

THE INDEPENDENT

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ON THE PROWL

Sarah Barrell braves sub-zero temperatures to trek across the Siberian wilderness in search of the elusive and endangered snow leopard

It's the middle of the night on the edge of the world. On the fringes of civilisation where man and beast have barely left a mark, 12 people are sleeping in small nylon tents. Pitched in the scant shelter of two towering mountains, the camp is at the mercy of the elements; and here on the edge of the world, where the steppe rolls relentlessly towards the horizon, the elements aren't that accommodating.

And what of the occupants of these tents? Are they dreaming of sprung mattresses and central heating systems? No. You can bet what they are dreaming of is that sometime during the next two weeks in the Siberian wilderness, they will cross paths with a large, rare, wild cat. The occupants of these tents have come to the ends of the earth in the name of feline conservation.

The Altai Mountains, which form Siberia's southern backbone and its border with Central Asia, aren't particularly nurturing. Soviet engineers failed to tame the steppe that rakes down from the Altai foothills and 19th-century European explorers either got spectacularly lost in the mountains or went native and ended up in what is now Tuva. But one creature that managed to survive in this lost world is the snow leopard - or almost.

Here in the Altai, I've joined a team of international scientists, Russian mountain guides and some willing volunteers who have set up camp in order to help gather information on the region's snow leopard population, as part of a Biosphere conservation holiday. This isolated area has never been studied before and the expedition aims to use data gathered to assess the habitat and help predict the remaining resident numbers of this endangered creature. After surviving our first night at base camp we meet in the mess tent for breakfast at 7am - a lie-in by expedition standards.



The Altai mountains.

Having arrived the night before by Land Rover convoy, with 1,000km of Trans-Siberian road under our belts, we have been treated to a late start. Despite this our group of eight volunteers looks less than sprightly, a night of cold, high-altitude air having robbed most of sleep. Our departure point, the city of Novosibirsk in central Siberia, already seems a world away.



On the way to base camp.

No one knows how many snow leopards inhabit the remote mountains of Central Asia. These endangered animals are as elusive as they are beautiful, their dusky silver-grey coats camouflaging them against the craggy rocks of their high-altitude habitat. The first photograph of a wild snow leopard wasn't taken until the late 1970s in Pakistan and the animal has only recently been recorded for study. It is now known that the beast ranges across vast distances, from the Tora Bora mountains in Afghanistan to the Pamirs of Tajikistan, from the peaks of Pakistan to the Siberian Altai. That this big cat's habitat crosses war zones and lawless areas only makes tracking them even tougher.

No easy feat for a bunch of armchair conservationists with little or no scientific training. Along with several guides, our team comprises Ukrainian scientist Volodymyr Tytar, British expedition team leader Tessa McGregor, a Norwegian volunteer and eight British volunteers. Tessa's first task as we pant our way up a scree-covered slope, is to equip us with the basic skills needed to assess the snow leopard's habitat. We are hoping to tally the photos and diagrams we studied during our breakfast briefing - of prey species' tracks and faeces - with the real thing.

Pausing for breath on a rocky bluff several hundred metres above base camp, it's hard to imagine anything could exist here. Even down where our tents are pitched, at 2,200 metres, the vegetation is sparse. But as we climb towards the snow line, inch by painful inch due to altitude-addled lungs, the grass and scarce alpine flowers all but vanish. But by the end of the day, with not a little supervision from Volodymyr, we've recorded several signs of mammal life and are even treated to a sighting of two Siberian ibex (mountain goat).



Base camp. Yellow communal and meal times tent on the left. One and two person dome tents in the middle. Blue shower tents on the riverbed stones in the centre.

These sightings, it soon becomes clear, are rare. This is not the cuddly side of conservation work. The temperatures veer between minus 5C overnight to 30C during the day, and a "sighting" here is defined as the slightest sign of life. Seven days into the expedition, post-dinner conversation has become entirely faeces-focused, complete with digital-camera illustrations and GPS position readings. The good news is that one of these choice findings may well be feline scat; bagged and tagged to be sent to the Snow Leopard Society in the UK for DNA sampling. "Snow leopards excite people, inspire conservationist urges but there is an awful lot more to this project than cats," says Tessa. "It's a whole environment that's at risk here. Overgrazing by local farmers and poaching threatens not just the leopards but their habitat and prey species too," she says. That's all very well but for the amateur scientist, a little living evidence goes a long way when it comes to finding the inspiration for hours of trekking up barren mountains in search of shit.



Morning briefing for a research team before going out on a day's work.



Surveying a mountain ridge (and radioing to base).

As it turns out this comes in human form, in the shape of a Kazakh herdsman named Kompy Petrovitch. Tessa takes us across the steppe, an hour's bumpy drive from base camp towards the mountainous border with Mongolia, where we find Kompy's yurt (the felt tents favoured by nomadic Asian farmers). Calling in on local herdsman for a cup of sweet tea and a slice of bread and salty cheese is one of the more agreeable parts of fieldwork. The relationship Tessa has built up with these nomadic farming families has proved invaluable both in terms of the local knowledge she's gained about animal sightings and poaching, and the co-operation and trust it builds between locals and scientists. The eventual hope is that the two can work alongside one another to protect the local environment, rather than hunt and farm it.



Yurts and mountains near base camp.

That this is a possibility, albeit a long way off, serves to bolster the enthusiasm of the amateur conservationist like myself. Faced with another morning of high-altitude trekking with not more than a marmot burrow as evidence of wildlife it's no small joy to know that we're working on the barely visited frontiers of Central Asia - indeed on the frontiers of conservation itself. It's hard to imagine a two-week holiday could be more uniquely spent - mastering Russian phrases, learning how to navigate miles of uninhabited grassland in a 4WD and, of course, becoming able to identify mammal droppings. As we sit around the campfire, a purple shadow drawing over the steppe, another Siberian night folds over us and I decide that while these aren't exactly transferable life skills they are nonetheless experiences that will stay with me forever.

THE BEST WAY TO SEE SPOTS

GETTING THERE

Biosphere Expeditions (01502 583085; www.biosphere-expeditions.org) organises four annual trips to the Siberian Altai in Russia. Beginning in July, the expedition takes place in four two-week slots, running back to back.

The cost is £1,150 per person (this price is based on travel in 2006) per two-week slot, with two thirds of that contribution going directly back into the project. It includes all transport from the pick-up point in the central Russian city of Novosibirsk, all meals, hotel, camping, equipment and guides. It does not include flights. The 2005 expedition is now fully booked, but those keen to travel this year can register on a waiting list.

The writer travelled with British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com), which flies from London to Moscow Domodedovo from £225 return. Onward travel from Moscow to Novosibirsk, and visa arrangements, were made by Asla Travel Group (01480 433783; www.asla.co.uk). Flights between Moscow and Novosibirsk are available from Aeroflot and Siberia (0870 240 6106) for around £300 return.

FURTHER INFORMATION

British passport holders require a visa to visit Russia, which can be obtained from the Embassy of The Russian Federation (020-7229 8027; www.russianvisas.org), Consular Section, 5 Kensington Palace, Gardens, London, W8 4QS. These cost from £33. Altai Republic (www.altai-republic.com).

Notes to Editors:

Background information on the organisation and its expedition itinerary are available at <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org>. The media resources area containing this article is at <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/media/>.

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