



EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2003

By Tessa McGregor

8 July

Just getting to base camp is quite an expedition. We departed from Novosibirsk (great city!) in high spirits on Sunday morning. Matthias leading the convoy with Sam and Martyn (old Namibia hands) bravely volunteering to drive the first shift. It's a long drive – first through vast swathes of agricultural lands, often tilled by hand and villages made up of traditional wooden houses adorned with intricate carvings surrounded by lush vegetable plots. It was hot (sweltering!). Matthias had talked everyone through the local traffic rules – just as well as the driving proved, um interesting – some spectacular overtaking by Matthias (3 vehicles abreast with oncoming traffic and clouds of dust) and a couple of other drivers also gave us “interesting” moments. Lunch in a roadside café afforded us our first big mammal sighting (bear). Unfortunately it was hanging on the wall. Lunch was good and the drive continued, and continued....and continued, through Siberian landscapes of silver birch, poplar, swathes of unimproved grassland, rich with flowers and finally in the afternoon, the Altai Republic border. The driving was done in shifts. We travelled on along the Katun river – very popular for white-water rafting and local tourism. The density of livestock increased (cattle wandering on and off road, horses, sheep, pigs and the first camels). We eventually reached the ‘Sibalp’ hut at Anoz in the evening (after crossing a narrow wooden bridge spanning the Katun River). Everyone very relieved to get out of the cars and enjoy the scenery. The hut is cosy warm and inviting – the cook wonderful and the view onto the Katun River great. Best of all a Russian sauna – I've never been in one so hot.

Our interpreters, Olga and Nastya are beautiful, charming and speak great English. Matthias has just told me this is far too long (“well get the**** on with it” to be more accurate) – just to let you know we have all made it to base camp intact. The location is stunning – have seen many birds of prey, ground squirrels – no snow leopards yet but brilliant off-road driving course on the steppe given by Matthias today. He was almost human. People have remarked that sophisticated is not how they would describe base camp. Matthias's answer is that the point of reference is Russia and that by Russian standards it's very sophisticated. The showers are character building (***** freezing) and it's very cold at night (but then Matthias says I'm a wimp).

Bring warm clothes and a 4 season sleeping bag. Forget the soap – we have! The Russian staff are wonderful and the food very good. Professor Yuri Malkov a real character. Next email will be dry and strictly confined to data, gear etc. (very efficient like Dr Hammer himself).

9 July

Research methodology and gear explained today and demonstrated on walk through steep forested slope behind camp (dominant vegetation of larch and pine with some willow, much creeping birch, juniper and bilberry). Plenty of animal faeces (deer, hare, fox and small mammals). Also signs of livestock (horse and sheep) – dung and skeletons. Flowers abundant and very beautiful. After thunderstorm and heavy rain, afternoon spent on the step doing map-reading skills. Base camp has a ground squirrel colony just by. Tomorrow the first sites will be surveyed.

10 July

Early start. 3 different groups. 2 surveying ridges and one surveying river valley for signs of snow leopard and prey. 2 quite tough and one medium route. Plenty of evidence of prey species found (hare, marmot, game birds, deer) but no evidence of main prey species (argali & ibex). Terrain steep and broken. River level had risen significantly with yesterday's rain. All groups out all day. Fantastic start as one group found evidence of snow leopard at the snowline (tracks) – no more than one week old. Can hardly believe it. Everyone ecstatic – made filling the data forms a real pleasure. We have a really good group – all working very well. Finding sign of snow leopard in this terrain is hard, but we know it's possible. The weather is very variable – cold nights and mornings and a mixture of overcast, hot sun and daily thunderstorms. Base camp is shaping up. The radio mast is up with the Biosphere flag flying.

11 July

Three groups again today – 2 surveying snow leopard and one to the steppe and poplar groves to look at butterflies and birds. A pair of Demoiselle cranes with 2 young seen this morning on steppe 3 miles from base camp. Butterflies abundant but the poplar grove due to be surveyed too difficult to get to by vehicle (marsh and boggy ground). One of the snow leopard survey groups found intact ibex skull and horns (male category 6). We are building up a collection of animal faeces to help in identification. Marmots and picas have been observed. Bird list increasing. Working here is a challenge, but it's worth it.

12 July

Snow leopard surveying again...and the weather just as changeable. Thunder storms and rain alternate with strong sun. Dramatic skies and ever changing cloud patterns. The snow leopard surveying continues. Exploring new areas. Matthias led a group today in the back valleys and found evidence of ibex. The two other groups surveyed lower ridges in rolling steppe. A lot of livestock and yurts. We saw a flock of rosy starlings. We are all getting very fit (there is no choice!).

13 July

Breakfast at 9am today and morning off. Very welcome and it was even sunny. Everyone took the opportunity to shower and wash clothes in the river. Also shook the grasshoppers out of tents. They love eating socks and just about everything else. The afternoon was spent going to the back valleys where there are lots of nomads with their herds, as well as ancient burial mounds and dramatic scenery. Despite the rain the drive was stunning. Everyone ready to tackle another arduous day surveying tomorrow. More rain.

14 July

It rained heavily in the night again.... How I hate wet flysheets first thing in the morning. The rain lifted and three groups went out again. My group went up a valley and then observed from the ridges. The rivers are fast flowing with all the rain and it is difficult to find places to cross without getting wet boots. The day was arduous – following the river along scree banks – climbing up to the ridges across steep scree slopes. Lots of evidence of domestic stock using the valley in the past and fresh signs of deer, pika and suslik. Found cat track – possibly manul. Back at base camp a big fire was going and the most amazing sunset. The whole steppe and surrounding mountains glowed. It was dry and we had all had a great day. I have never looked at so many scats (expedition members are very diligent!) – many of them belonging to mustelids so you can imagine the smell. A good and productive day.

15 July

Dry flysheet this morning! Makes a big difference to getting up. Three groups did different things today. One surveyed a marmot colony, another went to survey a new valley and I took the last group to interview nomads. Karin (one of the expedition members staying on for the next slot) was immediately deemed suitable wife material by one of our hosts for one of his four unmarried sons, but she won't commit until she has seen them. Thorsten (another expedition member) was mistaken for Tolstoy. I just asked questions about snow leopards and got to ride one of the horses. The off-road driving was quite a challenge! It is beautiful again as I write. We have just had supper. Our cook, Nadia, does a great job.

16 July

A beautiful, cold, clear morning. The groups went out surveying promising plateau areas and a difficult ridge. Matthias and I were busy sorting out last bits and pieces before he leaves (this weekend). The sun was hot and I got to shower and do my washing (lovely feeling). The first group was back at 4pm. The area looks good but needs longer periods of observation. Nothing was seen today. The second group were back after 19.00, having had an arduous climb (the scrub made walking difficult up the valley). No signs of snow leopard or main prey species today, but plenty of evidence of smaller prey (marmot, hare etc) and evidence of otter. Our last evening together at base camp. Nadia, our cook, made cakes to celebrate the successful completion of the first slot.

17 July

Another bright morning - group photos were taken before departure at 09.00. Karin, Tony and Marion stayed at base camp as they are also doing the next slot. The rest of us drove to Kosh Agach – I hated leaving base camp, the steppe and the mountains. The drive to Anoz went well. We stopped in the same restaurant at about 14.00 for lunch. It was very busy this time – many Russian tourists. We looked at the rock art (sadly being eroded away by weather and people treading all over it) before driving on. We reached Anoz at 19.00. There were queues for the sauna this time. Many thanks to Martyn for producing a bottle of Vodka. The toast was “to snow leopards”.

18 July

We left Anoz at 6.30 and the drive back to Novosibirsk was wet and long. Arrived at Hotel Central 5pm. I was very impressed by the expedition members' driving skills, especially for the last part of the journey and negotiating Novosibirsk rush hour traffic. This first team has worked very hard and I am very grateful for all their efforts. The information we have gathered so far is very useful and I look forward to building on to it with subsequent expedition members.

19 July

Day spent in Novosibirsk getting Land Rovers checked, shopping and meeting the new team. Torrential rain.

20 July

Matthias flew back to the UK today. Olga and I were back in Hotel at 06.30. We packed the Land Rovers at 07.00 and the first briefing took place at 08.00. All expedition members very prompt. Left Novosibirsk 08.45 and covered a lot of ground. The weather turned gloriously hot. Stopped at the same place for lunch and for a photo stop at the Altai Republic border. The Katun river looked particularly beautiful we were in Anoz by 19.00. Everyone enjoyed the evening there and Vica, the cook had prepared a lovely meal.

21 July

We left Anoz at 07.00. Another ravishing day. Stopped for photos at the car bridge and then made it to Silver Springs at 10.00. The stalls were just opening – selling the usual wooden artefacts, medicinal herbs, shamanistic trinkets, maps, tapes, books, beads and so much else. Sadly there were also brown bear claws for sale. Having planned to stay only 15 minutes we ended up having to spend over two and a half hours because problems with two expedition members passports meant a return journey had to be made to Gorno Altaisk. Please, please make sure that you have filled in your immigration form on the plane or at Moscow airport (these are handed out on some flights but not on others) as it is crucial to have this bit of paper. The other serious problem is for anyone on a business visa (i.e. a visa for more than 28 days). Sibalp's letter of invitation does not work for these and it is necessary to have all the paperwork sorted out by your visa agency and the Moscow office. One of our expedition members had to go back to Anoz and wait for the right paperwork to be faxed. She joins us tomorrow. We only left Silver Springs just before 13.00 and had a pretty tough drive with few stops, in order to get to base camp before midnight. Despite the pressure it was the most stunning drive. Driving through the Altai – with dramatic geographical and geological changes was breathtaking. We made it to Kosh Agach at 21.00 and to Base Camp by 23.00. It was cold – the sky bright with stars – the camp fire going. Lovely to see Karin, Tony and Marion again as well as Nadia our cook and young Oleg.

22 July

A bitterly cold, bright morning. We have run out of water as our river has disappeared after the 5 hot days with no rain. We have to use the Land Rovers to get it from the next water body (about 10 minutes drive from base camp). The day was spent going through the risk assessment, explaining gear, research aims and doing the off-road driving course. We are lucky in having very experienced drivers, so it did not take very long. We saw the cranes on the steppe and the usual birds of prey. In the evening everyone relaxed and played card games and chess in the mess tent. There is a good team spirit already. The rain has returned with a vengeance – so hopefully our river will also return.

23 July

We went out in two Land Rovers to re-survey a route located in the back valleys which had looked very interesting. It poured with rain for most of the day and was cold. However it was definitely worth it. There is a small lake which is not marked on the map and two further dried lake areas above, before getting into the high mountains and snow line. We split into two groups and the area was very thoroughly surveyed. The lake edge was full of tracks (argali – various age groups) plus traces of mustelids. The rocks heaving with ground squirrels and a very healthy marmot population. We also saw 2 snowcock (male and female). I climbed to the highest dried lake area and was rewarded with snow leopard track, following the edge of the scree before crossing the open area and disappearing up the steep grass and scree slope. The cold and rain were immediately forgotten and I felt really elated. When I rejoined the other group they had found manul tracks – going down towards the lake. The habitat is perfect for argali and we found plenty of fresh evidence (tracks and faeces) – but sadly no sighting yet. The rain came on again as we made our way down, back to the Land Rovers. The walking was testing (very in parts) but everyone did really well. We all made the return 2 hour journey soaked and tired. Filling in the data sheets was really positive with evidence of snow leopard and a good prey base. Everyone really tired.

24 July

It has been raining heavily in the night and our river has returned. We waited until the worst of the rain was over – during which time I took everyone through our now extensive collection of faeces (wildlife not ours!). It stopped at about 09.00 and we went off to survey adjacent forest areas and ridges. One group surveyed the lower edge, just in from the steppe, my group surveyed the upper end of the tree line (hellish walking on very steep slopes and patches of loose scree – also tick infested area) and the third group surveyed the ridge running parallel the steppe. A few people stayed back as they did not feel well. We were all quite tired after yesterday. Surveying the area was interesting. Rick and I found more fresh signs of deer than anywhere else to date and an abundance of mountain hare droppings and lynx faeces. Watching steppe eagles and black kites at close range was one of the highlights of the day, as well as hearing and seeing choughs. Annoyingly I have hurt my knee and Rick lost his binoculars so we called it a day and got back to Base Camp at 15.00 – the others were enjoying the sun and the opportunity to shower. I stuck my leg in the river which acted as an excellent ice pack and after arnica and a shower; I'm ready to walk up another mountain. Yuri Malkov returned at 17.00 from a walk up behind base camp having seen a manul, hunting ground squirrels. Just off to do data sheets. It's raining again.

25 July

It rained for most of the night and it's raining hard this morning as I write. It is very cold and there is fresh snow on the mountain behind base camp. The conditions are too cold and slippery to do a full day's surveying, so a small, intrepid group will set out after lunch to survey lower slopes. Fresh snow will be good for tracks, but it is too risky to survey ridges until the weather is dryer. Everyone is playing card games and chess. I am trying to sort out problems with the satellite phone (could be weather influenced) so that you can get the diary and I can pick up emails. At least we have a small stove to dry clothes now – but no spare tent! I am sorting that out today. The grasshopper population has dramatically decreased, although they still munch their way through anything left out in sunny weather and the rodents have suddenly decided to move in. They shred shoe laces, boot insoles, anything left outside the tents. One even tried to move in with Tony and Marion, but it was quickly expelled (in the middle of the night – Marion had to stand outside her tent while Tony dealt with it). Yuri Malkov continues to entertain us with his fund of dramatic stories. He also sings Russian folk songs and plays his guitar (late into the night if he has some vodka). Bring plenty (and I mean plenty) of warm clothes, thermals. Good waterproofs, hats, gloves and plenty of spare socks essential.

26 July

Sergey arrived with Ruth and Nastya at 1am. I was delighted to see them both. It was bitterly cold – we had tea and bits to eat in the mess tent. Got back into my sleeping bag after 2.30am so getting up this morning was hard! But this morning was stunning – much more fresh snow on the mountains (and closer to base camp). We went to survey the area that was out of bounds to group 1 (where Yuri and Oleg refused to go any further). It was spectacularly beautiful. The mountains marking the Mongolian border are covered in snow. Getting up to the snowline for our survey was hard going, but everyone had a great day. Yuri Malkov goes everywhere with his huge butterfly net, swiping erratically now and then and collecting every edible mushroom he finds. He saw 3 ibex and found two rare species of butterfly. Tracks of cat were found by Oleg in the fresh snow – possibly snow leopard? I was on a different ridge so did not get to see them.

Rain and sleet started once we were at base camp but there have been sunny intervals – during which I took a shower (it was necessary!) I'm still recovering from the experience, but as Matthias kept saying, where else can you get such a view from the shower. Nearly forgot – saw a lammergeier this morning with a bone in its talons – wonderful sight.

27 July

Temperature dropped to below zero last night – thawing out this morning was hard! Late breakfast as it is Sunday and the official rest day. The day was magnificent – sun, snow capped mountains, the vast stretches of steppe. Expedition members walked from base camp and enjoyed the chance to take pictures. I went back to the yurts in the back valleys with Olga, Yuri, Oleg and Martin – did some more interviewing and got to ride a different horse. Useful day. Everyone very happy and card games (Rick and Evelyn brought a game called Uno) in the mess tent in the evening are riotous. Just wanted to let the first slot know that it is at least twice as cold now. The water is frozen in the morning. We are heating buckets of water on the fire to keep the shower at the same temperature as during that first fortnight. Young Oleg is doing a great job as guide and Nadia is continuing to do us proud. Everyone loves her cooking. We also have fresh fruit this slot, which makes a big difference. Watermelons are in season and we enjoyed one today. Back to surveying tomorrow. Hope it keeps dry. Tony and Marion saw 5 red deer (maral) from observation point not far from camp.

28 July

Another survey day – a valley running parallel to base camp. One group surveyed the lower reaches and the second group went up to the snowline. Very exciting as tracks of snow leopard were found with smaller tracks (quite possibly last year's cub). I went to see a new area (Silugiem range) north of base camp with Yuri and Oleg. They fished (you should have seen the size of the one that got away!) and I surveyed. Very bad weather came in in the afternoon and we all spent the night in the Land Rover (an experience I will never forget!). It snowed heavily in the night and was very cold. It confirms my feelings that it is too risky to plan overnight stays away from base camp in order to do dawn/dusk observation.

29 July

Deep snow made the landscape unrecognisable and the drive back to base camp was tough (the rivers in the back valleys have risen and were only just passable this morning) but we were there by 09.00. No snow on the steppe near base camp, but plenty on the valleys and peaks just behind. It is cold and wet (rain and sleet). The mess tent leaks badly, but with the stove it is at least warmer. We went out in two Land Rovers at 10.30 to do more interviews. They proved interesting. It seems there are fewer snow leopards than there used to be, but manuls are frequently seen, especially in winter. We had very close views of steppe eagles, vultures and of course, black kites. We finished interviews around 15.00 and the snow suddenly came down again – in a very short time we were in a blizzard and the vehicles were skidding and losing traction. Visibility was down to fewer than 10 metres. The weather is so changeable it makes planning surveys (especially in areas further from base camp difficult). Oleg managed to get the Land Rovers back on another track and we all got back to base camp safely. Everyone needed a vodka! – Yuri played the guitar and sang after supper and many expedition members sang too. A very jolly evening.

30 July

More rain and sleet. Had to cancel surveying as the conditions too slippery and cold. We did very thorough vehicle checks in the morning and everyone filled in their post-expedition questionnaires. Hillary has been helping Yuri chop and split wood. Some people have braved the weather and are walking around base camp – I'm about to go up to the snowline to look for tracks. Everyone packing up for the return journey tomorrow. This has been a really good group and they have worked well in very testing conditions. We continue to gather valuable data. I just hope the weather improves soon.

31 July

It really is sod's law - today is beautiful, cold and crisp - the snowline low - in short a perfect survey day; but we have to leave. It is so frustrating. The drive to Anoz was stunning. Everyone drove very well and we made it in good time. We stopped and saw some (neolithic?) carved stones - or hysterical stoned women as Rick put it + burial mounds on the way. Frances and Ruth have come back to Anoz between slots. The weather so much warmer past Kosh Agach. Felt positively tropical in Anoz (especially after a session in the 'Banya'). Yuri on top form sang for us until late – helped by generous shots of vodka provided by Volodia – (who works for Sergey).

1 August

A beautiful morning. We left Anoz just after 07.00 and took an 'interesting' shortcut to Gorno Altaisk – off road, through fields – and dropped Yuri back at his flat. I will miss him very much. Then the drive to Novosibirsk provided exciting driving, as always. I have now earned my Russian passport (those of you who saw me drive first slot would not recognise me behind the wheel now!). I even enjoy it. Tony also earned Russian driver status (we heard Marion over the radio asking him "have you gone dizzy?"). We made such good time that we drove past our usual lunch stop and stopped instead at a roadside stalls that did the most delicious 'shashliks', salads etc. Great meal – eaten outside in baking sun. We can't believe the heat. I thought I would never feel warm again. Banter over the radio was very funny. Rick has the sexiest voice in the universe and the combination of Rick, Nigel, Hilary and our car made for a lot of laughter. Got to Novosibirsk by 17.00. Oleg, Nigel, Hilary and I took the Land Rovers in to Autoland to get them checked and I asked about snow chains. I was told snow chains are not available in Russia – and that I did not need them – all I need is a Russian man! And they were not joking. I was speechless. Got back to hotel just in time to put some clean clothes on and we all went to a really nice Mexican restaurant. A very jolly evening (except that I found out that I may have a hard head for vodka – but Tequila floors me.....never again).

2 August

Day spent collecting Land Rovers, shopping, sorting things out etc. Olga and I very tired. Pissing with rain in Novosibirsk today. Met new group at 20.00 and went to the Russian restaurant.

3 August

Drive to Anoz. I am beginning to know this road very well. Overcast day then rain. The grass has been cut and the road sides are dotted with hayricks and people selling mushrooms and berries collected from the forest. Stopped at the usual place for lunch. Arrived at Anoz 19.30. A lovely welcome from Vica who looked after us wonderfully, as usual. Lovely to see Ruth and Frances again (they look tanned and squeaky clean) and they are both looking forward to being at base camp again, as I am.

4 August

Sergey arrived at 01.30. Olga and I went with him and Oleg to do passport registration in Gorno Altaisk. Mercifully no problems this time. Stopped to buy a large sheet of plastic to cover the mess tent with and then met the others at Silver Springs. We then stopped at Sibalp's childrens camp as he wanted them to see the Biosphere Land Rovers and I was supposed to give a speech, but the children were all out. We parted with Sergey and carried on the journey. The weather improved. We stopped for lunch at 15.00. The Tuvan restaurant offered us 'vodka' made from fermented mare's milk – an acquired taste I am told. We made it from Kosh Agach to base camp in record time (Ruth, myself and Uwe driving). The snow has melted and the snowline is back where it was in the first slot. Arrived at 20.00. It was dry and sunny. People had time to unpack and then we ate (young Oleg had made a really good soup). We can contact base camp from Kosh Agach over the radio which is really impressive. Everybody this slot has brought really warm clothes and seems very well prepared. The sky was fabulous – so many stars. I saw 3 shooting stars before retiring to my tent = 3 wishes (shall I wish for 3 sets of snow chains or 3 Russian men?.....I think the former). Goodnight.

5 August

Bright, sunny morning. I can hardly believe it. The day spent going through risk assessment, gear, data collecting, field methodology, off-road driving course and vehicle inspection. Packed it all in and people walked around camp in the late afternoon/early evening. After supper, Annette Payne gave us a talk about her work on snow leopard DNA, which was really interesting. We sat around the fire. Andre and Nadia cooked shashliks on the fire and we had some wine. It was a really good first day. Christine (a plant scientist) has already been hard at work identifying flowers.

6 August

It rained in the night. Morning overcast, but mild. Today we went to the back valleys and started surveying the 'corridor' zone (that links our survey area to the Mongolian border). The habitat looks perfect for argali and Ibex, but the area is intensively grazed. Found signs of domestic stock up to 2900 m. Found one set of manul tracks at the same height (in the snow) but they were quite old. Gesine, one of our expedition members observed 4 argali (probably a group of males). It was a distant sighting, but she could distinguish the pale rump and underparts. It was a beautiful day. Sunny, but the wind was so bitter I was crying into my binoculars while sitting observing. Saw big flock of choughs, upland buzzard, saker falcon, steppe eagle, the ubiquitous black-eared kites and many LBJs (= little brown jobs). Great day. Everyone enjoyed the surveying. Ruth, Frances, Oleg and Nastya went on to find a route into our next survey area and were successful. On the way back we found an argali skull (young male) in the river bed. Also passed huge flock of domestic sheep and goats (which gave me the opportunity to observe them closely and note their horns) and then a boy on a white horse with cattle. He stopped to talk to Oleg – so I borrowed his horse and did some cattle herding. I wanted to swap one of the Land Rovers for the horse, but knew I was toast if I did. So don't worry Matthias. All 3 Land Rovers are back in base camp.

7 August

Back to corridor area to do more surveying. The expedition members are all very keen. It rained in the night (again!) and this morning, but the weather lifted during the day. Ruth and I stayed in camp today as she was not feeling very well and my knee was painful after I slipped yesterday. I took the opportunity to catch up on admin and have a shower. The expedition members came back at 17.00 and we went through data sheets and 'field samples' before supper. After supper Andrei, Olga and I went to find one of Andrei's friends from the first back valley yurt to arrange to interview him. He was not there, but driving through the steppe in the evening light was unforgettable. The herders are making hay in the steppe at the moment. The grass is not tall and the piles of hay low. It seems so little to feed the huge herds of livestock.

8 August

Raining again. Left to survey more of the area south of us (with views out to the Mongolian border). 2 groups surveyed the lower slopes and I went up to the snow line. It was bitter – sleet and some snow came down, but it was wonderful to be up there. Saw grouse, fleeting view of Altai snowcock and lots of game bird and hare tracks. We all went back in the afternoon. I left again at 3 for the back valleys to sort out some more interviews, accompanied by Olga, Oleg, Nastya and Nadia. We met Askir again (remember Karen?) and met more of his sons. I have been invited to join them to spend a full day on horseback, working with them on Sunday. An offer I can't refuse. Tomorrow we are doing a big survey at the bottom end of back valleys (about a 3 hour drive from base camp). I should think everyone will be glad to have the day off after that! All going well. My only complaint is that the mice are going too far. They have eaten my laces, Olga's laces, and my trousers and have made a hole in our tent. It's war!

9 August

Early start – cold bright day. Perfect for surveying. We drove through the back valleys and up the riverbed and then drove on, and on and on.....breathtaking landscapes and huge areas free from livestock and people. The off-road driving was challenging to put it mildly, but we got to our survey area eventually, after 4 hours driving. (Admittedly we stopped for photos). Had wonderful close views of a pair of golden eagles and steppe eagle. The survey area was craggy and steep with snow on the ridge and the valley below had an interesting lake. One group surveyed the lake area and the other group surveyed the ridge line. The views out onto the Mongolian border were spectacular. Oleg, Nastya and I went to find an alternative route home and succeeded. We can now reach this survey area by an easier (and shorter) route.

Had a really good view of a cinereous vulture on the way home (very exciting). The light was so beautiful on the steppe as we drove back. Everyone is working hard and doing excellent fieldwork. I am very lucky to be surrounded by such enthusiastic and knowledgeable expedition members. Samples brought back from the field continue to keep me occupied! The area we surveyed was rich in game birds and there were ducks (ruddy shelduck) on the lake. The bird list is growing and a copy will be sent to all expedition members at the end.

10 August

I left camp at 6.30 with Oleg, Olga and Ruth. We drove to the back valleys and stopped at Abai's yurt (just by Ascir's and other family yurts). I was in the saddle by 8.30 and went off up into the mountains with Abai, his son and his nephew. We went up very steep slopes and followed the livestock (sheep, goats and cattle) up the valley and into the mountains. I was able to see how they grazed and the amount of droppings they leave behind them. We covered a lot of ground, stopping frequently to wait while the stock grazed. The cattle stayed lower down and we continued to climb. The riding was quite tough in parts, but I had a very good horse. Saw a solitary snipe (well named). The views onto Salugiem were superb and I got the chance to see a lot of good habitat. Conversation was lively despite the fact that I speak no Russian. We drew pictures on stones using sharp stone fragments. Some of the results were very artistic. We headed back at about 14.00, driving the stock back down to the yurts. My "horse cred" is good and I can ride out with them whenever I like (I wish!). We were back at 15.00 and joined the others. Olga and Ruth had spent the morning learning to make butter and cheese. Abai's wife, Gulinara had prepared a delicious meal for us (bread, butter, fresh cheese, and a meat dish). We then took our delightful hosts with us to visit sacred springs (a 20 minute drive). We drank the water and wet our hair as the water is said to be healing. The area was festooned with prayer ribbons. Back at the yurt we had a last cup of tea and I tried yet another horse – very fast gallop across the valley – exhilarating! Left to be back at base camp by 20.00. Joined everyone in the mess tent. They had also had a very good day. Andrei had taken a group out on the steppe to bird watch and they had seen 25 cranes and had close views. Oleg sang around the camp fire until late while I battled with the satellite phone and caught up with lots of paperwork. The river has disappeared again.

11 August

Rain in the night and early morning, but it stopped by 6.00. A big survey day. We re-surveyed Silugyem and covered a lot more ground. Early start and we were surveying by 9.00. One group surveyed the valley and surrounding ridges. The valley is very lush - good habitat for a variety of mammals, including bear. So many varieties of berry are ripe now and the flowers continue to fascinate us. I went up with the second group to survey the high, ridge area. We found tracks of argali and followed them along the streambed going up the valley. The terrain got steeper and soon we were into bare scree. It was a tough walk up (the first group will remember) and the temperature dropped dramatically as we ascended. I found snow leopard tracks at 3330 m, in the snow. They were about 2 weeks old. We then found more snow leopard track at a higher altitude. These were much fresher (a few days old) – so one individual is using either the area regularly, or there have been 2 adult snow leopards in this areas in the past fortnight. You can imagine how happy I was. We also found sign of argali and large game bird. Being on the top of Silugyem, and walking the ground a snow leopard is using is something that will live for me forever. I keep talking about the views, but they were beyond description. The snow was 25 cm deep in places. I could look down onto the lake where Oleg found traces of argali during the first slot. We then came down a very steep scree slope – running down it is something else I will never forget! And eventually came down along the sides and bed of a steep river. Close to the bottom, where it joins the "lost valley" we saw argali. They were on a scree slope opposite us. There were 22 individuals (mixed age and sex). We watched them through binoculars. They were about 300 m away. They walked up and over the ridge. My happiness was complete. To have found new snow leopard tracks and seen the main prey species on the same day....I was on a cloud. The rain came down and we were soaked by the time we reached the Land Rovers at 17.00. As we arrived close to base camp we met Sergey. He had come to see us. The red truck was in base camp for the night. After supper, Pasha (from Anoz) sang and played the guitar and Sergey, Oleg, Olga and I talked late into the night – and yes, there was vodka.

12 August

Up early and it was bitterly cold. I had a shower and it was snowing. The cold was beyond description. One group went off to re-survey a valley. The others recuperated after yesterday's efforts (we walked about 18 km). Olga and I spent the morning with Sergey (no vodka, strictly business). He left at 13.00 and I took a group to do interviews and see haymaking in the steppe. Could only do one interview as everyone is too busy haymaking, but it was the most interesting interview to date. The man I interviewed has been a herder in this area for 43 years. He confirmed my suspicions that poaching has decimated the wildlife, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collective farming system. He also thinks that there are fewer snow leopards than there used to be. It was not possible to do more interviews as everyone is busy haymaking. Most of the yurts we visited earlier on are no longer tenanted. Nearly all the herders have moved to the steppe for haymaking and have moved stock to the autumn grazings. Andrei then took us to see burial mounds and stone circles. Saw 3 demoiselle cranes at the first burial mound. They were so elegant – dancing in the wind before flying off – such a beautiful sighting. It was bitterly cold. The other group had done a good survey and found very fresh faeces – probably lynx and one huge pile (human, bear?). Annette is going to analyse the samples when she gets back. Christine is pressing so many flowers and doing a plant list. She has also drawn sketches of the various mammal faeces collected. The group is also doing an excellent bird list. Progress is good. Uno continues to be a big hit in the evenings. It is now being played in Russian! And I still have not played it. Tomorrow...

13 August

Bitterly cold night. Got up at 5.30. Base camp under snow. Had to change my survey plan. Sent 2 groups out to survey near base camp as did not want to take the Land Rovers out. One group surveying the tree line other side of camp, the other up on the slopes behind base camp. The shower frozen (not for the first time and I'm sure it won't be the last). Buckets of water are warming on the fire as I write and the snow is melting – thank goodness, as we leave tomorrow. This afternoon I take expedition members onto the steppe to do a last bit of bird watching and to visit the Altai cemetery nearby. Nadia is singing as she prepares a late lunch. Young Oleg has just spoken on the radio – they have found tracks and seen ibex!!! (the ibex were resting on the slope behind base camp). Also found very fresh manul tracks. I am happy. Look forward to the data sheets later on....

It is later on – have spent afternoon on the steppe bird watching with some expedition members. Went to area we have not visited before and as usual, ended up looking for the road. Oleg stopped to ask at a yurt and we were all invited to be photographed and have tea. It was the grandmother's birthday - she was adorable and very voluble! Toril and Gesine got to cuddle the cats. Crossed a dry, wide riverbed, thick with willow and other shrubs. Oleg said it was a very good place for wolves. Now he tells me! We will survey it next slot. I have played my first game of Uno (we play it in Russian) and the full moon tonight is so beautiful. Must get some sleep before the next lot of driving.

14 August

Bitterly cold morning (minus 6 degrees in equipment tent). 7am breakfast – broke the ice off the water pail again. Left base camp at 08.00, leaving Ruth, Oleg and Nadia behind (lucky things). The drive started well, but the risk assessment sadly is all too correct – we had an accident about 200km from Kosh Agach. The minivan crashed, trying to avoid an oncoming truck, which was driving at manic speed, in the middle of the road and the road was narrow. Luckily, no one was hurt (Olga and Nastya were travelling with Andrei at the time). The expedition members were wonderful. Warning triangles and first aid kits were out in no time. Everyone was calm and helpful. We towed the minibus for about 40 km and left it in a secure yard behind a small roadside hotel. Continued our journey and made the Tuvan restaurant by 14.00. And were all in Anoz by 19.45 – having stopped to buy much needed beers first (and I didn't even get to drink mine as Oleg mysteriously lost it). Sergey was there and we discussed the consequences of no minivan or alternative transport late into the night.

15 August

Early start – away by 07.00. Made good time and stopped for coffee and food in the morning and then about 150 km from Novosibirsk for lunch (the roadside café that does such good shashliks and has flushing loos). It was very hot – strange to feel heat again. Haymaking all along the route. The leaves are turning already. Fruit trees laden with apples and plums. Sunflowers high. The harvest abundant. Got to Hotel Central by 17.00, so expedition members avoided the worst part of Novosibirsk rush hour. Olga, Oleg and I had that dubious pleasure as we went out again on expedition business. Met up with everyone for supper at the Russian restaurant, followed by dancing at the open-air place below the hotel. Thank you all. You have all worked so hard. We had a really good evening and were very touched by your generosity.

16 August

Another hot day in Novosibirsk (lovely!). Olga and I managed to go the museum and to the art gallery. Roedrich's paintings are exquisite. Met the new group in the day and again in the evening. They have all got to know each other already and there is a great team spirit. I really look forward to working with them. I'm still having problems with the satellite phone. It's driving me crazy.

17 August

All expedition members very prompt. Have managed to pack everybody and everything into the Land Rovers (quite a feat), including the journalist, called Nikolai, from Automobily (glossy Russian car magazine). We left Novosibirsk just after 08.00 – beautiful morning. Made good time until 40km from the Altai border when Land Rover 2 had to stop as it was overheating. We got out to check the problem and I saw there was a hole in the radiator, made by a stone. I could have wept with frustration as I need every single vehicle to get to base camp. The expedition members were brilliant, good humoured and resourceful. The bonnet was removed – I chewed gum on an industrial scale while the bonnet was strapped to the roof and then plugged the hole. Oleg and Nikolai told me I was wasting my time – but the repair held until the Gorno Altai border where we took our group photo. Managed to buy fluid to temporarily fix the leak and carried on the journey. Made it to Anoz before 20.00. Simply beautiful evening and Vica excelled once again with borsch, smitana and other delights. I just love her. She brought me a huge female stag beetle just after supper “because it was just passing by” she said. The banya was very popular – most expedition members in at the same time....in their swimming costumes, as Carolyn says she doesn't do naked and frankly, when else are they going to get to wear them. Managed to get hold of Land Rover people who said we can drive no.2 to base camp and back no problem. I'm very relieved, as with the minibuses out of use there is nothing else available. Anoz so soothing. The night warm and loud with the sound of crickets and the Katun river.

18 August

Left Anoz at 07.00 and waited at Silver Springs for Olga and Oleg to meet us after processing the permissions. This time all went without a hitch. I could hardly believe it. Very sadly, no more wild berry blinis available – had to make do with condensed milk roll with my coffee. The drive to base camp takes my breath away every time. This time was no exception. We stopped at the Tuvan restaurant for lunch at 14.30. Plov was the thing to be eating (isn't it always?). On to Kosh Agach for the last re-fuelling and onto the steppe. No traces of snow – tracks very dusty – ravishing evening. As always, so happy to be back, but this time I felt a deep melancholy at the thought that this is the last journey in to base camp. I don't want to leave. We passed lorries laden with hay and the steppe bearing the patterns of the scythe marks where the hay has been cut. Big herds of sheep and goats in the steppe now. Welcome from young Oleg, Nadia and Ruth – all looking tanned and lovely. The camp fire going. The slopes behind camp have turned red in the 5 days I have been away and the river has disappeared (again!). Lovely supper in the mess tent. Wonderful, positive and funny group of expedition members who all get on really well. Katya (alias Catherine) and Colin are worthy competition winners and have already proved themselves as great expedition members during the burst radiator incident, as has Grant.....and everyone else! We all have 'a really good crack' around the fire, helped along by the vodka. Young Oleg saw ibex behind base camp again in our absence. The sky full of stars. It is mild for base camp. Feels very strange.

19 August

Up very early. The mice really trying to take over the kitchen, the mess tent...everywhere. The first day followed the usual pattern of risk assessment, going through research, gear, etc. and off-road driving. Quite a few expedition members are really feeling the altitude. Oleg senior livened up the proceedings by chasing mice and voles around camp with a tea towel and actually catching one, which he proudly brought in to show us – wrapped in his woolly hat. We identified it as *Alticola macrotis* (yes, I know it's a vole, not a mouse). Carolyn stroked it and put it in a container to admire it – then dropped it and it ran off – probably heading straight back to the kitchen. Nikolai took some photos of the off road driving. Oleg cooked us a shashliks by the fire (one each – very good) and then asked me for some flares “to shoot mouse” and no, he was not just winding me up, he was serious. “Niet” is a word I find I am using more and more frequently!

20 August

Got up early – beautiful morning, and mild. I got so engrossed talking with Grant that I forgot to do the agreed wake up call (blasts of Biosphere whistle followed by Land Rover Alarm – and some people still manage to sleep through it!). Still ready to leave before 09.00 – drove through the back valleys to re-survey the very promising lake area (where we found tracks of argali/ibex and snow leopard in the second slot). The slopes are so vivid with all the low vegetation turning red and the green of the larch trees. There are lots of birds of prey (eagles, buzzards, falcons – saw pair of golden eagle mobbed by choughs). Arrived survey site – hills red and ridge snow covered – stunning. Sent group out with young Oleg. I stayed with other Oleg and Nikolai for the Land Rover photos, to make sure the Land Rover returned in one piece. Reminded them of the Dr Hammer's “no testosterone” rule. I was not popular, but the Land Rover survived the ordeal unscathed and Nikolai seemed very happy with his pictures. Went back to join the survey group. Everyone very positive. Another ravishing drive back to base camp. The yurts are all being dismantled and we pass trucks laden with the all the paraphernalia of summer camp – children sitting on the dismantled yurts. It is sad to see the herders we have got to know leaving and it reminds me I will also be leaving soon. Base camp is in shadow before 19.00 now and the trees are turning colour.

21 August

Another beautiful morning – frost on the ground. We surveyed the ridges and valley behind Tapduair. On the way to the survey site we saw a marmot very close to the track, lying very still. I thought it was dead, as the marmots here are very wary and never stay out in the open when people or vehicles pass. I was just about to get out and check it, when Oleg leapt out of the car and pounced – he just missed it. The marmot got the fright of its life and ran down the slope. It had been asleep. I was torn between feeling furious and laughing - the comic side won. Who needs Crocodile Dundee when you can have Marmot Zigarev? The expedition members all found the incident very funny. You can imagine how much stick I got about dead marmots. Quite what Oleg would have done with the marmot if he had caught it I still don't know – the word shashlik comes to mind – and the thought that he would need a much bigger hat...Once at the survey site we split into 3 groups. I went with young Oleg to survey the higher valley and scree edges, a second group to survey the rest of the valley and Marmot Zigarev, Ruth and Nastya to survey the ridge. The day was very productive – we had a great sighting of an arctic fox and I had a distant sighting of 2 argali (adult and young), plus plenty of sign and interesting faeces, which I collected for Annette to analyse. Everyone worked hard and the habitat is perfect for snow leopard and prey. While driving back to base camp, Nastya dropped a bombshell. “Tessa, Oleg says he saw a snow leopard, but we don't know if he is joking”. I looked at Oleg, and not for the first time wondered what on earth goes through his mind sometimes. I asked him about the sighting and he confirmed it. I wanted to shake him. The lucky bastard!!! He was not even excited (he reminded me that he has seen snow leopards before). Back at base camp I was able to cross-examine him closely about the sighting and I believe it was genuine. He had gone on ahead, alone (as he often does!) and had come to the “pass”, between the end of the survey ridge and Tapduair range. He looked down onto a steep, craggy ravine and a rocky ledge with boulders and saw a snow leopard, about 40 m away. It was resting and had not heard or smelt him. It was startled when it saw him (and so was he). It retracted its lips/snarled, before running down out of sight. The sighting only lasted a few seconds, Oleg said he was afraid. He showed me where he had seen it on the map and told me he also saw a herd or 20 ibex on the same slope – a distant sighting. He could not make out any detail, as he did not have binoculars. Everyone congratulated him, but he was subdued. It was good filling in the data sheets. We have achieved so much.

22 August

Frost on the ground – up very early (as usual) and that daily contemplative moment when I marvel at the beauty of this place while brushing my teeth. I have got much tougher. I am used to the cold and red hands devoid of feeling after washing. It doesn't matter. All that matters is being here and getting to know this area, its people and wildlife and making this project a success. We surveyed more of the corridor area today. The long drive through the back valleys and up the river beds always impressive. Saw the cormorant by the river again and many birds of prey. The mountain slopes red, the sky blue, white clouds cast shadows on the sunlit valleys. No more yurts – only dark patches of earth remain to mark where they and the livestock enclosures stood. Again we split up into 3 groups and survey 2 ridges and a valley. The day was magnificent. Silugiem and Tapduair - snow covered. Visibility towards the mountains on the Mongolian border very good – spectacular cloudscapes above. The Land Rovers are covering so much ground – much of it very testing for both vehicles and drivers – but we all love it and the vehicles, if not pristine, are in remarkable condition. I am so impressed by what they (and the drivers!) can do. My survey group made it up to the snowline, where we found arctic fox faeces. Also had wonderful sighting of 3 grouse on the way down (so close that we almost trod on one of them). Grant saw an imperial eagle. The other group found an argali skull (big male) but did not bring it back to camp as the horns were full of putrid liquid (which Rob got all over his trousers and socks – the smell!!!!). We all caught the sun today. I drank in every detail as we drove back through these remote valleys. I am elated by what we have achieved, but time is going by so fast and I don't want to stop. The expedition members all on great form. There is so much banter and laughter. Everyone is working hard and playing hard. Nearer base camp the intense colours of the rocks, the golden steppe the last fragile flowers.... Sergey has arrived and set up a camp near the winter station for 3 Germans who want to ascend Tapduair. I went over with Olga and Oleg to see him. Sergey as warm and hospitable as ever and we ended up staying for supper and had very interesting discussions about this whole area. I did my vehicle check before drinking any vodka (hope you are all impressed) with the Sibalp boys looking on with interest. Olga and Oleg not at all impressed as I was dusty and covered in dry grass. They both brushed me down before allowing me to go in to the tent to have supper. I kept trying to contact base camp to find out how the rest of the group was getting on with the data sheets – but no answer. Gave up about 22.00 and got into the serious business of vodka and conversation (Sergey knows so much about the Altai and this area. He also cares very much about its future and the wildlife – very encouraging). We had a great evening. Olga very animated and so beautiful. Oleg and I make a brilliant combination I drink and earn the respect of the Russians and he doesn't drink and can look all macho driving home. We got back to base camp at 01.00 and I understood why none of the expedition members were answering the radio. They were all singing around the fire and drinking more vodka than me! We joined them and the party carried on late into the night. The sky full of stars and a meteor shower.

23 August

Woke up with a start at 07.00 (disgracefully late) – but was still the first one up. Went and had a very cold shower as meeting Sergey this morning to go through the accounts (arghh!!). Expedition members made it to breakfast looking worse for wear – a lot of black tea and coffee consumed this morning. Good thing I planned a very flat survey for today (river bed that looks good for signs of wolf). They all left at 10.00. Sergey arrived shortly afterwards and we had tough negotiations. Tricky moments but all ended well. I understood when he said to Olga that I was tougher than I look. We then went to Kosh Agach with Olga, Oleg and Nikolai - who was hoping to find some method of transport back to Gorno A/Novosibirsk. Kosh Agach hot and dusty. Transport facilities out limited...Nikolai asked me to drive him to Gorno A, but as I said earlier, "niet" is a word I use a great deal more than I used to. Sergey and Oleg managed to find him a lift and we said goodbye at the fuel station. I was sorry to see him leave. He has been lovely to us all and very helpful in camp – chopping wood and singing/playing the guitar with Oleg. He even helped me with the Land Rover (vehicle checks) – something Oleg has yet to do. Spent the afternoon doing interview with the head of the hunting licensing board, thanks to Sergey and Oleg. Very interesting (all the interviews will be included in the report so won't go into detail here). Back to base camp late afternoon. River bed survey very exciting as not only did expedition members find evidence of wolf and fox – they also found fresh bear tracks. So exciting!!! I love them all. Sergey came to us for supper and then more discussions with vodka until the early hours. I have forgotten what it is to sleep and if this carries on much longer you will be able to tap neat vodka from my veins.

24 August

Sunday - so day off. Spent morning catching up on admin. Grant, Colin and others go off in the Land Rovers to collect firewood and water. Other expedition members rest and enjoy pottering around camp. I leave with Oleg, Olga and Ruth to go and find the family of herders we have become good friends with (the ones I rode out with). It is Gulinara's birthday and we are invited. Just as we leave, the Land Rovers come back squeaky clean – my wonderful expedition members have washed the cars in the river inside and out and got stacks of firewood. I just love them. We go off in search of Abai and Gulinara. Finding their winter quarters proves almost impossible and takes us 4 hours – we pass bleak areas of overgrazed steppe towards Kosh Agach. The sky is leaden and it rains – but we make it to the wooden winter quarters just after 16.00. The grass is lush, the sun comes out and our welcome warm. The rest of the afternoon is spent with the extended family – eating and drinking and celebrating. Many photos (Olga and I give Gulinara a camera for her birthday). A very happy occasion. Abai's horse is tethered not far away and I have my last ride – short and fast. Hate to leave. We stop at Kosh Agach on the way back to get expedition members requests (vodka, fags and chocolate). Much rain in the night.

25 August

Despite the rain in the night and cold morning I decide to re-survey Silugyem as there is fresh snow lying so good for assessing snow leopard movement. We all set off and go up the valley. Marmot alarm calls as we arrive. Lots of fresh argali tracks all the way up. Then the ascent up the scree and the final push for the snowline. Everyone is elated to make it to the top. No fresh tracks but the sun comes out and we take group and other photographs in the snow. Take a different route down, following the ridge – very dramatic. Find more very fresh argali tracks on the descent, including very small prints. I think the snow leopard is around Tapduair at the moment and that the ibex have moved there as well. Tomorrow's survey will tell. Supper in the mess tent very jolly. The range of conversations with this group is astounding. I don't think any subject has been left uncovered. Sergey comes round after supper and I spend another evening talking with him and Olga late (and I mean very late) into the night, which means more vodka. Can someone please remind me – what does sleep feel like ?

26 August

Beautiful morning. The cold showers are a punishing but necessary start to the morning. Young Oleg up early as well and making sure camp is running smoothly. Send one group to survey Tapduair (young Oleg, Ruth, Colin and Steve). I take the other group off with Oleg Z to survey the glacial lake above the lost valley. My group splits in the valley as not everyone up to the full survey. I go on with Oleg, Nastya, Grant, Rob and Carloyn. Oleg finds a perfect potential lying up site for snow Leopard. We ascend a steep boulder slope surrounded by towering scree slopes...and another...Make it to the lake by 13.00. Seeing the blue-green lake, sitting in a bowl between the forbidding mountain ridges is extraordinary – like stepping into another world. The silence (no wind) is only pierced by the alarm calls of pika and suslik. It is a magical place and has great potential as an observation site (sign of argali found all the way up the boulder slope). Rob gets close enough to a pika to get a good photo. I survey the area around the lake and find a place where argali have been lying up very recently – it still smells of them. At 14.00 we see tiny figures on top of Tapduair. We wave and make radio contact. They have seen ibex and argali. Head back down to join the others in the valley and the walk back to the Land Rovers so beautiful. Red slopes, willows turning gold, green larches, their soft needles underfoot, the river shimmering in the late afternoon – exquisite light – the last berries. Too many impressions to write here, except, again, the wrench of seeing this place for the last time (for this year anyway). Nadia has prepared a lovely supper (as always). Radio contact with the Tapduair group who make it back into camp at 21.00 – on a high. No snow leopard tracks but 2 sightings of large herd of argali (about 40 animals) and one sighting of Ibex (about 11 animals). We end the day around the fire and Oleg sings for us beautifully. Sergey and the Sibalp boys are living at base camp with us as we prepare to pack up base camp. The two trucks are parked with the Land Rovers.

27 August

The day spent packing up camp. So much to do. Hot sun. The Biosphere flag lowered and the mast taken down. Food packed. Equipment stored. It takes all day. Take a brief moment off to do group photo in the late afternoon. Some of the expedition members go off to wash the last Land Rover and Rob takes photos of Katya and Grant for me. Supper in the mess tent more subdued. Nadia has found time to make us cakes and they prove very popular. Kitchen tent dismantled in the dark and the packing of camp continues until after dark. I feel very sad to be leaving, but so proud of what we have all achieved. So many stars.

28 August

06.00 breakfast and departure just after 07.00. Leave young Oleg, Sergey, and the Siblap boys to pack up the tents and load everything. I travel with all the Russians and Ruth. We are packed and take it in turns to squash up in the back. The most beautiful rainbow on the steppe as we leave. I take it as a sign of hope. Tears in the vehicle as we leave the steppe. The drive goes well. We make it to Anoz by 17.30. Vica's warm greeting cheers me up. Oleg and I go on to Gorno – to say goodbye to Yuri and return his book. Funny seeing him in his flat – all clean – very dapper in jeans and a black t-shirt. Get back to Anoz at midnight. Sergey looking very sad. Sit up and talk until the early hours then I go into the Banya. I no longer care about sleeping.

29 August

Another 06.00 breakfast and the drive back to Novosibirsk. Hot sun, usual coffee and shashlik stops. Much traffic. Get to Hotel Central by 17.30. Everyone checks in and for once, Olga and I don't have to rush out to do things before supper. All meet up at 20.00 and go a Chinese restaurant. All the Russian team with us which is lovely. Really good food and really loud music – plenty of cold Russian beer. Thank you all – Biosphere for running the expedition – my much-loved Russian team and all you wonderful expedition members who have done so much. I am so proud and happy of what we have achieved and look forward to building on it in the future. I have fallen in love with the steppe and the mountains. Leaving has been very painful. I can't imagine life away from base camp; but the work does not stop here...there is the report to write, Russian to learn...I end with a toast "to next year".