



## EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2005

By Tessa McGregor

28 June

The start of the third expedition and so far all going too smoothly to be true. The vehicles are waiting for us in Novosibirsk (I'm told!) and I'm packing up at Biosphere HQ. Lots more to do before I leave so keeping this short. Flying tomorrow and will be at Hotel Central on Thursday "Transaero willing". Very much looking forward to meeting old friends and new team members. Plenty of work to do. My first toast of the season "to snow leopards".

30 June

Arrived with Volodya in Novosibirsk. Hot and sunny. Met by Sergey. He is in on very good form. It's good to see him again. Hotel Central hasn't changed except we are greeted not only by the chattering of sparrows but also warm smiles from the ladies at reception! Out to buy items of equipment. So much traffic! Cool Russian beer very welcome at the end of the day.

31 June

It's hot (29 degrees) and muggy. The swifts are in good voice. I never tire of watching their aerial displays over and around Hotel Central. Volodya and I have just returned from Autoland where we have seen the vehicles - yes they are all there!!! We have 4 new Defenders (2 silver, 1 black and 1 green) and they all have air conditioning! Most un-nerving of all, I got a big smile from Pavel. We even have all the paperwork... but only for the first slot. I am assured the rest will follow soon. Now we are off to meet Nastya (our lovely translator). She has been working very hard (for Sibal and at University) and has got her MA. Cause to celebrate!

1 July

Met most of the team members in the morning and immediately got three of them to help me collect the vehicles. All excellent drivers and vehicles now parked outside the hotel. Thank you Uwe, Klaus and Hartmut. The weather is even hotter. A storm stops the singing from bars below the hotel by 18:30. Some impressive thunder, lightening and heavy rain. The team all meet up as usual at 20:00 and we have a lively evening in the Russian restaurant.

P.S. Novosibirsk hotting up in all senses. Uwe, Klaus and Hartmut were propositioned by a 'professional' girl just outside the hotel when we met to collect the Land Rovers. I said they had other work to do. You also get phone calls in the rooms now, asking if you are interested in 'leisure' (it's put more crudely if you are not a Russian speaker. I get phoned in my room, but they hang up when they hear my voice.

2 July

Cool and overcast when we leave. There has been more heavy rain. Everyone very prompt and efficient. The sun comes out and in gets very hot. We stop at the usual place for lunch. The museum is open. I'm told there are more artifacts. It proves true. There is now a bear cub skin as well as a large adult one. The landscape gets more beautiful. So many flowers in the grasslands and along the roads. Sleek cattle graze, watched over by lone horsemen. We arrive at Anoz to find the gates locked and no one around.

Wilma and Hartmut enjoy scaling the entrance gates and letting us in. The house is locked but the banya is warm. Luckily Roman (from Anoz) arrives and lets us in. There have been more improvements. There are now two sofas on the landing and a (cold) outside shower. Sadly Vica is no longer here, but our expedition cook, Nina, rustles up a delicious meal in no time at all. The Katun is in spate so no swimming. Another very jolly evening with Altai vodka to toast the expedition.

3 July

Nastya and I leave early to do the registration in Gorno Altai. This Byzantine procedure drives me crazy. The office is very busy. We have to queue. Just when it's our turn the 'official' ladies tell us to go. They have a meeting. They leave the office, carrying their chairs. We're told to come back in an hour. An hour later we are back. Nastya rushes in, only to be pushed out again. It's floor-washing time. Finally we are let into the office. More queuing, but it's all worth it as everyone is registered successfully. Go back to Silver Springs to join the team. Nina needs more supplies and we only head off again at 14:30. The latest ever. We get to Tuvan Restaurant at 18:30. It has expanded. There is a new building and we don't get to sit in the wooden yurt. It's very busy. We drive on, and on. Dusk falls. The rain starts and by the time we reach Kosh Agach at 23:00 it's lashing down. Last re-fueling and final leg of journey to base camp. It's so wet. The tracks are treacherous and it's hard to keep traction in parts. We proceed very slowly. The sodden steppe is totally featureless in the dark. Even Andrei has to stop twice trying to find the right track. He is successful (as always). We see three jerboas, jumping off into the black. They must be flooded out of their burrows. We cross a river I never knew existed - that's because it has always been a dry gully, even in the wettest periods of the previous expeditions. We get to base camp at 02:00. Everyone tired and relieved. The rain stops while we unload. Tea and biscuits in the tent. Everyone cheerful and positive. Rain pouring down again as we head for our tents. Base camp river roaring - in full spate.

4 July

Wake up to - no sound of rain! 09:30 breakfast. Sorry Matthias, we deserve it! Nina cooks Kasha (porridge) to die for! Hearty breakfast followed by risk assessment and introduction of Russian team. Everyone already knows Volodya, our scientist and Nastya, our translator. We also have Oleg, a brilliant mountain guide. He has been in charge of setting up base camp.

Sadly he can only be with us for the first slot this year. The second mountain guide is called Raman. We have Nina, the cook and her son Ivan as camp helper. Nina cooks a delicious and copious lunch after which two groups go out. One with Volodya to the forest and the second with Raman, up behind base camp. The weather is still unsettled with rain, making it difficult to cross rivers (the back valleys and Eastern section will be impassable until water levels subside) and the ground very slippery. Heavy rain comes down just after the teams return. Good timing! We go through the science and equipment before supper and fill in the first data sheet (bird tick list). Volodya's group saw steppe eagle and demoiselle cranes and Raman's group saw a golden eagle. Not bad for first day. Good camp fire rounds off the day.

Cloud cover breaks up and see stars. Temperature falling.

P.S. Please, please make sure you have the right 'Altai Registration Request Letter' letter stamped by your visa-issuing agency. The letter from Kraft Travel (the German agency) is perfect. All the others are not (we have to 'modify' them - time consuming and never sure it will work). For those of you not going through Kraft Travel, the letter must say:

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We request you to register the presence of our tourist on the territory of the Altai Republic. A citizen of the ..(UK, Germany etc), Passport Number...who arrived with the visa number....

We request to register this person for the period of ..From:....To:....(dates of your time on the expedition). Aim of travel is tourism. The regions visited will be Chermal and Kosh Agach. The accommodating organization is Sibalp. The Visa supporting Agency is...

We request to do the registration in accordance with the rules of a foreigner being in the Russian Federation. We confirm all the information given is correct.

(The letter must be signed and stamped by the agency)

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I can't stress how important it is to have all this paperwork as without it you cannot be registered in the Altai Republic and won't be able to proceed to base camp until the right paperwork is obtained.

5 July

The whole team out to survey valley and ridge past the forest. This is a chance to get familiar with the terrain, the gear and what to look for. It's very hot when the sun comes out. Mosquitoes and horseflies are out for blood and they get it! I'm using 50% DEET and it's not strong enough! Findings from first day include sign of manul, wolverine and maral! Everyone very positive and enthusiastic. Very good day.

6 July

Again, whole team goes out. We go up 'lost valley'. It's still one of the richest valleys for flora and fauna. There are so many flowers - many we have not seen before. Christine (our plant scientist) has her work cut out. This is her third year on the expedition together with Toril and Peter and we are very lucky to have such experienced team members. Plenty of evidence of wild boar diggings. Some quite fresh. We ascend scree slopes near the head of the valley to access the glacial lake from above. At about 2700 m we hear rock falls above us and after some searching with binoculars spot a herd of ibex about 50 m below the ridge line. They are on the steepest imaginable bit of broken terrain. One large male, 9 adults (too hard to tell if they are all females or if there are also younger males from this distance) and one young. We watch them. Even lit by sun they are almost the same colour as the rocks. They jump a gully and ascend up to the ridge where some turn back to look at us before disappearing down the other side. So exciting! The sighting lasts about 10 minutes. We then go to the glacial lake to set up the hide. The lake is still mostly frozen over. Only the edges are clear. Oleg and Raman jump in as does Wilma. She must be impervious to cold! Hide erected in excellent place above lake. Return feels very long. Mosquitoes in valley are hungry! Back to base camp weary but delighted with such a productive day. Plenty of data to input after another feast from Nina.

8 July

Four team members go out with Volodya, Oleg and Raman for first overnight stint in corridor area. Helge is the first to go to the hide. I take another group with Andrei and Nastya to marsh and lake for bird list. Mosquitoes unbearable but bird list increasing! Then to interviews in the afternoon. We meet Compe Petrovich. He says there is a wolf with young not far from base camp. He also says he saw a snow leopard last year (early October) on the remains of an ibex kill half way up the valley we were in yesterday. It has been a very cold winter and the wolves have been a big problem with livestock. After Compe we go to look for Abai and Gulinara. The rivers are full and fast flowing but crossable. We meet up with Abai, Gulinara, Masha and her husband. Lots to catch up on (sadly, Gulinara's father, Nicholi - he of the metal teeth, died this year. He died in his sleep; of blood pressure I'm told. Is that a euphemism for fatal hangerover?). They also complain of the long cold winter. It lasted so long they ran out of fodder and the livestock got thin, but the herds are regaining condition fast with the grazing. I arrange a riding survey for next week and hiring a yurt.

After several toasts we head back to base camp with Abai and Masha's daughter. Back at base camp, team members enjoy Nina's cooking. I go off with Andrei, Nastya, Abai and niece to Tibilir, a village past Kokaria. We drop the niece off for a wedding and then drive to another village to arrange yurt hire from a distant relative of Abai's. More toasts. Then off to see Ascir, Abai's father to arrange transport of yurt to base camp. Luckily we are only offered tea this time. All is settled and a yurt should go up at base camp next Wednesday if all goes to plan (and that's always a big if!). Long drive back (Andrei driving!) to drop Abai off home. We get back to base camp at midnight.

9 July

Mosquitoes biting before breakfast. It's the price we are paying for this warm weather. Many team members out with Andrei and Nastya to see burial mounds and standing stones in the 'valley of a thousand stones'. They are so diligent they can't stop surveying so I've got some data sheets to go over soon. Helge back from the hide this afternoon delighted. He was woken at 5 am by an Altai snowcock and got great sightings and footage. As if that wasn't good enough, he also got really good and close views of ibex (9 in total - 5 adults and 4 young) and was able to record lots of behaviour. No wonder he and Ivan tripped down the valley in record time (1 hour and 20 minutes with heavy packs!!!). I just want to go to the hide right now. The overnight group is due back this evening. Who knows what they will have found? Will let you know.

10 July

Overnight group surveyed new part of corridor area. Interesting and potentially good habitat but lots of signs of human disturbance and evidence of poaching. The area is close to the Tuvan border and looks as if it's only being used by poachers at present. I take group for overnight camp to one of the valley's (and ridges) behind Tapuair. Stunning drive. Glaciers and snow on the tops of Silugiem and Tapduair. This is my third year in Altai and these drives are familiar, but I get the same sense of awe. It's so beautiful, so vast, so..bloody difficult to find any sign of snow leopard in!! But that's

the challenge! The stony riverbeds are filled with flowers. I'm not sure I've ever seen such intense colours or so many flowers. We get to the valley. Brilliant driving by Oleg and steep learning curve for Raman (he does very well). We set up camp and split into two groups for surveying. I go with Oleg, Helge and Ulrich. The start of every survey is the same - exhausting! It's very hot and despite reeking of DEET, mosquitoes and every other biting insect seem to find me irresistible.

As we start getting our breath and are ready to ascend the ridge, we notice two horses - unusual for this valley as there is no grazing. Then we notice two dogs, two men, two guns...we look through binoculars. They look at us through binoculars. Oleg feels it's not safe to leave our temporary camp unattended. I think this is a great opportunity to speak to hunters. We all go down. They are friendly and we have long, circuitous conversations.

Considering my Russian and Oleg's English (much better than my Russian I hasten to add!) we do very well. The hunters certainly know the law (even if they are probably breaking it). They say they are out to shoot wolves. I believe this is true (but I also believe that's not all they are out to shoot!). We talk a lot about snow leopards. One of them saw a snow leopard and two half-grown cubs not far from our base camp late August 2003, in a place we found pugmarks earlier, but have not seen one since. This matches our results. I arrange to meet the hunters next slot. I think there is a lot more to learn...

Give up ridge survey as too late. Hunters saddle their horses and move away. We get back to camp just before spectacular rain and hail (it rains briefly but heavily every afternoon) - poor Raman, Uwe and Klaus get soaked, but they see beautiful rainbow over Chikachova (mountain range on Mongolian border). Good evening. Smoky fire controls mozzies a little. Distant sighting of two ibex/argali on far slopes. Hear partridge. See Saker falcon mobbing black-eared kite. Wild call of vixen just before we turn in. New moon. Silence. Space.

11 July

Cooler morning. Off in two groups again. Raman's group to survey adjacent valley and glacial lake. My group to survey steep ridge. Find signs of ibex, argali (so many trails!) and Altai snowcock. Find good trail to set up trail master next slot. Survey right up the summit of ridge. Amazing!

Helge and Ulrich feel they are in 'Mordor' (Lord of the Rings land). Helge may be a professional photographer, but how he manages to carry 15 kg of equipment up these slopes is beyond me. I struggle with less than 5! We go down steep scree to valley and find about 40 argali/ibex resting depressions half way, plus more tracks. This is wonderful habitat, but the poachers know that too and they were here before us. Plenty of evidence of wild boar diggings in valley (sorry Roger - never found your hat. Tilly hats may pass through elephant guts unharmed, but stand no chance with Altai wild boar, marmot and ground squirrels!). Both groups back at camp by 16:30. Pack up and long, difficult but unforgettable drive back (beautiful bird of prey sightings and many marmots), circumnavigating core area, in order to show Raman before Oleg leaves. Back at base camp find Abai and pile of sticks, rush matting and wooden circle - it's the first part of the yurt! The rest will follow on Wednesday and we will have a yurt at base camp at last!

Volodya's group surveyed ridges near base camp and Volodya saw an argali (female) yesterday. Today they went to Silugiem lakes (an area out with our research area). I recced this place in 2003. It was wild and difficult of access with no sign of human activity. It's still a long, drive and not the easiest place to get to - but lots of sign of human activity this year. The bird list is growing and as for the plant list - there is no end to it! Christine is in severe danger of botanical burnout! Very jolly evening sharing information, vodka and data. Brilliant starry sky. Temperature falls in the night to zero.

12 July

Another brilliant sunny morning. I've never know such a run of warm weather at base camp. Volodya off for last overnight camp this slot with Christine, Peter, Toril, Hartmut and Raman. Oleg leads group up left ridge behind base camp. I catch up on admin and things that need doing at base camp (hate this bit - want to be out surveying, especially when horseflies are so bad during the day here). Uwe is off the spend night in hide. Hope he has better luck than Wilma (she saw nothing - experienced a storm at night and was still as positive as ever!

Warm showers, river-cooled beers and data sheets round off the day. t feels surreal to be here in this warmth. 'Bathing suits' very much in evidence as many team members are river bathing.

13 July

Off to meet some herders (our dear friends Abai and Gulinara) and take Wilma and Anja riding. Abai joins us and we ride out up a mountain behind his yurt that gives great views over a great sweep of our survey area. The riding is very steep and we have to lead the horses down. Helge still busy photographing when we get back. We are invited to lunch (a whole sheep's head, soup and boursak) after which Abai, Gulinara and Masha (their neighbour) come back to base camp with us to put up a yurt. Nastya wonderful at coping with being spoken to in Altai, Kasakh, Russian, English, German...sometimes all at the same time! Piles of felt are unfolded and shaken, bundles of sticks untied and hand-embroidered straps unravelled.

Team members sit, watch and take photos as lattices are unfolded, sticks tied, a wooden door nailed in place and then the top round piece of wood is held up high on a pole while the supporting sticks are tied and positioned to hold it. We all join in to help, but it's skilled work and poor Abai and Oleg keep getting hit by falling sticks (will have to add that to the risk assessment!), but once it's all tied it looks like a work of art. Then the felt is tied. Thunder, lightning and rain send most of us scuttling to shelter, but our herder friends keep going with the Russian team and by 17:00 we have the first yurt at base camp! It's wonderful. We toast it with vodka. The overnight team comes back delighted with their time in the field and then the sun comes out, just on cue for team photos and Russian champagne. It turns into a glorious evening. Abai, Gulinara and Masha stay for supper but can't stay late as they have cows to milk. We savour the last moments of this perfect day. Sadly the last for this slot. It's gone by too fast.

14 July

Many team members very sad to leave base camp. We stop for lunch at Chuya Ouzi as usual. This time we have the wooden yurt. Make good time to Anos. Weather beautiful. The usual heaven of banya and birch bundles. The new couple (Lena and Genya) running Anos are lovely and Lena is a wonderful cook. Multa, the new dog is very friendly and dying to play with everyone - trouble is, she's built like a tank and already as heavy as some of us, and she's not yet fully grown!

15 July

We leave Anos early - thank goodness as one of the Defenders' decided to break down at our first fuel stop. The coolant pipe is completely split, but we are very lucky as Klaus is an engineer and Hartmut, Uwe and Reinhart are also pretty hot on engines. Amazingly the garage sells a few items and the team manage an excellent and professional repair which holds all the way to Novosibirsk!! We get in just after 19:00. And had the usual fruit blinny and shashlik stops. Everyone in celebratory mood at the Russian restaurant and the waiters can hardly keep up with the cold beer orders. This has been a great team, hard-working, very positive and great fun. We have already achieved good results and I will miss you all!

16 July

Nastya and I spend most of our day in Autoland, sorting out Defender repair. Doesn't leave much time for anything else but Autoland are very helpful. I meet the new group in the evening and we are joined by Helge, Brendan, Klaus, Uwe, Toril, Christine, Peter and Reinhart - never has the Russian restaurant been so full of Biosphere team members!

17 July

The drive to Amos with new team goes well and we arrive in good time. Team members really enjoy Anos and I love it. Sergey there to greet us again. Crickets are in full voice.

18 July

Sergey and Nastya go to do the registrations in Gorno Altaisk. I go to Silver Springs with team members. Nearly fall over with shock when Nastya is back before 11:30 - registrations done!!! We leave at 11.30 am. Late lunch at Chuya Ouzi. Beautiful light for much of journey. Arrive base camp 10.00 pm. Mess table ready with candles and beautiful bunches of flowers from Roman and an equally beautiful borsch made by Volodya. What multi-talented men they are! It's so good to be back at base camp.

19 July

Another fine day. Cooler than last slot but still warm. Introductions to gear and science as usual followed by off-road course and washing the vehicles in the river (very low level but still just as cold). All excellent drivers (and car washers). The first slot was lucky not to have to wash dishes. We are back to a washing up rota. Nina gave us all a demonstration. Never knew it was so complicated and needs 6 people!!

Volodya took group off for survey on foot from base camp. Andrei went off with both Ivans (we have two, now Oleg has gone) to get a stove and they have installed it. Ceremonial first lighting with "big shit" as Roman calls the dried cow dung. Its toasty - so more toasts (vodka of course) followed by singing. Eva is a professional singer and the Russian team never let us down. I also sang (the 'Biosphere Song') but had to improvise as could only remember the first verse. Another late night. Sleep deficit quotient already used up and we're not even half way through the expedition.

20 July

First survey as a group in back valleys. Stunning as always. Group very quick to pick up sign and we find sign of argali, manul, wolf, sable and wild boar + many small mammals and game birds. Great eagle sightings (golden and steppe). Back in camp hot showers are waiting. Yvonne, Glyn and Simon still have spare energy and play frisbee (is that how you spell it?). I go to meet Valeri in Kokoria (the hunter from last slot) with Andrei, Volodya, Nastya & Roman. We get eaten alive by mosquitoes while conversations go round in circles about wildlife and poaching, but Valeri knows his stuff (don't all poachers?). He offers to take me to good area for snow leopard (just outside our research area) - only trouble is it has to be tomorrow. So I'm off with Roman (as he can ride) as security. Three days in the saddle and sharing a tent. Will make my fishing outing with Yuri and Oleg in 2003 look tame.

21 July

Another beautiful day. Volodya takes group to survey lost valley and glacial lake. Bo is the first from this slot to spend a night in the hide. Raman and I pack clothes, food, tent, GPS, binoculars, sample tubes (in the hope of finding snow leopard scat), small camera, sleeping bags. How will it all fit in the saddle bags (it won't!). We'll have to tie most of it to the horses and ourselves. Go to meet Valeri at 13:30 but no sign of him.

Wait, look...Andrei has to go to Kosh Agach so leaves a message with another herder. We go back to base camp. Gives me the chance to catch up with diary while the others go to Kosh Agach. At 16:00 Nina hears shots. We go out to look and find Valeri with 3 horses, but without Roman, we have to wait. So I'll be setting off this evening. Looks like even less sleep than I had anticipated, but the horses look good. They are grazing by the yurt as I write. I'll try and send this now. Some of the team is surveying Silugiem tomorrow while the others will go to the lakes and then to meet herders. Saturday is the day off, so Andrei will take people to the Valley of a Thousand Stones. There is also jerboa counting planned so team will be busy. I'll try and send this now over the satellite uplink. Wish me luck!

21 July (continued)

Things didn't quite go to plan (due to Altai timing) so finally left base camp just before 20:00. Roman and Valeri told me to go ahead as they were still packing up their saddle bags. I rode out alone on a big bay horse and a storm hit just as I reached the steppe. Thunder, lightening and pouring rain. Made it to Compe Petrovich's yurt soaked but luckily was invited in to wait for Roman and Valeri. Had tea and fermented-milk vodka (went very easy on the latter). Roman and Valeri arrived 30 minutes later and we all rode out into the filthy night - galloping across the straw-coloured, stony steppe against the rain, and then trotting fast in the night. Roman put up tent in the dark. Valeri tethered the horses and used the felt saddle blankets as sleeping mats. All crawled into tent, relieved to have stopped. Roman's cry of "Oh, my arse!" sums up how we felt! Horses really good but hard paces, and as for the saddles - let's not even go there!!! I was happy to share a tent with Roman and Valeri but less happy to share with Valeri's loaded gun. "Insurance for bear" Roman assured me. Moon appeared briefly behind cloud and saw a night rainbow - monochrome, mysterious. Never knew they existed. Vixen called in the night. Love that wild cry.

22 July

Woke up to no rain! No water either so used the dew to wash. Sun, resting horses, Valeri's white dog called Bim curled up. Packed up tent. Breakfast of kvass, black bread, cheese, ham, cucumber and tomato. Tacked up horses. Then disaster - one horse bolted (spooked by a magpie) and the other two followed. Valeri and Roman left me and gun and ran after the horses. They came back two hours later and we set off. Bare steppe, views of our research area disappeared as we dropped down into a valley (descent so steep horses slipping as we led them down) and headed for a yurt where a herder, Tania, offered us tea and 'chegen' (a type of yogurt) with smitana (cream) so fresh it tasted

grassy. Quite delicious. We rode on, past Bilugiem lakes. Breeding redshank, turns, ruddy shell duck (looking as big as geese and calling) and the lonely cry of common sandpiper. Shoals of small fish at the lake edge. Awesome scenery. Rain. Left signs of human activity behind us. Vegetation higher. Wild boar diggings fresh. Bim running on ahead. Valeri stopped frequently to scan rocky outcrops.

This is a good area for ibex, wild boar, maral and snow leopard, but we had no sightings. Rode on, and on, and on. It's tough terrain for horse and rider. We dismounted when slopes got so slippery and steep that I had trouble keeping a foothold. My horse (number 49 - they don't have names) sure-footed and kept going. Valeri found old maral antler (naturally shed) and tied it to his grey horse. Made him look like a stalker on the hill in Scotland! More rain, lightening and thunder and finally on the last ridge got views over the Buguzun Valley and countless ridges and mountain ranges.

Dramatic shafts of light illuminated the vast surrounding lands. Felt I was on the roof of the world. We dropped down to our resting place - a small plateau with a dewpond. Horses untacked and tethered/hobbled. Tent unpacked and spread out to dry. We went off to survey the lower slope before dark. Rain stopped. Evening light beautiful as temperature dropped.

Lichen dense and ghost-like, covering rocks and earth. Creeping birch. Wild, wild place. Valeri called me. He had found a snow leopard skull! In the last rays of the sun, we carefully examined it. It was 3 or 4 years old and belonged to a young animal, just over a year old. Intensely poignant moment - holding the skull of a young snow leopard in this wild, remote place. Looked for more bones but found none. It's unlikely that this snow leopard was a victim of poaching as poachers wouldn't have left the skull (or any other part that could be sold). Who knows how it died? Natural causes? Poison (put down for wolves)? We will probably never know, but it's an important find and will contribute to the DNA work (once the CITES paperwork is cleared). Valeri elated to have found the skull. Roman also thrilled. Back to put up tent up at 21:30 and light fire. Roman brewed tea and we ate raw fish (caught by the herders this morning) with salt, pickle, boursak and vodka. A full moon rose in the South and we talked (Roman translating), lying on the damp ground, about wildlife, snow leopards and many other things until the rain made us turn in; but not before admiring another night rainbow. Felt saddle blankets slightly damp and smell of horse. Bliss.

23 July

Woke up to no rain again! Beautiful, clear morning. Went with Valeri to look for more sign but didn't have time to look long. Saw a maral (adult female) grazing on opposite side of valley. Packed everything back into the saddle bags (wrapping the snow leopard skull very carefully in my hat). Ride back stunning, but so many horseflies and mosquitoes! The ridges and valleys felt as remote as yesterday but far less threatening as lit by sun. It was hot. Stopped occasionally to look for ibex. No sightings but quite fresh tracks. Lots of very fresh wild boar diggings. Stopped at about 14:00 by river for rest and some food. Then rode on. Very tiring for horses and riders. Even Valeri said he was tired. Stopped at Tania's yurt again for more 'chosen' and short rest. All the family there this time. The boys all fishing and admiring Valeri's gun (plus firing it into the air). Last push for home. Horses and us exhausted, but rode into camp at 20:00. Pretty good timing! Team members there to welcome us. Lovely to see them again. The film crew has also arrived with Sergey so base camp very full. Valeri and horses left us after we had unpacked and untied our belongings. Snow leopard skull intact.

24 July

Another beautiful day. I've never know a spell of weather like this. Off to a valley behind Tapduair with all team members and film crew. Filming of landscape, setting up overnight camp and surveying. Find signs of argali (faeces and tracks) but don't make it far into the valley. About 40 cattle grazing so human disturbance a factor. Very close view of tawny and steppe eagles. Drive back unforgettable - dramatic landscape and light. Sky dark and threatening yet intense luminosity and the dry grass glows. Herders with livestock. Florian, the cameraman has to keep stopping to film. We get back late, expecting the heavens to open, but again, the weather is kind and no rain at base camp where Oleg Zigarev (who was in the Russian team in 2003) is waiting with the black Land Rover, having driven it from Novosibirsk. The coolant pipe is mended but there still seems to be a problem with transmission. I love the Defenders - except when they go wrong!

25 July

I go to yurts with film team and team members. We have hired horses from Abai and Gulinara. Filming of riding survey followed by lunch of pasta, meat, boursak, butter and cheese with tea. Enmira sings two traditional songs for us. Her voice as lovely as ever. Eva and Roman go riding while the crew film in the yurt. Eva is a fast rider (and luckily so is Roman)! She has so much energy it's amazing. Back at base camp in the afternoon. Fire lit. Ivan does a brilliant job - making sure there is warm water for the showers in the evening and that the fire is lit, chopping wood, taking people to

the hide and carrying the gear, driving (he's a very good driver) plus a hundred and one other things. He's always calm and totally reliable. We are lucky to have such a great Russian team. The overnight team comes back. Had amazingly close and long sighting of eight golden eagles. All very pleased. Data sheets then chat around the fire. Stars. Lovely evening.

26 July

Can hardly write after today. Made it to the top of Tapduair from base camp with seven team members (Eva, Yvonne, Karin, Simon, Christophe, Glyn, Daiske) with Nastya, Roman and Oleg. Hard and exhausting don't even begin to describe what it was like, but Roman led us expertly and set a perfect pace. Oleg's experience was also much appreciated and helped me make it to the top (as did Eva's energy I'm sure). The views over glacial lakes and our research area incredible. Could see so much of it. The ridges leading to Tapduair mountain vertiginous and very high. Once on the summit (3503m) eagles were flying below us. Sign of wildlife was scarce but found some sign of argali, Altai snowcock and ptarmigan, only the latter was fresh.

Team photos on the top. Everyone elated. The way down makes us doubly aware of the climb. All this effort and no wildlife sighting is hard. I keep scanning with binoculars, but nothing, until finally, just as we drop down to the valley behind base camp I spot them - argali! Lit by the early evening sun, way above us: 3 females and 2 young. Everyone gets to see them before they disappear over the ridge. Karin finally believes the wildlife does exist and that I'm not just making it up! I'm on a high. We are back at base camp at 19:45 - exactly 12 hours after leaving. Must have walked for 11 hours. Have large blister but am so happy! Congratulations team. Tapduair summit has only been reached once in 2003 (by two team members) and in 2004 (by one team member and he was a fell runner!). Volodya's group also had a pretty strenuous survey day. They surveyed a high ridge in the back valleys and Bo found a possible snow leopard scrape (non-relic) - we're not sure but the measurements fit. We'll monitor it next slot. Film team also had a good day so everyone highly satisfied.

27 July

Early start and off to hide with film team and Veronica plus Big Ivan and Oleg. 'Lost Valley' as beautiful as ever. Filming up the valley. Big Ivan carries the 15kg tripod but, Dirk, the presenter also helps. More filming at the hide and then the long walk down. River crossings tricky with the gear, but Oleg carries camera, Veronica and me across the worst bit. What a gentleman! We get back to base camp just before Gulinara and Abai arrive with Aikun (their son) and Ursulan (nephew) in the Land Rover with team members, Nastya and Roman. Everyone has had a good day. Daisuke plays football again with Aikun and Usulan. Gulinara looks very glamorous in long dress and jacket. Sky ominous. Group photos and champagne followed by feast in the mess tent (prepared by Nina and Andrei) with any toasts. The heavens open - fantastic hail shower that lasts for ages. Ground white. Many of us go and dance in the rain before all piling into the yurt where Oleg sings and plays the guitar as does Roman and Eva sings again - fantastic! And we drink Karin's 'mean' vodka and champagne punch. It's one hell of a party!

28 July

Early start. Grey and drizzling. Subdued breakfast. I'm staying at base camp between slots for the first time which is wonderful for me, but I'm torn as I don't want to see the team go. Thank you all for your hard work and great company. Everyone leaves except Nina, 'little' Ivan and me. Clear up camp, air tents etc. All so quiet. Ground squirrels very bold now everyone's gone. Day turns beautiful. Spend it cleaning and sorting gear and catching up with 101 things. Hope to go into the hide tomorrow.

29 July

Had planned to go in hide but Sergey came to camp, so had interesting discussions and decided to go and meet hunters near Tabajoc instead (other side of steppe past marshy lake). These hunters also have horses and want to show me another very good area for wildlife. I may do another recce next slot. The rivers are full of fish ('halose' in Russian) and herders fishing everywhere. The steppe bleached. Geological camp near Tabajoc. Pass burial mound where ancient human and horse bones have come to the surface. The weather is breaking and heavy rain sets in.

30 July

Heavy cloud - more rain and maybe snow on the way. Ground squirrels outrageous. They are shredding the base of the yurt - stuffing felt in their mouths and tearing off when I shout at them. They are unrecognizable - no longer the shy, skinny creatures of a month ago. They are now sleek, glossy and double the size (and attitude!). I'm going to have to borrow Bim if this goes on. Not worth going to hide in this weather. Hope it clears by tomorrow.



## 1 August

Decided to go into hide after all, despite unsettled weather, as it's probably my only chance. Ivan helped me carry the gear and I stayed for 48 hours. The glacial lake as eerie and beautiful as ever. Arrived under late afternoon sun. I got into hide at 17:00 and Ivan left. Very windy and cold but rain held off. Pika alarm calls and nothing else. It rained in the night so uncomfortable and cold awakening, but excited by hearing rock falls - then less excited by one huge rock fall - an avalanche. No wildlife. Weather deteriorated - heavy rain, dripping into hide. Sleeping bag, rucksack etc getting wet. Worst of all, binoculars fogging up. Luckily rain stopped afternoon, but cold and grey. No sign of wildlife.

Spent a second cramped night in hide in hope of seeing something this morning, but nothing except one ground squirrel, the sound of pikas and coughs. Makes me even more certain that the ibex population in our research area is very small and mobile. Today turned lovely and it was good to walk down the valley back to base camp. Ivan told me he heard wolves in the forest near base camp yesterday. He was walking near the burnt area when he heard them howl (he thinks about three wolves were calling). It was between 17:00 and 18:00. Hoped to hear them this evening, but they haven't called (yet). Sometimes I think the wildlife is taunting me. Have been reviewing data sheets and being in the hide gave me plenty of time to think about the next month of surveying.

Base camp blissful today. After a shower went to pick flowers for the mess tent table and Nina has also added larch branches and balloons to welcome new group. We are waiting for them eagerly and hope they won't arrive too late.

## 2 August

The new team arrived in good time last night. Perfect weather. Fantastic night sky and many shooting stars. I think you all know my wish! All would have been perfect, but the minibus had broken down at Sminsky Pass and had all our food supplies! Andrei and Ivan left to rescue supplies in Defender that same evening. Today we go through the usual introductions to gear, off-road driving etc. It is hot. Fewer mozzies, but horseflies still fierce. As for the grasshoppers!! Nothing is safe. The ground squirrels continue to try and raid felt from the yurt. New team activity is 'suslik watch' (and chase away) in yurt area. Maybe we should add it to data sheets!

## 3 August

Group survey in corridor area - looking particularly for signs of argali. The weather breaks and we get rain and hail. Do find sign, some fresh (resting depressions, faeces and tracks) but not many animals (probably fewer than ten). Primary prey species sadly definitely in decline in this area. Not yet sure of cause (but probably poaching). Needs more investigating.

Much work left to do and feels like time is running out already. Will also recce another area to north of Tabajoc. Wind and rain this evening - weather very unsettled. Hope it doesn't deteriorate too badly - unless it brings snow and fresh tracks! As Oleg Zigarev used to say (in Russian) "rain good - rain means snow".

## 4 August

Plenty of rain in the night and grey drizzly morning, but first overnight group out with Volodya to corridor area (even closer to the Tuvan border).

I take other team members to meet herders. We visit Tarbia, but it is very sad to see her still grieving for Nicholi (her husband - he of the gentle smile, metal teeth). He died 9 months ago and she misses him badly. Luckily she is surrounded by family and Gulheart lives with her. We all have tea and then go and see Masha who feeds us wonderful soup. Back to base camp and team members go out with Ivan to survey up behind Manul rock. More rain late afternoon and thunderstorm, but team return glowing with lots of scat. Data sheets lively.

## 5 August

Up before 5:00 and leave at 6:00. I'm off for 3 days with a different hunter called Marat, to recce area behind Tabajoc. It's grey and cold. Raman and I have packed food, tent, map and not much else (no room in saddlebags). Team members accompany us. Altai timing takes over again. No horses ready when we arrive, but Marat's son gallops and rounds up a group of wild-looking horses, driving them into a coral. Then he lassoes a couple. They are tacked up (with some difficulty!) - our belongings stuffed into saddlebags and tied to the wooden saddles. Tea in the 'ail' (wooden yurt) and we're off. Marat's son, Gena decides to come too. The tent will be cosy! Sun comes out and we head off into wild country. Horses are great. Loose track of how many kilometers we cover. Stop and observe frequently. Weather changes from hot to bitter winds. We ascend and descend steeper and steeper slopes - riding or leading our horses.

See distant ibex (group of five including female and young). Takes all Marat and Gena's self control not to shoot them. Get to place where we will spend the night. Wild, silent and sheltered - in a pass. As soon as we dismount, mosquitoes attack from all quarters. Untack horses, put up tent, make fire and hurried meal before going up the slopes to observe until dark. Torture with the mozzies, but we do see another group of ibex (including a big male) but again, very distant sighting.

Long and memorable day. Have seen great snow leopard habitat, but so inaccessible and looks impossible to survey without ropes and specialist equipment.

6 August

Up 4:30 for morning observation shift with Marat. Cool but mozzies still biting! Clamber over rocks treacherously slippery with dew. Watch, and watch and watch...nothing. Gena has gone to a different ridge. Back to camp at 8:00 and brew up tea. Marat disappointed that we didn't see anything but I'm interested just to see the habitat. Gena comes back having spotted some ibex (probably same group as yesterday). Pack up and tack up. Ride on. Scenery very alpine. More steep ascents to rocky plateau.

There's a thunderstorm and my horse freaks, but it's worth it to see the men's faces when I just shrug and say "normalno". Torrential rain. Very steep and slippery descent. Dismount - hard to keep up, horse sliding behind me. The valley seems an impossible way down but find first ripe bilberries and Raman and I stop to eat some - very welcome! The rain get worse and worse. We keep riding - completely soaked now. Stop at 3:00 by river to rest horses, eat and fish. Never a wasted moment with the hunters. Gena gets out his fishing rod - Raman and Marat make a fire and brew tea - within seconds Gena 's caught the few first 'halose'. We huddle under a dripping larch to share tinned beans, bread and tea (a lifesaver!). It's not only wet, it's cold.

More fish caught and we ride on - fording rising rivers, riding through sodden forests redolent with sign of wild boar and maral. Ride and ride until dusk. Relieved to reach camping place - an abandoned 'ail' by the Bashkaus River. It's filthy and part of the roof is missing, but it's heaven. The men chop wood, I start lighting a fire and Marat prepares fish.

We drape our sodden effects around the 'ail'. Fire smoky and hot. 'Halose' boiling in pot. Eat boiled fish and chat. I'm in a different world and can only admire the hunters' skills and endurance. If only we could find a way to work cooperatively, so much can be achieved. Rains all night.

7 August

Still raining hard. No point even trying to look for wildlife in this. Rivers in spate. Low cloud. Marat decides to stay as he wants to do more fishing and he gives me his fast black horse to ride back. I'm honoured. Gena sets a fast pace and we ride and ride. See so much new habitat - ever changing and very different from our survey blocks. Then the descent past brimming lakes and to lower valleys by Tabajoc. Gallop across plain. We are at the 'ail' at 20:00. I'm heartbroken to give up my horse. Drive back to base camp difficult with the steppe a quagmire and water levels in rivers very high, but Andrei's ace driving skills make light work of it. We have great wildlife sightings - 32 demoiselle cranes, many jerboas (including one that dives head first into a burrow - long legs sticking up in the air and squeezes itself in jerkily - very funny to watch). Then near the forest by base camp see young wolf running - great views before it runs back into trees. Back at base camp late but Nina, as usual looks after us so well, and has food waiting. We exchange experiences with Volodya.

Things at base camp have been busy with James going into hide overnight (bad weather, no wildlife sightings and a big landslide) then going straight on with group to set up trailmaster on ridge in back valleys. Sadly more evidence of poaching on that survey (cartridges and tracks of hunter tracking argali). Team members have also been bird monitoring at the marshy lakes, they saw about 50 ducks, partridge with 20 young but fewer demoiselle cranes. Jens saw two male ibex on ridge behind base camp. There has also been more jerboa watching and the team saw an owl in the valley of a thousand stones. Genya and Maxim (from Novosibirsk) are back with us. Genya got bitten by a ground squirrel - he was waiting with his hat over a burrow and actually caught an emerging 'suslik'. He succeeded but it bit him hard! That's what happens when you mess with the wildlife.

8 August

I take overnight group to valley behind Tapduair. We have James, Nancy, Jens, Stephan, Ivan and Roman.

Beautiful day and beautiful place. Cattle and people no longer here. We split up for first survey. I go with Ivan, Nancy and James. James spots bear faeces - it's so fresh it's steaming! Interestingly the bear has used the same spot to defaecate regularly (fresh scat sits on two older piles of scat - found similar sign in 2003). The others survey one of the ridges and are still out in the rain and hail shower, but they are rewarded by the most intense rainbow over glacial lakes looking towards the Mongolian border.

Ivan and Roman rustle up great 'Land Rover camp' supper and then we sit by the fire. Nancy and I even sing. James not only cleans and polishes his boots in the field, but also declines tent and prefers to use his bivy bag despite the rain. Hard man!

9 August

Dry morning. Heavy mist but sun. I survey the valley with Nancy. The rest of the group survey the other ridge. We find lots of sign (marmot, argali, ibex, wolf and fox). Stop frequently to observe, hoping to see ibex or argali. As I scan a ridge over a perfect round plateau, my heart misses a beat - I recognize the posture of a big cat - watching..but it is very distant and I tell myself it must be a rock. Look intently - infuriatingly, cloud comes down and obscures everything. Tell Nancy and we walk closer to get a better view. The cloud lifts and I see the 'rock' is no longer there.

I'm very excited now and then I see movement and it disappears over the ridge. I hardly dare believe it! Snow leopard!!!! I'm so happy!!!! Wish I had time to get up to the ridge but it would take too long. More rain but we get back to vehicles just before downpour. Pack up the tents and wait for others who return soaked but happy to have found lots of ibex/argali tracks, trails and resting depressions. The feeling of excitement builds up all the way home and when we reach base camp I can hardly contain it.

Volodya and team as thrilled as me. We are all on a high and toast the event. Wonder if the snow leopard is resident or just passing through. To cap it, all have great wildlife sightings while driving at dusk/night - 32 demoiselle cranes, many jerboas (including another head diving one). Then near the forest by base camp we see another young wolf running – again great views before it runs back into trees. Deluge sets in again.

10 August

Wake up to roar of our river. It's in full spate - higher than I ever thought possible - careering down and lost all clarity. The rain just doesn't stop. Had planned riding for some team members from Abai and Gulinara's and decide to try and reach their yurt anyway. Rivers roaring and very high but the Land Rovers make it. Roman takes Lars, Sabine and Jonas out. River crossing with horses impressive and riders' boots have no chance of getting dry. The rest of us wait and chat in the yurt and watch Gulinara make cheese (Sabine helps - and she speaks Russian so able to chat at same time).

Many cups of tea. Riders come back and I take out second group (Nancy, Sabine and Jonas again). I'm on Masha's crazy horse this time. Enjoy the river crossing! Then go up opposite mountain. View over back valleys magnificent. Agree burst of speed on way back with Jonas who is itching to gallop. Rivers seem even higher and faster on way back.

Amazingly little Lada with half the ground clearance of the Land Rovers roars through one river ahead of us. However the second river is even deeper and the Lada gets stuck three quarters of the way across and blocks our route home. James volunteers to ford the river and run back to base camp to get the Land Rover with a winch. He crosses very professionally and to say we are impressed is an understatement - then radio contact! Volodya and Ivan were worried about us and are on their way with Maxim and Genya who demonstrate perfect winching technique. The Lada safely on the other side and whole family emerges, very shaken but safe. Andrei and Roman expertly drive our Land Rovers across.

It's nearly party time by the time we get back to base camp. The rain stops!!! We do team photos outside the yurt and then crack open the champagne. The snow leopard sighting and evidence of other wildlife means this slot much to celebrate. See James out of his combats/camouflage for the first time! Abai, Gulinara and Tarbia with us (the stove in our yurt is from her). Everyone in party mood!

10 August

Wake up to roar of our river. It's in full spate - higher than I ever thought possible - careering down and lost all clarity. The rain just doesn't stop. Had planned riding for some team members from Abai and Gulinara's and decide to try and reach their yurt anyway. Rivers roaring and very high but the defenders make it. Roman takes Lars, Sabine and Jonas out. River crossing with horses impressive and riders' boots have no chance of getting dry. The rest of us wait and chat in the yurt and watch Gulinara make cheese (Sabine helps - and she speaks Russian so able to chat at same time).

Many cups of tea. Riders come back and I take out second group (Nancy, Sabine and Jonas again - he is a natural and really enjoying it. I'm on Masha's crazy horse this time. Enjoy the river crossing! Then go up opposite mountain. View over back valleys magnificent. Agree burst of speed on way back with Jonas who is itching to gallop. Give Masha's horse his head. Big mistake!!! Only just manage to stop at the yurt. Rivers seem even higher and faster on way back. Amazingly little Lada with half the ground clearance of the defenders roars through one river ahead of us.

Amazing! However the second river is even deeper and the Lada gets stuck three quarters of the way across and blocks our route home. James volunteers to ford the river and run back to base camp to get the defender with a winch. He crosses very professionally and to say we are impressed is an understatement - then radio contact! Volodya and Ivan were worried about us and are on their way with Maxim and Zhenya who demonstrate perfect winching technique. The Lada safely on the other side and whole family emerges, very shaken but safe. Andrei and Roman expertly drive our defenders across. It's nearly party time by the time we get back to base camp. The rain stops!!! We do team photos outside the yurt and then crack open the champagne. The snow leopard sighting and evidence of other wildlife this slot means much to celebrate. See James out of his combats/camouflage for the first time! Abai, Gulinara and Tarbia with us (the stove in our yurt is from her). Everyone in party mood!

11 August

Andrei gets stuck in river trying to get Abai, Gulinara and Tarbia home and we have to pull the Defender out of the raging waters. Again, James very helpful. Defender has to stay at base camp with Volodya, Irene, Roman and Jens and Colin who are staying for two slots. Despite delayed departure we make very good time to Anoz. The rivers are so high with all this rain. Anoz as soothing and comfortable as always. Lena and Zhenya run it so well.

12 August

Fewer and fewer team members in vehicles as we leave Nancy, Sabine and Lars at Anoz. Again, excellent drive to Novosibirsk. We go to Chinese restaurant for farewell dinner. Always sad to see team members go.

13 August

Usual admin and trip to Autoland to get vehicle papers. They are now issuing them each slot so Nastya and I have to go every time. Meet new group in Russian restaurant as usual. It's lovely to see Roger and Bob back again this year. Very dynamic. Look forward to working with them. We also have a Russian journalist called Sergey with us this slot, writing an article for an off-road motoring magazine.

14 August

Perfect driving weather. Very good drive to Anoz. New team very enthusiastic and lively. Up chatting till late. Nastya, as always, has the unenviable job of filling in all the registration forms in Russian.

15 August

Usual stop at Silver Springs while Andrei and Nastya do the registrations in Gorno Altaisk. It all goes very smoothly!!! We are off 11:30 and have great drive. Have wonderful view of black storks flying low at 'ice cream' stop (no ice creams this time as the freezer is broken). Make Chuyi Oozy restaurant by early afternoon. Then the most beautiful drive to base camp I have ever experienced. We reach Kosh Agach by 19:00. Lorries laden with hay. After refuelling we drive on. Haymaking going on all around. People scything, raking, pitching new hay in to lorries. The steppe dotted with small tents. The light extraordinarily beautiful. It's cold. The snow-covered peaks of the Mongolian border glowing pink in the setting sun and then indescribable colours of dusk - our survey area dusted in snow.

Everything sparkling under brilliant stars and a half moon. Arrive base camp at 21:00. Greeted by Volodya, Irene, Roman, Colin and Jens as well as Maxim and Zhenya who are very helpful - keeping the stove going in the yurt. It's very cold. The mess tent is propped up with wooden stakes. It collapsed under the weight of snow. The weather has been very cold in our absence and ibex came down to slope behind base camp (males, females and young - 12 in total) so good sightings! New team allocated tents and hot soup waiting in mess tent. So good to be back!! See brightest shooting star of my life.

16 August

We are lucky. It's a sunny day! Usual risk assessment etc. and Volodya leads a survey along the river bed to check fresh tracks after all the heavy rain. Very good atmosphere in camp and new team raring to go. I prepare for tomorrow's overnight camp then go and bathe in the river. It's wonderful (but only because it's a hot afternoon - I don't know how Jens manages it early in the morning when it's freezing!)

17 August

Roman and I take a group of team members out on overnighter (Thorsten, Eva, Alexander, Stephanie, Bob, Colin and Sergey). We camp at the valley behind Tapduair as I want to look for snow leopard sign there after last week's sighting. Survey the valley - right up to the head. I survey an area of steep scree and rock bluffs - full of ibex/argali resting depressions, in lighter, gravelly patches. Go up to the rocks. Wonderful. Ledges, boulders and a tiny path. The call of ravens. Big flock of snow buntings.

Smell a perfect overhanging boulder and the pungent scent of snow leopard rock spray sends a shiver of excitement through me. Check it thoroughly and it is definite!! I'm thrilled. Go back down to meet the others who have found sign of ibex. We all walk back the valley. That last slope up to the camp is a killer. Very cold wind. Zhenya has joined us again in his Defender. Light fire and very jolly evening with vodka from Sergey and Altai balsam from Roman (for the cold of course!)

18 August

Another beautiful morning and we split into two groups. One to survey landform edges and other side of valley - the other to survey the bowl and ridge of snow leopard sighting. Fast pace and then ascent up steep side of bowl. Ominous cloud fast approaching from Mongolia - the sky dark. Raman, Thorsten, Eva and I decide to continue. Survey bowl and up to ridge. Stand in spot where saw snow leopard and find pugmarks in the fine gravel! We are on a high (quite literally) and despite thunderstorm, lightning and rain, continue surveying ridges up to 3340m.

Amazing to see so much of the core area - Tapduair, Sailugiem and Kunduyak plus valleys. Fresh snow-falls on Sailugiem. Roman leads a fast pace back to the camp. Then the magnificent drive back to base camp. Fantastic survey and results. Looks like there is a resident snow leopard back in our research area!

19 August

Volodya, Irene, Nastya and Jens off to survey new area with both Sergey's, Maxim and Zhenya for two days. They are going into Tuva. They leave in the morning. Rest of group go to see archaeological remains. Roman and I go to say goodbye to Marat and Zhenya. Only Zhenya there, but good to see him again. Also come with photos (including snow leopard scat and scrapes - so hope they will start keeping records for us). See Demoiselle cranes. Long-legged buzzard and five cinereous vultures on way back to base camp. Team members great. Everyone getting on and really mucking in. Nina continues to excel in every way. A lovely day.

20 August

Early breakfast and then off to survey Sailugiem with team members. Beautiful cool morning. The heavy rain and rivers in spate mean that the valley is different - new channels carved and even more river crossings. Roman spots steppe viper (first we have ever seen here) - it's using the morning sun to heat up in rock near river. All team members get a good look. Weather changeable. Sun, cloud, rain. The valley beautiful and lush changes to rock and the forbidding slopes that mark the ascent. Roman takes us up a different way - following boulders and river, then scree and snow. Tough but beautiful. Whole team makes it to the summit (over 3400m!) by 13:00. Light perfect and no wind. No wind. Team photos and observation.

See one large male ibex (another distant sighting). Survey ridges. Find sign of ibex/argali, manul, hare and game birds and then - snow leopard tracks!!! One set old and one set much fresher. Again the tracks are in fine gravel. I just can't believe it!!! This is as good as it gets. All team thrilled. More sign of primary prey and walk back to vehicles in perfect afternoon light and temperature. Back at the vehicles by 17:30 and then collect firewood. Whole team brilliant - make light work of collecting and stacking as much as the Defender can carry. Make it back to base camp with the load. Colin and Roger have already got hot water for showers on the go. Camp fire warm and perfect place for celebratory vodka (thanks to Bob and Neill). Volodya and co. come back from recce, so much excitement as we hear about their time away. Very difficult terrain. Had to use the winch 15 times! (thank goodness for Zhenya and Maxim!). Sergey very happy as he got lots of good photos. Great day.

21 August

Another beautiful day. I'm up early, but Jens is already coming back from the river when I get up (and there is ice on the tents - arghh!!). Volodya leads survey with half of the team. I take the others to see Abai and Gulinara. They are packing up. Most of the other families have gone or are packing up. We catch up with news. This is always a sad time for me - the herders leaving the steppe and the expedition ending, but the friendships we have made and the work we have done is something I treasure. Sergey gets lots of good photos and we enjoy precious last moments. New team experience great hospitality. Things get even better when I get a last ride on no.88! We then all go to see carved stone (one I have never seen before). Abai and Aikun galloping to show the way. Photos - then race with Roman. Back to base camp just in time to set up camera for team photos followed by brilliant party. Perfect weather. Ivan and Roman are the most professional openers and dispensers of champagne! Wonderful food. Dancing and finally arm wrestling in mess tent. Perfect day.

22 August

Very sad day for me. The yurt is dismantled in the morning. It comes down and is packed into/onto the minibus in record time. Then leaves with Andrei and Abai. Volodya leaves with half the team for overnight survey in corridor area. The rest of us pretty tired after heavy surveying of high ridges + party, so everyone takes it easy. Enjoy the sunny afternoon - river bathing is popular (especially as we are about to lose it - it's disappearing fast).

23 August

Rain in night and morning. Cool and damp, but decide to survey whole ridge system to left of base camp. Bitter wind. The colours are changing and autumn is close. Our group starts off, but only Bob, Thorsten and Eva continue with Roman and me. Survey whole ridge area. Find very fresh ibex tracks and trails plus areas where they have been digging for salt/minerals.

The ridge gets very narrow and slopes either side as steep as they get, but we all make it to 'Roman's Peak' - we name it in his honour. He deserves it. Fantastic place. Views onto so much of survey area. We are at 3300m - 3rd time this week for Thorsten, Eva, Roman and me! Back along difficult ridge before dropping down 800 m of scree to valley below. I couldn't have wished for a better last survey and team. Volodya and group back from overnighter with close view of 13 argali. Ivan even filmed them! Makes up for the trailmaster malfunctioning, so no footage from that this year.

24 August

Today is Gulinara's birthday and I promised to see her. I know it's mad with packing up and so much to do at base camp on the last day, but the friendships I have made with herders are too precious to take for granted and birthdays are important here, so we (Nastya, Roman, Sergey G and me accompanied by Aude and Jens) set off. Abai and Gulinara's yurt deserted, so we go looking for them in Tibilir. It all turns out to be quite an adventure and we end up at the winter station (guided there by Enmira). It is as beautiful and difficult to find as I remember. After all that effort, Gulinara isn't there! (Don't ask - we were assured she was). The good news is that Ascir (Abai's father) and other family are there, so we are able to say our goodbyes and leave our presents for Gulinara. We are treated to a feast of boiled lamb, boursak and tea, and I know none of you will believe this but we end up, and make our toasts with... water! It's special water from sacred springs. Long drive back towards base camp, then, as we get close, we meet little red car with Abai and Gulinara!!! Abai's brother, 3rd wife and two year old Mohamed also there. Much happiness all round and they come back to base camp to celebrate. It's a short time together, but very happy and we toast Gulinara with something stronger than water! She is a very special person and if she has another child, she wants me to be godmother. I'm close to tears when we say goodbye, but 'expeditions leaders don't cry' (unless tequila is involved and that is one drink I won't ever touch again!!!). Camp is dismantled and team members do a wonderful job helping me pack and label the last boxes. It's very cold. Big camp fire. Andrei leaves in green Defender. If all is fine, he will be at Anos before us.

If not, contingency plans kick in. I end the day with Russian team in red truck with cigarette smoke, bawdy Russian songs (Nastya says to me "Tessa, you're so lucky you don't understand the lyrics" then I remind her I do, as Yuri Petrovich mimed the actions for me in 2003!) and the best company I could wish for.

25 August

Early breakfast on small tables. Our mess table and benches have been dismantled. Minibus and remaining Defenders leave. The two Romans and Zhenya from Anos stay back with the red and grey trucks to finish dismantling tents etc. I hate this bit – leaving the mountains and the steppe behind and knowing that as autumn turns the hills red, the wildlife will come lower. As always there is just one more (I lie – many more!!!) survey I desperately want to do before leaving. But it will have to wait....

The drive to Anos goes well. At Chuya Ouzi we meet a couple of British guys who need to change money in order to eat! They have driven a Citroen 2CV all the way from London for charity and it's only taken them 25 days! Amazing! Their final destiny is Ulan Bataar, the capital of Mogolia. Even more amazing is that the car is still in one(ish!) piece. If the 2CV had 4WD, Defenders might have serious competition! Sergey G (journalist) is in heaven and all the team fascinated. Many photos and find space to add signature for Biosphere Expeditions. We arrive in Anos in good time. Green Defender and Andrei there and all fine. What a relief. Sergey Kurgin there to greet us. New banya being built at bottom of garden. Foundations laid. Will be huge! But I like the old one and Sergey has promised to keep it for me. Multa is now very well behaved and even more beautiful. Lena has cooked lovely meal again. The trees are laden with crab apples – deep red and delicious. Everyone dashing for banya. Both Sergeys have vodka to toast end of expedition - serious! Red and grey truck with rest of equipment arrive. Final sorting and repacking of equipment. Crickets calling, Katun racing. I love this place.

26 August

Last drive back to Novosibirsk. Blinis and shashliks as good as ever. Have to stop Roman and Thorsten from racing! Am very strict and remind them of the Dr Hammer 'no testosterone driving' rule. All team members, Sergey G, Volodya and Irene to Russian restaurant with Roman and Oleg S (both wearing shirts and ties!), Nina and Nastya (looking very glamorous). Zhenya and Maxim also join us. Brilliant evening which ends with vodka and arm wrestling (Thorsten and Roman again!). Thank you everyone. It's been a fantastic expedition. We found sign of snow leopard and had a sighting – but even more importantly the work really progressed. Ties with, and knowledge gained from local people deepened. We have learnt so much more. I want to say a special thank you to my brilliant Russian team for all their hard work and loyalty. Andrei, Nastya and Oleg have been with us for three years. I can't praise them enough. They are outstanding at their respective jobs and ensure a precious continuity. Volodya, the best field scientist anyone could hope to work with and Irene for her lovely presence and help. Nina for excelling not only as a cook, but for looking after us all so well. Roman and Ivan for being so much more than mountain guide and camp helper. They are total stars. Never has camp run so smoothly or has such a perfect pace been set for surveys. Special thanks to Roman for helping me recce new areas with the hunters and for being so interested and good at surveying! Also big thank you to Roman, Lena and Zhenya of Anos for all their contribution. Last but not least I make a toast to the 'big men' Sergey Kurgin and Matthias Hammer, and all team members. Without you and Biosphere Expeditions this research would not be possible. This has been the best expedition yet. Spasiba Balshoi!