

Zaraa's Remarkable Journey



Shonkhor



Saikhan



Devekh



Aztai



Khashaa



Zaraa

Go Zaraa Go: Zaraa's Remarkable Journey:

Zaraa - "Girls are way stronger than guys!" At least that is what Dr. Koustubh Sharma told us when he shared the fascinating results of Zaraa's recent expedition. During the week of May 19, 2011, Zaraa journeyed from our study area in the Tost Mountain region, 45 km. (~27 miles) north, across the Toson Bumba Mountain chain and all the way to another nearby chain called the Nemegt Mountains. This is similar to another trek she took in May when she surprised us by walking over 150 km (~93 miles) in five days south to the China border and back. However, what makes this northern trek so interesting is not the distance covered, but the fact that she is the first snow leopard in our study to reach the edge of the Toson Bumba Mountain range and actually cross over, then through an area we call the 'badlands' in order to reach this distant chain of mountains. The Nemegt Mountains are within the Gurvan Saikhan National Park and she is the first known cat to cross into this protected area. Quite a remarkable feat!

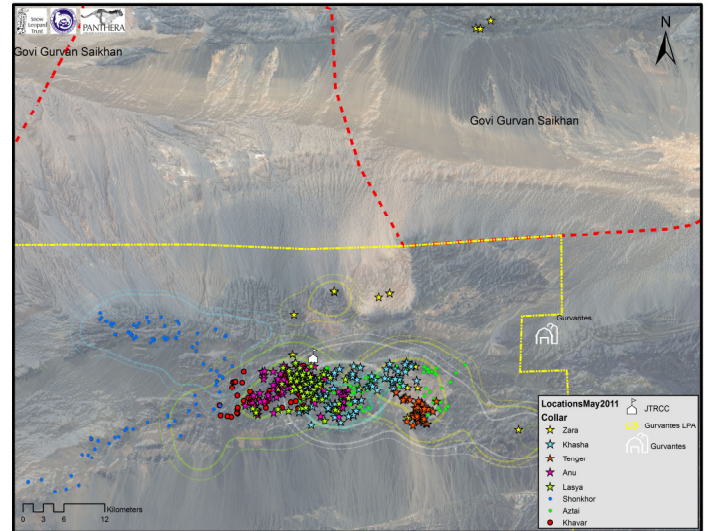
The week of May 23rd, she gave us more to talk about! Zaraa came all the way back to the Tost region, but then her collar suddenly stopped transmitting well, performing at only 25%! We then began receiving mortality signals from her collar and we suspected that the collar may have dropped off on its own. And where was the collar location signal coming from? The heart of the badlands! So, Orjan jumped on his bike and went to locate and recover the collar which holds all of the valuable additional data stored in the memory banks. He located it using the VHF telemetry receiver and discovered that the drop off had indeed worked, just a few days later than it has been scheduled to drop off. The collar was found about a kilometer from a summer ger (family home). Orjan talked to the family and they had not incurred losses to their livestock. So, now Zaraa is 'off grid', but not before giving us enormous insight into the world of dispersing female snow leopards. We hope we will see her in the motion sensor cameras and perhaps recollar her in the future.

Aztai - Although Aztai continues using Tsagaan's former home range, the pattern of use is becoming much more pronounced. His home range is currently at least 20 km long and about 5 km wide, with a total area of just over 100 sq km. What is interesting is that Aztai seems to be using almost the exact same borders as Tsagaan did. We wonder what it is that defines them so exactly for the snow leopard. It will be interesting to ground truth these borders and note any geologic or geographic features that might influence the cats.

Khashaa: Khashaa continues to survey all around 'her' own area and there is a possibility that she and Aztai may have mated in April. I will let you read about that investigation straight from Orjan:

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In mid-April, Aztai and Khashaa spent three days at the same place. The collar locations were spread out in a line and it seemed as if they had slowly, slowly moved down a steep mountainside. We got curious about what might have happened there, from looking at the computer it didn't seem like a hunting site but to know for sure we had to go there. The place is a steep canyon side and the locations follow a line of steep (almost vertical) rock formations, almost like pinnacles. They are about 20 m wide and 10-15 m high. On each side of the pinnacles are a field of loose gravel and rocks, very steep and very loose. Most of the locations are on the pinnacles but some are at the base of them. It was not possible to visit all locations, the terrain was just too steep and rugged. However, there were no signs of a hunt and the terrain doesn't look like anything that I have found kills in previously. Since the two cats were moving down along the pinnacles they would have had to drag their meal with them up and down, which doesn't make much sense. So the only likely explanation for them to spend so much time together is that they mated. We got a couple locations taken at the same time when the cats' collars were within 1 m of each other. I know that mid April is late for a mating but maybe Khashaa mated with Aztai. He seems to be the new dominant male of the area. Aztai sure didn't wait many days after Tsagaan died before he took over his area. While Tsagaan was our 'bad boy', always growling at me and keeping three collared females in his home range that he ventured between, spending at most a day with now and then. Aztai, on the other hand, seems to have found a nice cliff with a view all the way to China and spent three days getting to know Khashaa."



Tenger – We are also eagerly watching Tenger. She continues to use a very small area—between 5-10 km². One explanation could be that she is pregnant or with cubs. She has recently been very focused around a tight 'cluster' of GPS locations. The pattern of movement around this tight area is extremely different from any other cluster we have observed. Normally when we see a cluster of GPS locations, it means a snow leopard has made a successful kill. The cat typically stays very close to it for 2-4 days, not leaving until it is finished eating. After that, the cat rarely returns. But in this case, Tenger seems to visit the cluster for a short time, then move away, then visit the cluster again, and repeat this back and forth pattern. This behavior is similar to other cats, like tigers, who are with cubs. So we are hopeful! We will carefully be placing cameras close (but not too close) to the cluster. We hope to have photos that will explain her behaviors soon!

Lasya, Anu and Khavar – These three cats seem to be focusing their movements around our old base camp. Lasya seems to have made a kill recently. Very similar to Tenger, the area Lasya is covering is notably small. We can not rule out the possibility that she too might be pregnant. Anu's home range on the other hand is much bigger than that of Lasya. She is covering an area nearly four times greater than Lasya. They still overlap a great deal, with the intersection right around our base camp. Anu's location points make it appear that she is trailing Khavar for some strange reason. We will continue to monitor this. Khavar is now entirely occupying Aztai's vacated home range—and just as I mentioned above about Aztai sticking to the old border that Tsagaan used, Khavar seems to be following nearly the same borders that Aztai once used. We will send more on these cats and the project in July! Thank you!