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## **Participatory science expeditions to study the snow leopard in the Shamshy and Chon Jarquilchak valleys :**

*« Autumn special: tracking large predators and counting ungulates » (14 days)*

### **Kyrgyz Republic**



### **Objectives and schedule**

This OSI-PANTHERA expedition will take place in 2 stages in 2 different study areas.

Firstly, in the **Kyrgyz Ala-Too range, in the Shamshy valley**, which was recently converted from a hunting concession to a protected area. Pastoralism is therefore practised here in summer, but the motivation of the local rangers has already led to a good return in the populations of Siberian ibex (*Capra sibirica*) and snow leopard.

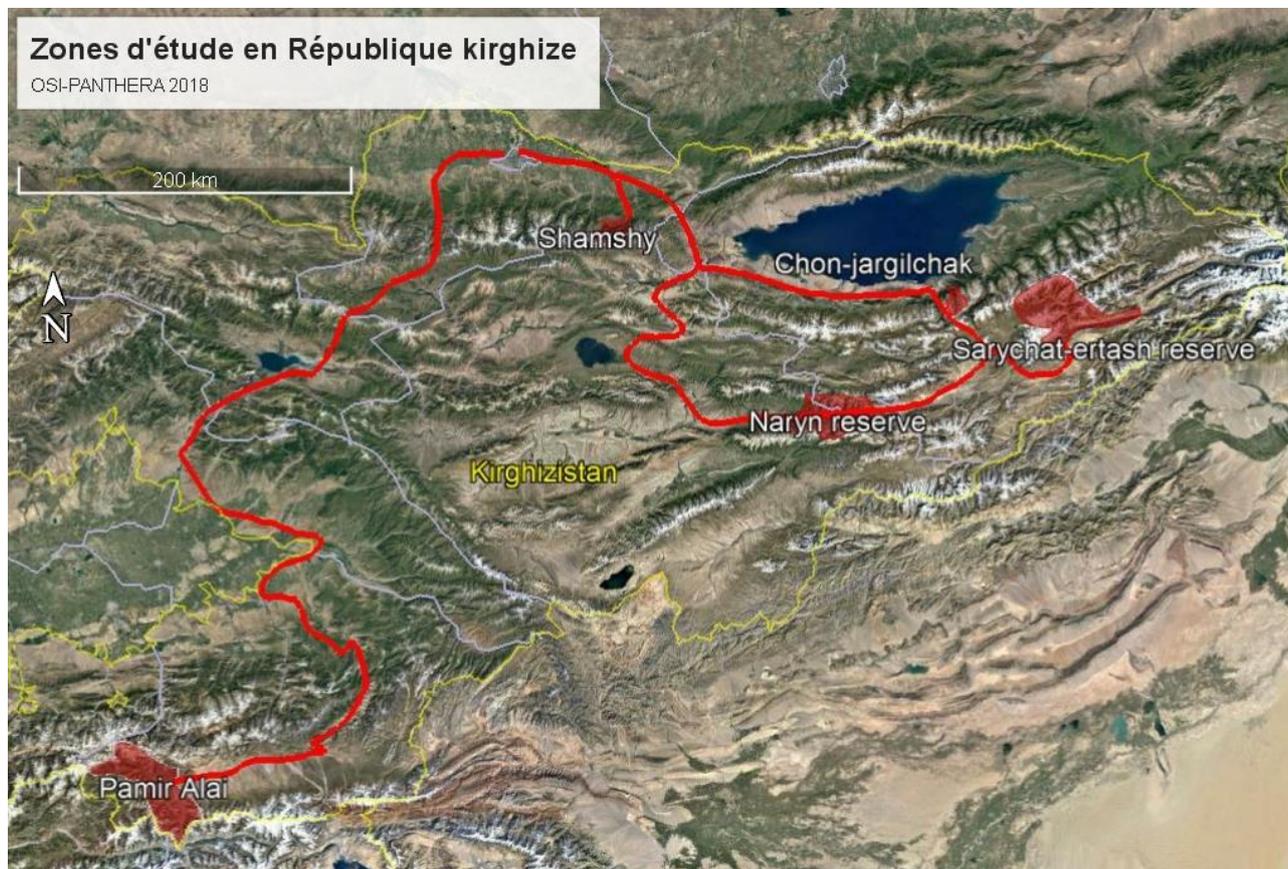
This mission in the Shamshy area is being carried out in partnership with the **Snow Leopard Foundation in Kyrgyzstan (SLFK)**, which has been working for years on projects to conserve the snow leopard and involve local communities in Kyrgyzstan and throughout the cat's range. The SLFK partly finances the guards who look after this area and the renovation of the hut housing them.

The second part of the mission will take place in partnership with the **Kyrgyz association Ala too bugu** in the **Chon Jarquilchak valley**, in the **Teskey-ala-too range**, south of Lake Issik-kul. Here, the OSI-Panthera team has been carrying out an annual ibex count and snow leopard surveys since 2019. The Chon Jarquilchak valley, where pastoralism is practiced in summer, is classified as a hunting reserve and is part of the Issik-kul biosphere reserve, but it suffers from poaching, particularly of Siberian ibex, pheasants and partridges. But the motivation of the villagers, who have been

grouped together under the Ala too bugu collective since 2021, is beginning to change attitudes in the valley and the first results are visible.

We hope that the example set by other groups of Kyrgyz villagers, sensitive to the preservation of their valleys where wildlife is now abundant and not too shy, can be followed in Chon Jarguilchak.

*Unlike the other missions, this one take place in a relatively less isolated setting (a day's ride from the first tarmac road). Packhorses will be part of the expedition, and may be ridden from time to time, but most of the travel and prospecting will be on foot, which may suit people who are put off by the amount of horse-riding involved in the other missions.*



**Different study areas where OSI-Panthera is present in Kyrgyzstan:**

## Your mission

The role of the volunteers during the expedition will be to prospect the valleys and ridges in half-groups according to a protocol in order to carry out the annual count of the Siberian ibex present in the study area, the main prey of the snow leopard. The sex and age of the individuals will be recorded as far as possible. The first snows will be our allies for spotting the herds using spotting scopes. All this will be done in a team with the rangers and villagers involved in the project.

In addition, the search for and tracking of snow leopard, lynx and wolf tracks will be carried out in small groups, using GPS to map the different routes taken by the predators and thus gain a better understanding of their use of the territory (marking areas, axes of movement, hunting and resting areas, prey, etc.).

Some snow leopard excrement will be collected for genetic analysis.

Photographic traps will be set/sampled at strategic locations where access is possible, depending on snow conditions. Depending on our partners' protocols, the photographic traps will be collected or will spend the winter in place to be collected by members of the association in the spring of the following year.

## Typical day-by-day expedition schedule

**Day 1:** Arrival at **Bishkek airport** during the night. Short nap, 1st meeting with your group. Collect the food you will need for your week of self-sufficiency in the Shamshy valley.

*In Kyrgyz, a "bishkek" is a churn used to make fermented mare's milk (kumis), the national drink of Kyrgyzstan!*

Depart late morning for the **Shamshy valley**. We meet the rangers and arrive at the hut that will serve as our base camp. First surveys and observations in the late afternoon.

*A former hunting concession, the hut is relatively comfortable and has recently been renovated by the SLFK to improve working conditions for the guards.*

**Days 2 to 5** : Exploring the surrounding valleys on foot. Horses can sometimes be ridden, but will mainly be used as pack horses to transport equipment. We will stay in two different huts and will make one or more bivouacs in tents, depending on the weather conditions, so as to explore all the valleys.

*Counting Siberian ibex and tracking large predators will take up most of our time. These will be supplemented by photographic trapping and wildlife and ornithological surveys.*

**Day 6** : A day's transit to Chon Jarguilchak, along the Kazakh border before following the southern shore of Lake Issyk Kul, where we will be staying with local people. We will pick up the provisions we need for these few days of self-sufficiency.

*The village of Chon Jarguilchak lies in the middle of the southern shore of the great lake Issyk Kkul. "Issik-Kul" means "warm lake": the lake is fed by 80 rivers and streams, as well as hot springs, none of which flow out of the lake. It does not freeze in winter, due to its low salinity.*

**Days 7 to 11** : Meeting with the villagers who will accompany us and collection of the horses. Departure for the Chon Jarguilchak glacier. Over the next few days, we'll be conducting snow leopard surveys in the valley and counting the number of Siberian ibex present. We will note any signs of snow leopard presence and the different animal species observed.

*A magnificent view awaits you. On one side you can see Lake Issyk Kul, while on the other the glacier towers above you, surrounded by a spruce forest. This valley is not a state nature reserve, but it is a hunting reserve where ibex hunting is theoretically prohibited. The aim of the expedition will also be to talk to the villagers to raise their awareness of the importance of preserving wildlife and promoting the valley's natural heritage.*

**Day 12** : Last observations, camp tidied up and return to the village of Chon Jarguilchak. Time to discover the joys of the bania !

**Day 13** : Return by mini-bus to Bishkek, souvenir shopping in the Osh bazaar and a final dinner together.

**Day 14** : Early morning flight back to Europe.



## Prerequisites

***WARNING:** To sign up for this trip, you need to be fully aware of its level of physical and sporting difficulty. Far from discouraging you, these challenges may seduce you, but you must be aware of them and accept them in order to take part in the mission!*

## Walking

Almost every day, even when moving from one camp to another, we'll be carrying out surveys in half-groups, on the ridge or at the bottom of the valley.

For the first group, which has chosen to climb the ridge that day, we can expect a **difference in altitude of between 300 and 1000 m over the course of the day**, which means walking for around 4 to 6 hours, or even more, **on steep, potentially snow-covered slopes**. For the second group, exploring the valley floor for example, the difference in altitude will be less.

In all cases, we'll be walking constantly **off-piste, on steep slopes, in very uneven terrain and with the potential for snow.**

## Horse

On this mission to Shamshy and Chon Jarguilchak, the amount of horse-riding is very small, and we'll be using the horses mainly to transport equipment, walking alongside them. If we get tired, and conditions allow, we may consider riding them. **You don't need to be a rider to do this, but you mustn't be afraid of these animals.**

## Cold

At this time of year, winter is already well established in Kyrgyzstan, and it is essential to be fully **equipped for the cold.** Temperatures can remain below 0 degrees even in the middle of the day. There is also a **strong possibility of snowfall.**

## Housing

Accommodation will sometimes be with local people (in village houses or yurts) at the beginning and end of the trip, but most of the time it will be in basic huts with wood-burning stoves for heating in the evenings. So you'll need to enjoy living in the middle of nature, in a relatively isolated area, far from the usual comforts, but also closer to the essentials!

Depending on the weather conditions, there will also be bivouacs in tents.

## Adventure

This participatory science expedition is a first for the region, and everything remains to be discovered. **Adventure will therefore be part of our daily routine, and we need to be able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and changes to the program.** OSI-PANTHERA's supervisors - with several years' experience of organising such expeditions in Kyrgyzstan - will be on hand to ensure that the expedition runs smoothly and handles all the logistics.

## Naturalistic interest

Scientific or naturalist skills are not necessary, but an interest in wild animals and nature is of course essential.



***Some practical information about our expeditions:***

***Immersion*** : This expedition is taking place in valleys that are a little less isolated than the study areas where we usually work. Even so, we will be several hours' ride away from any human presence or passable road. In this context, rescue is sometimes only possible by helicopter. Even if it's not extreme, the isolation carries a certain psychological and security burden that has to be accepted. As on other expeditions to more isolated environments, the team will be equipped with appropriate safety and communication resources.

***Hardiness*** : We sleep in rustic huts or tents (provided by the NGO). As the mission is organised in October, it will be cold and you will be in the snow. The highly variable weather conditions in the high mountains will be felt more keenly, especially with the fatigue and cold, which will require elaborate equipment.

***Autonomy*** : We will be totally self-sufficient for around 2 x 5 days as far as food is concerned, transported on horseback or in a 4X4 vehicle like all the rest of the equipment. It won't be great gastronomy, given the constraints of the terrain (starch and mutton), but it will always be sufficient and will delight most of our participants. We make our own bread once the initial stock has run out. As we're in protected areas, we won't be gathering, fishing or doing any other activity of this kind.

***Sporting and equestrian level*** : **Our expeditions are not sporting treks or equestrian holidays.** The horse is our means of transporting our equipment from one camp to the next, and we will mainly be on foot, taking them by lung. Walking will enable us to carry out our survey in areas where the snow leopard lives. These surveys will be carried out in very rugged terrain, off-path, sometimes in the snow and with gradients ranging from 500 to 1000 m per day. You'll need to be in good physical condition for the mission, and have experience of off-path mountain terrain in winter conditions, but you don't need to be a top-level athlete! Although horses and horse riding will be an integral part of our daily lives during the expedition, it is clearly not an equestrian trek, since on the rare occasions when horses are ridden, trotting and galloping will be prohibited for safety reasons. Riding boots are compulsory.

***Duration***: 14 days et 13 nights on site

***Accommodation*** : Full board : hotel, cabins, tents

***Travel*** : Plane, minibus, on foot (and horse)

***Groupe size*** : 7 participants maximum

***Supervision*** : 1 scientific educator + 1 assistant

+ 2 local rangers

Information and registration :

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***Dates*** : October - November