



EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2004

By Tessa McGregor

17 June

It's hot in Novosibirsk with violent rainstorms from time to time. 'Cotton-tree' seeds shower us with white fluff. The city is as vibrant as ever and the centre is very trendy. Olga and I have been in Novosibirsk for a week and preparations for the expedition are keeping us busy. Our scientist, Vladimir Titar, joined us yesterday and we have been discussing fieldwork. He is trying to find Russian field guides. Base camp is being set up and will be ready by this evening. I have been meeting Russian scientists in Novosibirsk and we have had very interesting discussions. Land Rover is holding a press conference this afternoon so I better go and spruce up. The team here is very much looking forward to meeting you all and working with you over the weeks to come.

18 June

After a meeting earlier this week with the assistant director of Novosibirsk zoo I went back, as arranged, to collect snow leopard scat and urine. Sadly the keeper had misunderstood and cleaned the cages, but I got one good fresh scat and a sample from a recent scrape. The zoo has 4 snow leopards (1 male and 3 females). The male is a very handsome specimen (unlike the old one from last year. He died earlier, aged 17). Vladimir, Olga and I took the opportunity to look at other animals found in the Altai. A wolverine scent marked just inches from my nose, so there is another smell to remember for the field (not one that I could easily forget!)

19 June

The team members have all arrived and I even had two volunteers to help me collect the vehicles from Autoland. We all met in the evening at the familiar Russian restaurant. Everyone fit and keen.

20 June

Russian state TV filmed the expedition departure - delayed us a little but still left at 08:15. Sergey Kurgin with us as he is accompanying us to base camp for a few days. The road was very clear and we made it to Anoz by 19:10 despite driving more slowly than usual (as we are running in the new vehicles). Anoz has been upgraded since last year. There is now an indoor shower and flushing lavatory - but still no plumbing. Give me the Banya and the long drop any day! Vica there and as welcoming as ever. Her cooking wonderful. Everyone enjoyed the cool night air. Nightingale singing outside the window in the evening. P.S Three team members bathed in the Katun river. Base camp showers will be too hot for them!

21 June

Long drive today. Office in Gorno Altai doesn't open until 09:00 now so we can't leave Silver Springs (where we meet the team members) until 11:00 at the earliest, but at least everyone was registered. We got to the Tuvan restaurant after 4pm. The temperature dropped and by Kosh Agach it was cold, windy and wet, but the drive to base camp was beautiful with dramatic light effects. Arrived at base camp after 22:00. Mercifully the rain stopped and we could unload without getting soaked. It's cool. People wearing their down jackets.

23 June

Yesterday was blazing hot. Base Camp has been well prepared. The solar showers make a big difference I'm told although I'm happy with the cold ones in this heat. Team members even bathed in the river. After going through gear, the science etc Volodya (Vladimir) took one group up behind Base Camp to an observation point and I took the other off-road driving. All went very well. It was even warm in the night. A first at base camp. There are not as many flowers as in July, and mercifully not as many grasshoppers. Surveying has begun with a ridge and a valley survey behind base camp. Sergey has left. We have the same Russian team as last year except for old Oleg. Instead we have Victor from Anoz as a second mountain guide and a young helper called Tolia.

26 June

The Altai hasn't changed – it's as unpredictable as ever. We've had wind, rain, sleet and sun over the last three days and last night temperatures went down to below freezing, but surveying is continuing apace. Team members are very fit. Two team members and Oleg saw 2 female ibex two days ago at about 3000 m. It was a brief sighting, but close (less than 100 m). We put up the hide and a tent in the survey area (back valleys). Uli and Franz were the first to do an overnight observation stint. It was a tough one with sleet showers and then cold wind in the night, but they loved it and want to do more! Four more people want to do this and of course, so do I... The changeable weather means lots of dramatic light effects over the steppe and in the mountains. Charlie has experimented with the trail master at base camp. Everyone is working hard and we're having a great time. The sense of humour is wicked!

I took a group interviewing yesterday and caught up with some old herding friends (as well as trying a new horse) and by chance, bumped into (not literally - Defenders still pristine!) the deputy head of Altai Republic Hunting Concession. He was driving a bigger 4WD than us with tinted windows and had more gear in it than our expedition has in total. He was looking for poachers and gave me a lot of information. Poaching of snow leopards is a big problem. I will meet up with him again in Gorno Altai later on.

30 June

Time has flown by. More surveying behind Tapduair (ridges and valley) and new survey in corridor area (survey block 2). Very exciting. Saw two female argali and evidence of herd using the area. Also found a scrape. Not snow leopard, but possibly lynx. This is a very fit group and we have covered a lot of ground. The weather has been pretty good. Interviews with herders are yielding more information. Last night had a party at base camp to celebrate Argali sightings. Everyone had a go at reeling (Scottish dancing before anyone gets the wrong idea). Must be a first in the Altai. Already packing up to leave tomorrow morning. I hate leaving base camp. The flowers are just astounding and we are really enjoying the bird life. This has been such a good group with a wide range of skills. Only drawback is that they are all fitter than me.

2 July

Safely arrived in Novosibirsk. Made good time on both days. Ursula and Sophia have stayed at Anoz for a couple of days before flying home. It was very sad to say goodbye. The vehicles felt strangely empty driving back today. We are going out this evening to celebrate the end of an excellent first slot. I will be very sorry to see this team go.

3 July

It was too good to be true. Parking spaces for all three vehicles outside the hotel doors. I had to move the cars this morning as the whole pavement is being dug up and asphalted. Mess, noise, mud. Not only off road driving in the field, but off-road walking in the city. It is pouring with rain in Novosibirsk and cool.

4 July

Good journey to Anoz despite much rain. Arrived under a downpour that lasted the whole night. The banya was so welcome and I tried the birch leaves for the first time. Team members already getting on. It is lovely to have Christine, Toril and Peter back again this year. Katie is also a great addition as she speaks fluent Russian and is an expert in Siberian cultures.

5 July

Stopped at Silver Springs as usual. Berry blinis wonderful (wild strawberry fillings). Sadly many musk deer teeth, bear claws and other bits of wildlife for sale among the trinkets and souvenirs. Made good time on the road and arrived at base camp at 20.10. Mercifully it only rained lightly as we unpacked, but was raining heavily by the time we were in the mess tent. Very good to see Volodya again. Not only had he surveyed the marmot colony close to base camp while I had been away, but he had prepared the most delicious soup for our arrival. Everyone tired and glad to collapse into their tents.

6 July

Overcast morning and more rain, but the sun came out at lunch and we were able to observe ibex from base camp! Three males were spotted with binoculars on the ridge just behind camp. We had the spotting scope out immediately and the whole team was able to observe the ibex. Although we were observing them at a range of about 1.8 km, we could pick out a lot of detail (colour, condition, and activity). We observed them for 30 minutes until they went over the ridge. As if this wasn't exciting enough, we saw them again (we assume they were the same animals) three hours later and observed them for another 30 minutes. Only two males were visible this time - both adult, one paler, smaller and in poorer condition (it was moulting). We observed them graze, rest and walk along the ridge. Everyone was really thrilled. Also enjoyed good marmot observations (adults and young) on the adjoining slope. There is a good colony above base camp. Sadly Boris (a very laid back marmot named and photographed by the last team) was not out and about, so no real photographic opportunities. The weather changed very abruptly and we had lashing wind and rain by 18.00 that turned into sleet and snow by 19.00. Base camp was soon white and Victor even made a snowman. The vodka came out and the temperature plummeted. A cold night. Tents covered in snow and stiff with ice.

7 July

Bitterly cold morning. Beautiful moon visible over snow covered mountain behind base camp. Large, grey vole in mess tent before breakfast. Rodents keen to share our facilities in this cold weather! Most of the group went out to survey ridge behind base camp to search for signs of ibex. Christine and I stayed with the spotting scope and did observation all day. Turned into a beautiful day - strong sun with cold wind. All the snow had melted by the afternoon. Survey group came back in the afternoon. Despite observing all day, Christine and I saw nothing (no large mammals). The flora is so diverse and beautiful. Wild onions and rhubarb are plentiful near base camp and they are a delicious addition to the meals. Boris made an appearance after supper and was photographed from all angles.

8 July

Bright, crisp morning. We surveyed an area three hours drive away. Stopped at the winter station, an hour's drive from here (it's becoming a tradition) and saw flock of hill pigeons and very close views of a family of choughs - parents still feeding the fledged young. They were using the dung-covered roof of one of the buildings. Interestingly they were red-billed choughs (we usually see yellow-billed). On the way to the survey site we saw a wolf (running hard across a slope, about 800m away) and a huge concentration of eagles (6 imperial, 1 white-tailed and 4 steppe) near a shallow lake. There were ruddy shell duck on the lake (5) and 11 smaller diving ducks. They were too far to be able to identify. We all enjoyed great views of eagles. The survey yielded evidence of argali using the area. Immense horizons and views into Mongolian and Tuva. Mosquitoes were really fierce. The flora so beautiful. So glad we have Christine with us to document it. Unexpected sight of 10 Bactrian camels at the winter station on the way home. No sign of any herders and the winter station is deserted in summer. Camels nervous when we got out to take photographs. Left in a flurry of dust and left very fresh droppings (always interesting!). Most beautiful (warm!) evening back at base camp. Filling in the data sheets after supper as usual - always interesting discussing the day's findings. Volodya a fund of information. Dan and Dave looking forward to overnight stint in hide tomorrow.

9 July

Cool and overcast today. All team members go to survey the valley below Silugiem ridge and we put up hide and tent in good area (visibility up and down large portion of valley plus ridges). Find fresh signs of argali. Weather turns really unpleasant (strong wind, rain and cold), so we turn back. Take some team members interviewing in the afternoon. See two pairs of demoiselle cranes with half grown young. A really good sighting. They are such elegant birds. It's always thrilling to see them. The weather improves - hope Dan and Dave have an interesting time.

10 July

Day off for people to relax, wash clothes etc. The river at base camp is nearly dry. Only small pools remain (just enough to chill the Russian champagne for this evening). Hot day. Flies and mosquitoes active! Andrei takes group of team members to see burial mounds in the steppe. Very successful outing. Dan and Dave collected from hide in the afternoon. They didn't see anything, but enjoyed the experience. Have left hide and tent up for next stint. The Russian staff very busy preparing a temporary banya (a Russian sauna / wash room). Stones collected from the river. A huge fire lit and finally the food tent transported to the banya site (below the shower tents). Bunches of larch (instead of birch). The results amazing and enjoyed by everyone. Then a party at base camp with shashliks cooked on the fire (prepared by Andrei). The black-eared kite making really low passes over the river, looking for scraps). A really fun evening that goes on late into the night.

11 July

Very hard getting up, not to mention surveying. Take Peter and Toril to the hide. The rest of us do the first relative abundance surveys around and above glacial lake in back valleys. Very hot day. Mosquitoes are murder - clouds of them envelop us as soon as we stop. Not much fresh sign of argali/ibex but fresh manul tracks (+ fox and marmot). The area around the glacial lake studded with yellow poppies and other alpiners. The long drive to and from the survey site a beautiful as ever. Great sightings of little ringed plovers in river bed and demoiselle cranes displaying (courtship) on the steppe. Magical. Also hear them call as they fly off. Two pairs of black-eared kites also treat us to dramatic displays. Everyone really tired. Data sheets and an early night (unusually warm).

12 July

Another warm day. Two groups out surveying. Volodya took one group to survey river bed; Oleg went with Katie and George up to survey ridges behind base camp. They found evidence of ibex and manul. I collected Toril and Peter. They enjoyed their time in the hide and observed a range of marmot behaviour. The afternoon was spent bird watching on the steppe and I took people out for more interviews. We were welcomed by a lovely family and gathered more useful information. Olga did a wonderful job as always, helping me gather information. Andrei took a group out to do some night viewing of jerboas on the steppe. Jerboas were seen and even stoked (yet another of Andrei's skills - he has now been dubbed the Jerboa Whisperer).

13 July

An early start to climb and survey Silugiem (3419m at the summit according to our GPSs). Another very hot day. Nadia with us. Man-eating mozzies and horseflies mean we are all covered in deet (and still they bite us!). Dave taking no chances and wearing head net. Beautiful up the approach valley and steep hot climb up Silugiem. Virtually no snow and hot even at the top - unbelievable. Hard but magnificent survey. Sign of argali and ibex trails. Magnificent views (and able to see more argali and ibex trails across the valley). Tapduair still has impressive glacier and snow patches - red in parts due to summer algae. Very steep scree descent and long walk back down the valley, where Toril finds large carnivore scat on rock (probably wolf, but it will be sent off for analysis). Thunderstorm and heavy rain as we walk. Luckily it stops just after we get to the vehicles. Back at base camp Nastya has prepared a magnificent supper and a cake - all beautifully presented. Is there no end to this girl's talents? Andrei takes second group out night watching - again very successful with jerboa, hamster and hare sightings (captured on video).

14 July

It's even hotter. I try to record the heat on the compass thermometer but it shoots off the scale (says it's over 50 degrees Celsius). Dan ready to defeat the biting insects by wearing 1½ pairs of thick woolly socks (other half eaten by voles), a jersey, hat head net and ski gloves. I am worried he will collapse with heat exhaustion before he even begins surveying, but he's smiling and ready to go. Volodya leads a survey. I take a group for last interviews in the prostrating heat. Half the herders are absent or asleep. But a family we know welcome us with open arms and we have an unforgettable afternoon with lively conversation, tea, bread, wild rhubarb preserve and as if that were not enough, fried dried lamb chunks - all washed down with vodka which George, Katie and Sarah decline as they say they are driving and I accept (out of good manners of course!). I'm just able to take some photographs on the way back and amazingly they are sharp! Hearty supper at base camp. Summarise survey routes done so far and what we have found. It is very hard to find evidence of large mammals or to have any sightings in this heat as they will have moved as high as possible and may be using different areas.

15 July

Up early and leave base camp by 08.00. Heat coming off the steppe - vehicles disappear in clouds of dust. Volodya and Dave with us. Dave wants to see snow leopards in Novosibirsk zoo (that's his story). Nadya and Victor staying at base camp this time. Very hot and hazy drive. Usual Tuvan restaurant has a power cut so sadly can't eat there. We travel on past Ongoudai and stop at a roadside café. Travel on and on as the landscape changes and becomes increasingly alpine. Weather change at Sminsky Pass (low cloud which stays with us for the rest of the journey). Usual stop near Anoz to buy beer. Thin little girl selling "cedar nuts" (seeds from Siberian pine cones) - Sarah, Katie George and I spend the rest of the journey trying to eat less shell than kernel. Drive in to Anoz over the old bridge. Very atmospheric with the fast flowing Katun turbulent under a brooding sky. Always thankful to reach Anoz - lush, scents of foliage and grass, the sound of the Katun river, cowbells and when night falls, cicadas. The blissful banya and Vica's cooking. It's heaven. A lovely evening followed by catatonic sleep.

16 July

Very hot drive to Novosibirsk but make excellent time. Stop for coffee and fresh fruit blinis at roadside market and then great shashliks later. In Novosibirsk we finally get the third Defender and papers!!! Supper in the Russian restaurant. Very sad to say goodbye to this group, but at least we've got Dave for the next slot - so head nets will still be all the rage.

19 July

Arrived base camp yesterday evening after long and beautiful drive. It was raining when we refueled at Kosh Agach at dusk - seems to be the pattern this year. Drove across the steppe to base camp in the dark. We arrived after 10.00pm. Nadia and Victor very relieved to see us. Wonderful supper in candlelit mess tent waiting for us. Despite the rain, everyone really glad to be at base camp.

20 July

Rain stops and first day spent going through the science, equipment, off road driving etc. Volodya takes a group out in the afternoon. It's sunny but the wind is cold. Marmots seen and all. The team is fit and rearing to survey. We are visited by a Russian botanist from Tomsk University doing field work in our survey area for the next few days. He is very surprised to find Biosphere Expeditions working in this remote region.

21 July

The team out to survey "lost valley" and glacial lake. The trail master is put up near the glacial lake, near an area used by argali to rest. Wonderful pika sightings and photos by team members. Long day in the field and everyone tired in the evening. I recce area across the steppe with Leonid (the Russian journalist from Geo magazine) and sort out horses for a survey tomorrow. Data sheet time very lively - everyone very interested and much discussion of findings (faeces, tracks, argali wool).

22 July

Heavy rain and low cloud in the morning. I go with Leonid, Olga, Tolia and team member Karen (she is a good rider and willing participant) to the back valley to meet our herding friends, Abai and Gulinara. They have arranged four horses for us. It is a good photo opportunity for Leonid and enables us to survey a useful area in a short time. Tolia wants me to race him, but I refuse (I don't do competitive, especially against an 18 year old built like a jockey and riding a flasher horse than me), but that doesn't stop a couple of fast gallops. We take the horses high up to a plateau from which we have a 360 degree view of so much of our survey area. It's amazing. Really worth coming back with the spotting scope and spending time observing. Enjoy sighting of red fox and chukar partridge plus find argali and hare faeces. Ride horses down and enjoy last gallop home. Olga is waiting for us at the yurt, making cream with Gulinara. We are treated to a feast of meat and pasta (a sheep was killed while we were out - not a scrap of it is wasted and I'm shown every bit, now in plastic bowls). Back at base camp the sun has come out and we find the rest of the team observing ibex from just above base camp. Shelley pulls me up the slope (she's a fell runner and I'm not!) and I look through the spotting scope. See a female argali with young below the ridge line and then a female ibex on the ridge line. The team has had several sightings during the day (some obscured by low cloud and rain). Oleg has finished the frame for the new mess tent and it's up. He is putting the finishing touches as I write and has proudly parked "his" silver Defender in it.

23 July

Heavy rain in the night but stops in the morning. Volodya, Oleg, Dave and Bob leave to spend 36 hours surveying the far side of Tapduair. They take a vehicle, tents and half the kitchen with them. The rest of the group and I go to check the Trailmaster video trap and do a relative abundance survey in the area around the glacial lake. The approach up the valley is so lush and filled with flowers. No domestic stock grazing it at present. Day turns very hot and the team find lots of sign of argali and some sign of ibex plus abundant signs of Altai snowcock. The Trailmaster was triggered but no footage, so it has been re-set. Leonid takes lots of photographs and is very happy with his last expedition day. He leaves early tomorrow morning.

24 July

Day off and it's a lovely sunny morning. Everyone makes the most of it to catch up with clothes washing, reading and generally relaxing. Andrei takes a group out to see the 'Kurgans' in the valley of 1000 standing stones. Olga and I go out with Roger, Karen and Ulrich to see herders and end up joining a felt-making party (to patch the yurts). This takes some time (and energy). Felt-making is followed by a large lunch of boiled mutton and fresh bread. Roger is treated to sheep's eyes and other bits of head. He's a brave man! I stick to the meat and home made wild-onion relish. After this we take the herders to sacred springs. A fierce wind comes up out of nowhere and then rain. We arrive to witness part of a three day celebration being held in honour of grandmothers (who have born in excess of 10 children). They have come from many districts. There are yurts, tents, trucks - men eating 'boursak' and meat sitting around low round tables in the rain. Some venerable looking old women come out of their yurt for photos. The men are eating outside. We are given some arak (a drink made from fermented mare's milk). It is very sour but a new experience. Back at base camp in the evening. Volodya and his group had a great survey and saw argali as well as 60 argali resting depressions. Nadia has made a cake and the men have made another 'banya', despite the pouring rain. The men go first this time and by the time they have finished it's dark, but Shelley, Nadia, Nastya and I brave the elements and it's well worth it. Nadia even swims in the river! And I thought I was half way to being a Siberian - I've still got a long way to go.

25 July

Heavy rain in night - clears temporarily in the morning. Volodya and Oleg take a group out surveying back valleys. Shelley, Ian and Jane go out with Victor to survey up past the forest (near base camp) in the morning. They come with me and Bob to do interviews in the afternoon. Rain comes back again. Too wet to survey. Pass trucks offloading relatives at yurts after the party at the springs. Drive to back valleys and interview Masha and family (they of the felt-making yurt adventure). Interesting, as relatives from the village there (past Kakaria) including Masha's sister - a school teacher (and very pretty daughters. Bob looks very interested!). She tells me there are many snow leopard skins in the village but can't or won't say how old they are. She also talks about ibex and argali, so it turns out to be a very productive interview, not to mention pleasurable, as Masha's hospitality is as large and warm as she is. We also interview a young couple in the same valley and drop in on Abai and Gulnara as we're passing, so team members get a real taste of yurt life. Back at base camp the river is in spate and roaring over the rocks.

26 July

Heavy rain continues in the night. Early morning it's still drizzling. The whole team goes out to survey new area behind Tapduair. Rivers swollen. Muddy tracks. Black earth patches around yurts where stock are kept. Dramatic drive through back valleys to survey site. Out surveying in all our waterproofs. Weather improves slightly. Flowers and butterflies in abundance. Most of group surveys up the valley. Only Ian, Shelley and Oleg go and survey the ridge as weather and conditions tricky, but they are experienced and can get down fast if the weather gets worse. Fascinating valley. Many argali/ibex tracks across the scree and valley plateau areas. Sun comes out. Mushroom season has begun. Find evidence of argali and wolf (plus usual marmot etc). On way back Nastya, Olga, Victor and some team members pick mushrooms (Boletus). Nastya and Olga so engrossed in their task that they almost bump into a wild boar. It bolts and runs across the valley and up the opposite slope - we all get fantastic sighting - an adult male in his prime with good tusks. Very exciting - as is watching Oleg, Ian and Shelley's descent - running down so fast (and in Shelley's case so elegantly). Amazing. Everyone thrilled with the day. But another great sighting on was back in the vehicles, of a wolf (Ian spots it) - on a ridge overlooking the valley. We stop to observe and by its behaviour, it looks like a female hiding cubs nearby. We are able to observe it for about 10 minutes before it vanishes from sight. Everyone on a high. Great day and good data.

27 July

Beautiful morning. Whole team surveys Silugiem except Oleg and Ian who not only survey Silugiem., but the whole ridge system (Silugiem - Tapduair - Base Camp) - quite a feat. Silugiem always a testing and uplifting day. Survey ridges well beyond. During observation period (looking down on the glacial lake) we have distant sightings of argali (five in total). Maybe we will have some footage of them on the Trailmaster? Also watch Ian and Oleg through binoculars. Keep in radio contact. As we finally drop down towards valley Olga spots a deer and we get wonderful sighting of three young maral deer. Long sighting and able to observe them feeding. They are very wary and eventually see us and run away. We all get back into camp after 19.00 - Ian and Oleg walk into camp just after we get out of the Land Rovers. Phenomenal! They saw a small group of ibex. Fantastic day. Everyone exhausted and exhilarated.

28 July

Another beautiful day. We all go to see a cow carcass on the steppe (Andrei found it yesterday). We arrive to find 54 cinereous vultures feeding on and around the carcass. I can hardly believe it. Spend time observing and making sure we have identified them correctly (these are rare birds and to see so many is almost unbelievable). They are wary and disperse. We then go to try and visit the museum in Kakaria - but as usual, the director (who has the keys) is away. Then on to lake area in the steppe (visible in the distance from base camp). See so many demoiselle cranes (well over 50 - on marshy ground and by river bed). They are the most beautiful and elegant birds. Everyone enjoys great sightings. The lake area is also a magical experience. To step out of the vehicles and hear the call of many waders (including lapwing, redshank, dotterel) and terns - and to see them...we are all entranced as we observe through binoculars and spotting scope and pour over bird guides. Good views of black stork, usual ruddy shell duck plus ferruginous duck (with ducklings). I could stay here forever (despite the mozzies). Back to base camp for very late lunch and out again for second look at vultures. Fewer than in the morning and even warier, but a few so gorged that they are reluctant to fly so get great sightings and photos. A perfect end to a perfect day.

29 July

Leave base camp in the morning. Voldya, Chris, Victor and Nastya staying this time. Drop Volodya off by Winter Station as he is taking catnip to Trailmaster site. Get to Anoz in very good time. It's hot and team members head straight for the Katun to swim. I observe! Karen and Ulrich leave us as they are doing a five day horse trail from Anoz. Olga and I dash off to Gorno Altaysk to try and see the confiscated snow leopards skins, but no luck. Back late, but still in time for Raman's birthday. Hear Vica sing (at last!!!!). It was worth the wait. She has a great voice. Collapse in the early hours to the sound of crickets, the odd cowbell and the Katun.

30 July

Olga and I leave early to try again (to see the snow leopard skins). More success this time, but we need to make an official written request to different person, so will go again next slot (third time lucky?). Hot drive to Novosibirsk with usual coffee, and shashlik stops. As good as ever. All go out to celebrate end of very successful slot - Lebanese restaurant, excellent food accompanied by loud music and sultry belly dancers (they all make a bee line for Bob and he doesn't complain one bit).

31 July

Petr (director of Avtoland, our local Land Rover partner) comes to collect us in the morning and we spend the day outside Novosibirsk for Land Rover challenge. Team member Alexander is with us as he doesn't leave until tomorrow. We take a Discovery and a Defender around the course and Petr takes us round in a very flash Range Rover (feels more like being in plane than a car). Interesting and fun day. Meet half the new group in the evening (other half don't arrive until tomorrow morning)

1 August

Rest of group arrive on time and we're all away by 08:00. Petr is with us as well. Another hot journey and again, all team members head straight for the river on arrival. They also get straight into birch twigs and banya habit. Vica excels with another wonderful meal.

2 August

Usual stop at Silver Springs and wait while Olga and Sergei sort out registration in Gorno Altaysk. Berry blinis outstanding. Good journey down to Kosh Agach. Stunning scenery never fails to impress. It's sunny this time and the evening still beautiful when we arrive at base camp. Nastya has prepared a delicious supper. Camp fire going. Everyone happy to be here.

3 August

Heavy rain in the night and still raining in the morning. Usual introductory day. Weather clears in time for off-road driving. River crossing practice followed by washing the vehicles in the river. Everyone getting on fine and with a range of complementary skills.

4 August

Beautiful drive through back valleys to survey site. Rain has stopped. Cool bright morning. Pass smoking yurts - the smell of burning cow dung similar to peat smoke. Cattle drinking in the river. Excellent bird of prey sightings (including pair of golden eagles and pair of steppe eagles). No fresh sign of argali since the area was surveyed in the first slot, but nearly step on young fledged grouse - see 6 in total, calling to each other. Cold night

5 August

Beautiful morning, but cold. One group (including Petr) out with tents to survey glacial and dried lake area over the next 36 hours with Volodya and Oleg. I take other team members back to lakes to see birds (no black stork this time and fewer waders, but still magical). Mozzies terrible, but it's a small price to pay for observing and recording. See large number of demoiselle cranes (more than 50 in total). Afternoon spent in the yurts - one actually - where we are welcomed and new team members meet the herders we have become friends with. I try a Russian jeep this time as no horse handy - quite an experience! I'm definitely sticking to LR Defenders.

6 August

Temperatures well below zero in the night. Tents hard with frost in the morning, but the sun comes up we're all keen to survey. Go and do the ridges behind base camp. Steep walk up through forest magical and find fresh signs of maral (plus signs of wild boar). Much small mammal activity. Voles, squirrels - everything feeding and dragging bedding into holes. Do relative abundance surveys above the tree line and along ridge/saddle and find sign of ibex and argali (including resting depressions) but none of it fresh. Also abundant sign of Altai snowcock. Back at base camp late afternoon. Volodya's group back 19.30. Really enjoyed their 36 hour stint and had an amazing encounter with a young male argali - so close (about 30 meters they got excellent photos and to cap it all the argali even followed them before running off! The encounter lasted about 15 minutes. Volodya thinks it had got separated from the herd/group. Heavy rain in the night.

7 August

Mild, windy and overcast - turns cold and wet. Day off. Andrei takes group out to see burial mounds (kurgans) and standing stones. I go and collect some of our herding friends as we have invited them to repay them for their wonderful hospitality to so many team members. Heavy rain but spirits undampened. Gulnara helps prepare a big dish of pasta and meat, Nadia excellent with yet another wonderful cake. There is singing and dancing (the weather lifts late afternoon) - so more Scottish reeling and general dancing. Andrei's super-loud speakers have their uses! Very jolly. Abai must be king of the dance floor in Kosh Agach - everyone joins in. Eileen is fantastic - an inspiration to us all. She's 72, never complains and always looks great. I don't know how she does it. Our herding friends leave before dark as they have cows to milk. Almost forgot. There are fish in the rivers here after all - Tolia caught two grayling and Oleg caught one!

8 August

Always hard getting up after a party, but we do. The mountains covered with snow and it's cool. I take a group for overnight stint in back valleys for long survey. Oleg and Nadia with us. We camp at the entrance to "wild boar valley" (where the sighting took place). After setting up the tents we survey ridges and glacial lake. The air so cold and pure after snow. Back at 19.00. Nadia's warming soup most welcome. We build a fire. Very cold. Everyone in all their layers (I've got 4 + down jacket). Snow flurries as we sit by fire in this wild place. Stars come out. Wonderful.

9 August

Luckily no fresh snow in the night so getting up OK. Pack up tents etc and off to survey. Oleg takes group up ridges. Chris and Sally survey valley. I take Graham and Poppy with the intention of surveying valley but we end up surveying higher and higher and end at a series of jagged peaks and vertiginous ridge. So many ibex/argali trails and perfect snow leopard habitat. Find the first really good and regularly used trail (at last!). Snow and bitter winds. Winter is already hard on the heels of summer. Steep scree descent and back at vehicles just in time (thunder hail and sleet). Drive back quite something. Water levels have risen so much in the last 24 hours and a large part of the way is driving along river beds. Good test of Land Rover off-road capabilities! They don't let us down. Snowing hard when we get back to base camp in the evening. Shower in brief interlude between snow showers. Bitter but water warm. Team members and Russian team have snowball fights. Heavy snow and sleet put an end to that and many data sheets to fill means we're up late.

10 August

Very cold morning with snow still lying thick. Luckily it's sunny. Wait until conditions are not so slippery before setting off to survey. Volodya leads survey up ridge behind base camp. I take other group to yurts. Victoria and Sally go off riding. Sad goodbyes to the herders. They have not only helped by sharing information about wildlife, poaching and their way of life, but welcomed us into their yurts and become friends. We go from one yurt to another and end up at Tarbia and Nicholai's yurt. Tarbia wants Rachel for one of her sons and offers me five dowry chests for her! She also wants Chris instead of her husband and is most put out he is not with us. We take back a big piece of cheese to give him with the message that she wants him in her yurt and has lost her heart to him. Beautiful drive back. Stop for photos. Two trucks arrive to take away all base camp effects. Many stars. Poker playing in the mess tent – betting with stones.

11 August

Beautiful hot, sunny day. Team members walk and survey around base camp. I pack up with the rest of the team. Victoria finally gets her date with Boris – he makes a late afternoon appearance and poses beautifully. Walk up above base camp after supper (how we will miss Nadya's cooking) and look out onto ink coloured mountains surrounding golden steppe as the sun goes down. Snow capped peaks rise behind me. It is utterly peaceful. The sense of space, the play of light - so much one just wants to hold on to. It is lovely to join everyone around a particularly good fire. We all share drinks and our feelings for this very special place. A perfect end to the last day in base camp.

12 August

Leaving is always hard especially on a sparkling day – cool air and snow-capped mountains. Beautiful drive to Anoz. Some expedition members swim in the Katun again. I head straight for the banya. My last one this year. It is very hot. Warm evening. Share cranberry vodka with Peter, Volodya and team members sitting under the stars and listening to crickets.

13 August

Hot, fast drive to Novosibirsk with wonderful stops at the market (for coffee and fruit blinis) and later, shashliks. We all go out to the Russian restaurant for last meal together. The expedition has sped past and has been a great success. Thank you all for your hard work and invaluable contribution. We have learnt a lot and gathered valuable data. Now comes the time for analysis and conclusions. It has been wonderful working with you all.