



## EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2006

By Tessa McGregor

26 June

And so it's that time of year again. Today spent preparing for and packing up for the expedition in Wuerzburg, Germany. It's hot. Football fever reigns. Matthias even wearing 'man make-up' (red St. George's cross on his – German - cheeks). Matthias and Peter wanted us to come to a party with a big screen and England playing. I think it had something to do with football? Luckily my flight was delayed, as was Andrew's, so we did not make it. Andy is assistant expedition leader for the two first slots this year and Peter, who is also with us (and knows everything there is to know about football, maps and GPS), will be joining the expedition in the third slot. All on target and we will be flying out to Russia tomorrow. Matthias has told me "you don't have to write a bloody novel..". Some things never change!. I'll sign off and write again from Novosibirsk. Oh, and I am also attaching a daily plan for the expedition, just so that you know what the inevitable & regular changes of plan are made from ;->

28 June

Flew to Moscow and on to Novosibirsk. All went very smoothly. One out of two Transaero flights on time (an improvement) and amazingly smooth 'collecting baggage from Moscow flight and checking in for Novosibirsk flight' despite very little time. Most incredibly of all, we got through customs without the usual hassle! Too good to be true. We met our scientist Volodya and his wife Irene just as we were boarding the plane. So good to see them again.

Landed Novosibirsk at 5:30 and were met by my Olga who works for Sibalp and Kolia. It's hot and humid in Novosibirsk. Most of the wooden houses that lined the road near the airport are gone. There is a lot of new building. Checked into the Hotel Central. It hasn't changed one bit. The same grumpy ladies behind the desk, the same sparrow chatter, the same Soviet feel. Spent the day photocopying fresh data sheets and buying expedition essentials as well as trying to get hold of Pavel at Autoland (the Novosibirsk Land Rover dealer) who was never in. Finally got hold of him late afternoon. We will go to Autoland tomorrow to inspect/collect vehicles. We met Nastya (our translator) in the evening for supper. It's lovely to see her again.

29 June

Another hot day. Shopping in the morning. The afternoon was spent in Autoland with Andy and Nastya. We were met by two shiny Defenders with number plates. One is a silver '90', the other a black '110'. The latter has a winch and a huge black, roof-rack. Our two other expedition vehicles may be brand new, but have no number plates and no paperwork which means we can't drive them anywhere. Remember – this is an expedition – plans will change AND this is Russia! We inspected all the vehicles in the baking heat, showered by poplar "snow" (the seeds look like cotton wool) and accompanied by tiny (biting?) flies.

Discussions took a long time, as did persuading Autoland of the importance of finding our expedition gear, stored with them (high-lift jack, waffle boards, car fluids etc). Andy drove the '90' back to the hotel. His first time in Novosibirsk traffic, but you would never have guessed. He's a real pro. At the hotel we were met by Sergey Kurgin, our Russian logistics coordinator, just back from Mongolia. He is on top form and when he heard about the incomplete vehicle paperwork he laughed and said "it's expedition!". But I wanted more concrete help from him so suggested using his Jeep. He was very obliging – but his Jeep is in pieces and will take time to repair. Yes, it has become my mantra "it's Russia, it's expedition!" but have no worries, we will get you all to base camp and the research will continue as assiduously as ever.

Novosibirsk was particularly lovely this evening. Pink sky with luminous trails of cloud. Flocks of swifts hunted under a sickle moon, their cries so evocative of summer.

30 June

Another very hot and humid day – we have sorted out transport to base camp so that is an achievement. We drove to Autoland this morning before the Land Rover press conference, to sort out exactly when the other two vehicles will be ready. Also to collect the high-lift jack etc. You won't be surprised to hear nothing was ready. I asked Pavel about it. He said he couldn't find it. I asked if he or anyone had looked for it. His reply was no. All as helpful as ever, at which point I took a deep breath and said it had to be ready after the press conference as we don't have the time to make twice daily visits to Autoland (it's at the opposite end of the city to the hotel). It was hot and I was steaming, although externally we kept our cool and were all smiles for the press conference, which was well attended. Andy, Volodya and Sergey went back to Autoland and collected the expedition gear. Spectacular thunderstorm driving back from the press conference and deluginous rain.

1 July

Team members arrived in the morning. Lovely to see 6 team members from 2005 again (Christine, Toril, Peter, Jens, James and Helge -and Christine, Peter and Toril are back for the 4th year running) all back and eager for more! Although team members have all arrived safely, 2 of them don't have their luggage. Luckily, after lots of phoning and help from Olga I finally hear it's made it to Novosibirsk at 18:00. Nastya is a star and drops everything to go with James and Ian to the airport and they are all miraculously back in time for the team supper where we get to catch up with the team members we know and meet the new ones. Football is a hot topic - James and Ian are determined to find a screen and see it. After another hot and humid day the rain comes down, just as I go the supermarket for last minute supplies with Volodya and Irene, and, can you believe it?...all alcohol apart from beer is cordoned off. It's not possible to buy vodka and the shelves are almost empty! It's a new Putin directive and has something to do with relabeling all bottles and tax.

2 July

Team members very prompt with their luggage downstairs (Hugh is down by 6.30). It's a good start to the first slot. We have breakfast and briefing. Andrey prompt and reliable as always in his beloved white minibus. Nina and Ivan there - big embraces and delighted to see them again. Nina has her black Scottie dog with her called Timi. Timi is coming to base camp with us and is a very cute mascot. We set off after collecting lots more Altai Republic registration papers from Olga. The forms have changed, again! Our convoy sets off - 2 Land Rover Defenders and 2 minibuses (one is hired to get the team down to base camp as we don't have all 4 Defenders yet, but hopefully they will be ready later in the week).

The drive, now so familiar, is lovely. We travel through the rich agricultural farmlands of Siberia. Dark, rich soils visible through growing crops. People tilling, hoeing, weeding. Bright headscarves top the bent outlines of peasant women. We go through vast forests of birch and pine.

People dotted at intervals along the road selling wild produce they've gathered. The weather very changeable. We make good time and stop for lunch at the usual roadside restaurant - it's closed - so drive on and stop at new place an hours drive further. It's very good and the service surprisingly fast. Andy and Ian driving the Land Rover 90 and Peter, Toril and Helge driving the 110. We pass the Altai republic border in the afternoon sun. The Katun River and Altai foothills are truly beautiful. We have entered a different place. We reach Anoz by 19:00. It's warm and sunny after heavy rain. Multa, the cream coloured guard dog is now fully grown and as friendly as ever. Kindra and Toril make a big fuss of her. The Katun River at the bottom of the garden is flowing fast. Countless white butterflies are roosting on intense blue flowers that cover the slope down to the river. There is a new banya at the bottom of the garden. It's not finished (I'm glad, as I love the old one we always use). Lena has prepared an excellent supper and after filling in the new registration forms, the team is ready for the banya and general relaxation in this delightful place. Nastya, as usual, works late into the night doing the paperwork for tomorrow 's registration.

3 July

We awake to a beautiful morning. Thick dew, sun, warmth, birdsong, tinkling cowbells and dogs barking in the village. Birds are busy feeding young in the bushes and trees around us. Nastya and Andrey go to Gorno Altaisk to do the registration. The rest of us to Silver Springs - the craft market and sacred springs. The team buys maps and local artifacts. We have tea and piroshkis, then, later, more tea and shashliks. We wait, and wait, and wait. Nastya and Andrey join us eventually and I'm very relieved, but Nastya explains the whole registration process has changed again - it is now necessary to have not only original passports, letter of invitation etc, but also photocopies of all these documents. As photocopying facilities in Gorno Altaisk are very limited and, if they exist, are nowhere near the registration office it makes things even more difficult. Nastya managed to achieve the impossible and got us all

registered, BUT PLEASE CAN ALL TEAM MEMBERS FOR 2ND AND 3RD SLOT MAKE SURE THEY HAVE A PHOTOCOPY OF THEIR PASSPORT (PAGE WITH THE PHOTO AND DETAILS), THEIR RUSSIAN VISA AND LETTER OF SUPPORT PLUS AND ANY OTHER DOCUMENTS SUPPLIED BY THE VISA ISSUING AGENCY (IF APPLICABLE). We left Silver Springs at 13:30. Very relieved to be registered and on the road again. The long drive takes us through the mountains, valleys, villages and settlements. The alpine landscapes become more austere and stony as we drive deeper into Asia after the Chikitman pass.

Drivers are excellent. We no longer follow the Katun river, but the Chuya. We reach 'Chuya Ouzi' restaurant by 18:00. It expands every year. Then the last leg of the journey to Koch Agach. Arrive at 22:30. It's 16 degrees and not raining! Fuel up all the vehicles and drive to Kokoria, where we leave the tarmac and drive off-road, across the step to base camp. See jerboas on the way and resting larks fly up from the tracks. Arrive 00:30. Met by Roman who has been looking after base camp. After unloading the vehicles and allocating tents there is a wonderful soup (made by Roman), bread, hot drinks and biscuits in the candlelit mess tent. I can't describe what it's like to be back.

4 July

Rain in the night but stops by morning. After a hearty breakfast we do risk assessment and introduction to the science and equipment. Then vehicle checks and off-road driving - instruction by Andy (he read engineering, has flown planes and helicopters so I'm more than happy to delegate!). At the end of the day, I go to see Abai and Gulinara (our herder friends) with Roman and Nastya. The rivers are fast flowing but luckily not too deep to cross. It is very moving to see Gulinara and Abai again and we spend time drinking tea, eating boursak and freshly made pasta and meat and catching up with all that's happened in the last year. Very sadly, Ascir, Abai's father has died, as has one of his sisters (aged 33). Spring is late and very cold. Melt water kept the rivers high and they have only recently put up their yurt - the subject of yurts is close to my heart as I would like one for base camp again this year. It's almost impossible to borrow or hire one in summer, because that's when all the herders use them, but thanks to Abai and Gulinara, it's possible again this year. Bless them!

5 July

Roman and I leave early to collect Abai and bring him to base camp. Morning sun hits the mountains. Sheep and goats, tightly packed in the coral cough, fart, grind their teeth and are generally restless, waiting to be led out to graze. Aikun (Abai and Gulinara's son and Gulfat, their niece are sound asleep in the yurt when we arrive. Angelic faces peeping from quilts. We get back to base camp in heavy rain. Delay survey departure and then change plans as slopes will be too slippery, so team goes out to survey birds in the steppe and lakes with Andy and Volodya. Hugh takes his fishing rod and catches many grayling, but releases them all. James and Ian stay back with me to do all the necessary work at base camp. We get it done in good time, the rain stops and sun comes out, as do the mosquitoes and horseflies! Abai and Andrey return with the yurt and the whole team helps put it up. First the wooden frame - circular lattice, then the circular top, held by Abai and Roman on a pole and steadied by team members, the roof poles that must be slotted into the circular top and finally the sheets of felt. All stages involve much tying and binding. It takes us 3 hours and by 20:00 it's done.

We christen it with a bottle of champagne. I'm happy! Base camp looks right. As Nina prepares tea Hugh calls me over. He has spotted ibex. We are joined by the rest of the team so a barrage of binoculars and the spotting scope are trained onto the slope behind base camp and we observe 12 - 16 individuals feed and traverse the scree. All are females and 4 of them have young. They are pale coloured. Dusk falls as we observe for about half an hour. Back into the yurt, delighted with this exciting sighting and we finish the evening with vodka, tea, fresh thyme tea and an array of sweet biscuits. The yurt has been well christened.

6 July

Volodya and Andrey take half the team to survey the left ridge and plateau behind base camp and put up the hide. I take the rest of the team with Roman and Nastya to do more yurt interviews. We meet new herders across the Buguzun river. Slava and Tonia invite us in to their yurt. Outside, other family members are putting freshly made cheese to dry on car bonnet and wooden platform. We have tea, home made bread and thick, fresh cream. Slava says 6 wolves were killed in the area in winter. They were poisoned. Slava also tells me he heard snow leopard mating calls last winter, deep in the mountains. These herders don't go back to live in the village, but stay in their winter station, towards Tabozhok. We then go on to recce new survey areas for overnight camps in the region of Builugiem. The lakes are heaving with fish. We see ducks, terns, waders, demoiselle cranes, a pair of breeding whooper swans with 4 young and a great northern diver carrying her 6 chicks on her back. The area is stunning. The 'road' is not easy, the rain sweeps in. We get back to base camp late afternoon. It clears. Supper followed by data sheets and scat identification and now Andy is here feather identification as well! Lively discussions last well into the evening. A very good day.

7 July

Heavy rain in the morning means we have to change our survey plan. The steppe is just a great, grey expanse. Visibility is low. Andy and I catch up on paperwork. Team members read field guides and research material. The weather lifts at mid-day so we decide to survey after 'lost valley' after all. The rivers are flowing fast. We survey the beginning of the valley, walking through thick larch forest full of bushes, shrubs and flowers. We find lots of faeces! Lynx, maral, ibex, argali, hare and large mustelid - probably pine martin. We see two marmots and countless burrows, plus the usual ground squirrel colonies and pretty pika tables or pika salads as Volodya often calls them. The rain comes down again and turns to sleet so we turn back to base camp. We are greeted by a smoking yurt chimney - everyone dives into the yurt and peels off sodden layers. Altai weather is a test for any waterproof jacket and only two people (Ian and Jens) have jackets that withstood today's weather. Andy does some nifty drying and incidental ironing of his very wet jacket on the stove pipe. He not only does his job expertly but looks pristine as well. Wow! It's great to thaw out and hot sweet tea has never tasted so good. The sleet turns back to rain, then eases and the ibex come to visit again early evening - the same slope behind base camp. It looks like the same herd of females and young. More good observations. Roman, Nastya and I go to find Marat, a hunter who has horses.

The steppe is very wet, the skies leaden and all the mountains white. It takes an hour to get to his 'ail' (wooden yurt). See a pair of demoiselle with two chicks on the way. Marat is not back from Kosh Agach so we head home again. Hopefully we'll catch him tomorrow. The rain sets in again and it's cold. Wet feet don't help!

P.S. Genya and Maxim arrived today with their Land Rover. They were with us last year. It's lovely to see them and a third vehicle is very welcome!

8 July

Wake up to no rain and snow covering the mountains down to the tree line. It's very beautiful and to make the day just perfect the ibex come and see us again. "Turns out that base camp is the best hide" says Volodya and he's right. We watch two groups - one on the ridge made up of 19 individuals. Females, juveniles and young plus 1 young male. The second herd is on the slope below - four females with young and one juvenile. The two groups merge and the herd moves off over the ridge and out of sight after having given us the chance to watch them pawing the snow, feeding, sparring and generally enjoying the morning. They are very clear through the spotting scope. It's the best observation yet and it looks like most of the ibex population of our core area is here. It's a perfect start to our day off. Half the group goes with Andrey to see the burial mounds and standing stones in the Valley of 1000 stones. Other team members go to look for tracks in the fresh snow. Roman and I go to see Marat. So many birds of prey, including eagles. Find Marat this time. Discuss plans for next slot and after tea and fried bits of sheep offal in "ail" go off in Marat's 'Uaz' (Russian jeep) for 'Russian driving course'. Another memorable experience. Cracked windscreen, no brakes, Marat puffing smoke between Roman and me. Roman drives back. We have set new recce for the 19th July, by which date he is sure to be sober.

Beautiful drive back across the steppe. Many birds of prey. It's grandiose. Back at base camp have just enough time to change for the wedding I've been invited to in Tibilir (Kazakh village). We go in Andrey's minibus, Roman, Nastya, Andy and me. The steppe glows in the afternoon light and the air is like champagne. See many birds of prey. Make good time and arrive Tibilir (without getting lost! - but then Andrey is an ace driver) 6.30. The village of wooden houses and one-horse streets looks ravishing as the colours intensify and the surrounding mountains are capped with snow. A large local 'marquee' type wooden structure is already laid out with trestle tables, benches and food. More food is being prepared. Kazakh pop vies with the calls of black-eared kites displaying above the decorations. We see Tarbia and Assipa plus other herders we know and are invited in to the house. A large room packed with low tables, stools, food, vodka, beer and wine and so many people. We sit. It's hot. The toasts flow fast - all in Kazakh, so none of us understand, punctuated by traditional singing. Temperatures soar. Nastya and Roman very stoic as they are both not well. We all need air and Assipa takes us to her house to show us traditional needlework and carpets. Then back to the wedding house. More people arrive. We watch the sun set and shadows lengthen. Bride and groom arrive at 9pm to much hooting of horns. Andy gets some great shots. More standing around, speeches, a traditional song and finally into the marquee in a great swarm to sit at the tables, eat, drink and dance. I'm still standing when asked to give a toast and sing. Luckily Roman there to help me. It's all clear until 11pm when I know it's time to go, but those last toasts as we leave...arghhh!!! Brilliant wedding. These people certainly know how to party!!

9 July

Up feeling very much worse for wear but we get ready for overnighter led by Andy and Volodya with Roman. Drive the approaches of 'Chorni', a mountain near Bilugiem (new research block No: 3). Both vehicles go. The overnight group sets up camp and my team goes and does more yurt interviews. First one not very productive, but that is often the case on first visit. Stop by at Abai and Gulinara's yurt on way back where sheep shearing is taking place. So skillfully done by hand and so fast. Back at base camp and discuss our work in the yurt. Very cosy with the stove on. It's still very cool. Very heavy rain in the night.

10 July

Luckily rain stops in the morning and I take my team to survey lost valley and glacial lake. Weather clears and mosquitoes come out in droves. See a steppe viper on the way up, under a stone by the river. Also see more sign of argali/ibex and maral plus hare. Marmot alarm calls and sightings as we progress up the valley. It looks spectacular with fresh snowfall on Silugiem and Tapduair and the glacier is dazzlingly white. Guy spots ibex at the head of the valley and we observe two females and young, above us on the precipitous slopes. We all have great views through the spotting scope of feeding, pawing the ground and resting. They are very pale - the adults in full moult, tufts of hair even sticking to the horns of one female where she has been scratching her coat. We make it up to the glacial lake. Find ibex tracks and faeces but no sign of argali. The walk back down the valley to the vehicle always feels about twice as long as on the way up. Everyone very pleased with the day and we all pile into the Land Rover (8 people + rucksacks in a short wheelbase - lucky it's only a short journey!).

Back at base camp, showers very welcome. Beautiful evening, but very cold. Magnificent light on the slopes behind base camp. The overnight team come back 20:40 - ruddy faced and glowing with achievement and cold! They did a big survey and got to the top of Chorni. Data sheets late into the night - but plenty of data so Volodya and I very happy and proud of the team.

Christine found a rare wild lily and the bird list with Andy and Peter/Christine/Toril/Helge is also growing.

11 July

Whole team out to survey back valleys. Another grey and cool morning. Impressive drive and hard to find way up the river bed after a whole year. The river beds change after every winter. See steppe, golden and tawny eagle on the way + buzzard and kites. Bitter when we arrive. Split into two teams. One to survey 'snow leopard ridge' (where we had the trail master last year) and one to survey the glacial lake and surrounding area below. Find a lot of fresh sign of wild boar and good sightings of ptarmigan. Also fresh wolverine tracks and manul (adult and cub) tracks. Very little sign of argali (and what we do find is old) but ridge team see 12 ibex (a distant sighting of adults and 2 young). Excellent survey and long drive back. More good data sheets and vodka in the mess tent. Unusually, I haven't been able to touch the stuff since the wedding!

12 July

Volodya takes group to survey valley not far from base camp. Beautiful; day - we pay for it in mosquito and horsefly bites. Good to be able to air tents and dry out sleeping bags. Andy and I take rest of team to yurts with Nastya and Roman. Then to 'Argan Su' - sacred springs. It's a rough drive and we arrive to find some a truck, a 'Uaz' and a hobbled horse with families of herders - some we know. All go down and drink the sacred waters and splash our faces (they cure everything, apparently, and are very good for body and soul). Roman goes for full immersion. It's a sacred place and ribbons drape surrounding bushes and the standpipes from which the water gushes. It tastes too sweet and pure to describe. It's also very cold! I'm handed the horse and I don't know if it's the water or having a horse between my legs but I get a surge of energy and I'm happier than a sand lark (where does that expression come from?). It's a short ride but it's my first this year. I'm happy. We pick up Gulinara and Noursan her 15 year old nephew on the way back, (Abai went to Kosh Agach 3 days ago and hasn't been heard of since) and bring them to base camp for the first slot party. Team photos by yurt. Champagne. A cake for Kindra's birthday (she's 17 tomorrow) and dancing (Helge is amazing!!!!) then around the stove in the yurt and Ian sings. It's a brilliant party. This first slot has been so productive despite bad weather and lack of third Defender. We have never had so many ibex sightings. I have also picked up a lot of info about snow leopard activity over the winter from local people. A great beginning to the 2006 expedition. No shooting stars, but I've got plenty of wishes when I see them. Top of my list is the other vehicles for slot 2!

13 July

Sad good-byes as the team leaves in the morning. Andy is in charge of this change-over. It's strange as we have never had so many team members staying in camp between slots. There are five (Hugh, Guy, James, Jens and Tracy). I am also staying as are Volodya, Irene and Nina (plus Timi of course!). Timi is as good as gold. I stay at base camp. There is the usual between-slots cleaning and tidying to do, plus admin, not to mention catching up with two weeks washing. Although bright, the morning is surprisingly cold. Team members help around camp, chopping wood, helping me and generally recuperating. After another of Nina's delicious meals we retire to the yurt where we chat about big cats, wildlife and how wildlife sounds in Wyoming & Tennessee (where Hugh comes from).

14 July

Wake up to a much warmer morning. Volodya and Irene set off for 24 hours in the hide. Guy goes to identify butterflies. Hugh goes off to survey ridges and Tracy to survey the forest and river edge. The grasshoppers start to stridulate. A sound I love as it means heat. Sure enough the temperature rises and the biting insects are merciless. Oleg arrives in the afternoon having driven all night to get the 3rd Defender to base camp! I can hardly believe we finally have it!! It's a graphite 110. Oleg disappears for a well-earned rest. Hugh and Tracy return in the evening. Tracy found a fresh wolf track and Hugh has done the ridges behind and around Tapduair (the way he can cover ground is extraordinary) and seen 18 ibex (females and young) at the head of the glacial lake above 'lost valley' and 18 argali in the valley behind Tapduair. He spotted them from the ridges and also had a close encounter with a cinereous vulture. It flew just over him while he was lying on the ridge - probably checking him out to see if he was a potential meal!

15 July

Up at 4:00 & leave 5:00 to take Oleg into Kosh Agach to catch a bus back. I'm accompanied by Nina, Jens, James and Hugh. It's raining and the sky is heavy with cloud. Swarms of mosquitoes attack the car. After dropping off Oleg we find the only shop open so early in the morning - customers buy food through the bars of a small window, but we are allowed in - the metal door bolted firmly behind us as soon as we enter. Buy provisions (vodka and chocolate for team members) and back to base camp. Volodya and Irene get back from the hide in the afternoon. We all take it easy and then at 18:00 we celebrate James 20th birthday. Nina has cut flowers for him and pulls out all the culinary stops - including fern salad and a birthday cake plus 20 candles (too big to put on the cake so dotted along the table). Many toasts (vodka and Russian champagne) and a great evening!

16 July

Beautiful morning. The Chikachova range (Mongolian border) has beckoned ever since I first saw it. Volodya and I are very keen to survey it and we decide to take a closer look. Genya comes with us in his Defender. The day and the 'road' are spectacular. Off road tracks split, twist and disappear and what looks obvious on the map is obscure in reality. The driving is challenging and we go through magnificent country. Bird of prey sightings are breathtaking - cinereous vultures, steppe, golden and imperial eagle, buzzards, kites and falcons.

We get close enough to the Chikachova range to observe slopes, ridges, valleys..and it's very surveyable - it looks awesome and I wish we could just start now, but we need to get special permissions. I'm moved, as ever, by the grandeur, infinite skies, horizons and the beauty of this vast landscape.

Grasshoppers and locusts are preparing to swarm - the dirt track pullulates with them. Back at base camp we enjoy the late afternoon sun and a river-cooled beer with Volodya and Genya. It's warm, the evening is golden. The river seems to join our conversation. After supper we sit and look at the stars around the camp fire. They are very bright and shimmer as the temperature drops. The spotting scope is out and we look at Jupiter and its moons - five are visible. An unforgettable day.

P.S. Have awarded Tracy the most glamorously-clad team member award - she floats around in beautiful tops and never looks grubby. How does she do it?

17 July

Overcast and grey this morning with spits of rain. Good day for fishing and Hugh goes off with his rod. Maxim and Genya leave for Novosibirsk. Team members survey in areas around camp. Jens is a star, chopping more wood and filling up the showers. Nina gets a luxury one (really hot!) and she deserves it. I go up to observation point above base camp in the afternoon.

I love just being there and hearing the river below that sounds like the wind - no other sounds... Spot two argali on rocky slope far up the valley - a very distant sighting (two adults) also get good view of marmot. Make my way back down to camp. The slope is very steep. The smell of crushed herbs underfoot, the intense colours of the flowers. It's a heady sensory experience. The wild onions and rhubarb are perfect for harvesting now and the mushrooms are coming out. Everyone back at base camp in early evening.

Volodya and Irene saw an adult maral in the forest and Hugh has caught fish! Fabulous borscht for supper. Nina is a wonder. Then sit around camp fire. Stars very beautiful. Wait for new team members to arrive and they make it just after 22:00 and I am very happy to see Gerald is with them, despite the problems with his visa. It was all sorted in Moscow. We have a very lively and late evening chatting in the mess tent and toasting the safe arrival. James goes up to a ridge above base camp to sleep in his bivy bag in the hope of early morning wildlife observations. It's nearly dawn by the time I get to my tent!

18 July

A beautiful sunny day. Andy is taking over as expedition leader this slot and I am concentrating on being just a scientist. He is very competent and does the risk assessment and off-road driving course. Volodya takes second-slot team members out to survey valley and forest near Compe Petrovich's winter station. It's an area that has magnificent mature Siberian pines and is full of large bird of prey pellets. I go to find Marat with Roman and Nastya to finalize the recce plan for this week. He is not there - but his son Gena is. Very good to see him and warm embrace (my lucky day - he's not even wearing a shirt!). We have tea, wild rhubarb preserve and thick cream and talk. Gena saw a snow leopard in the winter while out hunting with his brother - at a range of about 500m. He says it was in January. I ask about the temperature. "Oh, not cold. About 20 degrees - minus.". We go and see the wonderful black horse I rode last year. He's very lame after winning a race back in May/June. He is also as wild as ever. Eventually Gena ropes him and I can take a look. He has bust tendons and the injury is bad. I'm heartbroken I won't get to ride him this year.

Back to camp. New team members studying the data sheets and background reading. Hugh has come back with two impressive ibex skulls (again he has powered up steep sided valleys and ridges). Volodya's team has found a lot of sign including steaming fresh wild boar and wolf faeces. We cook Hugh's fish and eat them around the camp fire - heaven! Stars amazing. James off to sleep on a mountain again.

20 July

[by Andy Stronach, assistant expedition leader]

Tessa disappeared over the horizon in a cloud of dust on horseback, hair blowing in the wind with Roman (our mountain guide) and Marat (a local herder/hunter) today - she told us she was doing a reconnaissance for next years' expedition and mentioned something about picking up a snow leopard skull; sounds like a jolly to me though! As such, I (Andy) will be doing the expedition diary for the next few days.

Took our new team members (Angela, Maryse, Michelle, Gerald and Stefan) up to the local glacial lakes to survey, and having endured some heavy rain, were rewarded with glorious weather and stunning views of glaciers, ibex, turquoise lakes and a species of redstart new to science (no-one seemed to believe me though!) [note from editor: Andy really does know his birds, so if he says it's new, it's new!]. A few brave souls continued up the valley and after a very long and gruelling climb up a massive scree slope, collapsed in a heap at the top. The views were stupendous; snow clad mountains of Mongolia, Tuva to the north, China and the Altai steppe. A good day.

21 July

Day one of the first overnight trip away from base camp.

Angela, Maryse, Tracy, Jens, Hugh, Guy and I set off for the first overnight trip of this slot after breakfast. After 2½ hours of carefully picking our way up rivers and over rocks in our trusty Land Rovers, we arrived. The afternoon was spent surveying the lower slopes of our objective, where we found ground squirrels and marmot as well as ptarmigan, dotterel, ortolan bunting, bluethroat and other birds. On the way back to camp, we found some wild rhubarb, so loaded up; stewed with a few cubes of 'asucre' it was a delicious and very gratifying end to dinner. It was great to get away from the light pollution of base camp ;-> and to enjoy a sky full of stars and a vodka or two whilst chatting about life, the universe and everything around the camp fire.

22 July

Day 2 of the overnight trip away from base camp.

Got up early, had breakfast, packed up camp and got ready to go. The heavens then opened, so we retired to the Land Rovers, wished we had stayed in bed longer and drank Indian Spice tea as the raindrops rolled down the windscreens. After a bit of will we/won't we, we bit the bullet, put on our waterproofs and set off uphill to the glacial lakes. Ten minutes later, the sky cleared, the sun came out and we took off our waterproofs and continued uphill into a wonderful day in the mountains.

Sometimes we have butterfly days and sometimes, grasshopper days; today it was Burnett moths - beautiful black and red moths that we saw on practically every one of the many flowers we passed, slowing our progress as we marvelled at how beautiful they looked. As we came to the last ridge before reaching the glacial lakes, a small rockfall caught my attention; closer inspection revealed that it was not caused simply by topography and gravity, but by animals - four animals. Four big brown and gold furry animals playfully bouncing down the slope together, apparently having just as great a time in the beautiful summer sun as we were. These were wolverine!! I'm not going to tell you how chuffed I was at seeing these fantastic animals because my English is not up to it! They stopped, rolled on their backs and played together for a long time before noticing us and trotting uphill over the ridge and into Biosphere legend.

23 July

"Day Off"

After a long lie-in and a late breakfast, Andrey, Nastya, Angela, Jens, Gerald and Volodya went on a trip to the valley of a thousand stones on the far side of our study area. There were stone circles, tombs and standing stones all over the steppe, but the highlight of the trip was watching a man riding his horse up and down the steppe dragging a metal roller behind, flattening felt he was making. The afternoon was spent at the 'bird lakes' where we recorded many beautiful waterbirds, including a pair of Slavonian grebes with four black and white striped young on their backs. With the early evening steppe sun setting behind us, the birds looked stunning.

24 July

It's Tessa again - back from my "jolly" with a jolly sore arse! But happy. The past five days have been very productive. I explored the Bashkaus and Kalbaka valleys and found snow leopard rock scent spray plus lots of sign of maral, ibex, argali "loss" (which I think is moose), wild boar, bear shit so fresh it was steaming together with scraping and tracks (mother and cub) and learned a lot more about the poaching situation. It's worse than I thought and snow leopards are still very much a target. Poachers hunt them in winter when it's easier to find them. Young animals (14 - 18 months) seem to be particularly vulnerable as this is when they learn to hunt and separate from their mother. I also saw the Saljak ridges in the distance and the habitat looks perfect. Marat confirmed this was a very good area for snow leopard and primary prey (ibex and argali) but it's inaccessible by vehicle and a long way to ride, let alone walk. However, I now have a very clear picture of areas adjoining our research area, which is increasing all the time. I could write pages about the last few days, but I won't bore you although I want Christine in particular to know the floral diversity is spectacular. Roman was very stoic, as he wasn't well for two days but still rode and did a great job. I also had expert fishing tuition from Marat and caught my first grayling! (At a price - I am covered in mosquito bites). We survived on boiled marmot, fresh grayling, very sweet tea, bread, 'slivka' and vodka. The ride home today was very tiring but the weather was great and we were welcomed at Marat's ail by Andy, Jens, Hugh and Nastya (looking even more gorgeous than when I left). Andy and Jens went riding and after more tea I tried yet another new horse (very briefly). The drive back to base camp in the evening light with cranes and birds of prey, exquisite, and most perfect of all - sighting of three red foxes, glowing in the sunlight, sitting above their earth in the middle of the steppe. While surveying, Andy found a golden eagle nest today with chicks in a valley near base camp and all his team got to see it. The evening ended perfectly in the mess tent with Russian champagne to toast the many sightings and new snow leopard sign.

25 July

Andy, Nastya and I took team (Hugh, Guy, Jens, Maryse) to Chikachova (the Mongolian border). We now have permission to work in the area. We arrived at Aidbai's yurt where the whole family was half way through butchering a goat, so freshly killed it was still twitching. Andy and I hired two horses to cover as much ground as possible and managed two valleys and low ridges. Hugh powered on in his phenomenal way and surveyed one of the bigger ridges. He saw eight argali in the distance (three young and five adults). The others took the Land Rover as far as possible up a valley, past a disused mine and walked from there. It was much colder than in our present survey area. The Chikachova ridges are awesome - higher than Tapduair. The glacial lakes that lie below them are magnificent. Ruddy shellduck are breeding as are terns and gulls and we saw a goosander with eight tiny chicks.

We met back at the yurt in the afternoon. The wind was bitter and cold. Clear light exposed every rocky detail. When the Land Rover returned, we were surprised to see two men leap out - all Kalashnikovs and camouflage. They were border patrol guards. They appeared out of nowhere while Nastya was picking mushrooms near the car. They had spotted all our team (spread out over two valleys and ridges) and tried to catch up with Hugh but had to give up.

Nastya after the initial shock of being accosted by two strange men waving guns, did a perfect job (as always) showing our permissions and explaining our mission. Actually they turned out to be very nice and couldn't take their eyes off Nastya. We all had tea in the yurt and took photos of them next to the Land Rover. They confirmed how good the area is for snow leopard and said there is a resident one. It was a very exciting day. Got back to base camp in the evening and Volodya's overnight team arrived about 21:00, having worked hard surveying a very good valley behind Tapduair. They found plenty of sign and saw argali. So many sightings this year. It's wonderful. Everyone glowing with exercise, wind-burn (and maybe a hint of vodka?). Very lively evening in the yurt and Gerald recites poetry - even before the party!

26 July

Andy, Hugh, Jens, Nastya, Andrey and I go to Jarnaul village to see poached argali skin and skull - an old male, shot two years ago in Chikachova. Also see impressive maral horns (but they are 40 years old). Then go to museum (it's open!!!! The first one to be open in all the time I've been here). It's about Kazakh people of the Altai and fascinating. In the last room (just like a yurt) we see a snow leopard skin hanging on the wall. It's very fresh and from a juvenile (I would estimate about 15 months old). Makes me very sad, but at least it gives the opportunity for photos and measurements.

Back to base camp and then take team members to meet herders. Have a wolf sighting, out in the open in broad daylight - so good I initially think it must be a dog, but get the binoculars onto it and observe it nervously run into the forest. Amazing and so exciting. End up at Abai's again. He's just finished shearing his sheep. More toasts (except the drivers) and back to base camp for team photos and party in glorious evening light. Another of Nina and Nastya feast!

27 July

I always hate leaving base camp. Today is no exception. Volodya, Irene and Angela are staying behind. Beautiful drive to Anoz. Stephan drives all the way. Can't wrench the steering wheel away from him, but I love being a passenger and enjoying the landscape. Hugh's folk and bluegrass CDs are great. We make very good time and the team enjoys this beautiful stopover as usual.

28 July

Stephan still at the wheel - very cool in shades and cap. He has a smile on his face all the way. The berry blinis at Srostki market are outstanding and the shashliks later on as delicious as ever. Get to Novosibirsk at 18:00. Marsha has arrived minus luggage. It's somewhere between the USA/Paris/Moscow but she seems unfazed and joins us for supper at the Lebanese restaurant as does Peter, who is taking over from Andy for the last slot.

29 July

Day spent catching up on admin, phone calls, emails etc and miracle of miracles, we (Andy, Peter, Nastya and I) collect the 4th Land Rover from Autoland - and it works!!! Meet new team at Russian restaurant in the evening. Guy, Hugh and Andy still with us as their flights not until tomorrow. Sad farewells. Hard to see them all go.

30 July

New team prompt and ready. Bob is back for the 3rd year running and Jane returns after 2004 Altai expedition. Good new team. Marsha, in true expedition spirit decides to come without her luggage and thanks, in large part to James we have spare kit for her. Excellent drivers and again, make Anoz in very good time. It's very busy and there are queues for the banya.

31 July

Nastya, Andrey and I go to Gorno Altiask to register team members and meet Chagat Almashev, Director of FSDA (local NGO) who is joining us for the last slot. Registration causes the usual problems and we wait and wait. Finally make Silver Springs after 13:00 and then the long, but breathtaking drive to base camp. We make very good time and arrive 11:45.

So last team all safe and sound at base camp. It's warm and the sky is alive with stars. The Milky Way so bright it almost lights the way to our tents.

Mess tent so welcoming with candles, soup and flowers. Angela, Irene and Volodya have had a good time and great weather between slots. Jenya is with us again. His familiar Land Rover with snorkel and winch, complementing ours. This team has stamina and stays up well into the small hours!

1 August

Wake up to heavy rain and cold. The usual introductory training day. During off-road driving course in the afternoon the sky clears, sun comes out and it turns glorious. Marsha goes shopping in Kosh Agach for more warm clothes. Chagat is very knowledgeable, and it's a real pleasure having him with us. Another late night in the mess tent.

2 August

Whole team goes out to back valleys to survey argali plateau. It's a magnificent day and a demanding first survey, but everyone does very well. Less argali activity than in previous years, but then we know a poacher was operating in the area recently. Warm showers and Nina's cooking are a great way to unwind before doing data sheets.

3 August

Another fine morning and perfect survey weather. I take half the team (Camilla, Katie, Jane, Hannah, James, Ulf, Chagat and Roman) on overnighter to new area near Tabazhok. The rest of the team goes with Volodya and Nastya to survey Silugiem. The girls (Nasty and Angela) are first to the summit. Girl power!!! I learn later that after that they watched a DVD about snow leopards and then went jerboa watching. Talk about stamina! But then my team also shows impressive stamina. We survey steep-sided valley heady with the scent of wild herbs and fruit bushes. Thrushes call from thick willow groves that line the river. We stop to have our packed lunch by the river and the mosquitoes are quick to attack. Then ascend onto the ridge and grassy plateau. Last part of survey is down very steep-sided rocks and trail, used by ibex and argali. It overlooks the valley we are camping in. Perfect for snow leopard and half way down I find what I am always hoping for – a snow leopard scrape. It's old, but it's a scrape! And then on a vertiginous slope below, Roman spots a pugmark! Again, it's old, but it's snow leopard sign. Happiness and joy!!! Camilla, Hannah and Katie glowing with terror or elation, or possibly both. Chagat and Roman as agile as ibex. Chagat takes a team photo. We make our way back down to the valley. I'm on a high.

Collect driftwood from river. Back at the vehicles we join James, Ulf and Jane who surveyed adjoining valley. Ulf sprained his wrist this morning, but it doesn't stop him taking photos using his monopod, despite bandage and sling and he even keeps smiling.

We pitch tents and Roman prepares supper as dusk falls. Eat huge quantities of buckwheat dish + pickles and tea then enjoy blazing camp fire (the best ever!) as the stars come out and a veiled moon rises above the black silhouette of a leaning larch tree. The evening is very lively and long. This team's capacity to work and play hard is impressive!

4 August

Woken by the cries of a herder, echoing up the valley as he drives his cattle to pasture. Up and pack up camp after breakfast. Flock of sheep and goats come past our vehicles and tents with two young herders sharing piebald horse. We all go to the yurt in our valley. Having Chagat with us lovely. He introduces us and the work we are doing and helps me interview local people. We have a very productive discussion and learn that a snow leopard was seen by a hunter, in this valley in January 2006. They also tell us that this area is a migration corridor for ibex and maral.

The team is invited into the yurt for tea, bread, smitana and boursak. Reluctantly move on to survey adjoining area. Drive through remote valleys with the odd yurt or winter station. Then cover over 11 kilometres on steep terrain in under six hours. This team is impressively fit. Find very old cat track in remaining snow patch. It's degraded and can't tell if it's lynx or juvenile snow leopard. Another excellent survey. Glorious drive back to base camp. Showers waiting (Ivan runs camp so smoothly – does everything and is always calm, with a gentle smile on his face. He is one in a million) and Nina's wonderful cooking (wild and mushroom soup and mountains of freshly made pirozhki). Data sheets followed by looking at Chagat's photos and a film on the Ukok plateau. Then another very lively and late night in the mess tent. My sleep deficit and vodka levels I think even higher than in previous years, but excellent data and expedition really breaking new ground.

After their marathon day on Silugiem etc. Volodya's team does a flat survey and continues with the bird list. Gerald, Adrian and Bob bathe in our "bloody cold river" (Peter's words) – respect! But not as much as for Jens who did that daily first thing in the morning, whatever the weather. Sergey arrives. He is staying with us for a couple of days, which is lovely.

5 August

I go to Kosh Agach in the morning with Chagat to talk with the director of the hunting concession. Andrey, Nastya, Gerald and Ulf with us as well. The director of the hunting concession is away, but find the deputy director up to his elbows in car oil and surrounded by pieces of UAZ (Russian vehicle) in the yard outside his wooden house. Thanks to Chagat, have another very productive interview inside the broken UAZ. Meet up with the others and also bump into Gulnara, who is expecting a baby and learn it is a girl! Very happy moment. Then, back to base camp. Then whole team as well as Sergey, Gena and Lena go to the scared springs, where by a strange coincidence we find the professional ranger I wanted to track down is there, as it's his holiday.

A strong, weather-beaten man wearing shapka (hat) and camouflage jacket. We talk in the Land Rover and again, an excellent contact made and valuable information gained. Then I immerse myself in the springs – the glacial water gushing over me in the slippery, wooden cubicle. The springs are said to be deeply healing and sacred and, believe it or not, I feel like a new person afterwards.

The team then splits. Most go back to base camp. I go to yurts with Nastya, Roman, Peter, Christian, Adrian, Bob and Marsha. We see Tarbia and her gorgeous, red-headed grand-daughters, Gluhart and Gulfat and some of her grandsons. Tarbia is very insistent that she wants to keep Nastya and marry her off to her youngest son. Nastya playing for time, but he'll be waiting for her with fish on the road. Much hilarity. Tarbia is a hoot. As well as the usual, delicious bousak, and tea she feeds me two enormous bowls of airan (type of yogurt) –also deeply healing I'm told and bursting with every vitamin and mineral a body could need. Tear ourselves away and go and see Abai. More tea and good chat and I try his new, young horse. Just broken in. Great fun. Back at base camp. More food! including two grayling, caught by Sergey.

Have a very good evening chatting with him and Nastya followed by another very late night with Russian team.

6 August

Getting up is hard! I go with Sergey, Nastya, Ulf and Gerald to explore future survey area nearer Kosh Agach. Sergey leaves us to rejoin his group after very productive morning. Volodya, Irene, Chagat, Peter and Ivan go to Chikachova and Roman leads rest of team to survey valley behind Tapduair. The Chikachova team discover different area and good mountain pass road. They find themselves in Mongolia without realizing, as frightened shepherd tells Chagat he's Mongolian, not Russian and that "this is Mongolia!" so they quickly hop back over the border!

No sign of border guards this time. Gerald and Ulf are great company and as well as being top rate drivers they make me and Nastya laugh so much that my sides ache by the end of the day, but it's a great feeling. They also wash the Land Rover so well that it looks better than it did in the Avtoland showroom and they chop wood! So they get the hero of the day award.

Lena (Jenya's girlfriend) collects and prepares the most divine wild mushrooms. She is not only beautiful, but she cooks like a dream and I learn she also does tattoos. A real artist. Jenya is lucky. I seem to have eaten more in the last 24 hours than in the previous two weeks! Roman's team did a big survey and found new sign of argali. So another excellent day.

7 August

The weather has turned colder, so getting out of sleeping bag in the morning hard, but seeing all our ridges covered in a light dusting of snow gives me a buzz.. Volodya, Irene, Peter, Adrian, Christian and Gerald off for overnighter – back valleys. My team ('The girls' – Angela, Katie, Camilla, Hannah and Jane plus Bob and James) surveys Tapduair with Roman and Ivan. We take a different route via 'lost valley'.

Angela spots three argali (two females + one young) on rocks at head of valley. Wonderful to see them as we have seen very fresh tracks on the way up and evidence of where they have been using natural salt licks. We start to ascend – steep scree, steeper scree and \*\*\*\* steep scree. It's bitter, rain turns to hail and I almost think of turning back. Almost, I said, but you know me, once out surveying I'm hard to stop.

The weather clears as we go up. Roman picks an excellent way and we are on Tapduair by 13:45. There is snow and the visibility is perfect. Breathtaking views of our research area. To look towards Chickachova now we have been there and officially added it to our research area is very exciting, as is looking at the valleys and ridges all around us that make up our core area. It's an amazing feeling to have surveyed all these valleys and ridges. I see two ibex resting on rocks in the valley behind Tapduair.

Descend Tapduair via different route, following ridges and dropping down into the valley behind base camp. Roman, Ivan and James take the opportunity to 'bum-board' down snow on scree slope. All speed and snow flurries to impress the girls. Then in the valley Angela is the first to spot another group of argali – eight animals (five females, one young and two juveniles). They look in top condition, chestnut coats and creamy rumps, picking their way so effortlessly over rocks. We watch them disappear over the ridge and walk back to base camp in the evening sunlight. Arrive 19:30 tired and happy. Team ravenous and all do justice to Nina's fantastic cooking – then the vodka! Bob's toast "to fit girls" and Angela's "Tapduair, \*\*\*\*\* yeah!" mark the beginning of another long and lively evening. Ulf gets the hero of the day award for the second day running. Not only has he washed another Land Rover with Marsha, but he's also mended the shower tent – sewing it with his fair hands. Marsha asks him to marry her but we all protest – she can't have him to herself! (P.S. tragically for us he's married with 3 daughters)

8 August

More rain in the night and it's cold, although I don't seem to notice at the moment (maybe it's got something to do with the vodka???) Take my team out to Tabajoc area where I have arranged for five horses. Chagat is also with us. Arrive at Marat's ail. No sign of horses, but we are invited in for big bowls of 'airan' (type of yogurt). Marat says he has five horses, but only three saddles and bridles. Two horses eventually tacked up, then a third. Take James, Katie, Camilla, Jane, Hannah, Marsha and Nastya riding in relays. I love the grey horse Marat has given me today. He really does have the best horses. Chagat also rides.

I don't even notice the rain. We then drive to a last yurt to deliver a photograph, but the person I wanted to see has already left as haymaking has started.

Back to base camp by 17:00. Gulinara and Tarbia already there. They have been cooking a sheep and have brought us cheese. Volodya's group return. They saw argali on the way home. Abai and Andrey took down the yurt this morning so team photo is in front of Land Rovers and the sun even comes out for us. We open the traditional party champagne (although we have to go easy as there were only four bottles left in Kosh Agach!) James makes the first toast to me and the team present me with the most beautiful traditional carpet – I can't tell you how moved and surprised I am. It's not often your expedition leader is lost for words – but on this occasion I am.

Thank you all, from the bottom of my heart. Abai, Gulinara and Tarbia stay for supper but have to leave soon after as they have cows to milk and children to look after. Emotional goodbyes. I will miss them so much. Gulinara gives me hand-stitched pillowcases so I can still dream I'm in a yurt when I get home. After they leave we party late with much music and dancing. Perfect last party.

9 August

Even a 9 o'clock breakfast is too early for much of the team! Peter and I pack and list all expedition kit while Roman, Ivan and Andrey dismantle camp. Ivan also manages to find time to prepare shashliks with the rest of the sheep and they are cooked over the camp fire after which the evening goes on until the early hours. This team is unstoppable!

10 August

Yes, 3.30am...or maybe later. At some point between then and 7 am breakfast I do make contact with my tent and sleeping bag. We take down our tents. The mess tent comes down and table, benches and latrine and shower floors are strapped to the Land Rover roof racks. Sergey arrives later in his jeep, plus another vehicle and driver. We leave. Cloud, wet steppe, tired team. Peter wonderful, calm, funny and great driver. Always very difficult to leave and this year is no exception. As we drive to Anoz through rain and cloud, the rivers are in full spate. They are brown, muddy and foaming – exciting rafting conditions. Stop at Chuya Oozi – power cut so some food hot and some food cold – but all good. Stop again at Sminsky pass for sweet tea and coffee to keep energy levels up. Weather improves and warms as we get nearer Anoz. Make good time. Smoke coming from the banya. Lena welcoming as ever. Roman, Ivan, Nina and Andrey busy sorting and putting away Biosphere kitchen equipment, tents etc. We stay up again and it's all Nina's fault as she brings in balloons at 23.30 for Angela's birthday tomorrow – so we blow them all up, have a balloon fight and then burst into Angela's room at midnight to wish her Happy Birthday. She (and Marsha who is in the same room) is remarkably good natured about being woken and greeted by so many people. The evening continues. Lovely atmosphere and finally, for me, very late banya, still hot, and all to myself. Bliss

10 August

Beautiful morning. This is where I say goodbye to team members as Chagat and I are off to Gorno Altaisk for meetings today and tomorrow. It's strange to see the Land Rover and minibus convoy go and not be part of it. Sad goodbyes... Sergei drives Chagat and me to the Gorno Altaisky Botanical gardens where we meet the director, Vasilii Pavlovich. A very knowledgeable and interesting man. I am shown round the gardens and taste 'Quiet fields' herbal tea, followed by the spirit version. A car then takes Chagat and me to Gorno Altiask where I have a very interesting afternoon meeting Micha, head of NGO 'Arkhar' who has done a lot of work on argali, ibex and snow Leopard, visiting the museum and then to FSDA office where I meet Natalya Yurkova who also works there. We end the evening together in a lively restaurant. Great evening with Chagat and Natalya.

11 August

The morning is spent in meetings with directors of national parks, head of game department, Vasilii Pavlovich and others, organized by Chagat. We discuss strategies for conservation, sustainable development and ways of working together. It's very productive and I feel very positive about the potential and future of our work. I leave Gorno Altaisk at 3 pm and arrive late in Novosibirsk, but Nastya and Russian team waiting for me and spend best last evening ever with my team. They mean the world to me. No sleep and straight to airport with Nastya and Andrey at 04:30 to catch return flight with Peter, Volodya and Irene.

Thank you all for your hard work, brilliant company and helping this project to be such a success. This year we have gathered so much new data. The picture of snow leopard and prey activity gets clearer every year and ties with local people get ever stronger. The bird inventory is impressive. There is lots more work to do and I look forward to planning the way the project develops. Although this is my last year as expedition leader, my commitment to the project is total and I will continue to be involved as expedition field scientist with Biosphere and in snow leopard conservation here in general. The Altai is in my blood. I can't stay away for long. So thank you Volodya, Irene, Nastya, Nina, Andrey, Ivan, Roman, Andy, Peter, Matthias, Sergey, Chagat, Abai, Gulinara, Tarbia, Marat, Gena (and many other local friends) and Biosphere 2006 team members – you make it happen! And of course, big thank you to Matthias, Katherine and Sergey. Together, we make one hell of a team. My toast (Jack Johnson) "It's always better when we're together".

Tessa McGregor  
Expedition Leader