



Long-term Ecological Study Update, 15 August 2011

The loss of a snow leopard



Panthera/Snow Leopard Trust

Shonkor waking up after being collared in May 2009 (he is seen wearing the old style of North Star collar that has since been replaced with the Vectronic version).

Shonkor joined our study in May 2009. His name means “falcon” in Mongolian since a pair of rare Sakhar falcons were nesting at the site where he was first collared and falcons are a symbol of youth in Mongolia; Orjan estimated that Shonkor was just two years of age. When Orjan recaptured Shonkor last November to change out his radio collar, Shonkor had gained 5 kg and seemed to be reaching his adult size.

In mid-July, we noticed that Shonkor’s movements had become extremely restricted, moving only a few meters in between uplinks and never more than 70 meters. After giving him about two weeks of time in case he was eating a large prey animal, Sumbee carefully went to check on Shonkor and found him dead, apparently of natural causes. We sent a veterinarian from Ulaanbaatar to camp, joining a veterinarian from the local town of Gurvantes to perform a necropsy on Shonkor. We hope to learn more from the tests now being run on tissue samples, but at this point all we can confirm is that the exam detected no signs of human induced wounds. We also hope to accurately determine Shonkor’s age from tooth cementum annuli.

You may remember Shonkor's livestock depredation incident back in February 2011 when he spent a week killing and feeding on 13 goats before our field staff were able to drive him away from the easy meal, but he then returned three weeks later to kill 10 more goats before again being chased away. Shonkor was lucky to not have been killed by the herder defending his livestock; instead, the herder notified our camp staff for assistance and the herder has since joined our livestock insurance program.



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Shonkor in February 2011

In early June Shonkor left his core home-range and traveled across 30 km (18 miles) of open steppe-desert, finally reaching a small isolated patch of semi-mountainous terrain. Having made similar excursions before, we had little concern that he wouldn't reverse course and come back home eventually. Orjan speculated that *"he is out on an exploratory trip and he stays there because there are no good mountains in the vicinity except the one where he is, which provides great hunting opportunities."* Orjan found remains of Shonkor's prey in the same area this spring, including a large argali that he spent six days eating.

In memory of Shonkor, we would like to share Orjan's thoughts after replacing his collar in November 2010: *"I like Shonkor, he has a lot of personality. First time I saw him he rolled over on his back with all four paws in the air. I puzzled my brain, trying to recall if anyone had ever mentioned what to do in this type of situation."*

When we collared him this time Shonkor was lying down with his head on his front paws. He didn't seem too troubled about the situation, a lot of the vegetation around him was untouched so he can't have been moving around much. He bared his teeth but except for that stayed still. I left the site and when we came back a couple of minutes later he was sleeping with his head resting on the front paws."

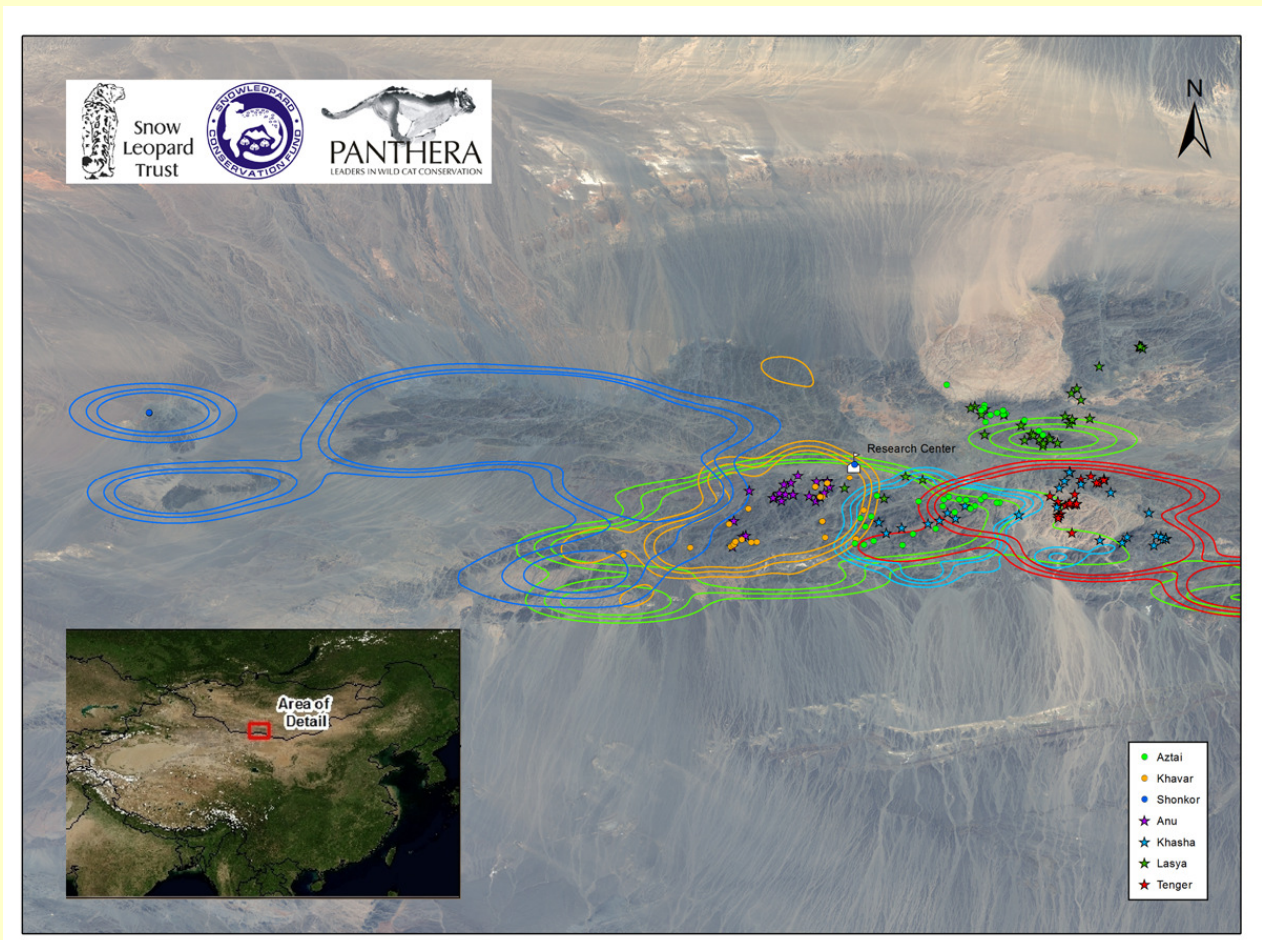
Shonkor was a little skinny but seemed to be in good condition, his head as grown a lot wider since last time we met and now he gives the impression of a big powerful male. Though, he doesn't have any scars in his face so perhaps he isn't fully grown and hasn't yet engaged in fighting with rivals."

Activities of our collared cats

Aztai spent much of the past month 10 kilometers north of his usual home range, then returned to the border he shares with Khavar on 10 August. Lasya also moved east and north, often in the same area as Aztai but never closer than three kilometers to him. She returned to her usual range on 9 August before heading east again.

Khavar covered his entire home range twice while Anu spent the month within Khavar's area and seems to have made a few kills. Khavar and Anu were only 17 meters apart on 6 August, so it is likely that they met up again.

Khashaa spent little time in her typical home range, choosing instead to move all the way across Tenger's although not in the core area where Tenger is staying. The two females with cubs were never



Cat

locations for 18 July through 12 August 2011 with home ranges calculated from each cat's entire data set. We do not yet have enough data to calculate home ranges for our two newly collared female cats, Anu and Lasya. Shonkor's one location is at the far western site where he was found dead.

closer than 1.5 kilometers and Khashaa returned to her usual area on 7 August.

Camp News

Biologist Sumbee continues his search for the collar dropped by male Devehk that we mentioned in our last update. The search for a dropped collar in such a rugged landscape is like looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack. As Orjan pointed out, listening for VHF signals in mountains can be very tricky. Sometimes you can stand in one spot and not hear anything but just one meter to the side and the signal can be strong. Sumbee is focusing his search along high ridgelines in areas where Devehk was found in 2010.

This study is a joint project of PANTHERA, Snow Leopard Trust and Snow Leopard Conservation Fund in cooperation with the Mongolia Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism, and the Mongolia Academy of Sciences. For more information visit: www.panthera.org or www.snowleopard.org.



PANTHERA'S role in this project is made possible through collaboration with and/or funding from:

