Rovers and headed off to Irbestu – Valley of the snow leopard. After Kosh Agach where we did a bit of food shopping and filled up with diesel, we drove west across the steppe. After the endless miles of billard table flat steppe, the entrance to Irbestu valley was very dramatic with its high cliffs and glaciers. The track was mostly reasonable with a few bits that needed care, though nowhere could you drive quickly. In the distance, we saw a camper van; as we drove closer, we could see it was stuck. The driver asked if we could pull him out, so I had a go, but with little success. The driver then took the van out of gear, that seemed to work better and the van came out no problem.... We then gave him a jump start and that was him sorted.

When we got to our camp site, we hurriedly put up the tents in case the threatening clouds soaked us, but we got them up and our kit sorted in the dry :-) Next job was the toilet; I made what I thought was a fine toilet, comfortable, fine views of river and mountain, a discrete distance from camp and equipped with toilet paper dispenser. However, my efforts did not meet with approval from Eden; previously I had thought his obsession was with birds, I was very wrong. Not content with my 50 cm depth toilet, he armed himself with the spade and set off digging for Australia (or should that be Chile). Next, Eden decided that the dwarf Birch were a bit on the dwarf side in matters of modesty so he set about an engineering task to rival the Great Wall of China, scouring the countryside for rocks to build a wall around the toilet. Last I heard the planning department had been called and Eden was looking for two doors to go between the kitchen and the toilet, or rather, as it has become known, The Garden of Eden.

## 17 August - Survey

This is the day that all the locals have been predicting for months, that the first snows will fall. Well, no snow, but it certainly felt cold enough for it as we huddled behind the Land Rovers eating our breakfast.

We split into two groups, Volodya with his group heading further up Irbestu valley to the glacial lake at its end. The valley was beautiful and the glacial lake even more so, but the whole valley was completely full of sign of domestic livestock, so no sign of ibex, argail or the like were found.

My group headed up into the mountains to the place that looked to me likely to be the most remote in the area. The valley I went up was very beautiful with glaciers on the mountains at its head. Disappointingly, there was a lot of sign that domestic livestock had been using the area frequently, this meaning that local wildlife would be displaced or worse. In one area, we did find some old sign that ibex had been present, however, there was also much sign that horses had been in the area, at one point this was accompanied by sign of a dog and worse of all, an empty cartridge case; all bits of a jig-saw that taken together painted a grim picture for local wildlife.

As if on cue to cheer me up, a falcon came into view that looked a bit bigger than the Altai falcon that I've become familiar with. As well as its size, its colour was unusual, being all white except for some black spots. This could only be one thing; a Gyr falcon. The Gyr falcon is an almost mythical bird that breeds in the arctic and is not known to be present in Altai; this is a fantastic find for the expedition.

In the evening, a discussion brewed about the first 'star' to appear in the sky; was it a star or was it a planet? Some said Venus. I got out the telescope and had a look, there were four moons in a line on the left hand side, this was Jupiter, everyone else queued up to see, but were thwarted by an orographic cloud, the only one anywhere in the sky that formed and dispersed so maintaining its position in front of Jupiter; everyone eventually managed to see the moons.

## 18 August - Survey

Volodya headed west into the mountains with his team where Eden completed his holy trinity of birds, being lucky enough to see eight Altai snowcock :-)

Katrin, Marina, John, Jens and myself headed south climbing high up into the mountains in the opposite direction from yesterday. Again, it was disappointing to see so much sign of domestic livestock and so widespread. At around 3300 m, after lunch, Katrin, Marina and Jens headed back down whilst John and myself continued to the top at just over 3500 m. Barely 5 min after the others had left; I spotted a group of 19 ibex resting on a ridge around 400 m away, across a glacier on a ridge. We could see the group split into three – 8 juveniles in the lowest group, 7 immatures in the middle group and probably all adults in the group highest on the ridge, three of these were males with big horns and beards. John and myself who were both dressed in muted colours, kept off the skyline and kept still – the ibex did not appear to see us, just lying there as we watched, it was wonderful.

The much talked about snows of the 17th did not arrive yesterday on schedule, but today, there were small snow flurries around. These were not like the occasional snow showers that we get in the summer when the air is warm and the snow does not last; this was different, the air had a bite to it and heralded harsher times ahead, fantastic.

At the top of the mountain, the 360 degree panorama was stunning. We could see across the steppe to Kosh Agach and beyond to basecamp and beyond that to the snow covered mountains of the Chikichova range in Mongolia. We could see the 6000 m peaks on the border with China and we could see Kazakhstan. Below us we could see exquisite turquoise glacial lakes, hanging glaciers, mountains of moraine in the valleys and a constant stream of raptors cruising past – kestrel, Altai falcon, lammergeier, steppe eagle, long-legged buzzard. John, veteran of travel to 70 countries said 'that's the most stunning view I have ever seen'; I would have to agree.

19 August - Irbestu to Elangash petroglyphs to basecamp

After one of Nina's legendary very hearty breakfasts, we packed and headed for home, taking a small detour to Elangash valley to look for petroglyphs which were reputed to be there. The lower reaches of Elangash were gentle, but the head of the valley was dramatic and dominated by a huge mountain and glacier that commanded the whole area. There was little in the way of potential for petroglyphs in the lower valley but where the mountains started, there were some rocks as well as slabs of bedrock sculpted and smoothed by glaciers long since disappeared; it was to there we headed to start our search. At the side of the track I spotted a rock with two petroglyphs – an ibex and a maral deer, we searched on foot from here. On the big slabs of rock, we found many, many more petroglyphs; ibex, argali, maral, wolf and even a snow leopard attacking a maral. As well as the non-human animals, there were men with bow and arrow and even wheeled vehicles. It was a great privilege to be able to look round such a wonderful site, free from all tourist signs; just the valley, the rocks, the petroglyphs and your imagination.

20 August - Argen Bugazon Sacred Springs

Today we went to Aggen Bugazon sacred springs where locals and not so locals go to take the waters, relax and socialize. A long, long time ago in a place called Argen Bugazon, a hunter shot a deer with his bow and arrow, the wounded deer, with an arrow in its leg struggled to run away and passed through the spring. When it emerged from the spring, the arrow fell away and the deer was strong, healthy and free from any wounds and ran away from the hunter. The hunter went to look at the spring whereupon his lunch of dried fish fell into the water; immediately coming to life and swimming away. The hunter, being a perceptive type, thought there may be some health giving benefits from the spring, so spread the word; it has been in use ever since, even being prescribed by GPs. At the spring, we interviewed all the people who were there, a very important part of our work, both to get information on animals as well as gauging feelings towards wildlife. Interestingly, one man said he had seen a snow leopard last August on Mount Chornie, another man had previously said exactly the same thing.

21 August - Last survey day

I spent the entire day checking all the equipment against our inventory and making notes about things that need to be replaced etc. :( Volodya and Roman took the team to the bird lakes in the middle of the steppe and then to Kamtitigem for the final survey of the expedition. In the evening, we dined like royalty thanks to Nina; the piece de la resistance being a particularly tasty vodka soaked cake ;-) We all played rizzla head into the night, the final round being me as a snow leopard – I guessed it, eventually.... ;-)

22 August - Basecamp to Anoz

Being frozen into our tents in the morning, a punctured tyre and a police check all conspired against a smooth timely drive to Anoz, so it was 20:30 when we arrived. However, all was not lost and the highlight of the day was, according to Graham, being whipped with birch twigs by Nina in the (very hot) sauna...

23 August - Anoz to Novosibirsk

The day got off to a flying stop with our 7th (?) puncture of the expedition; no spares left for the drive to Novosibirsk.....

Well, that's the end of the 2008 Biosphere Expedition to the Altai. This was the year of exploring new areas away from our core zone mountain range; much hard work was done by all our team members so that we now have an idea of the distribution of wildlife outside the core zone – well done and thanks to you all. See you next year ;-)

Andy