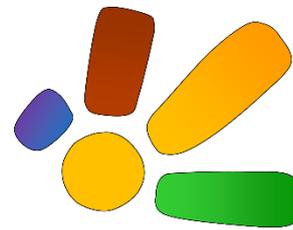




OSI-PANTHERA
CITIZEN SCIENCE EXPEDITIONS



**Objectif
Sciences
International**

Organisation Internationale Non Gouvernementale

Expedition to Naryn (14th to 28th of June, 2022)

Objectives :

- Cross the Naryn reserve from West to East along the left bank of the river Naryn, in the primary area
- Gather proofs of presence of snow leopards and information about their ecosystem through an ensemble of scientific methods (photographic traps, feces genetic analysis, prey counting...)

Team :

The team included one guide (Bastien Chaix), and a assistant guide (Adis Kubatov), two kyrgyz reserve guards (Ardak and Jirgal) et 4 French participants:

- Aurelie Durand
- Sebastien Quetant
- Mireille Coulon
- Eleonore Villain



Our first day all together in Bishkek!

Area of research:

2 days at Son Kul Lake before entering the natural reserve

The expedition crossed :

- Baibitche valley
- Deubeutateur valley
- Chong Tepchi
- Bokbai
- Jirgalbai
- Kokceki
- Umeut
- Arpateker
- Kashka-suu
- Ak Bai
- Ulan

in the Naryn reserve, created in 1983 and partner of OSI Panthera since 2016.

Map of our expedition through Naryn :



Son Kul Lake :

Tuesday, June 14th, we left Bishkek in the morning and after a long road with our driver Azir, we arrived at Son Kul lake. We were to stay in Kaku's yurts for two days. After a nice warm dinner, we did our first evening bird observation session. Notably, we got to see 3 Demoiselle Cranes, a flock of Ruby Shelduck...

Wednesday, June 15th, we rode around the lake to familiarise ourselves with the nice Kirghize horses. Here we saw 7 Cinereous vultures, circling a fresh foal's carcass. We then had a small hike but it was unfortunately cut short by the rain. We came back for another bird watching session on the lake.



Hors riding on the lake



A Cinereous Vulture

Thursday, June 16th, we left for the city of Naryn to get ready for our expedition : we bought 2 raincoats hoping they will stop the rain and protect us from thunderstorms ! We also picked up the most important : our food supply for the next 11 days. The meat was cut up and cooked : all ready for our long, cold evenings in the wild. On the road we saw a Himalayan Rubythroat, some Daurian Partridges...

Expedition:

Day 1 (17/06/22)

A one hour drive from Naryn took us to Iri-suu where we met with Ardak, Jirgal and our horses. It took some time to get all our stuff and supplies sorted out and distributed across all the horses but soon enough we were up and ready to go. The sun was shining so we all immediately left on horseback into the reserve with a slight change of plan : the right bank of the river Naryn being impractical, we changed and followed the left bank instead, taking with us a shovel just in case !



And we are off on this exciting expedition !

After a very long ride, the longest of the expedition, we set up camp still on the river bank, in the valley of Baiditche. We were glad to arrive and take a break from riding, our bodies not being used to it yet. Along the way, we observed 2 Black Kites, Fire-fronted Serin, an Eurasian Hobby, and many others.

Day 2 (18/06/22)



Road work ahead...

We started the day with another early bird watching session with notably: 2 Common Buzzards, another Eurasian Hobby and Common Grasshopper-Warblers. After breakfast, we packed our things and were off for another day on the road. Under gray skies with a few raindrops, we arrived a bit tired in a small wooden cabin for our lunch break in the Deubutateur valley. There was some bear fur all around the window and door frames: it had clearly been visited a few times before! On our way there, we spotted a Booted eagle, a Blue Whistling-Thrush, Hume's Warbler...

However, the afternoon didn't go as smoothly as we could have hoped: the Naryn river had destroyed part of the road which we had to rebuild in order for our horses to go through. As we rode on, we saw 21 Himalayan Griffons with 4 Eurasian ones, probably around another carcass which we couldn't see. There was also a group of Ibex, watching us from above: two females, a young male and 2 younglings; 5 bear feces, 1 wolf one and 1 stag one; and a deer running before us. Finally, the sky cleared as we climbed the Chong-Tepchi valley where we set up camp for the next 2 nights. In the

evening, we observed an Eurasian Kestrel and a stag in the forest, from afar.

Day 3 (19/06/22)

Today was our first day looking for our photo traps!

How do photo traps work?

They are set in places where proofs of presence of snow leopards have been found (urine, scratching...) or where the environment seems promising for passage (ridge lines). They trigger a picture when movement is detected, regardless of the source of it (so we often find other fauna, but also snow movements, dust carried by wind... in the pictures). When found, we change the batteries, the memory card and the strap holding it in place as they are subject to very hard environmental conditions. If necessary, the position can be adjusted, or changed entirely if another spot was found.

We separated into two groups : Aurelie, Sebastien, Adis and Ardak went to Kichi Tepchi while Mireille, Eleonore and Bastien went to Bokbai. Jirgal waited for us in the middle of these two crests with the horses. Along the way there, both groups found proofs of presence : scratchings, urines and a footprint. These reassured us on the placement of the photo traps on which we sadly didn't see any snow leopards. In Kichi Tepchi, most pictures were taken because of grass moving in front of the trap but still one wolf in July. In Bokbai it was knocked over by an Ibex quite early on, taking only pictures of the sky for several months. The first group did see about 20 Himalayan Snowcocks flying away.



Bastien and Eleonore placing the Bokbai photo trap.



A Himalayan Vulture

Day 4 (20/06/22)

Another full day on horseback was ahead of us to take us from Chong Tepchi to the pass of Jirgalbai. It was quite steep and we had to dismount a few times to help our horses cross the different crests along the way. However, during this tiring day, we did get to see a badger, a fox, 3 Ibex and 5 male mountain sheep with a nice weather.

Once we arrived at the pass, Ardak tried to cross on the snow but it was impossible for our horses. Therefore, we decided to set up camp right underneath it, near a lake and try tomorrow to go by foot. In the snow, we saw old bear footprints.



Our guards trying to cross the pass... guess only bears can do it...

Day 5 (21/06/22)

Bastien has been wanting to extend the research in the Naryn preserve westward for quite some time : now was his chance ! We had 2 new photo traps to place here for the first time. We decided it would be easier to simply go up to the crest by foot in order to set them up and take another path through the primary region of the reserve for the continuation of the expedition. We placed a Bushnell on one side of the pass and a Browning on the other. Here, we collected our first Snow Leopard feces, though quite old, and some fur in scrapings.



Bastien and Adis checking the trap settings

In the evening, our observation session was quiet. This high up there was nothing much to see but an Alpine accentor, an Altai Accentor and a Plain mountain finch. We heard Himalayan Snowcocks singing very loudly in the mornings and evenings, enough to wake us up, but we only saw a few, once.

Day 6 (22/06/22)

We weren't able to cross the pass on horseback, so we turned around and went all the way back to the Naryn river, still pushing eastward. Instead of going all the way around the snow, we decided to go down directly through the very steep rock slide, on foot, our horses behind us, it was very impressive ! However, this was only the start of our troubles for once we reached the river, we found the path damaged again. Under a cloudy, menacing sky, we had to set up camp earlier than expected in Kokceki to go fix it tomorrow morning.

A bright point in this tumultuous journey was the first ever hearing of a Corn Crake in the reserve ! Although we didn't see it, we heard it twice, very loudly.

Because we stopped our travel early, we had time to observe the birds around us and saw 2 Long-legged Buzzard chicks in the nest, with their parents flying above regularly ; as well as some common sandpipers, green sandpipers and a Golden eagle.



Some bird watching going on !

Day 7 (23/06/22)

An eventful morning was ahead of us as we found the path impracticable in three different places. All of us together, with our shovel, two saws, and a lot of moving stones around, we managed to fix it enough!



Road work still in progress...

Rain started to pour as we were back to camp, packing up everything. We quickly ate lunch at Kokceki before setting off for a full afternoon all the way to Umeut. All day long, we saw a lot of varied passerine birds but nothing too noteworthy.

Day 8 (24/06/22)

Above the wooden cabin of Umeut, on the pass of Arpatekter, there was another photo trap for us to collect. We all went to the crest on horseback then Ardak and Jirgal went back down with the horses to start fixing the path ahead. We followed the crest to the photo trap and found a lot of proofs of presence: especially very fresh Snow leopard footprints in the snow and the mud, coming towards us. Though others were also sampled, we found our first feces containing mericaria: we can absolutely sure these are from a Snow Leopard!



The art of sampling feces presented by Eleonore

Looking at the photo trap, we found out that it was there only 3 hours before we arrived! While we were climbing the crest, we didn't see it but it definitely saw us.



Around the woods, going up and then back down, we saw twice a doe running around, some Ibex, some Himalayan Snowcock and some White-winged Grosbeak. We think we spotted a wolf from above but we weren't sure until Ardak confirmed that he ran into it in the after-noon.

Day 9 (25/06/22)

While Bastien, Adis and Jirgal went to continue fixing the road again, Ardak and the rest of us stayed at the cabin. We made fresh bread because we were running out for the end of the expedition, though it was hard not to eat it all on the spot!



Much better than our 10-day old bread!

We also checked the pictures taken by the photo trap: there were quite a lot of panthers, wolves, a bear and the Manul; but most of the pictures were of a pika right in front, running around all year long! We heard a knocking noise, like there was Woodpecker in the forest (?), which would be surprising as they are unknown in the reserve.

We all ate together at the camp, packed it up and under a warm, sunny weather, we started climbing towards Kashkasuu, which we reached in a few hours. There, in the evening we saw quite a big group of Ibex: at least 30 females and 10 younglings.

Day 10 (26/06/22)

Today, we had another 2 photo traps to collect so we separated in two groups: Aurelie, Mireille, Sebastien and Adis went by foot from camp to the West side of the Kashka-suu crest. They found the SD card of their trap completely full after only 2 months because of the moving surrounding vegetation. Thus, they decided to move it a few meters away, where they found urine and collected Snow Leopard fur. Eleonore, Bastien and Ardak went on horseback to the Ak Bai pass. Their trap didn't take a lot of pictures because the pass is quite large and animals don't necessarily have to walk in front of it. Although there weren't any clear pictures of Snow Leopard on this trap, they found distinct, very fresh footprints a few meters away from it.



Probably from yesterday afternoon or evening.

We were supposed to go through the Ak Bai pass but there was still a lot of snow. Nevertheless, Ardak was able to cross it with his horse, reassuring us for the next day. The evening was quite still, as we only saw a Golden Eagle flying by.

Day 11 (27/06/22)

We set off towards Ulan, crossing the Ak Bai pass by foot, with our horses behind us. We made it to the bottom and arrived in the high plateau region, a very clear change in landscape!



Sebastien and Aurelie trying not to fall in the snow!

Here, we saw a lot more hares and marmots all around. We arrived at the edge of the reserve, in Ulan, it was the cabin of the rangers inhabited by Jirgal and his shepherd. It was early so we went to see the Golden Eagle's nest: there were 2 healthy chicks, about 40 days old. We saw the parents circling around, defending their territory and feeding their freshly

caught prey to the younglings.

Day 12 (28/06/22)

The evening before, Jirgal and his shepherd left to look for his yaks and didn't come back for the night. In the morning, we waited for them to get back and thus left later than expected. To make up for this, we walked quickly through the highlands for we needed to arrive to Karakolka before the river became too big to cross. On the way, it was very sunny at the beginning but a storm was approaching and the wind rose! We were still able to spot a Bearded Vulture and some Ibisbill on the river banks.

Talent came to pick us up with another driver and although we had to stop and fix the breaks along the way, in the end we made it safely to Chong- Jargilchak.



Bye everyone and thank you for this amazing expedition!