



EXPEDITION DIARY Altai 2007

By Andy Stronach

1 July

This is the first entry for the 2007 expedition to Altai. Yesterday, I travelled to Germany from Scotland, meeting with Matthias (Biosphere Expeditions' director) in England. We spent today, packing all sorts of things. GPS and binoculars, mist nets for catching birds which will allow us to identify many birds we have probably not even seen before. Jackets for the Russian staff as it will almost certainly snow on occasion during the expedition; it's usually lovely summer weather but we all need to be properly equipped – sunscreen and waterproofs, hot and cold, sunshine and snow – you name it! We have also been sorting out paperwork as the Russian authorities are very particular about that. Tomorrow, we both fly to Moscow and then on to Novosibirsk to prepare the vehicles and supplies for those of you joining us for the first slot. I very much look forward to meeting you, both first timers and old hands so we can do some great research work and see some amazing sights. Can't wait....

Andy Stronach
Expedition leader

3 July – Moscow

At Moscow's Shermetyevo airport, Matthias and I got the free transfer bus to the other terminal for our domestic flight to Novosibirsk. There are lots of taxi drivers offering "special rates" for the transfer, special for them that is, but if you go just outside the arrivals hall you will find the free "avtobus transfer".

The Moscow – Novosibirsk flight passed very uneventfully in our somewhat comatosed sleep-deprived state and the renovated airport made baggage claim a delight compared to the stampede and crush that was baggage claim of old. We were met at the airport by Tim; for the second time in barely ten minutes, I was again delighted, this time because his English was very good, which is really lucky as he is our interpreter for the expedition!

4 July – Novosibirsk

Spent all day at the Land Rover dealer in Novosibirsk, where all four of our vehicles were there waiting for us; two brand new Discoverys and two almost new Defenders – yes, you guessed it, I was delighted. Spent ages going through the mountain of paperwork making sure everyone has authorisation and insurance to drive the vehicles, that they are properly registered, "MOTed" and that they are free from defects – it's all looking good. All of the vehicles have CD players and as we have a 1000 km drive to base camp near the Mongolian border, it might be an idea to take a few CDs so that you can embarrass yourself with your choice of music! Matthias is into opera, but luckily does not have any CDs with him, as I can't stand the screeching. So do please bring some CDs of your own. Having said that, there's no real need as I've got my Mongolian throat singing CD that we can play the whole way there to get us in the groove ;-)))

6 July – Novosibirsk

Spent some more time on the vehicles today and we now have all four prepped, full of diesel and ready to go. I'm looking forward to meeting team members tomorrow at 20:00 in the lobby of Hotel Central to go for an informal dinner (we'll do the same for slots 2 and 3).

If anyone needs to get in touch my mobile phone number for the duration of the expedition is +7 913 4540878. Please remember that this is for emergency communication only (such as missing a flight and being late for assembly or emergency information from home). Whilst I am at base camp, you will not be able to phone me. Instead send an SMS, which I can pick up at times when in the right place in the study site, so expect any reply to take a few days.

Anyway, really looking forward to getting out of hot and sticky Novosibirsk now and into the mountains. You probably won't hear from me again until we're back in Novosibirsk in two weeks time.

Wish us luck for the surveys.

7 July – Novosibirsk

Many of the expedition team members arrived early in the morning, all others by the end of the day; the greeting they received was, a little unusual. Today in Novosibirsk, there is a pagan festival in honour of Ivan Copal, the god of water, where people's right to wash, be clean and free from disease is celebrated. This very solemn and important festival is played out in a very practical manner; basically everyone in Novosibirsk gets soaked! Gangs of kids wander around ambushing innocent pedestrians with buckets of water, drivers squirt other drivers with water pistols if they have been foolish enough to leave their windows down and anyone else quick enough to dodge that falls victim to water balloons.

In the evening, the expedition team got together for a meal in "Jelly Belly" restaurant; it does not translate very well, but does serve great local food. It was good to have a chat and begin to find out a little about everyone. After that, we all squelched our way back to the hotel for a sleep before the long drive to Anoz.

8 July - Novosibirsk to Anoz

We all (almost all!) got up early and had our bags packed into the vehicles for 07.00 when the breakfast buffet opened in Hotel Central. After breakfast, we all sang happy birthday to Marianne, who was duly embarrassed and then jumped into our vehicles and headed off. The 500 km drive to Anoz was over mostly flat agricultural land, but the massive roadside verges filled with wild flowers were a delight to look on as we trundled along. Lunch stop was at a roadside honey market where dozens of stallholders sold every conceivable kind of honey, all stacked up high on groaning benches. "Bleenies" - fresh blueberries, strawberries or raspberries wrapped in a crepe and kartoshka – potato or cabbage "pasties" were the order of the day; afterwards we all rolled back to the vehicles and were on our way again.

Arriving at Anoz, it was great to see Roman (our mountain guide) and especially Nina (cos she's the cook!) again. Nina promptly outdid herself, after dinner, presenting Marianne with a delicious birthday cake. Marianne later said this day spent with us, had been her best birthday ever; poor girl!

9 July - Anoz to basecamp

Where yesterday had been flat and agricultural today was mountainous and wild. It seems we have now crossed some kind of line on the map, yesterday people had European features, now the locals look decidedly Mongolian and we no longer blend in. Mountains have larch trees, cliffs, scree, wildflower meadows or glaciers. Rivers are crossed on wooden bridges. As the day passes, we gain height reaching high arid steppe late afternoon and finally base camp at 20.00. It's good to be back.....

10 July

Today is spent sorting kit, explaining the camp set up, going through and making sure everyone understands the risk assessment, doing some training and enjoying the fresh mountain air as eagles soar high above.

11 July

The drivers amongst the expedition team were subjected to a physics lesson covering such exciting subjects as the difference between static and dynamic friction, momentum and slip, and they thought they were going to be surveying snow leopards! Eventually I decided to let them loose with our Land Rovers and everyone got on great climbing steep slopes, descending steep slopes, crossing rivers and crawling over boulders. Marianne was understandably a little nervous never having driven off road before, but did great with no problems or mistakes whatsoever – what a star.

Matthias thought the physics had not been taken seriously enough, so got stuck into a lecture on geostationary satellites, caesium clocks and transverse mercator projection mapping. He tried to disguise this as GPS, navigation, map reading practice for the surveys, but I doubt if anyone fell for it.

Volodya, our scientist, got in on the act too, but being a nice guy taught something useful; how to identify animal tracks and signs. By the end of the day everyone was well and truly ready to go anywhere and do some great survey work, but most importantly to do it all safely.

12 July

Matthias went exploring to “snow leopard valley”, a three hour drive, with Ute and Robin thinking it might be a good place for a snow leopard expedition to spend some time - pure genius!

Meanwhile, everyone else went out on their first proper survey, driving half an hour across the steppe and through a small river before walking up a valley. Where we parked the vehicles, there were dense woods of Siberian larch, full of vocal but well hidden birds, any open areas being filled, and I do mean filled, with a great profusion and variety of flowers. As we progressed up the valley the trees thinned, the flowers changed and we passed through an area jam packed with dark throated thrushes – beautiful birds with striking russet throats. The high point of the survey (in both senses) was the saddle at the valley end at 2700 m with great views of the surrounding mountains; or maybe it was finding a beautiful Siberian viper, only the third record for the expedition; or maybe it was finding sign of wolf. Lots of great sights and experiences and lots of practice and learning in sign identification – a good day.

13 July

Volodya with Jules, Marianne, Roman, Ute, Iain, Silvan and Tim set off on an overnight trip to carry out surveys in “snow leopard valley” whilst Matthias with Malika, Stefan and Jennifer went alpine, climbing and surveying the surrounding mountains.

When we finally got rid of them from base camp, Robin, David, Roger and myself set up four mist nets which we have never done on the expedition before, hoping to catch some elusive bird species that we have not recorded before. Having spent hours untangling mist nets, we missed the best part of the day and ended up only catching one bird – however, it was the first record of the species for the expedition, an Arctic warbler. In the afternoon, we went looking for a couple of lakes that looked very interesting, but due to the very large scale and possibly inaccurate maps, we could not find the track we were looking for to lead us there; however, on our alternate route we did see a dead cow (slightly interesting) and 13 rare cinereous vultures (very interesting!).

14 July

Robin, David, Rodger and I got up early to be greeted by a beautiful sunny morning, clear of cloud and with views across the steppe of snow clad mountains to the north west in the far distance. Two of the mist nets we had got up to use were unusable as they were on the far side of the stream, which had risen dramatically in the night, but with the two remaining, we caught two arctic warblers and a beautiful yellow wagtail. After a lovely breakfast of omelette from Nina (I'm sure we are her favourites) we drove to Bugazon river in the middle of the steppe and set up our mist nets in the flood plain forest by its banks. We had an early success, catching in our nets a serlik; a very impressive animal, shiny black and weighing in at around a ton – yes we managed to catch a yak/cow cross! No worries about running out of food any more I guess.

15 July

The overnight survey troupe returns with tales of torrential rain, a Land Rover bogged down to its axle and recovered, beautiful mountain valleys and vistas, yurt interviews of herders who have heard snow leopard roar in the valley and seen ibex and argali, two of its main prey species. Matthias' alpine group climbed a 3425 m peak and could look all the way into China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. They may even have found the first sign of snow leopard this year in the form of two tracks in a snow field high up and underneath the peak. The tracks were old and the sun had melted them a few times already, so they were pretty undefined, but they are down on our datasheets as “snow leopard track ?”.

Down in the valley Volodya's group conducted interviews with local herders and surveyed a couple of valleys, which look very promising – so plenty of work to do for the next couple of groups. When exiting the valley they managed to get the Land Rover buried up to its axles, but dug it out in a good team effort to arrive somewhat late and covered in mud at the meeting point!

16 July

Matthias gets himself into trouble with the border guards when trying to explore the other side of the snow leopard valley range in the Land Rover. Apparently he is in the wrong area for his permit. He only gets two hours down the road and then has to spend the rest of the day and night explaining to various officers what he was doing “out of area”. He ends up with a “border violation warning” and a fine. Serves him right for wanting to go for a drive looking at spectacular mountain scenery on a beautiful clear day.

Meanwhile us law-abiding folk have a great day surveying some glacial lakes where we find lots of sign of argali and ibex.

17 July

We're off again on an overnight survey, breaking camp in the morning. This survey takes us close to the Mongolian border to the other side of the Sailugiem range that our base camp is in. It's an area of spectacular wide open steppe grasslands and high mountains with great views of Chikachova ridge, which is the border to Mongolia. Put some antelopes and zebras on the steppe grasslands and it could almost be the African savannah – not what you would expect from Russia/Altai at all.

We set up our camp high on the mountainside and split up into two groups, but not without having conducted some more interviews on our way there. One group stays low and one goes high. The low group surveys glacial lakes and the high group heads towards Tapduair at 3500 m. Signs of argali and ibex abound including sleeping/resting depression high on one of Tapduair's ridges.

The excitement of it all makes one member of the high group push herself hard on the ridge until she eventually collapses into a heap just below the summit. The rest of her group stay calm and execute a perfect rescue plan, bringing her down to a point where one of the Land Rovers can recover her and drive her back to base camp. In a dazed state our casualty is fed chocolates, glucose tablets, sweet tea and a hearty dinner until she comes back to life with a splitting headache and a great story to tell (at least the parts that she can remember!). Well done everyone for executing such a model mountain rescue mission!

18 July - Tapduair

After the excitement and exertion of the rescue last night, Iain, Malika, Stefan and myself had a long lie-in until 0800 before getting up to a beautiful morning by the three emerald glacial lakes to the east of Tapduair. The rain stopped as we got up and the air was wonderfully rich and earthy. After a breakfast of very squashed cheese and tomato sandwiches, we headed up a broad ridge towards Tapduair. Our first find of the day was an Altai accentor, a small rare bird only found in Altai that sang as we passed. As we climbed, we found lots of sign of animals; there was scat from argali, ibex, hare and Altai snowcock. However, the most exciting finds were four different groups of resting depressions where ibex or argali had scraped out small holes in the ground to sleep; these depressions ranged in number from 12 to 18, giving us a good idea of the size of groups of these animals. At the top of the ridge, the views opened out - the ridge we had climbed the day before to the right, a knife edge ridge in front of us leading to Tapduair summit with its hanging glaciers in front of us and to the left, a huge valley system surrounded by rocky ridges and summits – under the sun and blue sky, we all just sat and looked, the most fantastic of views.

On exploring the ridge leading to Tapduair, we found many, many ibex and argali trails. A kestrel approached and landed a little further along the ridge whilst being mobbed by Mongolian finches, a lovely high altitude bird only seen around the peaks. Two years previously, Tessa, the expedition leader and scientist had seen a snow leopard in the area, so we spent a long time searching the many cliff ledges with our binoculars, but to no avail.

Having descended to our camp, we packed, returned to our vehicles and then drove the two and a half hours back to base camp. After some Russian champagne and a lovely last dinner prepared by Nina our expedition cook, we retired to our yurt and partied the night away – a fantastic last day.

19 July - basecamp to Anoz

After a 0700 breakfast, we set off for Anoz, leaving Nina, Volodya and Ilya at basecamp. Lunch was at the Tuvan restaurant and we spent a little time looking at the petroglyphs carved into the rock nearby. Deer, men with bow and arrows and what is probably mammoths were all there.

On getting back to the big city of Anoz (!) first stop was the ice-cream shop; it tasted so good, I just had to have a second one. The banya (Russian sauna) we had later was fantastic and made the skin feel wonderfully clean and fresh.

20 July - Anoz to Novosibirsk

As we left Anoz, we also left the mountains behind, driving through agricultural land with massive fields. However, the roadside verges were awash with blue vipera bugloss flowers, apparently a little later than last year. As we neared Novosibirsk, the traffic got heavier, towns and villages more frequent and the comments about people wishing they had just stayed at basecamp rained down constantly – maybe you'll all be back next year, I hope so.....

21 July - Novosibirsk

Did some shopping and prepared a few things for the second slot. I'm looking forward to meeting everyone on slot two tonight; meeting in the Hotel Central lobby at 2000 before going for a meal. See you all there!

22 July Novosibirsk – Anoz

The 500 km drive took us about 8 hours, during which time we saw three crashes including a fatality; the drivers here are nuts.

23 July Anoz – basecamp

We got to the office in Gorno Altaisk just before it opened; the registration process took a while, so it was almost 11.00 before we left. We then had to get to Aktash before 1700 to obtain permissions to operate in various areas from another office there; we got there at 1630 but still did not get the permissions – Tim will have to go back to get them tomorrow, Russian bureaucracy is a wondrous thing.

24 July

Went through the risk assessment, the off-road driving course, how to use GPS and how to use the radios. All went well, not bad for one day!

25 July

Got up and just made it to the mess tent without drowning – wettest I've ever seen it here, hmmmm. Volodya gave the introductory science talk after breakfast and as the weather had not improved and looked set for the day, we decided to do yurt interviews, but with a difference – no yurt! We all set off for Arzhan-Buguzun stopping to record mammal and bird sightings on the way. Today rapidly turned into 'Eagle Day', with many sightings of both imperial and steppe eagles, both soaring above us and sitting on a huge stick nest on a big crag; the birds golden crown glowing in the sun. On arrival at Arzhan-Buguzun where there are a number of sacred springs we were greeted by locals who were visiting the springs for a few days, camping, rejuvenating themselves in the sacred waters and socialising with friends and other visitors. We talked to many of the people there, asking them whether they had seen snow leopard and other animals and what they thought about them. When asked what he thought about snow leopard preying on livestock such as sheep and goats, the local shaman said 'that's what happens to bad people!'. After much more talking, it became clear that everyone there valued wildlife and 'the old ways' where man and wildlife existed in some sort of balance. Many too, expressed a sense of frustration at being powerless to ensure wild places and wildlife were properly protected – kindred spirits indeed.

The long drive back to base camp was broken with a short stop at a carved standing stone marking a Turkic burial tomb from the 5th – 8th century, the carving of a man's face was probably that of the man buried there.

26 July 07 Mt. Kawshawlyou

After breakfast, we all set off together, walking west from base camp on our first full day out learning how to identify sign as well as carrying out a survey. Initially, we went through a Siberian larch forest full of birds singing in the beautiful morning sun that was such a contrast from yesterday's monsoon. Before emerging above the tree line, we had seen red squirrel and chipmunk as well as signs of other mammals. Above the tree line, we found fresh sign of Siberian ibex, less than a day old; scat, tracks, trails and wool; this was very good as we have not seen any ibex this year - yet. On reaching the top of the first ridge, the views out over the steppe opened up past the Buguzun river and towards Tapajok.

Further up, we heard what sounded like cow bells, but was in fact falling rocks! On close inspection of the cliffs where the sound had come from, we saw five ibex – at last! It was fantastic seeing them breeze up the crags and onto the horizon before they disappeared. After lunch, Alan and Gerald headed down from just over 3000 m and back to basecamp, everyone else headed up hill. We found old scat from what was wolf or snow leopard; we collected it for further investigation... We then climbed a little further to the top of Mt. Kawshawlyou where the views were really stunning; to the east, the glacier clad Chicachova range in Mongolia, to the west, our steppe, the Kosh Agash steppe and beyond the snow clad Chunksy range. Having managed to tear ourselves away from the views, we found lots more sign of ibex as we started our descent. On the way, I saw another ibex as it disappeared over a ridge; unfortunately no-one else saw it. We picked some wild onion leaves for Nina to use in salads, but the quality was not up to standard...everything had been going so well until then ;-)

27 July

Packed up the vehicles with tents, food and excitement and headed off to Irbestu's Snow Leopard Valley for Biosphere's first survey into uncharted territory. Stopped for lunch on the way near Ortelek by a small river where James spotted a cuckoo with what I'm sure was a cheese and onion wotsit in its beak; others thought it was a worm or grub – what do they know. With Peter at the wheel, we crossed the Kosh Agash steppe, which was very different from basecamp steppe – very stony and seemingly endless. Snow Leopard Valley's entrance was beautiful with lush green vegetation by the river and high cliffs either side. Just as we were arriving at our camp site, we saw 14 ibex on the cliffs, quite a welcome! We set up our tents whilst two rare lammergeyer vultures soared on the crags high above and three herders rode in on their horses with tales of snow leopard tracks seen in the winter.

28 July

After breakfast off a perfectly polished beautiful rock by the river, we split into two groups. Volodya with James, Martin, Peter, Christine, Alan and Guido headed up Tyesta (3861m) whilst Gerald, Tim and myself drove further up the Irbestu river (literally!) in the Defender. Guido spotted ibex on a ridge a little further up the valley from where Gerald, Tim and myself were. I've no idea how he saw them, they must have been 4 km from where he was! Having told us about them on the radio, we set off to investigate. We got to the cliffs and gave them a thorough check, Gerald on the telescope and me with my binoculars, but to no avail, they were gone. Further along the valley, we met a herder Victor; he had been totally alone, living in a small log cabin with only his dog for company for a month. He should have been relieved by his boss long before and wondered if he'd been forgotten about; it was his birthday the next day so I gave him my bar of chocolate. We talked to him about wildlife and he said he'd seen a group of ibex cross the valley 30 min earlier – must have been the ones Guido saw. Further up the river, we headed south west up a side valley as far as the Defender would take us – a long way. A half hour walk took us past a mixed group of sarlik (cow yak cross) and horses to glaciers and then back down along a small valley filled with white-winged redstart and Mongolian finch. Unfortunately, due to the poor weather, Volodya's group had to abandon their survey.

29 July – “Day off”

Woke up to a monsoon! Our small stream by base camp had transformed into a raging torrent that was dragging boulders along with it, grinding and cracking. Venturing out for a walk or sightseeing did not appeal (!). However, on showing Christine (our botanist from Cambridge University) photos of a yellow flowered plant, she got very excited and had us at the site by the Buguzon river (which was surprisingly a bit lower than usual) in no time at all. The plant was still in flower and Christine identified it as a lousewort – much more beautiful than its name suggests. We spent some time by the river watching birds before lunch. Among the many birds we saw were six rough-legged buzzards, which should only be in our area in the winter; good bit of new information.

In the afternoon the risk of drowning when venturing out had reduced a little so a few brave souls went to have a look at some 7th century Turcic stone circles, carved stelae and burial tombs; there are a surprising number of these around and they add a whole other fascinating dimension to this lovely area.

30 July

Low cloud and rain this morning so we shelved our plans for the overnight trip to Tapduair, instead deciding to survey birds in the lakes on the steppe. On arrival at the Buguzon river that we had to cross, we were confronted by a raging torrent so took a detour to Kokorea where there is a bridge. Two new species for the expedition were white-winged tern that Christine saw and spoonbill that Guido spotted. On the lake we normally survey, the pair of Slavonian grebes that I had seen two weeks ago with tiny black and white chicks were now accompanied by juveniles that were in beautiful plumage like their parents; rusty ochre and black with a piercing red eye and yellow stripe on the head. After the birds, we headed to Marat's Isle; Marat is a local hunter/herder with whom last year's expedition leader, Tessa, went exploring/surveying on horseback for four days; an isle is a wooden version of a yurt built from round logs. We had planned to do our standard interview about snow leopards and their prey etc. but the conversation wandered off into many interesting directions over tea, bread and cheese in the course of an hour, actually two hours, or was it three??

31 July - Overnight trip to Tapduair

Weather glorious today, so packed the vehicles with tents and a big box of food and headed off for Tapduair. On arrival, we set up our tents; Volodya and Gerald headed off for one ridge, everyone else headed for another. Straight away we were finding lots of sign of animals, carnivore scat, argali tracks and more. Eagle eyed Alan spotted a fox running across the hill and out of sight. I set off to look for it and almost immediately, was confronted by two argali fewer than 150 m away. I looked at them, they looked at me; eventually, they ran off and the fox re-appeared, not a bad start to the day! We worked our way up Tapduair's south-east ridge line abreast, covering a huge amount of ground and finding a huge amount of sign: tracks, scat and resting depressions of both argali and ibex, a mountain hare ran off in front of us leaving its footprints in a patch of snow. The last saddle on the ridge at around 3200 m was a veritable motorway for ibex and argali, their tracks everywhere. Looking west across the valley with three turquoise glacial lakes, we could see Volodya and Gerald, little black specks on the bright white snow; I hope that when I'm 77 I can make it to 3300 m like Gerald – amazing! The last part of the ridge was more exposed with a steep scree slope to the west and a broken rocky cliff to the east (and a lammergeier vulture above). The way to the top was blocked by hanging glaciers, but we reached the summit 'plateau' at 3450 m (50 m below the summit) and had fantastic views all around of our core area, Chicachova mountain range on the Mongolian border and just about everywhere else too it seemed.

Having photographed ourselves and the views from every conceivable angle, we started to carefully pick our way back down. From about 3100 m on the ridge, Guido had a very tantalising sighting of an animal, the observation conditions were poor and it was a long way away so he was not at all sure what he had seen, something like wolf or snow leopard! We can't be sure, but it's a great result and certainly made for a very exciting day out!

1 August - Tapduair to basecamp

After the exertions of yesterday, we split into three groups and did short survey walks, again finding much sign of the snow leopards main prey species – ibex and argali. My mission for the day was to identify which species of snipe was in the area – there are four possible species and they all look pretty much identical, so I took lots of photos of them and will study them later, watch this space. On the drive back to base camp, the skies were amazing: deep blue with bits of wispy cirrus clouds and cumulus clouds. After an age filling in datasheets for the last two days, we set about the feast that Nina had prepared for us; thought I was going to explode. Later, in the yurt we had a number (!) of bottles of Russian champagne fresh from our cooler (the stream) as we chatted into the night about our adventures, past and future.

2 August - basecamp to Anoz

The weather decided to give us a send off of blue skies and sunshine; it always makes it more of a wrench to leave, the hills looked wonderful.

3 August - Anoz to Novosibirsk

A long drive today, filled with diary writing....

Looking forward to meeting everyone on the third slot 20.00 Saturday in the entrance lobby of the Hotel Central before dinner together if you wish.

4 August - Novosibirsk

Met all the team members for the third slot at 8 pm and then went for a fantastic Russian meal at Jelly Belly.

5 August - Novosibirsk to Anoz

Apart from myself falling asleep at the only junction on the 500 km drive and hence missing it (not driving at the time – only supposedly navigating!) we had an uneventful drive – just the way I like it.

6 August Anoz – Base

A familiar long drive through beautiful scenery, now with the addition of many people out cutting hay with scythes; great to see that industrialisation is not everywhere.

7 August - Base: Training Day

Did the off road driving course in which Jean Phillipe excelled having done a lot of driving in muddy conditions already. Also went over the use of GPS, map and compass and radios.

8 August - Argali hills and overnight camp to the back valleys

Decided to do the animal sign training 'on the job' so headed for the Argali hills by the back valleys. Working our way up a river, a boat might have been the natural choice for the journey, but our two Land Rover Defenders did a great job. Straight away on the survey Karen and Kevin found sign of argali and ibex as well as marmot, pika and other rodents. Unusually, the hills were gentle and rolling covered with a profusion of wild flowers indicating that grazing is not a problem here. Near the top Roman found a wonderfully clear and detailed fossil of a mollusc shell, later Katherine and I found brachiopods and marine mollusc – this at 2800 m in central Asia, about as far as it is possible to get from the sea on this planet.

9 August - Horseshoe ridge

After spending the night by a small stream underneath the horseshoe that was our objective for today, we had breakfast and set off. We climbed the ridge that got progressively steeper, rougher and more exposed. The views into the valley in the horseshoe where Volodya, Katherine, Karen and Kevin were wonderful with a turquoise glacial lake, hanging glaciers and rugged cliffs. As we picked our way up the ridge, we found lots of sign of argali whilst in the valley, the other group found sign of ibex. At dips in our ridge, natural crossing points, there were very well worn animal trails with sign such as resting depressions and wool. Then, suddenly, after one well used crossing point, there was no more sign at all, we were now really high at around 3100 m. After a slow climb to the summit under a blue sky and hot sun we had our lunch and enjoyed being in what was instantly my favourite spot in the whole of Altai; I'm afraid my grasp of English is inadequate to describe how beautiful it was.

10 August - Travel to Irbestu

After the rigours of yesterday and getting back late, we had a late breakfast, discussed and recorded all the findings of the previous day and then set off for Irbestu. By far the most important part of the day was stopping at Kosh Agash on the way for ice cream – everyone attended to their duties most diligently! The Kosh Agash steppe on the way to Irbestu was a far more colourful place than two weeks ago, the recent rains having tempted out a host of purple and yellow flowers. Rivers, mud, ruts, rocks and steep slopes entertained us and our Land Rovers all the way to our camp site at the head of a side valley at 2700 m. Arriving at 8pm, we set up our tents, had dinner and then went to sleep in preparation for the next day.

11 August - Irbestu

Split into three groups, we surveyed three different areas around the head of our valley. Christine and Katherine went with me and we headed for the high peaks and glaciers. Accessing the high ground via a narrow rocky ridge we found lots of sign of ibex as well as many beautiful crimson-winged finches. Climbing over rocks the whole way we reached the high point of our survey at 3450 m to be greeted by endless views. Mount Belucha, covered with a thick rounded dome of ice, Altai's highest peak to the west, Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan around the south and everywhere peaks, glaciers and turquoise jewels of glacial lakes.

Each mountain range that we survey is very different, each with its own geology and its own flora and fauna. One example in Irbestu was a bird that we were very lucky to see and had not seen in Altai before, a nightjar that very obligingly sat in front of us for a while before whipping off at speed in the strong mountain winds. Shortly before getting back to camp, we turned a corner to be met by a group of 12 ibex; we froze and were very privileged to be able to watch them causally wander off up the hill only 150 m away from us, a fantastic way to end the day.

12 August - Run Away!

Got woken up at around 5am by very heavy rain, I had a look out of my tent and did not like the look of the weather, not only heavy but also set for the day. I decided it was time to leave before the rivers rose too high and impassible. Packed up quickly and left what were now snow covered mountains; we had no problems leaving the valley. Driving away across the steppe, Irbestu in the rear view mirror was hidden under a big black cloud.

13 August - Kamtytygem

A mountain area, west across the steppe from base camp, this area was first visited by Biosphere's Tessa and Roman last year when Tessa found a snow leopard scrape. Splitting into three groups, Katherine and myself headed up a very steep slope to access the ridge above. Having just passed the peak we got to a small crag at the bottom of which I noticed a skull and horns – ibex, these were very big horns and counting the ridges on the back of the horns the animal must have been about 11 years old when it died, perhaps a month before. There was a very strong smell by the horns, Katherine thought it smelt like her cat..... The only predators likely to kill such an animal are wolves, snow leopard and humans. Wolves normally defecate by their kill; we had a good look around but could see no such scat. Teeth marks on the skull can give clues to the identity of the killer, but the only clear marks were those of rodents gnawing the skull after the predator had finished its meal. A very intriguing find that may with further investigation conclusively identify the predator but for the moment is uncertain.

Revived by the excitement of our find, we headed off and straight away bumped into a group of about 20 Altai snowcock, an endemic bird species that are almost turkey sized. One of the birds displayed its tail feathers, spread out fan shaped it looked fantastic. Reaching the valley floor, we saw dipper in the stream, a new species for the expedition, lammergeyer vulture and lots of very bold Northern pika squeaking at us from the rocky slopes as we passed by.

14 August - Arzhan Buguzon sacred springs

As all our work this slot has been surveying in the mountains looking for animals and their sign, we decided to do some interviews today, this being important to get information on animals and also to gauge local opinions on wildlife and conservation. Arzhan Buguzon Sacred Springs is a holy place where locals go for a few days at a time to benefit from the healing springs there, to appreciate nature and to socialise, as such it was the perfect place for us to go and talk to lots of people about wildlife. One slight flaw in our plan was failing to appreciate that hay making activities would occupy the time of many people at this time of year; when I say many, I mean every man and his dog, and his cat, budgie, hamster and favourite cactus named Cyril. There was no-one there, the place that is usually full of people was totally deserted. Plan B; have a walk, go home, have dinner and pretend it never happened.

15 August - Packing Up

Christine, Katherine, Kevin, Volodya and Roman went surveying on Kosholu, finding much fresh Ibex sign as well as a few fossils before a snow shower persuaded them back to the shelter of base camp. Karen helped me with the packing in our mess tent as a few bold ground squirrels helped themselves to tea bags and other goodies out of our bins – got some great photos. Jean Phillipe and Tim arrived with Gulinara and set about dismantling our yurt – very sad to see it come down as it has been great chatting and warming up around its stove. Took the yurt back to its owner in Tobeler where lots of black-eared kites were loitering, looking for something to eat. On the way back, we picked up Boutagoss, Gulinara's niece whose name apparently means 'baby camels eyes' – aptly named. Lisa had prepared some lovely food for our last night at base camp, after which we had some champagne around the best camp fire we've ever had and under a star filled inky black sky; what better way to end our time here.

16 August - Base to Anoz

Having packed our belongings and dismantled the tents, we breakfasted on cake and other goodies left over from the previous night's festivities before heading off from base camp for the last time. The weather has definitely changed in the last couple of days and though the weather was lovely on our departure it felt like it could change at any moment. The leaves on the dwarf birch are starting to turn brown, hay making will end soon and yurts are being taken off the steppe, even during the long drive to Anoz, all the road works that had been an inconvenience for the last six weeks, were now all completed in preparation for the winter.

17 August - Anoz to Novosibirsk

Set off from Anoz in heavy rain that soon became torrential; everyone glad that we were not out on top of a mountain surveying. Stopping at the honey market, we had piroshkies and delicious cherry bleepies for one last time. Loaded with all kinds of honey we set off again.

This concludes this year's expedition and I would like to say a big thank you to everyone involved. All this is only possible through your commitment and enthusiasm and I think we should all be proud of what has been achieved. We'll be back – as they say!