











Siberian Tiger Winter Tour

Destination: Russia **Duration:** 14 Days **Dates:** 27th Nov – 10th Dec 2014

-  Missing a Tiger chase and kill a Wild Boar across the road by less than 5 minutes
-  Having the expert guidance of Alexander, a leading Russian tiger expert
-  Seeing some winter resident birds including Ural owl & Rough-legged buzzard
-  Being involved in a vital tiger census by counting tracks and setting camera traps
-  Finding tiger tracks that were so fresh, the tiger must have reacted to our presence
-  Exploring the immense Taiga forest that spans 2/3 of the northern hemisphere
-  Being watched by wild Siberian tigers as we shared their winter habitat on foot
-  Coming face to face with an enormous Wild boar on the road one afternoon
-  Seeing the seldom seeing Siberian flying squirrel and Siberian roe deer
-  Meeting Zhorik the disabled but playful tiger who was rescued from a circus



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Alexander (Reserve Director & Guide)
 Sergey (Base Camp Cook)
 Nikolai (Reserve Guide)
 Arkady (Base Camp Assistant & Ski Instructor)
 Ivan (Base Camp Assistant & Fire Manager)
 Roman (Base Camp Assistant)
 Ruslan (Russian – English Translator)
 Alexander (The Sable Fur Trapper)

Participants

Mr. Henri Batut
 Mr. Stuart Hill
 Ms. Susan Teece

Overview

Day 1:	Khabarovsk
Days 2-12:	Forest Reserve
Day 7:	Utyos Centre
Day 8:	Udeghe Village
Day 13:	Khabarovsk
Days 14:	Home / Khabarovsk
Days 15:	Home



Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Tigers are most commonly associated with the tropical and subtropical forests and elephant grasslands of the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia; however they used to range far and wide over the Asian continent. From Iran to Korea and Indonesia to Kazakhstan including most of Far Eastern and Central Russia; unfortunately over 93% of their historical range has been lost since the start of the 1900's (incredibly a reduction of 40% since 1990!!). Most of the comprehensive decimation of the tiger's range has occurred in China where the tiger has a paradoxical role in the culture; both a revered and celebrated species; an animal integral to the creationist myths of Chinese religion and also one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. However this reverence is countered by a merciless hunger for tiger products; every part of the tiger is utilised by the Chinese in their traditional medicinal practises. From penis (for fertility) to whiskers (for asthma) and every part of the body in between the demand for tiger products is so lucrative that they have been hunted to the verge of extinction in China and now the demand has been met by poachers in other countries. The vast reduction of the tiger's numbers in China has led to a huge gap in the tiger's current distribution. Whilst still present in areas of South and South East Asia any map of the tiger's range will include a small shaded area along the Russian coastline just north west of Japan. This is the realm of the Siberian tiger (more correctly called the Amur tiger and in the local Udeghe language Amba); a forest that is covered in a blanket of snow and ice for 6 months of the year and then a rich and diverse temperate boreal 'jungle' in the summer. At first glance in the winter this seems like the last place that a tiger would be found, however they have spent a considerable amount of their evolutionary history in the forests of eastern and central Asia. The evolutionary history of the tiger starts in Java around 2 million years ago and at this time there were land bridges connecting Java to the mainland and the tiger quickly moved north and reached the Russian Far East, Japan and Korea around 1.5 million years ago. They remained here for some time, spreading west and as far as Turkey (for some reason tigers never made it further west and into Europe and they didn't cross the land bridge connecting Asia with the Americas. The tiger has been and is a truly Asian species, born and bred. It is ironic that the most closely associated country with the tiger (India) is the one that they arrived in the latest. Tigers only made it to India round 12,000 years ago, this is known because fossil evidence suggests that they never made it to Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka was attached to India via a land bridge until around 12,000 years ago. Since evidence of tigers has been found throughout India from around then it is clear that they would have made it to Sri Lanka if they had arrived when they were still connected. As tigers have spent most of their history in cooler climates they are more at home in the temperate forests than the sub-tropical ones of India, a fact that is highlighted by their dislike of the heat and their love of bathing in the heat of the dry season. So despite the Russian winter seeming so alien for a tiger to call home, they are very at home here and arguable more so than in India.

So it is here, in the frozen forests of Far Eastern Russia where our search for one of the most elusive and endangered animals in the world would take place. Whilst seeing a wild Siberian tiger is extremely difficult we would be helped in this task by Alexander and his team who run the 20,000 hectare reserve around 200km south of Khabarovsk. This reserve and the surrounding forests are home to a very high density of tigers (a density so high that it rivals densities in some of India and Nepal's most productive national parks); one of the main reasons for this high density of tigers is the prey base. Even though finding any wildlife in these forests in winter is tough there are lots of deer and wild boar around and whilst hunting occurs here (during hunting seasons) it has been less so than in other areas and so the numbers of prey still remains high. Our time in the reserve would coincide with one of the two annual censuses that are conducted in the reserve; by counting the tracks and also by collecting pictures and videos of the tigers from remote camera traps the team are able to build a picture of the current population. The presence of adult male and females using the same areas are great and a litter of cubs is the perfect reward for many hours of tracing tracks in the freezing conditions. By spending time with the team in the reserve and becoming part of the tiger's continued fight for survival here you will be given a unique view into tiger conservation in a part of the world that is seeing genuine tiger conservation success. Most of the tiger populations around the world are decreasing, plagued with poaching and surrounded by huge and growing populations the tiger's days seem numbered in many countries they exist in. But in Russia the numbers are increasing, from around 40 in the 1940's to 500 or so today. This is in part due to increased conservation since the 1950's when the first ever census of tigers (anywhere in the world) was conducted and the government realised the peril that the tiger was in, part the fact that Vladimir Putin loves tigers and has set up numerous new parks and reserves and has implemented new patrols and anti-poaching measures and also part that Russia is so vast and the population so low, that there are still places where wildlife can live in complete ignorance of people. All of these factors contribute to an increasing number of tigers and with lots of forest habitat around there is scope for a vastly larger population here. But most of this incredible work is only possible with the help of people like us, the eco-tourist and that is what sets Alexander alone, his ideology that eco-tourism here will provide enough income to support conservation and research and will also provide alternative income to the hunter that are currently the only people who pay the reserves for their use.



So we would try and see if we could find a Siberian tiger, however this tour is about contributing to their continued survival and also to understand a very different tiger to the one that is usually covered in documentaries and books. To see huge tiger tracks in deep virgin snow is an incredible experience and one that will live long in the memory even if we are not lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the incredible and hardy animal that inhabits these frozen forests.



Day 1 **Khabarovsk**

Arrival

Susan and Henri had already arrived the day before the tour started and so Susan would meet Martin at the hotel reception in Khabarovsk in the morning, Henri would be collected from his hotel and Martin would meet Stuart at the airport. After everyone had been picked up we met at Alexander's apartment in the city as final preparations were made for the stay in the forest. When we were all at the apartment we were introduced to Alexander himself, Ruslan who would be our interpreter for the duration, Nikolai who would be a great help in taking us around the forest in the vehicle and snow mobile and Olga who has helped to make all of the ground logistics. As we relaxed and got to know people Alexander then made some small snacks and we had a small briefing and introduction to the reserve including looking at some of the books that Alexander has published as well as some pictures and videos of the wildlife and tigers in the reserve that Alexander has recently captured on his camera traps. We then loaded up the cars and made a trip to the local supermarket to buy any last minute snacks, alcohol and other supplies we may miss when isolated in the forest for the next 12 days. Martin, Stuart, Ruslan and Alexander were in one vehicle with Nikolai, Henri and Susan (who speaks Russian) in the other vehicle. This would be the configuration for all of our vehicle safaris and transfers throughout the tour. Most of the journey was uneventful, driving out of the sprawling and industrial city of Khabarovsk and into the rural areas that dot the southern boundary of the taiga forest before entering the forest as we closed in on the reserve. Some of the hardy winter birds were seen along the way including a huge flock of carrion crows and some northern ravens. Whether this is a commonly used roosting site or a carcass of an animal was nearby we couldn't ascertain but the flock was over 100 strong and imposing as they perched in the leafless almost lifeless trees either side of the icy road. It was a wonderful sunny day today and with 2 early winter snows already this year it would be interesting to see how the wildlife reacts to the early accumulation of snow. Snow usually starts to fall hard in late November but in the first week of November they had already had 60cm and then 30cm of snow fall. This is the most snow they have had in this region since the 1960's. The last hour or so was on a road that is only a road in the frozen winter, during the summer the area we drove through is a marsh and as a result there are a couple of wooden bridges to cross. We crossed the barren snow covered flat marshes and silver birch forests until we reached the taiga forest that marks the start of the reserve. On the entrance to one of the marshes we found 4 day old brown bear tracks. The bears here may be heading to an early hibernation with the increased snow fall and this bear was walking straight and quick towards the forest and away towards possible hibernation locations. As we drove closer to the base camp we found 10 day old tracks of an adult female tiger and her cub following a large male wild boar. They left the road and headed deep into the forest and we arrived at the base camp at around 5pm as the sun began to set behind Big Ambine one of the 2 hills that dominate the centre of Alexander's reserve. This evening we just unpacked, settled into our cabins and met the rest of the camp's staff including Sergey (Alexander's son) who is the camp cook and who had prepared a wonderful spread of local food for us on arrival. The vast majority of the food we consume in the reserve comes from the surrounding forest, during the hunting season the wild boar and roe deer are harvested and then stored in the natural deep freeze, the trout and salmon are all locally caught, all of the fruit and jams are collected from the forest as is the wonderful wild garlic condiment that is so typical of the Russian Far East. We also met Arkady, Ivan and Roman and were showed and had explained the traditional banya (Russian sauna and integral part of the culture here) which we were welcome to each evening. After our meal we retired to our warm and cosy cabins for the night, tomorrow we would have a tour of the camp and then head out into the forest on our forest tiger census trip.

Day 2 **Durimskoye Reserve**

Tiger Tracking

This morning we awoke to a brisk -24°C and had a hearty breakfast. We all met in the kitchen before having a guided tour by Alexander around the base camp. Throughout the tour and the following days the enthusiasm for the forest and its wildlife that Alexander has comes through and is not lost in translation. In fact there were many times when he would talk about tigers and the wildlife in the reserve and you would understand everything before Ruslan had translated anything! He explained about the different trees and plants that are found in the forest and



many of which he has planted in the base camp so that the camp can make the most of these species. One of the most fundamental things that shines through here is that nothing is wasted, cigarette butts are saved and burnt as fuel, ashes from the fires are saved, mixed with salt and left as mineral salt licks for the deer at certain strategic locations in the forest and the tea leaves are taken from the kettle and buried, these then attract worms that are used in the summer for fishing. It is very humbling to see people here live in harmony with the forest in a way that is so completely lost in most of Western society. We were shown the banya and how it works, the chicken coups for fresh eggs and the big house that is usually only used in summer as it takes too much fuel to heat up sufficiently in winter. We also met the hunting dogs, there are 2 dogs here Zidane the male and father to Urza, they are incredibly friendly and good natured and clearly like the snow as they come bounding out of their cages and never stop running and rolling in the snow. They are kept in cages as a precaution against tiger attacks. Tigers in Russia compete with wolves and they have evolved a seeming dislike for wolves and as a result all things canine. In the wild they would actively kill and try to disperse wolves from the forest (to reduce competition) and this can manifest itself in dog killing, which is not just distressing for the dog owner but can lead to a tiger spending too much time around a settlement where it may one day take a human or itself be killed. In fact many of Alexander's stories of the tigers occurred within the perimeter of the base camp, including one where a tiger took one of his puppies from just 5m in front of Alexander as he stood in the entrance to the kitchen. Alexander showed us the *Schistandra* vine which produces berries that are made into a delicious jam and also which roots are used to make tea with. We were also guided through some of the other plants that have been deliberately planted around the camp as their roots, leaves and berries are very good in a concoction of teas. One thing that is also very noticeable around here is the high presence of mistle-like parasitic plants that grow in clumps in the tree tops. Around one in 5 trees has one of these and Alexander explained that when a bird eats the berries of the mistle their dung becomes very sticky so that when the bird defecates it sticks to the trunk or branch of a tree (without falling off and to the ground) this allows the seeds that are undigested in the dung then grow direct from dung at the top of the tree. One of the most amazing plants that we were introduced to is the famous ginseng, the ginseng grows in this forest all over but amazingly only grows a new bud and leaves every 9 years, so it is understandably highly sought after by the local people and one of the two groups of indigenous peoples here (the Nanai) use lots of ginseng in their medicine. After this introduction to the base camp and a small insight into the way that the local people use the plants here we wrapped up warm and boarded sledges and using snow mobiles went to check some camera traps, count tracks and visit a hunter's winter cabin. This would be a test for everyone to see how everyone copes with the cold (with temperatures that can drop to -40°C it is imperative that the Russian team makes sure that everyone has the correct gear before we head deeper into the forest and for longer). Along the snow mobile track we were looking out for all of the tracks, whilst counting the tiger tracks is the main target for the tiger censuses it is also very important to count the tracks of all of the wildlife here as the tigers can only survive here with healthy populations of prey animals too. The 2013 censuses showed populations of 138 Manchurian wapiti, 53 wild boar, 27 roe deer and 15 musk deer. Whilst these are not large numbers of animals this is only from a small sample area of forest and when extrapolated to cover the whole protected forested areas around here the numbers are very healthy indeed and the density of tiger numbers supports this. In the 20,000 hectare reserve there are 14 tigers (including 4 cubs) in the greater area (encompassing another 3 forest reserves like Alexander's reserve) has a population of at least 27 tigers that have been positively identified. This includes around 6 cubs; and it is this incredible density of tigers ($4.5 \text{ tigers}/100\text{km}^2$) that makes this reserve by far the best place to try and get a glimpse of what is one of the rarest, most elusive and threatened animals in the world.

So throughout this trip Alexander and his team would be guiding us along certain transect routes that they use twice a year to make these censuses and will be making a note of all animal tracks we see. This particular track was very quiet with no tiger tracks and very few other animals either, of the tracks we did see, wild boar, roe deer, mountain hare, squirrel and sable none were very fresh and so we continued direct to a large silver birch tree that is a well used scent marking tree. We set up a camera trap opposite the tree and carried on. We came across many large nests in the trees either side of the track. These nests were made by Asiatic black bears in the summer as they sleep in the trees as well as climb the trees to feed on tender leaves and buds at the top of trees. This is a strange behaviour for the Asiatic black bear and the reason they spend so much time in the trees is the presence of tigers that are predators of the bears. Obviously during the winter the Asiatic black bears as well as the brown bears that also live here are hibernating, but the reserve in summer and autumn is also the best place in the world to see this endangered bear species. We then arrived at a small wooden cabin, one of many that dot the woods here and allow hunters a place to stay and get warm if they are caught out in the elements. The cabin was basic and currently the home of Alexander (a different Alexander) who was spending some time here with a license (provided by 'our' Alexander) for 10 sable pelts. So we chatted to him and had some tea. We were also shown a fungus called chagga that grows on the trunks of large birch trees, this fungus has many nutrients and minerals and is reported to have anti-carcinogenic qualities. We would be having more chagga tea as the trip goes on. As we learned from Alexander there had not been any recent tiger sign around here, and whilst this may seem like a negative thing it most likely means that the 2-3 adult tigers who regularly patrol this territory border are likely to come through here in the coming days as they usually patrol their entire territory for scent marking within 10-14 days. Another aspect of having the cabin occupied was the presence of many birds feeding on the seeds and suet that Alexander had left out for them around the windows. It can be a lonely existence in the cabin in the forest on your own and the birds (according to Alexander) are interesting to watch. So we sat and watched the Eurasian



nuthatch dominate the many marsh tits and it was interesting that the larger eastern great tits stayed away from the seeds near the window and instead fed from the meat attached to a wild boar skin that was hanging nearby. This is the bait that is used by Alexander for his sable trapping. We also had some home-made kuish which is a traditional Russian drink made from fermenting rye bread and was a lot nicer than it sounded. A little further up from the hunters cabin we found tiger tracks, these tracks clearly showed the tiger is full run and in between the large bounding tracks of the tiger we found deep and sharp tracks of a running wild boar. The chase occurred around 1-2 days earlier. We followed the tiger tracks backwards (having come across them as the tiger leapt into the forest and away. Before the tiger had come across the wild boar it was walked slowly down the road and scent marked on another large silver birch tree. This tiger is known to Alexander is a 4 year old male, trying to establish his own territory for mating rites. However there are 2 very large and powerful males in the area and as males continue to add muscle mass until around 5 years old it is unlikely this small and inexperienced male will be able to beat either of these males to mating rites with the females around here. Following the tiger further along we found where he had lay down in the road, the dirt on his coat coming off and staining the snow. This is incredible to see and shows that these are since the last snow which was around 36 hours ago. Pinpointing the set of tracks to within this period. We also found a very good example of a tiger scrape on the side of the pathway, these scrapes are made with the hind legs as they are scraped back and forth in parallel creating two grooves and a mound, this mound usually has urine and / or a scat on it and these scrapes are used as long term (as they last very well for around 4-5 weeks) scent marking sites that can be reused many times. Before turning around we found some very fresh wild boar tracks running from one side of the road to the other, this was probably in response to hearing our snow mobiles coming. We counted 2 females, 1 adult male and a young male from their tracks and also saw where the adult male had rolled in the fresh snow before running off. These tracks were very dirty showing that the group of boar had found a wallow somewhere and were covered in mud. We set up a trap around here (in fact Stuart's camera trap) as with a group of wild boar and a tiger in the area there is a chance of getting something on these cameras. We then turned around and headed towards a natural salt lick, as we were turning the snow mobiles around in the narrow forest passage Alexander spotted a Siberian roe deer bolt away from us and into the forest. The presence of the roe deer coupled with the small group of wild boar was encouraging news for Alexander as needs to have high prey densities in order to have high tiger densities. Alexander's philosophy is that he would prefer the tigers to have the prey animals to themselves and not the hunters, so he had reduced (unofficially) the hunting season in his reserve by a couple of weeks and also issues less permits than usual. He also allows the local people of the nearby village to hunt on the periphery of the reserve, this is very much frowned upon by the bureaucrats who run the forest reserves from their city centre perches. But this gains a special respect for Alexander from the local people and they help him combat the poachers and also if you just ban the local from hunting (their subsistence hunting which they have been doing for hundreds if not thousands of years in some cases) they will still do it, but they will start to build up a resentment for the protected species and could possibly turn into poachers themselves. Alexander is truly one of the most pioneering reserve managers in Russia and a man who is embracing modern conservation management techniques including eco-tourism and including the local and traditional ways of life into the overall forest ecosystem. We would hear more of this philosophy and see it in action over the course of the time in the forest.

At the salt lick we found a Eurasian red squirrel climbing amongst the pine trees and had great views of Eurasian jay too. We then departed for lunch (a late lunch) back at the base camp. As the sun got lower in the sky we headed out to another base camp, this one is a large and during the summer and autumn used by many hunters as well as students who study the forest. During the winter it is largely abandoned and looked after by Vitali, Alexander wanted to touch base with Viatli and check on any recent tiger activity. When we were here in February 2014 Vitali ad a wonderful, friendly and cute puppy, however in the summer this puppy had been killed and eaten by a tiger and he had been given a new very young puppy by a group of hunters recently. This puppy was small enough to hide underneath the houses and also very scared. It will be these two traits that could prove life savers for the little fella. Although when I head back in February 2015 I have little hope that this dog will be alive. It is telling that Vitali doesn't cage his dogs or invite them into his house or really offer any protection from the tigers and when he said that he is not naming this dog or training it because it will not be alive long enough to learn anything; it hit home that this man has spent too much time on his own in this beautiful but brutal place. The last time he had seen a tiger was a while ago but there were tracks of a young tiger from 2 days ago nearby. Tomorrow we would focus attention around here and as the cold really started to set in we headed back to the camp, had a snack and Martin played a documentary about Siberian tigers (in fact a documentary filmed in this reserve a few years ago) before heading to bed.





Day 3 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the thermometer hovered around -26°C at breakfast and we decided to take the cars out today once the sun had rose above the hills and started to warm the air a little. However the temperatures rarely peak above -10°C during the middle of the day around here. Our destination today is the 'post-office' this is a large rocky escarpment in the forest and very close to a logging road that heads into our reserves that are not as concerned with conservation and nature as Alexander's. The escarpment contains many overhanging rocks and is on the confluence of 3 of the forests small rivers, this is a very good natural territory boundary and also signalling point for tigers. Hence the nick name 'post-office'. In the last 2 years the camera traps have recorded 7 different adult tigers scent marking on these rocks and many of the females have had litters of cubs in the past. Alexander always has cameras set up here and he would be changing a memory card and Martin would be setting his up here for the duration of our stay. As we started driving up the hill passes towards the post-office we passed a very old tree which has a large hole going down into the belly of the trunk. This is one of the more well-known Asiatic black bear hibernating sites and as we do not know if there is a bear in there or not the moment, we didn't poke our head inside. Along the road a little further up we found male tiger tracks from around 2 days ago walking up the road and towards the post-office. Older tracks were found underneath the males tracks and these were from a female around 6 days ago. It is very likely that this female is in oestrous and the scent produced by the anal glands and also the inter-digital glands (which are in between the toes on the feet) is informing the male of her receptiveness to breed. For largely solitary species such as tigers these long distance olfactory queues are often the only way the animals communicate with each other. A little further on, following the tiger tracks and heading towards the post-office Alexander's vehicle got stuck. This is not unusual as the high snow fall often leads to the occasional vehicle getting stuck. But this was different as the vehicle's front left tyre had broken through the ice and into a divot. The road is used by large logging trucks and they cut up the muddy road in the warm and wet summer and leave huge holes and deep tyre tracks in the road. Then in winter the water freezes and then gets covered in snow, eventually as winter progresses the water and snow is all compacted to solid ice and becomes as hard as concrete. But this early in the winter not all of the water had frozen with the unusually high level of snow fall recently these holes were not obvious and we had been caught out. With the help of Nikolai, some shovelling and pushing we managed to get the car out, but we had lost a lot a time. The plus side of this was that we had happened to get stuck in a part of the forest that was true taiga forest, most of the forest around here has been logged at some point in the past and the secondary forest growth is dominated by silver and 3 other species of indigenous birch trees. With the help of past forest reserve managers (as the birch is quick growing and a favourite in the current logging industry) the forest in many parts – particularly the reserves bordering Alexander's – is dominated by silver birch. This is not the case in natural primary taiga and that is the forest we were stuck in. The major difference is that the most common tree is the larch and other than that the diversity of trees is much higher. The whole basis for the taiga ecosystem is founded in the presence of large seed bearing trees such as Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut and Korean pine. These massive and slow growing hard woods were naturally the first to be targeted by the loggers in the 1950's-1980's and there are very few stands remaining. The odd Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut or Korean pine still can be seen in the forest and Alexander has a small stand of Manchurian oak in his reserve that somewhere remained unknown to the loggers. These acorns are the main source of food for the wild boar which is the number one prey animal for tigers. The whole ecosystem is dependent on the presence and fruiting success of these few species but in particular the tiger's continued survival is inextricably linked with the Manchurian oak. So seeing some areas of primary taiga forest is very refreshing and gives hope that the thriving tiger population here can continue to be thriving into the future. We didn't want to risk heading any further down this route today and would come back with snow mobiles on another occasion, the logging trucks had ruined this road and vehicles would really struggle down the road until the winter deep freeze sets in and sets the ice like concrete. So we turned around and headed back to the base camp, at the border of the reserve we stopped to look at some fresh wild boar tracks and Martin and Stuart spotted a Siberian flying squirrel, this usually strictly nocturnal mammal was gliding from one tree to another and then scurrying up before launching itself off again and away into the forest. Alexander has set up various nest boxes for this species around the reserve and base camp. Whilst the sighting was brief it was very good and nice to see this usually unseen species. We also spotted a hazel grouse flying into the trees, this is the most common medium sized bird in the forest during winter and they spend their days searching for seeds and dried berries on the ground and low-lying bushes and when they are disturbed they take off and fly into the trees, as soon as they land their perfect camouflage is showed off as they completely disappear until they take off again and fly deeper into the forest. We had lunch when we arrived back and then after it had settled we headed out on the snow mobiles. We would not have the time to get to the post-office and back on snow mobiles this afternoon so we headed to a trail which will not have been explored this winter, so we would blaze that trail. All of the trails, roads and routes we travel down throughout our stay in the reserve make up the census trails for the tiger counting. This afternoon was very quiet for sightings and tracks, which is not unexpected as the wildlife (especially the tigers) prefer to walk on the compacted trails as it is easier for them to walk on. So they have avoided the powdery snow in favour of other trails, our hope is that now we have created a compacted trail that the tigers will use this trail more, we set up a camera trap overlooking a very popular scent marking birch tree. We did however find tracks of a large male Asiatic black bear who was still not hibernating and in fact feeding on cedar cones, still fattening up the seeds before hibernating. So we returned to the base camp for dinner and another documentary about Russian wildlife in the evening.



Day 4 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature was incredibly warm for this time of year, with the thermometer showing -18°C . Today we would try and get to the post-office and loaded the snow mobiles into the trailers and drove the vehicles to where we got stuck yesterday. Shortly before arriving at that location we met a hunter walking along the trail, speaking to him we learned that he had seen male tiger tracks from last night or this morning heading towards the main road (and then across the road and into the forest) and coming from a seldom used road heading towards a base camp that is not used in winter and located deep in the forest. So we knew that in the last 18 hours or so a large male tiger had walked down this track, again heading towards the post-office, but following his tracks he veered off into the forest shortly after reaching the main road. Perhaps put off by the presence of logging trucks, the fresh tracks of which were also present further down the road. But very intriguingly we found a small piece of scat from last night, this was followed by another small piece. Tigers usually leave token scats when they have just fed and we did see and hear crows and ravens in the trees around the pathway. It began to look likely that the tiger had made a kill in the forest around here at some point in the last 24 hours and had no finished and was moving to another location in his territory. These small scats are usually only deposited around 3 hours after the tiger has finished a meal, and as they tend to sleep immediately after eating it was very likely that the carcass of the animal was very close to us. However to go and investigate such a fresh kill is very silly and not something we would be doing. Whether you take a gun or not the danger for you and the tiger is very real and so we avoid such possible encounters so that we do not invite an defensive attack and we also do not want to put ourselves in a situation where we have to take action against a tiger we didn't need to disturb. So we moved further down this road and found another set of tiger tracks but these ones being even older and also Eurasian lynx tracks from this morning. The more we travelled down this road and investigated the area we had the distinct feeling that we were in the presence of a tiger. But further up the road the tracks stopped and so we turned the snow mobiles around and headed back to main road to continue towards the post office. On the way back we had more time to look at other tracks (as we were not as focused on the tiger tracks) and we noticed a whole host of sable tracks darting in and out of a wood pile, interspersed with the sable prints were many smaller prints of a rodent, most like a birch mouse. The sable obviously came here last night and chased various mice around and in and out of the wood pile. The hunt and chase was very evident and as the wood pile was pretty large and probably home to a good population of mice we set up a camera trap opposite in the hope of getting some interesting sable footage (as well as possibly tiger and lynx which also use this road). When we got back to the main road we left the vehicles behind and headed towards the post office in the snow mobiles. We quickly found the tracks of a female tiger, these were the freshest we have come across so far and were made from this morning. We also found 3 scrapes that she had left, clearly this female was in her territory and with the rate of scraping probably in oestrous and wanting to advertise that fact. We then arrived at the post-office and could see old tiger tracks heading down and away from the rocks and the female tracks from this morning headed up there. We carefully scanned the hillside and couldn't see any sign of the tiger and if the tiger was very close (with 50m or so) we would surely have received a growl or roar to make us aware of her presence. So in the absence of this we climbed slowly up the slope and around the back of the rock face. We could see her tracks near the top and see where she had lay down on a small pine sapling. She was close by as we could not find any evidence of her moving on and we were almost certainly within 100m or so of the tiger as she watched us. This is typical tiger behaviour as they like to watch and wait and only when you seem to be getting to close to them will they let you know they are there with a call before walking or running off and deep into the forest. Again during this kind of expedition into the forest and so close to a tiger it is too dangerous for us and for the tiger for us to continue tracking her. Another very serious consideration in this instance is that Alexander was quite confident that this female has only just come into oestrous and has 3 cubs. The cubs will be close to dispersal age (maybe 2 years old) and around 90% of adult height. They could well still be around their mother and she could be extra defensive because of it, there is also the possibility that the male who was following her a few days ago (the tracks of which we found yesterday) could also be here and be defensive over his potential mate. So all in all we decided to set the camera traps, collect Alexander's old memory card and leave the post office as undisturbed as possible. But undoubtedly this was the closest we had come to a tiger so far and we were probably being watched by the tigress the entire time. On our way to another base camp we found some scats (most likely the male who we suspect of making a kill in the area) they were very rich in wild boar hair and very large. Tracks nearby suggested that the tiger was very close and probably moved off when hearing our snow mobiles on their approach. Stuart also spotted three Siberian roe deer running off up a forested slope. At this ranger station we asked if they have had any recent tiger sightings whilst we watched a pair of Eurasian nuthatches, a greater-spotted woodpecker, a flock of bohemian waxwings and several eastern great & march tits as they made out a living around the base camp during the harsh winter months. The ranger here had not seen a tiger for a while and admitted that he avoided the areas they are known from, his proximity to the post office would suggest that he would come across evidence of them often. We arrived back at the base camp at around sunset and close to the base camp we had great views of a hazel grouse on the ground, its camouflage not working on the pristine white snow. We also had nice views of three bohemian waxwings as they settled down to roost. Back at the camp we had our dinner and then in Alexander's cabin we went through the pictures on the memory cards that we had collected from the post-office. The results were amazing and included wapiti, Siberian weasel, Siberian chipmunk, Eurasian red squirrel, long-tailed birch mouse, sable as well as Eurasian



lynx and of course tigers. The tigers included a young male and a female, this was not the same female as we had tracked up to the rock, in fact we were very close to this tiger as she had not visited the rock to scent mark before we arrived! However the female we did capture on the camera was amazing for the fact that she had 3 young cubs with her. The cubs were probably no older than 3-4 months and they were very curious about everything. The first pictures of the family was in late October and without the snow and then the camera showed us the heavy and early snow falls in early November and then we had wonderful footage taken when the cubs experienced their first ever snow. The video footage is most probably the best ever footage taken of wild Siberian tiger cubs. They were playing with each other in the snow, running, jumping, pouncing, wrestling and rolling in the snow. We watched with incredible delight and were transfixed, to be lucky enough to see this, even through the lens of a camera that had recorded some weeks ago is a fantastic and inspiring privilege. This footage and the presence of the other mammals just goes to show what incredible wildlife lives here in the seemingly inhospitable frozen forest.



Day 5 **Gvasyugi Village**

Tiger Tracking & Cultural Sightseeing

This morning the warm weather continued and the temperature was -12°C ! Very warm for this time of year. Today after breakfast we went to visit a local Udeghe village. In the world it is estimated that there are no more than 50 tribes who still live out their lives in as much of a traditional way as possible. In the Russian Far East there are two such tribes left in existence, the Nanai and the Udeghe. The Udeghe are more numerous and in the Khabarovsk Krai (district) there are around 600 (out of a total population of 2,000) and the village of Gvasyugi has a population of around 150. On the way out of the reserve we found a large tiger scat in the middle of the road, from around 1 day ago and the scat was full of wapiti hair. Further along 2 other scats were full of wild boar hair showing that at least 2 tigers had been hunting successfully in this section of the forest since we arrived in the reserve as these scats were not on the road when we drove down here to get to the reserve on the first day. The road in and out of the reserve cuts through the most incredibly beautiful silver birch forest, the white trees with black markings standing so straight and proud in the pristine white snow. Even though this not ideal or 'natural' taiga forest the appearance is startling. As we continued in the forest we came across a young male tiger's tracks walking along down the road and towards the local village. This is probably one of the tigers responsible for a scat and was from around 24 hours ago. We followed the tracks and stopped at a scrape, the scrape still had dirt inside from in between the toes of the tiger. We could establish the approximate age and sex of the tiger by the prints, in crisp and compact snow it is possible to get quite accurate measurements of pads. These measured 9.5-10cm wide and this would mean a large female or sub-adult male. However the general shape of the pads is also a factor in determining their sex, for example if you could draw a box around the pad on a front paw and the shape was elongate then it is very likely this would be a female and if the box was square then it is likely this is a male. As the males have much larger front paws as these are used for fighting with other males for mates as well as hunting. Before we entered the lowland marshes we saw a Ussuri shrew and a Eurasian red squirrel foraging in the snow and then came across a couple of hunters. We spoke to them and found out that on the 28th November (just 3 days ago) they had actually seen a male and female tiger moving close together around 20km away from our base camp. This fits perfectly with the tracks we had been seeing and the summations we had been making about a breeding pair starting their courtship. This would last 3-5 days once the female has accepted the male and she may mate with more than one male. In fact this would be her intention as the more males she mates with the more protection her cubs will gain as any male (who mated with her mother) that they come across with their mother will left them alone as he will think they are his. This tactic is used by many solitary animals and results in mixed paternity litters of cubs. After leaving the hunters (it is always so good to hear of actual sightings and to see how happy they were to see the tigers is refreshing and a sign that the attitude to the top predator and lord of the forest is changing). we travelled through the lowland swamps (during the summer) and saw lots of fox, weasel and roe deer tracks these species like the more open areas to the forests. But we didn't have any sightings of these mammals, along the way we did come across plenty of birds including many Eurasian magpies, northern ravens, rock doves, Eurasian jays, azure-winged magpies, hazel grouse and small flocks pine buntings. We first stopped in the village and then crossed the large Durmin River and headed up the forested hills towards Gvasyungi village. At around midday some light snow started to fall, but by the time we stopped for some local food in a little roadside café the snow was getting quite heavy. Once the snow had passed a little we had views of a pair of hazel grouse perched in a tree and waiting for the weather to perk up. After arriving at the village the elder (who is almost single handily keeping the Udeghe way of life alive) had been taken ill and was not very well at all in hospital. As a result we didn't have the cultural performance that is usual here, however we did visit the small outdoor museum that showed the traditional styles of hut, storage and shrines that were used in the forest. Inside the shrine was a wooden idol this idol is called Amba and is believed to be the lord of the forest and Amba is represented as the tiger. The Udeghe people revere



and worship the tiger (as well as other wildlife) and it is very important that this mind set is not lost and that the people elsewhere in the Russian Far East understand that the tiger and other wildlife is vitally important to the forest here and also that people and the tiger can live in harmony when they are given their own space. We left the village at around 5pm and headed back to the base camp. The snow continued to fall steadily for most of the journey back and as the light faded we didn't see anything of note, at around 6:45pm we made a brief stop at the village and then carried on into the forest. The snow cover was around 2-3cm and fresh tracks from this afternoon us that Siberian roe deer, wapiti, Siberian weasel, sable and wild boar had all been active in the reserve. This level of snow fall is very good for tiger tracking, not only does the fresh snow make tracking and aging the tracks easier but also this level of snow cover means that tigers increase their scent marking when the snow stops. This is because the snow fall could have washed away any scent and covered any scrapes, so patrolling activity usually increases after a snow shower. By the time we got close to the base camp it was very dark and we had brief views of a Manchurian hare on the road before it hopped off speedily into the forest. Around 4km away from the camp we saw Asiatic black bear tracks heading into the forest, this is most likely the same male bear who left the tracks we saw yesterday. Back at the base camp we had dinner and headed to bed.

Day 6 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature was once again -12°C and the skies were overcast, snow had fallen again overnight and a covering of 3-4cm blanketed the ground. The forecast was for heavy snow over the next 2 days and as some of the roads in and out of the reserve can become impassable after very heavy snow we would stay close to the base camp for a couple of days, in fear of us getting stuck outside of the reserve. The constant snow fall was also due to make tracking difficult and most wildlife moves less in the heavy snow, so we would most likely have to wait until after the snows to stop before we would have fresh evidence of tigers. However you never know, so we would head out and see what we could find in the forest. Today we went down to the hunter's cabin once again to see if there had been any recent activity along this trail. Along the way we spotted a large-toothed Siberian shrew running alongside the snow mobile before darting into a tunnel underneath the snow. The shrews and rodents here do not hibernate and instead move under the snow during winter, there is a complex network of tunnels and holes throughout the forest. They are often only revealed on the sides of the pathways and roads that we have made, the sides of the trails often have small holes on either side with small footprints crossing the road. Whilst you would think the small mammals are safe under the snow you would be wrong as many of the owl species here including the specialist great-grey owl can hear the scurrying under the snow and pin point the location of the animal before diving down and capturing the animal even under around 20-30cm of snow. At the cabin we once again spoke to Alexander and watched the birds at the window for a while. We had a snack with Alexander had made and warmed us up before we continued to check on the camera traps. It is important to check the camera traps after snow to clear the sensors and lens of any snow build up. Along the trail we could see prints of around 10 wild boar crossing the road, further along we came across tracks from the same group of wild boar running across the road in the opposite direction. These were accompanied by tiger tracks, it seemed very likely that the tiger had chased the wild boar from the forest, across the road and possibly killed one in the nearby forest. This section of forest is around 500m from the base camp and we are well within the territory of a female with 3 cubs around 18 months old. All of the evidence was suggesting that the female was in this small wedge of forest (surrounded by roads, none of which had tracks leaving the forest) with a wild boar kill. Because we suspected that this tiger has cubs we would leave this area for a few days so not to disturb the female as she would be leaving the kill to collect the cubs from their den. Whilst we would desperately want to see the tiger we also do not want to disturb the tigers particularly the ones with cubs, so we would leave this feeding female and her cubs in peace for the next few days. After lunch back at the base camp we had a visit from a couple of hunters. Two days ago whilst out driving we came across a young female husky trotting along the road in the forest, the dog was not recognised by Alexander and we passed it off as a hunter's dog. However around 4km later we stopped the car and the dog has followed us the entire way. On closer inspection the poor dog was very cold, thin and terrified. We collected her and warmed her up in the vehicle and took her back to the base camp. We cared for her and she must have been so scared to be in the forest on her own and surrounded by tigers. Alexander then asked around in the village when we went there yesterday, it seemed very unlikely they we would find the owners of the dog as it wasn't anyone in the village. But news had travelled fast and far and hunters from Khabarovsk (who were hunting at the weekend in a nearby reserve) heard and headed to collect their dog. As soon as they exited their car the dog recognised them and looked happy than we had seen her for the last couple of days. They loaded up their car and headed back to the town, it appeared that the poor dog had been out on her own (after running off whilst being trained as a hunting dog) 4 days ago. The snow continued to fall and seemed to be getting heavier and heavier as the afternoon turned to evening, we headed out at 4:30pm for a drive but the snow was definitely impairing our range of vision and we only found Siberian roe deer, wapiti and wild boar tracks as well as spotting a pair of hazel grouse feeding on the ground. Tomorrow we hoped for a stop to the snowfall and therefore an increase in the tiger activity.



Day 7 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning was a little cooler than previous days and the thermometer showed -19°C , there was also still some snowfall this morning but it was definitely lighter than previous days. There has been some snow overnight but overall the day seemed better for tracking than yesterday. At breakfast Henri told us that he had spotted something up on the hill (towards where we had surmised the tigress and cubs were) this sighting was most likely a wapiti after consulting with Martin and Alexander. Even though the snow fall had stopped the fresh snow will make driving on some of the roads difficult until we can compact the snow and the local plough from the village comes and flattens down the snow. This job is essential so that we can leave without delay when we have to depart for Khabarovsk. This morning we split into two different groups, one group (Alexander, Stuart, Martin and Ruslan) headed up towards the hills and the other group (Nikolai, Susan and Henri) headed towards the second base camp to see Vitali and explore than section of forest for any fresh tiger signs. After a the snow fall we wanted to cover as much ground as possible and see if any tigers had been active so splitting into groups was the best solution. AAs the day progressed the snow completely stopped and the sun began to shine through. Up near the hills we saw a long-tailed birch mouse crossing the road and many tracks of wild boar and two quite fresh wapiti tracks. We also had excellent and close views of a Eurasian bullfinch before leaving the vehicle and walking up a seldom used trail (the snow being around 40-50cm deep in places) to check on a camera trap. There were no tracks around this camera trap so we left the memory card in and didn't disturb the area immediately around the camera trap. Alexander has found that when you completely leave the camera trap alone with no tracks you often get more results than from camera traps where people have been moving around and leaving tracks. Sometimes (around scent marking trees) Alexander will walk up to the tree and make his tracks look as tiger like as possible so that when a tiger comes past it is more likely to scent mark or at least check the tree. When we returned to the car we headed up the hill as far as we could progress until the snow forced us to turn around and head back. As we were on the other side of the hill if we had gone further around and gotten stuck our radio to Nikaloi and the base camp may not have worked and we didn't want to run that risk, or have people at the base camp panic that we had not arrived back. Before arriving back at the base camp we spotted another pair of hazel grouse. Then back at based camp we met up with the other group and compared stories, they had seen many sable tracks as well as lots of evidence of wild boar, some of which were very fresh indeed. They also saw a sable crossing the road and some very close hazel grouse. But over all it was quiet and no one found any fresh tiger tracks, which among other things further suggests that the female was still in that section of forest as we had not seen tracks leaving the area. We did set up a couple of camera traps near to where we had seen the scats a couple of days ago but it was very quiet.

Day 8 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning was colder again at -24°C and with some snow falling the skies looked heavy and overcast, maybe there was more snow on the way. After breakfast we headed down from camp towards Vitali's camp, here we left the vehicles and headed up onto the back side of Big Ambine on the snow mobiles. This is the third side of the triangle to see if the female and cubs are still in this section of forest. To get up to the where camera traps are set and as far as we can go on the snow mobiles (many of the further trails are very seldom ever used in winter and are mostly ski trails) took a couple of hours and once there we stopped and rested. There is a small clearing in the wood where the camera trap is located. Nikolai went ahead on his own to see if it is at all passable, he was gone a worryingly long amount of time and just as Alexander was setting off to search for him, we heard the unmistakable sound of the snow mobile coming back up the hill. It was too difficult for him to get through just on his own, never mind with a passenger and a sledge. But whilst we were waiting up here we spotted some azure-winged magpies, Eurasian nuthatches and many marsh tits. On the way up here a pair of wapiti were spotted in the forest to the side of the road, but there were no fresh tiger tracks. In fact this was the longest Royle Safaris had ever gone in the reserve without fresh (from the last 24 hours) tiger tracks. The heavy snowfall was definitely playing a factor and limiting their movements. Nikolai reported no fresh tracks further down so we swapped the memory cards and headed back up towards the main road at the base of the hill. On the way back we spent more time checking out the sides of the road for tracks and we went further up beyond where we had been before on the road. Here we

found tiger tracks some 3 days old. They were heading up away from the hill and then went off into the forest. As this was very little to go off and the tracks were old we went to a nearby stream and made a small fire and got some



tea boiling. The tea today would be infused with *schistandra* roots and berries as well as chagga. We also had some food here and relaxed a little in the frozen forest. The sky started to clear up as the afternoon wore on and we were hopeful that tomorrow we would have more luck, after the lunch break and when we were all suitably warmed up we left the stream and headed on the snow mobiles to Vitali's base camp. Here we left Alexander to come back on the snow mobile after us and Nikolai too went to make a phone call. The only place in the reserve with phone signal is a road which was cleared for a power line and is only accessible by foot and lies around 700m into the forest. As the sun was beginning to set we Martin decided that Stuart, Susan, Henri and Ruslan would go ahead in Alexander's car and head back to the reserve. This was a very good decision as around half way to the base camp we came around a corner and an enormous male wild boar was stood on the road facing us. It was easily the largest wild boar we had ever seen, probably weighing close to 200kg and standing 1.2m at the shoulder he was enormous. He looked a little groggy and instead of running off which is the standard reaction of wild boar to people he stood and stared at us, for what seemed like an age. There was a lot of wild boar sign on the road including some blood and dirt. At this time of year the large males are fighting with each other for mating access to the females. It is very probably that we had broken up a fight between this boar and another, the other one running off sharply. But judging by the size of this male and the fact that he was a little bloody and definitely shaken, I would not have wanted to come face to face with his adversary. After a minute the wild boar started to move off down the road, still not heading off and into the forest, we watched as we walked down the road a little and then stopped and looked at us one last time before jumping into the forest and bounding away. This was a great sighting, it is so hard to see the large mammals in the forest during winter and the wild boar (as they are the preferred prey of both the tiger and hunters here) are very nervous and tend to bolt at the first scent, sound or sight of people or vehicles. This proved to be a very good end to an otherwise slow day for wildlife. We had dinner later that evening and watched a documentary on Russian wildlife before retiring to bed. Tomorrow we would head to the Utyos Rehabilitation Centre where they currently have 3 tigers.



Day 9 Utyos Rehabilitation Centre

Tiger Tracking & Sightseeing

With the sun shining this morning and a morning temperature of -23°C today was the day we would go to see a rescued Siberian tiger in a nearby rehabilitation centre. We would see the work being done by a handful of people in Far Eastern Russia (largely self-funded) who dedicate their lives to protecting tigers that have come into conflict with humans, tigers that would ultimately face a certain death without any intervening help; and whilst here we would also be able to see one of these incredible tigers in the snow of the Russian Taiga forest. Along the way we would be visiting different tigers' territories and a couple of transects that are very valuable to the overall tiger censuses. The quick route to the centre is over the hills and past the post office, but this route was still not possible in the vehicles, so we would have to go the longer way around and through the village. Almost as soon as we set off we found tiger tracks on a road from last night. The tracks walked down the middle of the road towards the village and were made by a female tiger. We followed them for around 4km, it was interesting that when we came to a bridge that she left the road and walked over the frozen river and then climbed back up to the road and continued to walk along the road. Alexander told us that only one tiger has ever been known to walk over the bridge instead of avoiding it. This was Abore a huge male who in February followed the last Royle Safaris group for several kilometres along the road under 1 hour behind us. Following her tracks we passed several scraps and also two sites in the road where she had lay down to sleep. The second one was magnificent the whole imprint of the tiger was there, from tail, body, 4 legs, neck and head. You could even see where the breath from her nose had melted the snow. We measured her body length (~1.8m) here and stood watching the space, it is incredible to think that despite all of the problems and dangers facing tigers globally and their continued survival into the next 100 years being in severe doubt; that here just last night or this morning one of these incredible, majestic animals was padding along down here and slept for a while in full view on an exposed road. Just minding her own business, this feels me with an awe and sense of hope that I seldom get with endangered wildlife. Maybe the tiger has a long term future in Russia after all. If this female is the one that Alexander thinks she is based on her territory, track size and body length then she has cubs that are approaching independence age; and the speed of her walking and the directness of the walking it is apparent was just patrolling and the regularity of her scent marking was indicative of her advertising her readiness to mate. Tigers often use roads and well worn pathways to walk around the best hunting grounds in their territory and this seemed to be what she had been doing last night. Following her tracks further

down the road we came across more scrapes and scent marking, as well as where she had reached up to scratch her claws on the bark of a prominent birch tree. The resulting prints showed small drops of blood inside them, from



where she had cut her paw whilst scratching the tree. I find it absolutely fascinating to get this kind of insight into the private life a tiger, all together we could piece together a few hours in the life of this female as if we were watching her and following her last night. Further along we found a scat from the tiger and this was full of wild boar hair, clearly she is a well fed tigress and had probably been on the kill for the last few days and was now patrolling her territory. We followed her all the way up until she left the road and headed into the forest and then we headed across the marshy plains towards the village. We drove through several traditional villages on our way to the rehabilitation centre, these villages were once thriving communities but since the fall of the Soviet Union the villages have been abandoned by the government and since then many of the farms have been bought by the Chinese, during the summer growing season the owners bring their own Chinese labourers in and so the local people are left with even less space for growing, as well as less job opportunities and the spiral continues to deepen. Most of the crops grown here are potatoes and corn however in the winter these fields are pristine and snow covered. During the winter the major source of income for the local people is selling the cedar cones that they can find during the autumn. Interspersed between the villages were small stands of forest and in one of these Stuart spotted a juvenile white-tailed sea eagle perched in a tree on the side of the road, the eagle took off and flew over the fields and away as we turned around and approached for better views. These eagles are common around the rivers during the autumn and due to the rivers freezing up in the winter they tend to move to the coast. However this young eagle was still around and was a great sighting. The great bird sightings didn't end there as we also spotted a rough-legged buzzard and an Ural owl. Both species perched in the leafless trees and provide very nice views and some photographs. The Ural owl is quite a difficult species to see around here and during the daylight is an even rarer sight, so we were very lucky to have such a good sighting. As we drove on we came across a vehicle carrying the head of another reserve and we stopped so Alexander could have a chat, they were preparing for a huge global tiger census that was due to start in February 2015. This is part of the massive tiger conservation initiative that was implemented in 2010 during a conference in St. Petersburg. The overall idea is to double the tiger numbers by 2022 and whilst many of the countries are on track to achieve this (including Russia) the survey in 2015 is the one that will see if Russia (as well as other countries) are still on course for this. We then arrived at the rehabilitation centre the light was fading a little and so we headed straight to see Zhorik. The centre was established by Vladimir Kruglov in 1991, Vladimir used to be employed to catch Siberian tigers alive using nothing but ropes and a large sack. These animals were sold to zoos and circuses and during his life he caught over 40 tigers like this. Then he caught one particular tiger for a circus but this tiger had a missing canine and the circus refused to take him. He was caught as a cub after his mother was killed by poachers however his injuries meant that Vladimir could not risk releasing this tiger back into the wild. So he built a large enclosure on his land, this was the birth of the rehabilitation centre and from this he started to rescue other animals (tigers, bears, foxes, lynx and deer) any animals that were reported orphaned or injured on roads or by hunters were taken in by Vladimir with the aim of helping them recover or grow to independence age before being released into the wild. Some of the animals however are too badly injured or too dependent on people to ever be released and so they are kept at the rehabilitation centre and given as good a life as they can provide. They also become very important ambassadors for conservation and education around here. The most famous of these was of course the tiger that started all of this, named Lyuti he was probably the most famous Siberian tiger in the world and also the most photographed, he also helped to raise much needed money to conservation and research into Siberian tiger during the 21 years he was kept at the centre. Vladimir himself died after a tree fell on him in 2005 and when Lyuti died in 2012 he was also buried with Vladimir and as is tradition in Russia the tombstones have pictures of the deceased on them. Vladimir's is probably the only tombstone in the world that has a picture of a Siberian tiger on it next to him. Since his death the centre is run by his son Erdo Kruglov, unfortunately he was away when we arrived and so after we visited the tiger we had a late lunch with his wife. Currently the moment the centre is home to 3 tigers, 2 Asiatic black bear cubs, 2 brown bears cubs and a litter of raccoon dogs. But before we would see any of these animals we had lunch in the home of Vladimir's son and a spitting image of his father, who has carried on the good work started by his father. Two of the Siberian tigers that they have here were caught as they were hanging around a village. They are around 18 months old and were most likely orphaned by poachers. Without their mother around to make sure they take the correct prey (wild boar and deer) they are likely to take 'easier' prey such as livestock, dogs and possibly people. Being so close to a village the authorities decided that they are best captured and placed in the rehabilitation centre until they are old enough and conditioned to their natural prey and then released into a protected reserve far away from villages. This is where Utyos comes in, there are a couple of such centres in the Russian Far East but Utyos has the best record in terms of successfully rehabilitating tigers. It is always a risk when releasing a top predator into the wild, they sometimes get too used to people and seek them out, and they sometimes get too stressed out and do not live a normal wild life. However the alternative of leaving them involves a far higher chance of them coming into contact with people in a negative way. The general consensus with Siberian tiger rehabilitation is that is if it increases their chance of long term survival by a fraction of a percent then it is worth doing. These tigers (and all tigers that they are planning on releasing are kept off display, they have the bare minimum human contact and are kept in small enclosures, the overall point is to make them hate people, the idea is that they do not have any happy memories about people and so when released they stay away from people as much as possible. Only by doing this will they stand a chance of living a good and long life in the wild. There is a live video feed from their enclosures and we

could see the tigers and they are monitored 24 hours a day. These two would most likely be released in the spring time when they are a little older and the hunting is better and easier with little snow cover. Along the way to the



larger enclosure and the famous tiger Zhorik we past a couple of small pens housing bear cubs, one with 2 brown bear cubs and one with 2 Asiatic black bear cubs. These cubs were also orphaned by hunters and were taken in to hibernate. They are kept in small enclosures to ensure that they sleep through the winter and get into a hibernating rhythm. However they were all found underweight as their mothers were killed before they could put on enough weight to successfully survive the hibernation. So they are more active than they should be for winter, they are likely to be released in a reserve neighbouring reserve in a couple of months (once the snows have melted), this other reserve already keeps orphaned bear cubs and has a good track record of their survival. Once again the enclosures are small but they are not meant to enjoy their captivity and after their release they hopefully never come into contact with people again. When visiting this centre it is important to remember that this is not a zoo and the overall aim of this zoo is to make sure that the animals they care for have the best chance for survival once they are released. After these enclosures we made it to the tiger, this tiger is named Zhorik. A 5.5 year old male tiger was a performing tiger in a the Kurgansky circus when it got a chicken bone lodged in its cheek, this wound became infected and the circus could not care for the animal and so the centre took custody of the tiger. The odds were definitely stacked against Zhorik making it as the infection was getting gangrenous, however with funding from the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation and WWF, Utyos was able to operate on the cheek and jaw. With the expert help of a veterinarian team led by Dr. Karen Dallakyan and 19 operations later Zhorik now has perfect health and a life. He will never be able to be released into the wild, having been hand reared and being far too comfortable around humans as well as not being able to hunt (the results of the operations meaning that most of the left hand side of his upper jaw has been removed including all of the teeth on the upper left quadrant – this was because the infection had spread this far); however Zhorik now has an important role to play as he follows in the footsteps of Lyuti as an ambassador for all Siberian tigers. School children visit this centre and Zhorik is probably the only tiger that they will ever see and hopefully they gain an appreciation for this incredible animal and through the hard work that Erdo is doing here the next generation of Russians grow to love the tiger and its habitat and continue the upward trend of tiger numbers in this part of the world. With increasing numbers of tigers in Russia (bucking the trend from elsewhere in the tiger's range) and the abundant space and prey populations in the vast Russian wilderness this is probably the last hope that tigers have for their long-term survival.

We enjoyed our time with Zhorik, it is hard to see a tiger of this size and power in an enclosure (around 1 acre in size) and even harder to see the disfigured face of the beautiful tiger. But when you consider the alternative fate of this individual and the need for heightened education and awareness the ends do justify the means here. With Zhorik being an ex-circus tiger he is very friendly to people and mock stalks us, charges and then jumps at the fence. All a show and wanting to play he shows us the behaviours that make the tiger such a formidable predator in the snow. Their huge paws acting like perfect snow shoes and their senses all focused intently on the target, it is remarkable how anyone would want to kill such an incredible animal but with more people joining tours like this in the future we can start to buck the trend in poaching by making alive tigers more valuable to local people, communities and economies than a dead poached individual. This is a long process but one that can be done, it has worked with mountain gorillas, whales and certain species of sharks such as great-white sharks.

After around 45 minutes with Zhorik we left and started to head back to the base camp along the same roads, we made a brief stop in the village of Bitchoi and then headed back to the base camp.



Day 10 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature was -23°C and the skies were overcast, it didn't look like it would snow again, but with the weather being so unusual recently we couldn't really tell. This morning there was some maintenance work to be done on the vehicles and snow mobiles so we stayed around the base camp until around midday. This was a chance for people to try the traditional skis and go around the base camp with Arkady, using the wooden skis to move through the forest and around the base camp is a great experience. This was and still is the main method of transport that the hunters use when heading out into the forest. Being silent and gliding along through the trees is a good way to experience the forest as well. Another activity that could be done around the base camp is some target practise on the small rifle range they have at the base camp. Again this is a good chance to use the weapons that the local hunters use when looking for food. After the target practise and skiing we had lunch before heading out on the snow mobiles, we would split into two groups and search for fresh tiger tracks. With a fresh 1cm layer of snow on the ground the conditions are perfect for finding fresh tracks and also aging the track from either last night or this morning as the snow stopped around sunrise. We didn't find any fresh tracks this afternoon along the roads we

checked and our only sightings were hazel grouse near the hunters cabin, more great birds feeding around the cabin as well. The only tracks we found were of wild boar and there appeared to be many wild boar moving around



the forest early this morning. Nikolai took Susan into the forest a short way to show her where a group of wild boar had been feeding and foraging. The snow had all been beaten down and the bare earth had been routed around as they searched for roots, bulbs and other food items. But alas no tiger tracks today and on returning to the base camp we checked camera traps from the main road we took yesterday and the one we found and followed the tigress's tracks along. We discovered that the female had walked down the road at around 7:40pm the day before yesterday.

Day 11 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

This morning the weather was cloudy with some snowfall and the temperature was -15°C , there had been around 1-2cm of snowfall over night and we once again split into two groups. Susan, Henri and Ruslan went with Arkady on skis to the hunters cabin once again (having thoroughly enjoyed the skiing the previous day, they wanted to explore the forest further on the silent skis); Stewart and Nikolai went out in the vehicle to stake out a location on the hill road heading towards the second base camp, and see if any wildlife would come out onto the road. It was once again very quiet today, the snow was hindering the wildlife movement again. At the hunters cabin they spoke to Alexander and watched the birds that he regularly feeds there and Stewart's only sighting was a hazel grouse. The group at the hunter's cabin had lunch there and Arkady had arranged for Roman to come with a snow mobile and collect them for the return journey. Once back at the base camp Stewart took the afternoon off and rested whilst the others all went with Arkady up Little Ambine on the skis. This is a seldom explored hill, it can be very steep in places but the experience of Arkady in these conditions ensured that everyone had a good time. Along the way they saw a very fresh Himalayan black bear hibernating tree hole as well as many nests they that use in the summer and autumn to feed and rest in the trees. Along the way Arkady explained about the various trees that grow in this section of forest including the golden birch, Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut and larch. However the recent snow cover and continuing snow fall and overcast was definitely affecting the movement of animals as no body today spotted any recent or fresh tracks. We hoped for better luck tomorrow, tomorrow would be the last full day in the reserve and we would be heading back to the post-office to collect our camera traps and maybe a sighting.

Day 12 Forest Reserve

Tiger Tracking

Today the temperature had dropped again and was -22°C , during the night Martin had a visit from a tiger, at around 2am the unmistakable sound of a large animal walking along one side of the cabin awoke him and by listening in bed he heard the scraping of a scent marking and then the animal walk off. Unfortunately the windows are not situated in a good location for Martin to see the animal during the night, but the next morning the tracks (although not the most visible because of the compacted snow around base camp and the cabin) of the tiger were seen on the well worn pathway around the back of Martin's cabin. In fact this made Martin doubt a little that it was a tiger and maybe a wild boar instead as the scraping of snow could have been made by a rooting wild boar as well as a tiger, but it wasn't until after breakfast Martin went to the outhouse toilet near his cabin that a perfect half paw print of a tiger was visible. The other very distinctive thing was that the dogs (who nearly always make some noise throughout the night, were silent from 2am – 4am; during this time Susan was also awake and looking at the large moon and stars and confirmed that the dogs were making noises all night expect from 2-4am). Whilst visits from tigers in the base camp are rare they are not unheard of and this was a wonderful way to end. Whilst we didn't see this tiger to know that we had a tiger enter the camp and even scent mark by the side of one of the cabins was amazing. So with this exciting the group and giving us a sense of real adventure (and also underlining the importance of the rules when it comes to not leaving the cabins at night and also not ever leaving the confines of the base camp at any time without a guide). After breakfast we left for the post-office on the snow mobiles and quickly found fresh tiger tracks, a female had walked down the road last night towards the base camp, possibly the same tiger who paid a visit to the base camp last night. This was the only sighting of note until we arrived at the post-office when the perfect tracks of a Siberian weasel could be seen hopping away carrying a mouse, the tail of the mouse hitting the snow and making a small impression every time the weasel leaped forward. Stewart and Alexander went to collect the camera traps and found many tiger tracks all around the scent marking rocks, we were very hopeful of having some images and videos on the camera traps. On the way back to the base camp we made a short diversion to get the camera trap we left with the sable prints and the pile of logs, there were not as many prints around the log pile today however. Maybe the sable had exhausted the population of mice here and had to move on. We also stopped at the base camp of an adjoining reserve, the hunter who lives there full time was in the banya when we arrived. Alexander chatted to him as we had some tea, he had not seen a tiger for a while, but he actively avoided them. Like most of the hunters here they avoid any sign of the tiger and so are not always the best source of information. However with so few people using the forest in winter information of any kind is hard to come by. Later on that night we checked the camera traps and a combination of the heavy snow blocking the sensor and also a slightly too high position meant that we didn't have any images from the post office. But excitement awaited us as we approached the base camp, we found wild boar tracks followed by tiger tracks heading across the road and then a little while further we found wild boar tracks coming back across the road. This was since we had been on this road this morning. We had missed a chase and likely kill across the road by

minutes! That is the luck of the draw when it comes to tracking one of the world's rarest and most elusive predators. We stopped and got off the snow mobiles, the air and forest was deathly silent and we stood knowing that a tiger



was most likely watching us from a raised position in the forested hill next to the road, lying over a freshly killed wild boar and watching to see if we pursued the tiger into the forest. As frustrating as this is, this is not something we do, not only would it mean putting our lives in danger but also the tigers and even if there was a not a combative interaction it would likely mean that the tiger would abandon the hard won wild boar and run away. We would not want to make life any more difficult for the tigers in winter, so after a few minutes of soaking in the presence of the tiger and reliving the chase and the action as it was written in the snow we loaded back onto the snow mobiles and sledges and headed off to base camp. During this trip Alexander had sent Sergey to collect the other camera traps we had set up on the trail past the hunter's cabin. On checking these Stewart had some great pictures of a small sounder of wild boar coming out of the forest and crossing the road. This was the sounder whose tracks we saw on the day we decided to set the camera up here.

This evening we were joined in the dining room by Roman, Sergey, Arkady, Nikolai and Ivan so that we all enjoyed our final evening meal in the forest together. Exchanging stories, presents, thanks and vodka until we all retired to our cabins and prepared to head back to civilisation tomorrow.

Day 13 **Khabarovsk**

Travelling

This morning was by far the coldest of the trip with the thermometer set way down to -30°C , clear skies overnight allowed for all of the heat that had built up with the overcast weather of the last few days to leave. After breakfast we all packed up the vehicles, checked the cabins for anything left behind and all headed back to the village, even Roman, Ivan, Arkady (who would be going all the way to Khabarovsk) and Sergey were leaving, the other three going to their homes in the village until the new year when Alexander and his family come to the forest to celebrate and bring in the new year. The base camp would be left in the capable hands of a friend of Alexander's from Khabarovsk. On the way out of the forest a Siberian roe deer ran out in front of our vehicle, and bounded off quickly into the forest. Its winter coat of grizzled grey almost shimmering like silver, in the summer this coat is shed in favour of a shorter russet red fur which adds better camouflage in the summer. From the second base camp to the marshes we followed tracks from a male tiger made from the night before, he was following the female from a few days ago. It is now very likely that we were correct in our summations that this female was in heat and this male was following her for several kilometres. He scent marked along the way and scratched on a particularly favourite tree. We also had great views of several hazel grouse on the side of the road as well as a large group of ravens feeding on some roadkill. We then said good bye to Sergey, Roman and Ivan in their village and continued on to the city. The only other sightings we had along this drive were ravens, carrion crows a white-tailed eagle perched in the forest near the road, Eurasian magpies, azure-winged magpies and various smaller species of birds such as rustic buntings and Eurasian tree sparrows. After arriving in the city and checking in, everyone split up to spend the afternoon as they wish. Whether it was just relaxing, catching up on emails, showering and changing or a walk around the town and down the main street towards the frozen Amur River. Being only 10km away from China here it is possible to see China in the distant hills on the other side of the river and to walk to the river and the orthodox church on its banks is a great experience and a nice way to end the trip. Later that evening we all met up (barring Stewart who just wanted to rest) and headed down to downtown to the restaurant for dinner. Tonight we would say bye to Henri who was staying at a different hotel to us and in the morning we would all head our separate ways as we departed Far Eastern Russia for western Europe and a very different life to the one we lived and experienced when out in the inhospitable, frigid and frozen forest which are home to the wonderful, enigmatic and damn elusive Siberian tiger, known around here simply as Amba.

Day 16 **Home**

Departure

Today Stewart left first from our central hotel with Martin and Susan leaving on the same flight to Moscow. Henri was collected and taken to the airport from his hotel and we all made it back to our respective homes in one piece.

Species List

Siberian Tiger Winter Tour / November 2014

Mammals (* = heard or signs only / CT = Camera Trap images)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Vole species (unknown)	Arvicolinae spp.
2	Siberian roe deer	<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>
3	Manchurian wapiti	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>
4	Manchurian hare	<i>Lepus mandshuricus</i>
5	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>
6	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
7	Eurasian lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>
8	Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>
9	Siberian weasel	<i>Mustela siberica</i>
10	Mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>
11	Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>
12	Siberian flying squirrel	<i>Pteromys volans</i>
13	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Scuirus vulgaris</i>
14	Long-tailed birch mouse	<i>Sicista caudata</i>
15	Birch mouse species (unknown)	Sicista spp.
16	Large-toothed Siberian shrew	<i>Sorex daphaenodon</i>
17	Ussuri shrew	<i>Sorex mirabilis</i>
18	Wild boar	<i>Sus scofra</i>
19	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
20	Himalayan black bear	<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>
21	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>

November				December									
27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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†Alexander only

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
2	Bohemian waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>

November				December									
27	28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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3	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
4	Common redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
5	Pallas's rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus roseus</i>
6	Eurasian treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
7	Oriental greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>
8	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
9	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
10	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
11	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
12	Large-billed crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
13	Azure-winged magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
14	Greater spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
15	Black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
16	Meadow bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
17	Rustic bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
18	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
19	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
20	White-tailed sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
21	Spotted nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>
22	Eastern great tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
23	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
24	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
25	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
26	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
27	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
28	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
29	Black grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>
30	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>
31	Eye-brow thrush	<i>Turdus obscurus</i>

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