



EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2011

By Andy Stronach & Jiri Haurelijuk

15 June

Welcome everyone to the 2011 Biosphere Expedition to The Golden Mountains of Altai where we will be searching for the Mountain Ghost - The Snow Leopard. I am Andrew Stronach, the expedition leader, and this is my first diary entry.

Well, I'm sitting in Moscow airport, waiting for my flight to Novosibirsk and I'm now travelling considerably lighter than planned as my big bag full of all sort of goodies didn't arrive. I've got all the essentials with me in my hand baggage though; toothbrush, driving licence, binoculars, camera, waterproofs, fleece, woolly hat and sunscreen, so all should be well.

I'm really looking forward to getting back to the mountains and I can't wait to show you all the fantastic Altai and its many wonders. It will be great to meet you all in Novosibirsk (and hopefully being re-united with my bag!)

Andy

P.S. My mobile phone number is +7 923 154 1130. Remember that this is for emergency purposes only (such as being late for assembly) and that for most of the time I will be out of range as there is no network at base.

19 June

Everyone in slot 1 has arrived safely and is ready to go. Four brand new shiny Land Rovers sitting outside the hotel, full of diesel and ready to go. Breakfast at 7 tomorrow morning, then off we go, at last, to the Golden Mountains of Altai. I wonder what adventures await us?

23 June

We have all made it to base camp safely and everything is looking great. We have finished all the training, everying is driving well, through mud, up and down hills and through rivers; ready for action now! There is a little snow on the mountain tops, the trees are green and the flowers are just starting to bloom; looks like it's going to be a great summer.

28 June

Our first day of fieldwork got off to a great start. With Chris and Bertrand driving our Land Rovers and making a great job of the very muddy conditions, we went to the top of Kara Gyem pass. It started off cold and wet, but then turned snowy. Well, after only about an hour of surveying, we found a very clear trail of guess what - snow leopard! The trail was around 10 days old and there were perhaps 40 individual tracks in the mud, mostly very clear. Not content with this, our intrepid team then found a second snow leopard trail in the snow, and fresher, much fresher, probably made the night before we arrived; fantastic! Lunch amongst an amazing display of flowers and then watching two groups of Siberian ibex rounded off the day.

Doesn't get any better than that!

On the second day, we went high along a ridge from Kara Gyem pass towards stunning mountains and glaciers. On the way, the wild flowers were spectacular; probably the best I've ever seen, anywhere; huge swathes of hillside were a riot of colours; orange, yellow, and blues. On the way back we found the trail of two wolverine in the snow, another fantastic find of a very rare animal.

During the last three days, we moved to a temporary camp near the Mongolian border with fantastic views across the border to spectacular mountains. Lots of birds on the way, loads of sign of Siberian ibex on the mountain where we ascended to 3350 m and lots of rain and hail on the way back. Heading for base camp and a big feed now :-)

2 July

Slot 1 team headed off to Novosibirsk yesterday. Chris and Bertrand had spent the second last night out alone high on a mountain and were rewarded with a great display of stars in the inky black night sky. In the morning they saw a big group of over 20 Siberian Ibex, some butting heads, a rare and dramatic sight. Later, Peter and I joined them and headed up another mountain with fantastic views along a superb alpine valley, massive hanging glaciers to the south and Mount Belucha, Altai's highest peak, to the western horizon, cloaked in white. Sam, Sayan and Volodya meanwhile surveyed a nearby valley. Whilst they didn't see much in the way of animals, the flowers were outstanding. Lines of bright yellow buttercup family flowers marked wet areas and purple showed where the ground was drier, whilst in between, were huge swathes of orange globe flowers.

Our trusty Land Rovers did a great job of getting us home, through some long stretches of mud, and as it was our last night, we decided to eat out. After driving up the valley for about a mile, we got to a yurt where a very friendly family had cooked a sheep for us (vegetarians catered for by Nina!). We had liver, meat, salad, ayran, tea, broth and of course, swiss roll. The evenings entertainment included: dancing; trying to avoid being set up for marriage and; watching a pair of White Wagtails flying in and out of a hole in the roof, bringing food to their brood of chicks in a nest in the corner. That was a very special evening.

Well, team one will take a lot of beating, lets see what you've got team two! Volodya will meet you in Hotel Sibir Sunday evening at 19:00 and then depart for base camp at 07:30 Monday morning. I look forward to meeting you all.

16 July

Team two have all just arrived back safely in Novosibirsk at the end of a successful second slot where we surveyed many new areas.

During her time here, Verena certainly opened up a whole new dimension to the expedition with her expert knowledge of water insects; fascinating. Margit gave Oleg, our mountain guide, a good run for his money one day, running some kilometres back to camp after a long survey walk in the mountains - fit as a fiddle! Cassie has been spotting all sorts of birds which has boosted our records and Katryn has been a demon behind the wheel of the Land Rovers, making easy work of some challenging off road driving - excellent.

Weather during slot 2 has been amazing, blue skies, hot and sunny most days, so that the ice which was filling the Taldura river valley near base camp, has almost all melted now. One day, Cassie and I drove all the way up to the end of that spectacular valley, where many massive glaciers feed the river that rises and falls in height dramatically throughout the day with changes in temperature and hence melting of the ice; this was a reconnaissance trip, so maybe we'll go there with team three to survey the high ridges and valleys around the glaciers; it looks fantastic :-)

So, Team 3, I will be in the reception area of Hotel Sibir at 1900 on Sunday evening to brief you on the trip to base camp and then we can all go for dinner together if you would like. On Monday morning, we will leave for base camp at 0730; it's going to be great. At base camp, the big swathe of bluish purple Acanites are starting to open their flowers, should be quite a welcome for us when we get there.

19 July

What a lovely morning we woke up to. Sun already high up and pleasantly warm. With a big day ahead, we wasted no time and started polishing the camp before the team's arrival. Oleg made the last bench for the mess tent and Volodya made us another of his heavy duty egg/meat omelettes. I was really starting to look forward to Nina's return and her healthy porridge. We then left Dzelo shortly after 15:00 and met the team in Kosh Agash, some two hours later. I think they were quite relieved, after spending nearly two days crammed into two Land Rovers, after Ania's and Ilja Suzuki broke down in Gorno Altaisk.

Nina, Ania and Lisa drove back with me, while Debbie and Albert skilfully negotiated the first sections of dirty, dust roads leading into Beltir and beyond. We didn't make it to the camp until 20:30 and Volodya was already waiting with his signature meal, Ukrainian bortsch. Nina was very pleased with her new 'cow proof' kitchen and almost immediately started ordering us around. Nice to have her back. The team enjoyed their first dinner and their first starry night by the fire. With Andy in retirement, it was also my first night as a new expedition leader.

20 July

Earthquake! Quite an experience to wake up to a slight earth tremor. All tents shook and even ever cool Nina jumped out of the kitchen, when her pots came off the bench. After breakfast I went through important health and safety procedures and Andy was nice enough to do the Land Rover training.

Everyone then learnt how to use the GPS, compass, had their first look through the spotting scope and fired the flare gun - always the most favourite part of the training. Later in the afternoon Volodya took us through the scientific part of the expedition, how we will be collecting data, how will we recognise one scat from another and what it is all going to be used for. Ilja and Anja from the Siberian Ecological Centre then told us about their research into Pallas' cats and their raptor monitoring techniques.

21 July

Rain, rain, rain. The plan to split into three groups and explore the surrounding valleys was over the very moment we opened our tents. Dark sky, heavy clouds and heavy rain. Yet it was clear no one was interested in staying at the camp. With rain easing and Nina's cheerful predictions, we jumped into the Land Rovers and headed over to the waterfall. Andy's various attempts to cross the river failed and he had no choice, but to abandon the climb to the falls and headed straight up to Karagem pass. Lisa, Kim, Ben, Paul, Mary Lynn and our two Russian scientists Anja and Ilja and I stayed in the valley and went to the glacier. After two hours of rather pleasant strolling, we came across a river too deep to cross and hampered by rain, we decided to turn around. To cheer us up, eagle-eyed Ania spotted a herd of four ibex, all males, directly above. They were staring right at us, all carrying impressive sets of curvy horns. We made it back to camp in a cheerful mood, finding the rest of the team just about to head out with Volodya for a river walk. They made it up to Karagem, but found only clouds and had to turn around. Volodya's team got back later on and even with such bad weather throughout the day, we all managed to record nearly 30 bird species, including steppe and golden eagle.

22 July

With three cars loaded to the roof, we set off early in the morning, heading yet again to the infamous Karagem valley. Morning drizzle made the track very slippery and we were all sliding from side to side, struggling to keep the cars straight and on the road. The intended journey to the glacier was off due to high water. Luckily, we found a great spot for the camp and soon everyone headed out for an afternoon walk. Andy took Debbie, Albert and Ben to the forest; Volodya headed along the main road, with Paul, Mary and Mila.

The first mini survey proved to be quite a success, with 19 recorded bird species, one almost complete bear skull, found by Andy and wolf droppings, full of bone fragments and hair. What a great start to our Karagem adventure!

23 July

We couldn't have wished for a better start to the day - sunny, with no clouds, at least for the moment. Andy immediately organised his first bivi adventure this year, taking along Debbie, Kim, Lisa and Ben. Their aim was to climb up above the valley, close to the base and stay up the night, high in the saddle, armed with spotting scopes and dreams of ibex. Volodya and the rest of the team headed up into to the valley. Going proved to be difficult from the very start and we had to slow down significantly. Yet, we still managed to find plenty of fresh signs around, particularly those of elk, maral and musk deer. Birds were plentiful and our list was filling up fast. Back at the car later with Mila, we spotted two maral deer directly above us, both carrying enormous antlers. Their presence on the ridge was constant and we could even see them from the camp later on.

Volodya did make it as far as the treeline. It was a great day of surveying with some good results. Andy meanwhile made it to the top of the saddle late in the evening and we watched from the camp with our telescope, as they were settling down for the night. Shame they missed out on the bottle of beer, Jana pulled out of nowhere, which we all shared. Well done Paul, Mary Lynn, Gunter and Albert, you deserved it!

24 July

No rest for us on Sunday. Cheered up by the morning sun, we left the camp early and crossed the river, hoping to explore the other side of the valley. Volodya went up to the road with Mila, Paul and Mary Lynn, while Albert, I and the ever intrepid Gunter. At 70, hats off! But yet again, it was the weather which got the better of us and halted our ambitious plans. Heavy rain and dark clouds looked set for the day and we had no choice but to turn back. Andy was having better luck with ibex. What we could hear from their radios, there seemed to be plenty of them, up on the mountain. Volodya, judging by his silence on the radio, was determined to push on and we could only hope they found a nice dry spot to hide from the rain. Andy got back late in the afternoon, with tales of ibex and maral deer. It was great to hear how much everyone enjoyed their 'night out'.

A herd of 15 ibex came over the horizon on a distant hill and Mila, Albert and Gunter finally got to see their first Siberian ibex. This brought our daily ibex count to well over 40 strong. Plus six maral deer, plus last night in Karagem, there was no excuse to leave two bottles of champagne unopened. What an adventure!

25 July

The river level had gone up about a foot in the past few days, but Andy's experience expertly guided us through all the tricky driving bits and the Land Rovers sailed easily out of the valley, yet again, in record time. With a cloudless day and the sun high above us, we had no reason to rush back to the camp and lingered around Karagem valley for a bit longer. Volodya was determined to survey one of the last valleys he has not been in and Gunter, Albert, Ben and I came along. The glacier at the end of the valley was spectacular as ever and the flower display was amazing. Sadly no ibex and fresh horse droppings indicated why - poaching! The rest of the group remained either with the cars or headed with Ilja to look for raptors. After so many days without the sun, we all got decently sunburnt on this sunny day. It was also first time, after three trips up to Karagem pass, we had some great views from the top and not just thick clouds. But to be honest, no one was very interested in views. Showers were a much bigger draw. After four days, it was only understandable. And Oleg didn't disappoint, showers were superb and hot water plentiful. Paul's comments of how great it is being back in the Ritz were more than fitting.

26 July

Today was the day to fulfil our promise to Ania and Ilja. Before leaving for Karagem, we agreed to do two full day surveys of their favourite environment, the steppe. Andy took two cars along with both scientists, Paul, Mary Lynn, Kim, Albert and Debbie and headed off to Beltir, shortly after breakfast.

Volodya was keen to check for more marmot signs around the waterfall area and Gunter with Lisa volunteered to go along. The raptors, Ilja's main study subject, were not keen to take to the air until the sun came back up but when they did, the team was in for a treat.

Only meters away from both cars, a Saker falcon killed a squirell and didn't seem to be awfully bothered by everyone watching, while eating it. Eagles were plentiful and the team have even managed to spot a rare and endangered black stork, right behind an old brick factory in Beltir. But the biggest highlight and first ever Biosphere sighting came a little bit later, when Kim decided to stop the cars and take a few pictures of Bactrian camels.

Ilja and Nina, being locals, wandered off in the opposite direction and while everyone was photographing camels, they nearly stepped on a Pallas's cat, hiding in a little depression. The sighting was heavily celebrated over the fire - a great opportunity to introduce the team to some local brew Nina bought in Kosh Agash.

27 July

Volodya was determined to see a Pallas's cat too and headed over to the Beltir steppe, along with Andy, Mila and Kim and both excited scientists. Albert, Debbie, Lisa, Ben and I decided to conquer the glacier above the camp. We discovered a long valley by the lake, leading to Karagem pass and couldn't help ourselves but climb to the very top, reaching an altitude of 3124 metres. The views into Taldura valley below us were spectacular, so were the distant glaciers. Our surveying found plenty of evidence of pikas in the area; we spotted a ptarmigan and watched steppe eagles soaring around us. For dinner we all packed into a yurt belonging to one of our neighbours, where we enjoyed the local produce. Nina then welcomed us back in the camp with two bottles of champagne and homemade cake. What a great and tasty day!

28 July

Our last day in the camp was declared a semi-free day. Volodya, headed with most of the team members to check out the petroglyphs, while Albert decided to climb up to the waterfall. Mila spent most of the day around the camp with her camera. Kim and Paul drove back later on and we celebrated our last night in the camp in style.

Albert enjoyed his day out and brought us back an impressive set of ibex horns. Volodya thanked everyone for their contribution they made towards his research and we went again through both mammal and bird lists, which were impressively long.

Well done team, you made quite an impact on our research here in Altai.

Thank you for all your patience and thank you for making my first leading experience such fun. Good luck everyone and a safe journey home!