



Long-term Ecological Study Update, 14 April 2011

Loss of a Snow Leopard

Tsagaan has been a part of our study from the first time we saw him in a camera trap image in 2008. Since being fitted with his first collar in February 2009, we have followed his every move and came to know his habits well. So we were very concerned about him when messages from his collar abruptly stopped on April 4th. For several days before the silence, GPS data showed him in an extremely limited area. Orjan went to the last coordinates as soon as possible (approximately 20 km away from camp) and sadly he found Tsagaan several days deceased with no obvious cause of death. The collar's satellite-phone antenna was underneath him, thereby blocking any uplinks. A veterinarian from Ulaanbaatar is heading to the field to attempt a necropsy. Tsagaan was a full grown adult when he was first collared and has been an easily identified visitor to our camera traps with his distinctive spot pattern. This is a loss to our study, but also a loss of a cat we had come to know very well and who shared many secrets of a snow leopard's life with us -- we will miss him. In any study such as this, where individuals and families are followed over generations, the death of an animal is part of the cycle, but we are never so objective that it doesn't bring us sadness.

Please see the story of Tsagaan's loss in Orjan's own words at the end of this update.



Photo by Orian Johannsson

Tsagaan looking back at Orjan immediately after receiving his first collar in February 2009

Activity of Our Collared Cats

This project continues to set records and to date we have received 8273 GPS locations from the 12 cats that we have collared since 2008. Additionally, there are two collars currently deployed that although they are not uplinking successfully, they likely have hundreds of data locations stored on board. Currently, we regularly receive location data from five of the seven deployed collars. The first collared male, Aztai, has provided over 3200 data points alone.

Aztai and female Khasha continue to frequent many of the same areas, but on different days. Towards the end of January, Aztai spent nine days moving south and east of Gurvantes, the soum (county) center, outside of what we consider his 'usual' range. At both the beginning and middle of March, Aztai made two long walks into this same area, both times making the round trip of about 100 km in only four days.

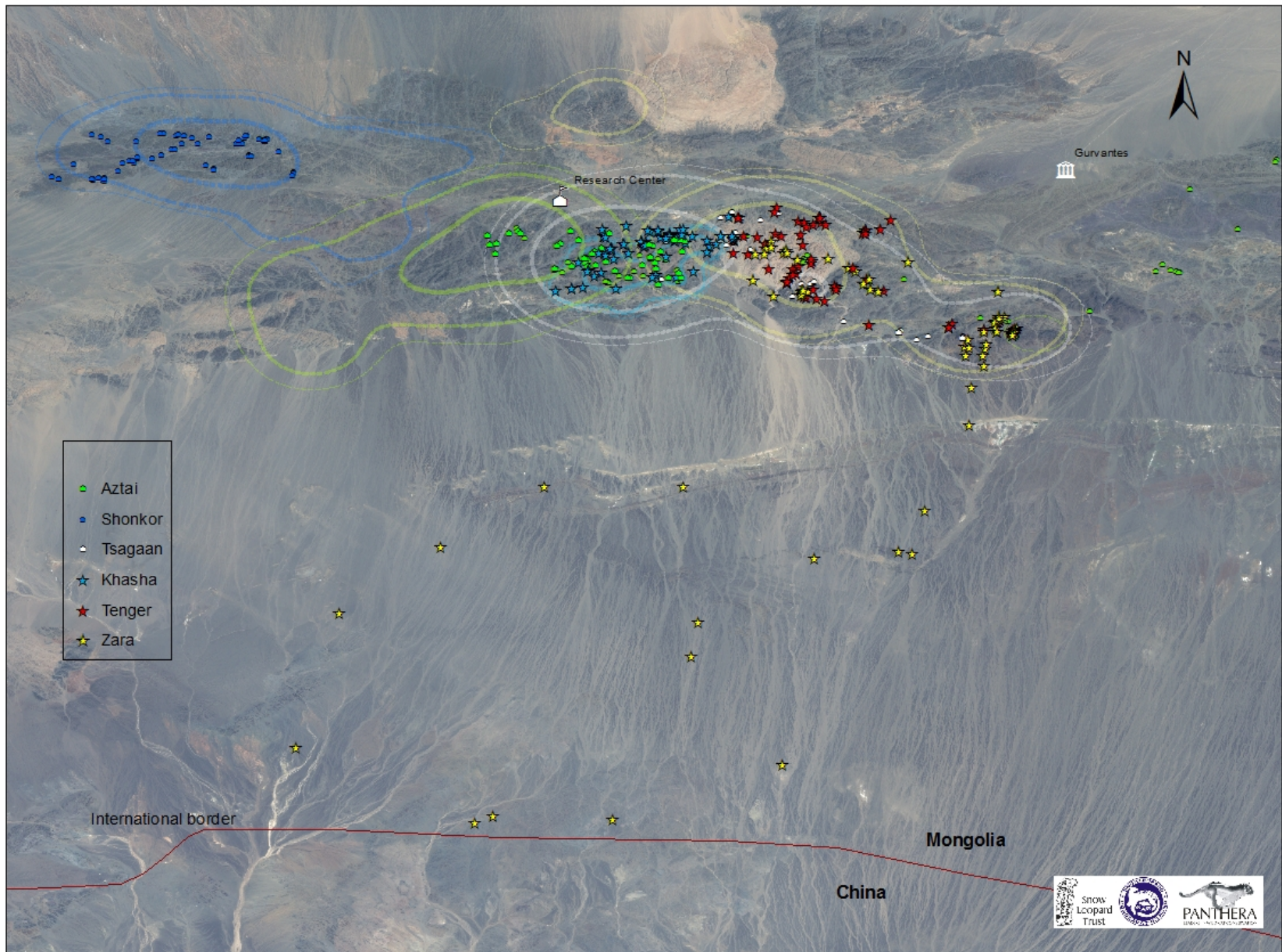


Pamihara/Snow Leopard Trust

Male Devekh, shown here in a camera trap photo from summer 2010, wears one of the collars that likely holds hundreds of stored locations.

Our one mother and daughter pair of collared cats, Tenger and Zara, have not been traveling together since January 2011. We do still often see considerable overlap between their movements but not on the same days. At the end of March, Zara left the study site and traveled to and along the Chinese border over a four day period before returning. Upon reaching the border, she walked west for about 28 km as if there was some sort of deterrent, although to our knowledge there are only the battered remains of a fence and a ditch marking the border. We have actually known Tenger since the 2008 trap camera season though she was only collared last August.

Unfortunately, collared male Shonkor that we have followed since April 2009 got himself into trouble by depredating livestock at least twice this year. In mid-February, he killed 13 goats in just a few hours. Fortunately the herder was aware of our study and contacted our camp manager, who relayed the situation to the Snow Leopard Conservation Fund (our collaborators) office in Ulaanbaatar. Project scientists intently monitored the GPS data sent by the satellite phone on Shonkor's collar and sent this data to our field staff. However, it still took a week to drive Shonkor away from the area by removing uneaten meat and chasing him on foot. Shonkor unfortunately returned three weeks later and killed another 10 goats before being chased away. We continue to closely monitor Shonkor's movements in order to alert camp staff if Shonkor returns to this herder's location. Shonkor currently remains in the far west away from the other collared cats, and the most recent uplinks show him some 8 km west of his 'usual' area.



*Cat locations for 12 March through 8 April 2011 with home ranges calculated from each cat's entire data set.
Note Zara's long trek towards China and back.*

Camp Opens

Orjan is back in camp and spring is proving to be a busy time for him. He is working 14 hour days in the field right now. He arrived in the South Gobi at the beginning of April along with two fellow Swedes, assistant Carl-Fredrik Nilson and filmmaker Ulf Jonasson. A Swedish documentary film starring Anders Lundin and featuring Orjan will be shot this spring; Anders will be in camp for a few weeks later this month.

Orjan, Carl-Fredrik and Ulf are currently living at our old Base Camp and quickly got to work building snares to begin our spring collaring season. They have 10 traps set already and are building more. Orjan hopes to catch up with Aztai and Khavar, and maybe even Saikan – the female who dropped her collar after one day but whom we identified in trap camera photos from last summer. Once the traps are set, Orjan and his team will start visiting sites where GPS clusters indicate cats have made kills, and will start filming the documentary on the project.

Additional spring visitors to camp include Orjan’s doctoral advisor Dr. Henrik Andren from Sweden’s Grimso Wildlife Research Station, who will be visiting the South Gobi in early May. He will be joined by Project co-Director, Tom McCarthy (Panthera), as well as Thomas Lind, our long time supporter from the Kolmarden Zoo. When this group departs in mid-May, LTES coordinator Rana Bayrakçı will be traveling to camp to work with Orjan for a few weeks. Sometime later this spring, Swedish lynx expert, Dr. Per Ahlqvist, will be traveling to camp to assist with our first attempt to capture, weigh, measure and PIT tag (microchip) snow leopard cubs which will allow us to identify them using a handheld chip reader if they are later captured and collared as adults.

Logistics is always a serious consideration in this extremely remote study area, but our collaborators in Ulaanbaatar recently negotiated seats on flights chartered by a local mining operation which land just one hour’s drive from camp. This has already saved us large amounts of time, money, fuel and wear and tear on our camp vehicle, since the previous domestic flights deposited our team at an airport which was a 10+ hour drive from camp.



Panthera/Snow Leopard Trust

June 2010 camera trap photo of mother Tenger drinking and daughter Zara with collar; Tenger was collared in August.

Recent Activities

In early March, the Mongolian government announced a decision to allow the hunting of four snow leopards for “scientific purposes”. An international outcry ensued, urging the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism to cancel the permits. Intensive lobbying by multiple Mongolian and international NGOs, including Panthera, our partners the Snow Leopard Conservation Fund, and the Snow Leopard Network, resulted in the successful revocation of these permits.

It has been a very busy year so far, and the field season is barely underway. We look forward to keeping you posted on developments as the year progresses.

A Farewell to Tsagaan in Orjan Johansson's Words...

14 April 2011 - *Two days ago I got an email saying that Tsagaan had been in the same place for four days and after that we had not received any locations for seven days. The site is far from camp and we did not know what had happened to him but to be prepared for anything we packed our motorbikes with darting equipment, food, water, headlamps, clothes, necropsy sample kit etc.*

Unfortunately we found Tsagaan lying dead high up on a mountain. He had chosen a sheltered cliff wall with a magnificent view for his final resting place. There were no visible wounds on the body and as of now we do not know what he died of, hopefully a necropsy can provide some answers.

The collaring study provides insights in some snow leopard individuals lives and changes them from a 'grey mass' somewhere far out in the mountains into individuals with their own personality. I have caught Tsagaan five times over the last three years, after the first time I always knew that it was he who was in the snare even before I had seen him. Before I was in sight of him he greeted me with a growl and as I approached him he hissed and bared his teeth, trying to scare me. None of the other cats have behaved as aggressive as he did. His complete opposite is Aztai, a male of similar size whom I have also caught five times. Aztai lies still in the snare and settles with staring at me, I have even led him away from a steep cliff, holding his collar as he was walking away from the capture site. I would not have tried that with Tsagaan.

As I hike in the mountains here I often try to imagine what it is like to be a snow leopard. For a cat this must be the perfect terrain. They are the undisputed kings of these mountains. No one can touch them here, let alone harm them, with the exception of humans with our technology. Sure I am able to catch them but I use tools that are far from natural. And as I try to climb the slopes, stumbling and catching my breath even though I never venture into the really rugged parts that the snow leopards love, I must be quite a feeble sight to them. Tsagaan must have seen me many times, recognizing my red jacket. I bet that he wondered how that miserable creature could have caught him.

Tsagaan was the dominant male of a large part of central Tost which he ruled since at least February 2009 when we first collared him. His home range encompassed all three of our collared females. That is not a bad life, right? Since none of the females have cubs at the moment, there is a good chance that we will see little Tsagaan Juniors arriving in the South Gobi this summer.

*Cheers,
Orjan*

This study is a joint project of Panthera, Snow Leopard Trust and the Snow Leopard Conservation Fund and is in collaboration with Mongolia Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism, Mongolia Academy of Sciences, and Mongolian State University of Agriculture. For more information, please visit www.panthera.org or www.snowleopard.org.



Breaking News!

Orjan just reported capturing and collaring a sub-adult female on 14 April! Look for more details about her in our next update on the fifth female snow leopard to join our study.