

Sarychat-Ertash valley expedition (7th to 25th July 2019)

For this expedition to the Sarychat-Ertash valley, in the frame of the OSI-PANTHERA scientific program, we were a group of 7. The leader and scientific coordinator was Anne-Lise Cabanat. She was assisted by Aliia Narynbekova. With us were also 2 rangers, Oemourbek Kourmanaliev, and Mirbek Kelgenbaev . The group was completed by 3 volunteers from France : Morgan Le Tron, Elsa Falières and Mathilde Delsol.

Reserve was created in 1995 and monitored by OSI-Panthera teams of volunteers since 2007. For this expedition the area of Sarychat-Ertash explored covers the high plateau near Kumtor, a gold mine, and the left bank of the Sarychat-Ertash river down to Koilu to the east. It was not possible to go further south and east due to the high level of the river. Five sectors were explored through transects around the camps of Atcha, Bordu, Koilu, Chomoi and Oroï-Suu.

Weather

The weather conditions happened to be favorable. The first week, the mornings were clear and sunny, while the afternoons turned cloudy and sometimes rainy. During the second week, the conditions were clear and stable, with the exception of the last rainy, icy and snowy day.

These mild conditions resulted in the rather high level of the rivers, making it often necessary to be back in camp around midday. This year it was possible in the North of the reserve to cross early in the morning the biggest river of the reserve, Ertash, with the exception of the weather.



Daily reports

09.07 → ***Meeting with the two rangers and the horses. Ride on the high “plateaux” from Kumtor mine to Atcha camp.***

From the beginning of our journey, we saw one fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), a couple of red-billed chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) and one buzzard near the mine, and also 2 Tien Shan argalis (*Ovis ammon*) after the Kumtor lake.

In the afternoon in Atcha camp, there were birds and one jumping fox upon the cliff.

10.07 → ***First ride in the direction of the right bank of Atcha river.***

At the end of our first beautiful transect, we changed a camera trap and we saw a lot of Tien Shan argalis & Siberian ibexes (*Capra sibirica*) footprints, birds and snow leopard's pug-marks, feces and scrapes. We had the felicity to find pictures of snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) for the first time on this camera trap.

During the sundown, we observed some Tien Shan argalis in Oroï Suu, a mountain in front of Atcha.

11.07 → ***Ride from Atcha to Bordu camp with a stop at Boroko valley.***

Observations of wild fauna were made on the way to the green and flowered Boroko valley: footprints of wolves, birds and argalis.

On the road to Bordu, we changed a camera trap in Boroko valley.

During the sunset, we saw one wolf (*Canis lupus*) in front of Bordu camp, who was hunting a marmot below a little group of Tien Shan argalis.

12.07 → ***We divided the team in two groups in order to do two distinct transects: one to Ortho-Bordu and one to Chon-Bordu (“middle Bordu” and “big Bordu”)***

Group 1 to Ortho-Bordu in the crest.

We checked the pictures of the former camera trap and changed the battery and SD card. There was a lot of pictures of fox, hare and argalis at this place. But also snow leopards, including a mother with 3 cubs !

We also saw some feces of snow leopard and many scrapes on this transect.

Group 2 to Chong-Bordu in the valley.

After finding many scrapes and feces of snow leopard, we put a new camera trap on the road of the snow leopard when it pass through the valley. On the way back to Bordu, we also saw one lonely female argali with skin hurts, probably sick.

When we came back, we enjoyed our first wash in the pretty source of Bordu.

13.07 → ***Ride from Bordu camp to Koilu with a stop at the fabulous Kizil Keregue.***

When we left the camp, one very freshly killed marmot was found near Bordu, perhaps by a wolf.

During the horse riding we made a stop to change a camera trap near a cliff called Kizil Keregue which has a stunning view on the big valley. The camera trap was fallen by bears, but it had enough time to take amazing pictures of bears and snow leopards. In fact, there were 2 cubs with their bear mother at the middle of March and a couple of snow leopards

in February... they were just mating in front of the camera trap and they stayed 2 days at this place, it was an incredible surprise!

At the end of the afternoon, we arrived in the valley of Koilu and did a small transect from the camp and we saw a lot of feces of snow leopard and bear there. Moreover, there were a couple of bats in the cliff near the wagon, enchanting moment at dusk.

14.07 → **2 groups did transects to Kitchi Sary Etchki valley («small yellow goat») and Chong Sary Etchki valley («big yellow goat»).**

In both wonderful valleys we saw some scrapes and feces of snow leopards. We also saw some couples of swallows nesting in one cliff of the Kitchi Sary Etchki valley.

We set up camera traps in each valley.

At the end of the afternoon the rain was very hard so we had a rest in our tents, but Pandajok (the dog and eighth member of the group!) was barking because there was a wolf approaching the camp... Morgan and Elsa tented a way out wrapped in plastic bags and they saw it not so far for several minutes!

15.07 → **Ride to Chong Koilu (“big Koilu”) to change the camera trap on the crest, which had a bad orientation with the daily movement of the sun.**

The beautiful valley which was quite narrow opens to a stunning wide green space seems to be a great hunting place for predators with many skulls of ibexes.

We had some pictures on the camera trap and fresh scrapes of snow leopards on the ground, we also saw 2 Himalayan vultures (*Gyps himalayensis*), one adult golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*) and one lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*).

On the way-back, we took a freezing shower by the Koilu waterfall and we sampled some snow leopard feces on the flowery road.

16.07 → **2 groups did transects in Kirk Choro (“forty thieves”), a valley, and in Ortho Koilu, a little crest near the camp.**

Kirk Choro crest and valley, we saw one young and one adult golden eagle, one young lammergeier, one pika (*Pika pika*) who ran nearby our feet and snow leopard's scrapes at the top of the crest.

On Ortho Koilu crest we saw many scrapes and collected a few feces. This place has a great view on two valleys and we could observed that each river has its own color.

At a fantastic sundown, we had an observation session during 2 hours...and Mathilde saw... one marmot, alive !



17.07 → *Installation of a camera trap early in the morning, not so far from the wagon. Then ride from Koilu to Chomoï to settle the camp for one night.*

At the beginning of the Chomoï valley on the way for the new camp, we saw 3 wolves and one young hidden in the den.

We settled the camp, picnic and ride in Chomoï valley to explore the transects possibilities and contemplate the glacier at the end of a moraine.

Rainy evening at the camp, we took a time to observe the crests and we saw a big herd of Siberian Ibexes (females and young), we had an intimate group diner in one tent and almost burn Anne-Lise's tent (the kitchen).



18.07 → *2 groups in 2 different valleys at the left bank of Chomoï and put a camera trap in one of them.*

In both transects we saw nice fresh pug-marks and scrapes of snow leopard. One camera trap was set up. A group of 4 Himalayan vultures was turning upon the crest and one lammergeier was flying from one valley to another.

We ended the day riding from Chomoï to Bordu wagon with a hurry to cook delicious fresh bread. In the evening it was snowing on the summits.



19.07 → *Ride from Bordu to Atcha and the group did transects in 2 valleys and put a camera trap.*

After a tasty fresh bread breakfast, we were packing for leaving the camp when we suddenly saw a little group of five Tien Shan Argalis along the river, maybe pushed by a group of four Ukrainian hikers who came from Kizil Suu valley (“The red water”) to leave the reserve by Kitchi Bordu.

Then we made a long pleasant road on horseback to Atcha camp with a stop to put a camera trap in one of the valley on our way.

20.07 → *2 groups in 2 different places: one group cross the river to go to Oroï Suu and the second one at the opposite, on the other bank of the Ertash river.*

The first group rode to Oroï Suu and saw a lot of fresh pug-marks of wolves and bears and some of snow leopards but older. On the way back to take the horses, there were many rocks with astonishing crystals.

The second group did a little transect in one valley in front of Oroï Suu with a beautiful waterfall and orange rocks, then go up on the crest with a wonderful view and some scrapes of snow leopards, afterwards go down in the other valley behind.

Second round of cooking fresh bread.



21.07 → *Whole morning of horse-riding from Atcha to Kumtor gold mine on the plateaus.*

The weather was very bad with rain, hail and snow but the horses were very brave and we tried to cheer each other. We spent the afternoon in the tents talking about what we saw and had the visit of an onlooker fox near the camp. We also made a few birds observations.

22.07 → *Leaving Kumtor and the plateaus for Chon Jargylchak by driving.*

Surprisingly, watermelon and vodka for last breakfast in the mountains before saying goodbye to the rangers and the horses, then driving back to Issyk Kul.

On the road on plateaus, there were many sheep's herds with shepherds on their horses, and some yurts around.



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