

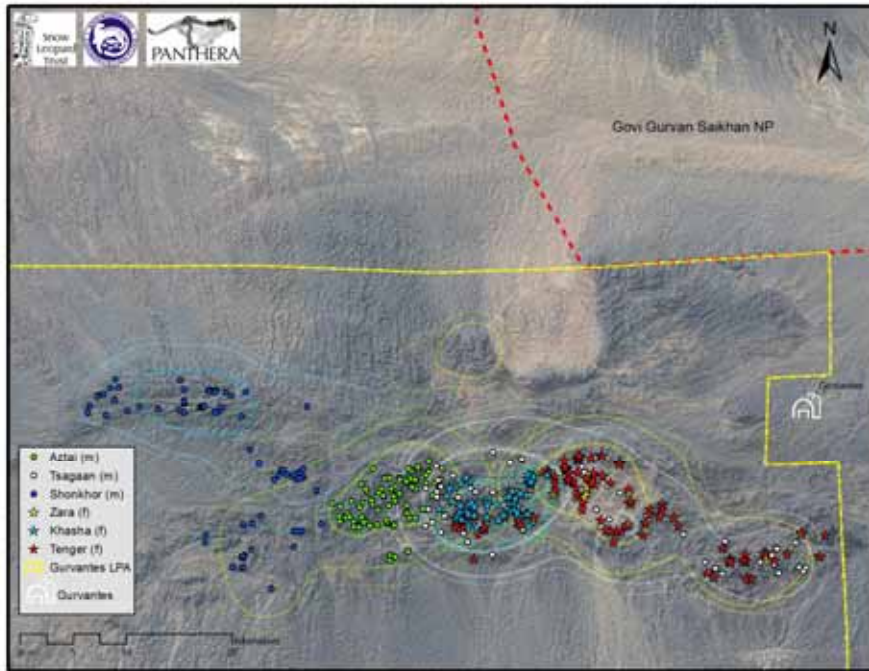
Final 2010 South Gobi Update: *Snow doesn't stop snow leopard research!*

November marked one of the coldest months in South Gobi with mercury dipping to abysmal limits. Field work became increasingly difficult with a thick cover of snow on the ground. Some interesting data and activity has taken place however and here are few of the highlights and notable moments regarding the snow leopards that we are coming to know as part of the Long-term Ecological Study:

*** Despite the cold, our lead researcher, Orjan, witnessed one of the most remarkable behaviors of snow leopards he had ever observed in the wild:** a female with her two sub-adult cubs remained close to the site where Orjan recaptured the male snow leopard Shonkhor. It is likely that this female is Agnes, one of the known females from the area who has been photographed earlier with her two cub in close proximity to Shonkhor. How is Shonkhor related to her? We don't yet know and won't until we get to analyze and compare their DNAs. However, legal restrictions still make it impossible for us to export blood and hair from endangered species out of Mongolia. Hopefully in the future we can help develop a facility within the country that will allow us to analyze material efficiently.

* The male snow leopard Aztai – the most veteran member of our study – was seemingly restricted to the core of his home range in November while Shonkhor, another younger male, patrolled the western border. It is interesting to observe and wonder how they are influencing each other: perhaps Aztai is being pressed within his home range from the west by Shonkhor, or perhaps Shonkhor is taking advantage of Aztai's restricted movements, or perhaps there are other reasons yet to unfold. Orjan noted that when Shonkhor was last observed, he was beginning to look more like an adult grown-up male, though he still lacks scars on his face which may indicate that he hasn't had many battles with other males yet.

* Tsagaan's re-collaring has proven really beneficial to the study. His home range overlaps with that of Khasha, Tenger and Zara and his recent locations show him visiting all of them more than once within a month's time. In a first of its kind, four collared snow leopards came within 500 m of each other on the 7th of November. This happened in an area that we refer to as the core of Khasha's **currently** known home range. While Tenger and Zaraa left almost immediately, they were followed closely and revisited by Tsagaan within a few days time all the way up to the easternmost limit of their home ranges.



* One of the mysteries last time was that of the cluster on top of a hill we dubbed Mount Brad where Khasha and Tsagaan remained really close to each other for a while. Orjan and Elin managed to visit that cluster and found a carcass of a male ibex in one of the highest saddles of Tost and Toson Bumba Mountains. It was indeed a meal that both of them had shared, though we are yet to understand why Khasha is using such a small area. Her approximately 40 sq km home range is one of the smallest that we know of female snow leopards and time will tell if she has cubs, is mating, or is satisfied with the small home range in what we may call as one of the best snow leopard habitats given its ruggedness and the ibex encounters.



Looking ahead to 2011:

One of our field researchers, Sumbe, is out in the field now and is installing about 25 camera traps at strategic locations so that we get to know more about snow leopard behavior and associations in the next three to four months. Nadia, a Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation/Snow Leopard Trust staff member is working on her graduate degree. She is back in the field with an objective to collect data for her Masters' dissertation in a course that she is pursuing at the Wildlife Institute of India. She is hoping to compare people's attitudes in presence and absence of community based conservation programs. She will build up on the data that she collected for understanding the social, cultural and economic factors behind wolf trapping in Tost, and her study will be of great value in evaluating the effect of CBC programs on people's attitudes, which eventually is expected to translate into conservation of the species.

In the next few months we will keep a close eye on the cats remotely while Orjan recuperates at home (he and Elin, a visiting graduate student, fell ill following a recapture and the visit to one of the carcasses they were investigating at snow leopard hunting sites – see the blog for more on that) and a lot of data collected during the year will get analyzed. It will be exciting to see how the population of Tost and Toson Bumba Mountains has changed, if at all, over the past two years using sophisticated models of mortality and recruitment on camera trap data. The data analysis will also help us better understand the relationship between sign based snow leopard occupancy and abundance. Elin will analyze the movement pattern of snow leopards around kills and attempt to link it with the size and species of the preyed animal. We also hope to get a better understanding of hunting sites as Orjan runs a preliminary analysis on the data collected from several kill sites.