Participatory Science Expeditions to Study the Snow Leopard in the Shamshy and Chong Jarguilchak Valleys

Kyrgyz Republic

Objectives and progress

This new OSI-PANTHERA expedition will take place in 2 stages on 2 different sites.

First of all, in the **Kyrgyzala-too chain**, in the **Shamshy Valley**, which has recently moved from being a protected area hunting concession; even though it does not yet have a nature reserve status. Pastoralism is therefore practiced but the motivation of the local guards already allows to observe a good return of ibex populations and a confirmed presence of the snow leopard.

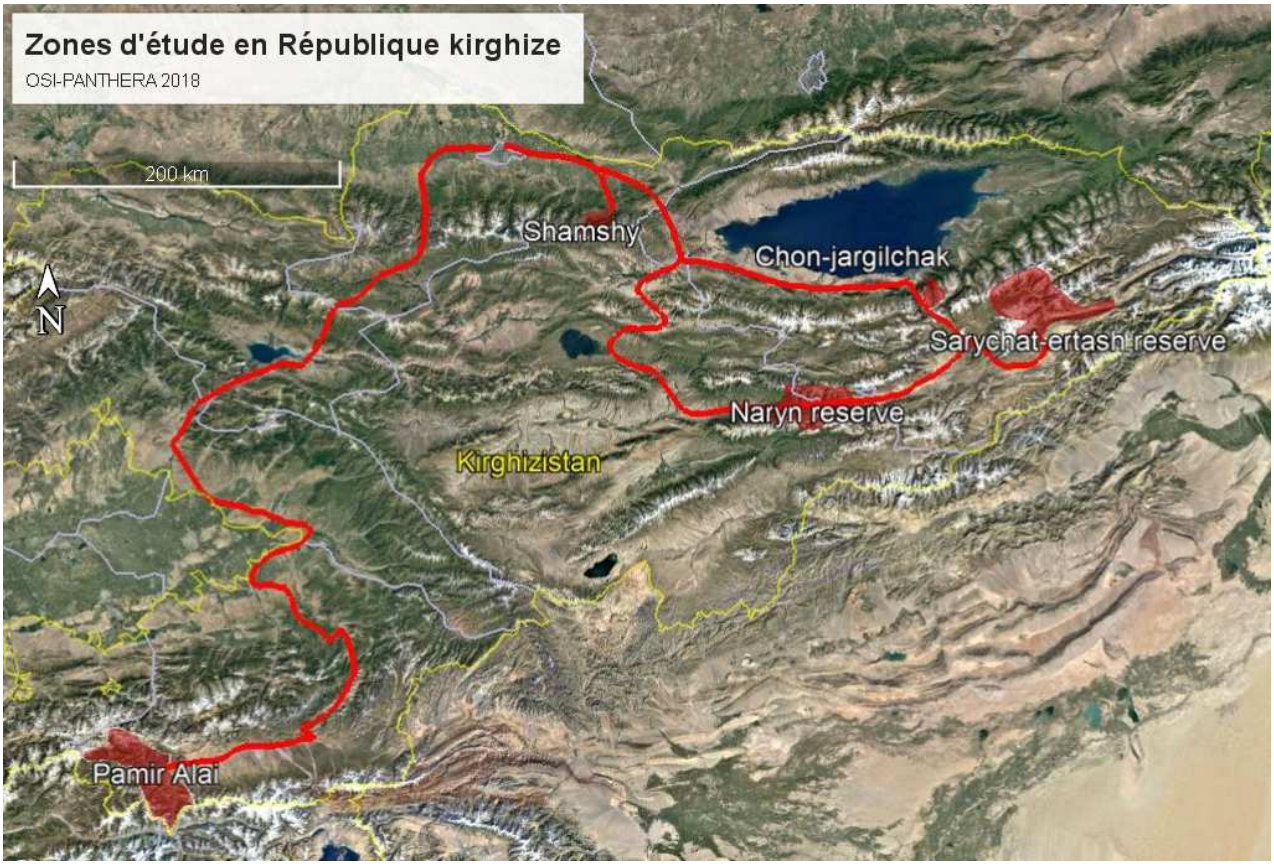
The expedition to the Shamshy area is taking **place in partnership with the Snow Leopard Trust International Organization (SLT)**, which has been working for years on conservation projects for the snow leopard and the involvement of locals in Kyrgyzstan but also on the entire range of the feline. The SLT partly finances the guards who look after this area as well as the renovation of the cabin housing them.

The arrival of volunteers should make it possible to pose and control photographic traps while bringing a certain dynamic around the preservation of nature through the exchange of knowledge with the local populations concerned by the project.

In addition to setting photographic traps, the purpose of the expedition is also to survey the snow leopard and to collect as much data as possible on the prey species present.

The second part of the expedition will take place in the **Chong Jarguilchak Valley**, in the **Teskey-ala-too range**, south of Lake Issik-kul. There, the OSI-Panthera team wants to make faunistic inventories as well as make the first surveys concerning the snow leopard. Unlike Shamshy, the Chong Jargilchak Valley, which is a hunting reserve, suffers a lot from poaching. We hope that the example of Shamshy where wildlife is now more abundant and less fierce can develop in Chong Jargilchak.

Unlike other expeditions, this one takes place in a relatively less isolated setting (a few hours of riding from the first asphalt road). The horses will be an integral part of the expedition but a large part of the surveys will be done on foot which may be suitable for people who would be discouraged by the importance of the riding part of other expeditions.



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

Your mission

The role of the volunteers during the expedition will be to search the valleys and ridges for signs of presence of snow leopards (scraping, excrement, traces, etc.), but also to pose and raise traps-photographic so to evaluate the distribution and density of Snow Leopard. In addition, they will make an inventory of prey species and competitors observed. All this in team with guards and villagers involved in the project.

Every day, we will travel on foot or at the bottom of the valley, in half groups to pose or control photographic traps on favorable areas. Photographic traps will be ideally placed according to the needs of the SLT in the Shamshy Valley and according to our protocols in the Chong Jarguilchak Valley. This sometimes requires traveling between sites.

Everything will be noted during surveys and all presence indices concerning the snow leopard such as scraping, urine markings, footprints etc. Snow leopard droppings will be partly taken for genetic analysis.

Standard program of the expedition day after day

Day 1: Early morning arrival at Bishkek airport. 1st meeting with your supervisor, then a drive to the center of the Kyrgyz capital which is already 800 m above sea level. Installation at the guest house. Discovery of the city, its big market, the oriental "Osh Bazar", its parks. Recovery of necessary food for the week in autarchy in Shamshy Valley.
In *kirghiz*, a "bishkek" is a churn used to make fermented mare's milk (kumis), the national drink of *Kyrgyzstan* !

Day 2: Departure to Shamshy Valley. Meet with the guards and hunt to the hut that will serve as a base camp. We will set up the tent camp near the guards' cabin and then move it according to the needs of our surveys.
Being an old hunting concession, there is a relatively comfortable cabin recently renovated by the SLT to improve the working conditions of the guards.

Day 3 to 8: Prospecting the surrounding valleys with trips on horseback if necessary but most often on foot. Faunistic inventory, particularly ornithological.
A first ornithological inventory was started a few years ago but a complement will be very interesting. Similarly the population of ibex being rebuilding the guards will appreciate our help for counting!

Day 9: Departure for Chong Jarguilchak, we will follow the Kazakh border before following the south shore of Lake IssykKul where we will be hosted at the inhabitant. We will recover the necessary provisions for this week in autarky.
The village of Chong Jarguilchak is located in the middle of the southern shore of the great Issykkul Lake, "Issik-Kul" means "hot lake": the lake is fed by 80 rivers and streams as well as hot springs. It does not freeze in winter, due to its slight salinity.

Day 10 to 16: Meeting with the villagers who will accompany us and recovery of the horses. Departure towards the Chong Jarguilchak Glacier. During these few days we will make the first surveys of the snow leopard in the valley. We will note the presence indices of snow leopard and the different animal species observed.
It is a magnificent view that will await you. On one side you will dominate Lake IssykKul, on the other the glacier will dominate you while being surrounded by a spruce forest. This valley is not a natural reserve state, however it is a game reserve where hunting ibex is theoretically prohibited. The expedition will also have for vocation to exchange with the villagers so that they become aware of the rarefaction of these ungulates.

Day 17: Day in the village of Chong Jarguilchak to make a computer data entry, a first sort, see a start of analysis of images of traps recovered photos and writing the balance sheet of the expedition. All this will be done of course between 2 dives in the lake!

Day 18: Return by mini-bus to Bishkek.

Day 19: Return to Europe by plane in the morning very early.

This scientific expedition has two objectives: each year we organize an expedition with Kyrgyz teenagers so that they have the opportunity to discover their mountains, and the ecosystems that compose them. Either a project to rehabilitate the base camps (insulation, installation of solar equipment) was created to improve the day-to-day life of the Kyrgyz guards at the coldest times of the year.

Prerequisites

ATTENTION: Registration for this stay requires a full awareness of its level of physical and athletic difficulty. Far from discouraging you, these challenges may seduce you, but you must be aware of them and accept them to participate in the expedition!

Walking

Almost every day of presence except the days of traveling on horseback from one camp to another, we will pose traps-photographic half-group.
For the first group that chose to set a peak trap that day, **expect a difference in altitude from 300 to 900 m in the day,** or about 4 to 6 hours of walking, or more, on steep slopes .
For the second group prospecting for example the bottom of valley, the difference in altitude will be less.
In all cases we will walk very often **off-trail**, on **steep slopes** and in **very rough terrain**.

Horse

Horses are used to move from one camp to another, to get close to the trap areas and to transport the logistical equipment. **For this it is not necessary to be a rider but you must not be afraid of these animals, nor to mount them**. We will stay in most of the time and in any case we will not exceed the speed of a trot. The horses are small, very docile, know the trails on the ends of hooves and are very well trained by the villagers who accompany us. This expedition to Shamshy and Chong-Jargilchak has far fewer horseback parties than the others and most of the time we will only use it to carry the material. We will regularly do half-groups during surveys, some pedestrian, other equestrian.

Camping

The accommodation will sometimes be at the inhabitant (village house or yurts) at the beginning and end of the stay but will be mostly in camp under tent.Il must love living in nature, in the area relatively isolated, far from the usual comfort, but also closer to the essentials!

Adventure

This participatory science expedition is a first in the region and everything remains to be discovered. **The adventure will be part of our daily life and it is necessary to be able to adapt to the unexpected.** The supervisors of OSI-PANTHERA - with many years of experience in organizing such expeditions to Kyrgyzstan - will be there to ensure the smooth running and logistics of the expedition.

Naturalistic interest

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

Some practical information about our shipments:

Immersion: This expedition takes place in slightly less isolated valleys than other study areas where we usually work. We will still be several hours of horse from any human presence or road. In this context, rescue can sometimes only be done by helicopter. Although it is not extreme isolation has a certain psychological and security weight that must be accepted. As on other expeditions in a more isolated environment, the team will be equipped with appropriate means for security and communication.

Rusticity: Our expeditions are done with a fairly limited comfort, we sleep in tents (provided by the NGO) every day and sometimes we do bivouacs under the stars. Highly variable weather conditions in the high mountains will be more noticeable, especially with fatigue which requires elaborate equipment. The toilet is done in cold water along a stream.

Autonomy: We will be in total autonomy on at least 2 times 6 days with regard to the food transported on horseback like all the rest of the material. They are not great gastronomy given the field constraints (starch and mutton) but still sufficient and feast the majority of our participants. We make our bread once the starting stock has run out. Being in state reserves, we will not practice gathering, fishing or any other activity of this type.

Sports and equestrian level: Our expeditions are not sports treks or equestrian stays. The horse is our means of transportation from one camp to another while walking allows us to conduct our study on the areas where the snow leopard evolves. These surveys will be carried out in very rough terrain, off-trail and with elevations ranging from 500 to 1500 m of elevation gain per day. It is necessary to arrive in form in expedition and to have already practiced the mountain off trail, without being a athlete of high level! If the horse and riding are an integral part of our daily life during the expedition, it is clearly not an equestrian trekking because for example for safety reasons gallops are prohibited during the expedition.

Duration: *Eighteen days on-site (twenty days including the round-trip plane ride)*
Or ***five weeks***
Lodging: *Full board (hotel, yurts, tents)*
Travel: *Plane, minibus, jeep, horseback, on foot*
Group: *Six participants*
Monitoring: *One sciences educator and two wildlife officers*

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Dates: *May to October*