









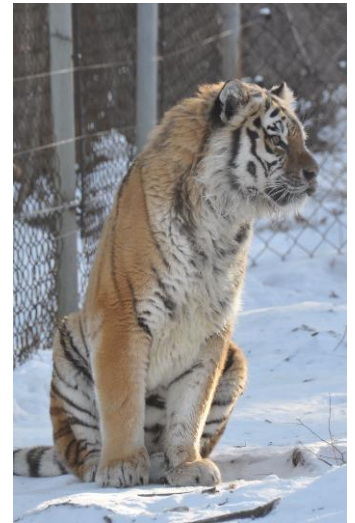
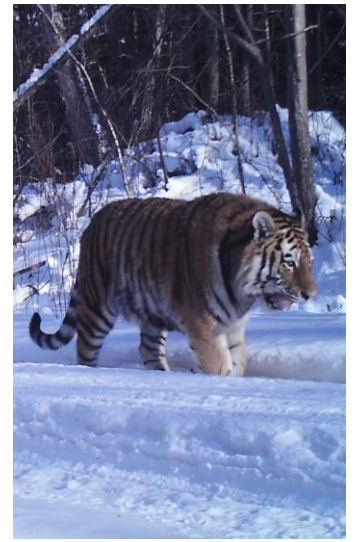


## Siberian Tiger Winter Tour

**Destination:** Russia **Duration:** 14 Days **Dates:** 27<sup>th</sup> Nov – 10<sup>th</sup> Dec 2017

-  Following in the footsteps of at least 8 different Tigers during our time in the forest
-  Having the expert guidance of one of Russia's leading Tiger conservationists
-  Being within 50m of a Tiger whilst investigating a kill and certainly being seen by it
-  Camera trapping a rare mother Lynx and her kitten in the same day as a Tiger
-  Finding tracks and marks of 3 different tigers all together on the road
-  Exploring the immense Taiga forest that spans 2/3 of the northern hemisphere
-  Collecting camera traps footage including 2 adult male Tigers following each other
-  Learning about the indigenous Udeghe people from one of their elders in Gvasyugi
-  Tracking two different kills made by two Tigers & piecing together what happened
-  Meeting Zhorik the injured but playful Tiger; rescued from a circus & living in Utyos



### Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Alexander (Forest Reserve Director & Guide)  
 Sergey (Base Camp Cook)  
 Nikolai (Vehicle / Snow Mobile Driver)  
 Alexander (Transfer Vehicle Driver)  
 Igor (Base Camp Assistant & Fire Manager)  
 Alexei, Arkady & Valeri (Base Camp Assistants)  
 Viktor (Russian – English Translator)  
 Eduard & Yana (Utyos Rehabilitation Centre Manager)  
 Sergey (Asiatic Black Bear Scientist)

### Participants

Mr. Yanai Bonneh      Ms. Paula (Polly) Forrester  
 Mr. Justin Cote      Ms. Allison Skidmore

### Acknowledgements

Khabarovsk Central Hotel – for their small yet functional rooms.  
Utyos Rehabilitation Centre –for accommodating us for lunch.  
Olga– for organising the logistics and our visa docs.  
Valentina & the Gvasyugi Village – for their museum and for safe guarding their unique cultural history and heritage.

### Overview

**Day 1:** Khabarovsk

**Days 2-12:** Forest Reserve

**Day 6:** Udeghe Village

**Day 9:** Utyos Centre

**Day 13:** Khabarovsk

**Day 14:** 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 either the Amur tiger or Ussuri 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 China around 2 million years ago 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); whilst some walked the land bridges connecting Sumatra, Java and Bali to SE Asia at the same time as many migrated northwards. The tiger has is and always has been a truly Asian species, born and bred in this vast continent.

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 the numbers recorded here are vital in the ambitious yet achievable target to double the wild tiger numbers throughout their range by 2022); 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 450 or so today (320-350 adults with the rest being cubs and sub-adults).

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. As the wonderful and passionate Russian tiger specialist Dale Miquelle says 'Nowhere else do so many tigers live around so few 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 / Forest Reserve**

*Arrival*

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

We had snacks at Alexander's house and dinner at the reserve base camp.

### Transportation:

Private 4x4  
vehicles.

This morning Viktor and Olga met Yanai, Justin and Polly at the airport as they all arrived at the same time from Moscow, our fourth client Allison had missed a connecting flight due to a delay and so would be arriving the next day and heading to the base camp with Alexander directly. They were transferred the short distance to Alexander's apartment in the city and met Alexander.

From here we loaded up the vehicle (to be driven by Alexander and the vehicle was an old Soviet era van), it looks like it would fall to bits if it hit a bump in the road, but what a remarkable truck that took to the terrain with ease) and visited the nearby supermarket for any alcohol and snacks we would like to take with us.

November this year was proving to be colder than usually and today the temperature was around -19C, which is not too cold by the forest standards (as the temperatures in the forest are usually 10 to 15C colder than the city. But the wind that had been blowing the last couple of days made the air bitterly cold.

Along the way we didn't see very much, of course some of the hardy winter birds were seen from the road, including a huge mixed flock of large-billed crows and carrion crows which roost along a section of road a few kilometres out of the suburbs of Khabarovsk. This is a commonly used roosting site and the 100 plus strong flock (or murder (the collective noun for crows)) looked imposing as they perched in the leafless almost lifeless trees either side of the icy road.

On the approach to the reserve from the village we passed the barren snow covered flat marshes and silver birch forests which marked the start of the taiga forest and the reserve. There was not much in terms of wildlife, some small birds such as common redpoll and Eurasian tree sparrows fluttered about and there were tracks from sable and red fox crisscrossing the road. There was one animal spotted today as an orange coloured Siberian weasel ran across the road and gave us a brief but nice view.

We arrived at the base camp in the late evening and it was already largely dark, so we got into our allocated cabins and warmed up before dinner. Around the dinner table we discussed various topics about the forest, tigers and Alexander. The meals here are a great selection of locally foraged and produced food. The vast majority of the food we consume in the reserve comes from the surrounding forest, during the hunting season the wild boar, Siberian roe deer and wapiti 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.

The base camp would be staffed by a team of 8 Russians whilst we would be here, Alexander and his son (Sergey the camp cook and a brilliant tracker and hunter), Nikolai as a second vehicle drivers and then Alexei, Arkady, Igor and Valeri who would help in making sure that the base camp operates effectively by keeping the supply of fire wood going, the cabins warm, collecting water from the nearby stream and many other vital tasks to keep the village like base camp operational. As well as our accommodation cabins, the kitchen and dining cabin the base camp has two outdoor toilets, a museum, a garage and indoor chicken coop, a traditional banya (Russian sauna and integral part of the culture here) which would be available for use every night, various store rooms, dog kennels and work stations. We would have a full briefing and tour of the base camp tomorrow morning, tonight we retired to our animal themed log cabins for our first night in the icy wilderness of the Russian Far East.



## Day 2 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp today.

### Transportation:

4x4 Vehicle, Snow mobiles and walking.

This afternoon Allison was met at the airport by Olga and Alexander and after a brief stop at the supermarket they left for the forest. The temperature was similar in the city as yesterday and a little more snow had fallen.

Whilst in the forest the rest of the group rose for breakfast at 09:00am, the temperature was  $-21^{\circ}\text{C}$ , for breakfast we met in the camp dining room and had a hearty breakfast prepared by Sergey. The camp's resident Eurasian nuthatches and tiny marsh tits were very active this morning (as they usually are) flying back and forth from the small feeders near the main cabins and their nest holes and also searching in between the recently cut and chopped logs for firewood. These freshly cut logs are home to hibernating insects and beetle grubs which are welcome food for nuthatches.

After breakfast the group got their cold weather clothing on and headed out with Sergey, in the snow mobile and sledge to a nearby streambed. This is a commonly used tiger trail and several adult tigers use the area for scent marking. Continuing down the trail we found the carcass of a Siberian roe deer, it was nearly completely eaten, with just the hide and bones left. Sergey was brilliant at explaining where the tiger had approached from, the chase, where and when the deer was grabbed and killed, the drag marks showing where the tiger had moved the deer before settling to eat. The tiger that made the kill was a female (based on the size of the prints) and judging by the territory it is most likely Rachelle. This female tiger has a male cub around 1 year old and he would not have been far behind his mother as she made the kill. After exploring the kill site and around the area the group headed back to the camp, the skies had turned grey and some snow began to fall. In the late afternoon Alexander arrived with Allison and everyone met up and got to know each other a little better.

The snow looked set to stay around all night and indeed over night a fair amount of snow (4-6cm) fell overnight, this is a good amount of snow, it is enough to prompt the tigers to get scent marking again (as the snow can wash away the scent) but not so much that hinders movement of wildlife and ourselves over the next few days.



## Day 3 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All of our meals were served at the base camp in between excursions into the forest.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

Today the temperature was  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the snow continued to fall so today we would spend most of the day around the base camp. After breakfast we were given 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 shines 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 Viktor had translated anything!

The camp itself had started life as a geologist's camp but in 1993 Alexander took over the reserve and wanted to do more biological research in the forest. No body knew the tiger population here when he first arrived and the numbers of wild boar and other ungulates were decreasing and the trend for all wildlife around here looked very grim. Since then Alexander has worked wonders in protecting the area and raising awareness and now the tiger numbers as well as the ungulate populations are increasing. One of the things that sets Alexander's base camp apart from other base camps in the forest is his better and larger cabins for tourism as well as a very nice banya. We were shown these cabins, the banya as well as the other buildings that make up the base camp. The idea behind the better and larger cabins being that he could feasibly run a research station here throughout the year and not just have some people here some of the time of the year as other base camps operated. As he showed us around the base camp 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. As we were being shown around we were introduced to Alexander's favourite dog; Zidane; he is the father of the many litters, the last being from earlier this year when the base camp had 5 tiny puppies born in the middle of winter! Zidane is definitely Alexander's pride and joy. The dogs here 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 about 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.

One of the most fundamental things that shines through at the base camp 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 and tea bags 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 various cabins that are themed to particular animals in the reserve, *izybur* (wapiti), *medved* (bear), *casoula* (roe deer) and *kaban* (wild boar) as well as the banya and how it works, the chicken coop, that provides fresh eggs and the museum that is usually only used in summer as it takes too much fuel to heat up sufficiently in winter.

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 faeces 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 directly from faeces 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. We were shown where our water comes from, direct from a frozen over stream at the back of the camp and it is so cold, refreshing and delicious he claims he could bottle it and become very wealthy (however during our stay we would boil the water first – just to be safe). He also explained about the old banya that he wants to convert to be either a small bee farm in the summer or a rescue shelter for orphaned bear cubs to hibernate over winter. Currently a neighbouring reserve is run by a bear scientist and he keeps many orphaned cubs over the first two winters before tagging them and releasing them to fend for themselves once they are sufficiently old enough. Another wonderful aspect of Alexander's knowledge and respect for the forest is born out of his love and compassion for the indigenous people who live in the forest and always have done. A little Buddha style wood carving has a great place in the base camp, this is Podi the Udeghe people's god of nature and rubbing his belly is good luck.

As the sun shone brightly in the sky we were shown various natural artefacts collected by Alexander and stored in his own cabin. We were also shown the official animal of the reserve, the rather innocuous Eurasian nuthatch (not the tiger or bear that inhabit the forest but this small forest bird), the reason being that Alexander loves the nuthatches never ending work ethic as it is constantly busying itself in search of food.

After this introduction to the base camp and a small insight into the way that the local people use the plants here we headed out to check one of the commonly used tiger patrolling routes. This is around 2 kilometres from the base camp and runs along a small stream (all frozen and under a layer of snow during winter), we would use the snow mobiles and sledges and create the nice compacted pathway that would hopefully encourage the tigers to use it in the coming days.

Throughout the trip Alexander and his team would be guiding us along certain transect routes that they use twice a year to make the tiger censuses and he will be making a note of all animal tracks we see. The rare direct sightings along with track data and camera trap images and videos are all combined to produce an accurate summary of the tiger population in the reserve and surrounding forests and Alexander was also in charge of collecting the similar data kept by other reserve managers (although few – if any) are as dedicated and tiger friendly as Alexander, many use the forest reserves strictly as they were meant to be used which is to sell off certain trees to logging commissions and also selling hunting permits. These are things Alexander does seldom, he never allows logging and only sells a few permits as he does need the money to run his research, however he cuts short the hunting season by 2 weeks and never sells his full allocation of permits. This is one of the main reasons that the tiger numbers are so high in and around his reserve, there is more food (seeds and nuts) for the prey animals and so more food for the tigers (deer and wild boar). They seem to use the protection of his reserve as a nursery and the reserve acts like a heart, pumping out tigers to nearby forests. Here his work includes educating the other forest reserve managers on the importance of having a healthy forest and also the local people that the tiger is an important species and one that should be looked after and not persecuted.



Today we also saw several large 'nests' in the trees either side of the trail and even one in the middle of the camp and very close to a cabin at the back of the base camp. 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. 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.

Other commonly seen tracks crisscrossing the road throughout our stay would be sable, Manchurian elk, wild boar, Siberian roe deer, hazel grouse, Eurasian red squirrel, hare species and various species of shrew and mouse who spent the winter in tunnels under the snow and make quick excursions in the open when crossing the road.

## Day 4 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp in between excursions into the forest.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle &  
Walking

The temperature was  $-19^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the sky was blue and clear this morning. After breakfast everyone got into Alexander's vehicle and went to check the road heading back towards the study centre around 10km from the base camp. This road is an important route for many tigers and it wasn't long before we found tiger tracks. Around 1km away from the base a large male (most likely one that Alexander has called Achkarik – which means 'geek' in Russia as there is a marking on the base of his tail that looks like a pair of glasses. The tracks showed him coming out of the forest, crossing the road, scent marking and then walking down the road briefly, scent marking again and then disappearing into the forest again. Continuing along the road we came to the study centre, this collection of large buildings has not been used in years and is just manned by one person, Valeri. He lives here with his cat and dog. Although he has had many dogs, he is not the best at looking after them and keeps them outside and in the 4 years that Royle Safaris has been coming here we have known at least 5 dogs to have been killed by tigers here. Valeri really shouldn't be trusted with dogs, but he keeps on getting given puppies to look after.

The main reason to check this far was to see the status of a road that heads around the back side of Big Ambine (Big Tiger Mountain) which separates the base camp from the study centre. This road is also the quicker way to get to the local Gyvansi village that we will be visiting in a couple of days. The road didn't look to difficult to drive and along and so as we headed back to the base camp Alexander stopped at one of the few places in the forest where there is phone signal and called Valentina at the village to arrange the visit. He also called (or at least tried to call) Martin and Nikolai. Coincidentally Martin and Nikolai had just met the vehicle and the rest of the group back on the road.

It was around lunchtime and once Alexander was back we all departed for the base camp and met up for lunch. Martin quickly got up to speed and meet everyone we wasted no time in recounting the last couple of days and making plans for the coming days in the forest and after lunch we headed out in two vehicles to test the mountain road. This is often the most difficult road to access during the winter and no body had been down it since the snow had fallen. We didn't know how far down we would get but we had to try and hoped to see some tiger activity along the way. We split up into the two cars, with Nikolai driving Martin, Allison and Polly in one vehicle and Alexander taking Viktor, Yanai and Justin in the other.

We didn't get very far (maybe 5km) down the track before it started to become too difficult, we had already got stuck a couple of times on the powdery snow and had to winch ourselves out before we decided to call it. Either the bulldozer or a couple of snow mobiles would be needed to get down here to compact the snow down before we could drive further along this road. The road itself was quite quiet, there was a sable track, squirrel tracks and several roe deer tracks going one way and then another and finally a very large male wild boar crossed on his own. We arrived back in twilight and retired to our rooms for a while before meeting up again for dinner. This was the first dinner with the entire group including Martin and as a result there would be wine and vodka flowing.





## Day 5 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp in between excursions into the forest.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle & Walking

This morning we woke to clear blue skies and a falling temperature at 8am it was  $-31^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the coldest it had been so far on the trip. Martin had arranged to meet Allison, Polly and Justin for a pre breakfast walk into the forest. We walked around 2km into the forest along a snow mobile trail, however no snow mobile had used this track so far this winter and we walked using the ski tracks left by Arkady as he went about setting his sable traps a few days ago. The walk is along a very well used and important tiger territory patrol. We were going to get to a well used scent marking tree to see if there had been any recent activity and collect the camera trap here if there had been any fresh tracks.

The walk itself was cold but beautiful, the sun was rising above the hills and silent forest ahead of us and the welcome glow started to light up the sky. It was so serene and peaceful you forget about the cold and after a few minutes of walking you warm up quite well. It is just your own breath condensing into ice on your stubble, eyelashes and hair that showed how cold it really was.

There were few tracks around, some Eurasian red squirrel, Siberian roe deer and one sable from the last couple of days but no tiger and no fresh tracks of any animals. Martin did hear and then catch a glimpse of a hazel grouse taking off from its sleeping place (half buried in the snow) and disappearing into the forest. They are perfectly camouflaged and quickly evaporate into the forest when they take off. Other than some of the small hardy birds such as marsh tits and Eurasian nuthatches there was nothing else seen. But it was a great way to start the day and we arrived back in time for breakfast.

After breakfast we were taken into the forest by Sergey the Asiatic black bear scientist. He was here to investigate and record the hibernation dens currently being used by the bears in the reserve and he wanted to take us to one that had a bear cub in currently. It was around 3km into the forest behind the camp and we all headed there after breakfast.

This was the same tree hole (hibernation den) that Alexander has a video of Achkarik climbing up to have a look inside (as he is one of the tigers that specialises in killing and eating hibernating bears). We would be shown this video at some point in the coming days. Some tigers, such as Achkarik, have learnt that bears are easy to kill and good to eat (with such high fat supplies) during their hibernation.

The tree is located in a beautiful area of true taiga forest, so we set out with Sergey guiding the way as the clear blue sky illuminated the magical winter wonderland forest and made the snow falling from the trees (blown by the wind) crystallise and look like sparkling dust filling the air.

We stopped at a large Manchurian oak tree that had a large bear nest in it, Sergey told us that the bears make these nests before the acorns are ripe so that they can feed on them. It is easier to collect them before they fall onto the ground. It is interesting that the wild boar here look for bears and their nests in the tree and know that where a bear is feeding in an oak tree there is a good chance that lots of acorns will be fall down and be easy to collect. In this area there are less silver birch and instead you can see true taiga forest. The taiga forest is continuous for hundreds of miles to the north (until the Arctic tundra takes over and is distinguished by its absence of trees) and stretches from Scotland and Iceland through Scandinavia, Russia into Canada and even as far east and south as New England in the USA. Here at the reserve the taiga is at its most southerly and it mixes here with the more temperate Manchurian rain-forest that is more prominent along the Sikhote Alin mountains and the coast of Primorye.

It is this habitat that is preferred by the tigers and it is only here in the surrounding forests of the reserve; in the farthest north-west of the tigers distribution; that you get the tiger living in the taiga. It is this mixing of the forests here that results in the more Asian species such as tigers, leopards, Asiatic black bear, yellow-throated martens and musk deer sharing the same habitat as northern boreal species such as brown bears, Eurasian lynx, wolves, wapiti, sable and Siberian roe deer. Most of the forest that we have been travelling through since arriving at the base has been heavily logged in the past (prior to Alexander acquiring the lease in 1993) and the secondary forest growth is dominated by silver and 3 other species of indigenous birch trees, there is also the *Schisandra* vine, thorny aralia, oaks, walnuts, cedars and pine trees. The major difference in what is true taiga forest compared to the secondary birch dominated forest around here is that the most common tree is the larch and taiga has much higher tree diversity. The whole basis for the rich ecosystem here is founded in the presence of large seed bearing trees such as cedar, 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 somehow 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 masting 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. In this area the amount of Asiatic black bear nests in the trees are very high and there is one particular tree which is hollowed out and the usual hibernation spot for a bear during. The Asiatic black bears like to hibernate inside hollow trees and can squeeze into surprisingly small spaces, whilst the brown bears prefer caves and holes further up the hills and slopes. The black bears are also heavily predated upon by tigers and tigers often check the hibernating trees for sleeping bears. Several of the more well-known hibernating trees can be found to have tiger scratch marks on the outside where tigers have attempted to get into the tree. Whilst we know there is a bear inside the tree we cannot see it and wouldn't be disturbing a hibernating bear. In the upper branches of the tree was a beautiful Eurasian red squirrel, however here they appear dark grey (almost black) on their top and sides with a white belly. They couldn't look much more different from the red squirrels we are used to seeing in Europe but they are the same species, just in the winter coat at the opposite end of their large range.

Along the way we saw lots of fresh Siberian roe deer tracks crossing the pathway and also spotted some areas where they had kicked through the soft snow to get to the grass underneath as well as an area underneath a large Manchurian oak where the group (5 or 6 individuals) had slept. Their bodies melting the snow into small deer sized holes under the tree.

We came back to the base camp and had a bit of free time before lunch and our plan for the afternoon. After lunch we headed out in two snow mobiles and the sledges with Alexander and Alexei to check some camera traps along the well patrolled (by tigers) stream. We visited two scent marking trees along the stream and collected a couple of camera traps, we also found tiger tracks from the last 24 hours. They belonged to Achkarik, he had been very active in this area the last couple of days. Interestingly he had recently made a kill as there was some frozen drops of blood in his paw prints. Despite knowing he was in the area the camera traps hadn't caught him, but there was some nice wild boar and Siberian roe deer images from before the first snow fall in the middle of November.

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## Day 7 **Gvasyugi Village**

## *Tiger Tracking & Cultural Sightseeing*

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

Breakfast and dinner were served at the base camp with a snack eaten en route and lunch prepared at the Udeghe village.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle.

This morning was not as cold as the previous day, but the thermometer still read  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  at breakfast, the sky started quite overcast and there was some very light snow falling, but when we were getting ready to get in the vehicles the snow had already stopped and the clouds cleared up.

We then left in two cars, Alexander, Viktor, Polly and Justin in one and Nikolai, Martin, Allison and Yanai in the second; and headed towards the nearby Udeghe village.

In the entire 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 250. This village is of cultural importance as it is the home of Valentina, the village elder and one of the most prominent members of the Udeghe culture. She has single handily translated their language and alphabet into Russian and also published many books on the Udeghe language; in an attempt to save the language from extinction. She has also established the museum at the village and teaches the young women in the village the traditional and important beliefs and skills that would have otherwise been lost. Skills such as producing their stunning traditional dress and knowledge of how to perform their dances and songs were on the verge of being forgotten as the modern world, alcohol and other temptations start to have larger and larger impacts on their daily lives. The sad part is that once Valentina dies (she is 83) who will take this over, who will be the protector of the Udeghe's culture? It is hoped by Valentina, Alexander and Martin that if more people visit here for the tiger tracking and experience the wilderness as well as the Udeghe culture that the next generation will be value and profit in their culture and the surrounding forests. So that both are protected and secured into the future.

Driving along the forest roads and then the main roads (as the quicker road is a mountain pass and we didn't risk this on the way there as we were unsure if we could get all the way through) to the village we would once again be looking for signs of tigers and other wildlife. Along the way and close to the village we found tracks of a young male tiger walking along the road and then sitting next to the road. There was a little blood in one of the paw prints and Alexander suspects that this is the tiger responsible for killing some of the dogs around the village in the last few weeks.

These were the only tracks of note, with various wild boar, roe deer, red fox, sable, mountain hare, mice, shrews and Siberian weasel making up the usual suspects in terms of tracks.

Then heading to the village on the main roads we didn't see much, we made a small stop for some more supplies for the base camp, before making it back into the forest nearer to the village. Then Alexander found tracks of a large





male tiger on the road, they were old (maybe 4 days old), but a good sign. They are of a male that he knows lives around here but he has failed to get pictures of his on the camera traps.

We then arrived at the village of Gvasyugi; the village was started in the 1930's when three local tribes merged and formed the permanent settlement. On arrival at the village we were immediately met by Alicia, she is the granddaughter of Valentina (who was away in the city and unable to meet us) and firstly we had the dance and singing performance from some of the village women and a couple of young girls.

We were shown some traditional musical instruments which included a birch bark horn being blown to mimic the bugle call of a male wapiti during the rutting season and strange looking instruments made from a type of woody reed which is hollow and can be played by inhaling through the reed. We were also treated to several songs including the song of young happy women, a song from a myth where an explorer who was looking for a new place for the Udeghe people to settle had to cross the sea and a sea gull tells him how to do it. Another song was a call to people to celebrate during a special holiday and the last song as an ode to the famous (and only Udeghe author) call Jansiki Mankhor. We also had some dances performed for us including the dance which showed off their sowing of their traditional dress, a rattle dance, the dance of the bear cubs playing together and finally the tambourine dance. Justin and Polly had a go on the tambourines and we all sat with the women and children as Alexander told them some information about us.

From here we visited their museum in a nearby building. This is the life's work of Valentina and we had a tour of their museum, the museum is made up of two sections, first the outdoors section which contains traditional style buildings, store huts and a shrine. The use of bark as insulation, roofing and walls was particularly interesting and the little shrine was complete with an idol to the forest god Amba. Also in this small section was a very small cone shaped wooden hut that is where a woman would have traditionally gone to give birth. She would also stay there with her new-born baby (completely isolated from anyone else) for 2 weeks. Inside the museum (the second section) we were shown the traditional dress, some carvings, equipment such as spears, arrow heads, idols and masks. Also in the museum room where the very few and limited texts on the Udeghe people, including Valentina's own publications. They also included some interesting rock art information, from a cave in the north-east from the forest reserve which bears a striking similarity to rock art found in Hokkaido (northern Japan) and made by the Ainu people. The connections between the various tribal people and the relatedness of each is poorly understood and clearly more research is needed to understand the complex relationships between the people of Manchuria, Amur, Korea and Japan. We were shown the importance of the birch tree as most of the dishes, bowls and handicrafts are made from birch bark.

We then lunched at the cultural centre a traditional meal of greyling (lenok) soup with savoury fried donut like bread which was delicious. The fish were caught in the nearby Khor River.

After lunch we left and drove back, we decided to try the mountain pass as from this side we could see that the snow didn't look too bad. It proved to be a good decision not only did we not get stuck, it took much less time to get back but also we found some very interesting tiger tracks on the road. Firstly we found tracks coming out of the forest and a large melted patch of snow on the road. This is where a tiger had lay down. In the patch was a lot of frozen blood. At first it looked like it could have been a kill site, but then on further inspection there was no hide, fur or bones. It was therefore much more likely that this tiger either had a lot of blood on its coat from a kill it had made and when it lay here to rest the blood was washed off the coat and froze on the road or the tiger was injured and it was the tiger's own blood. Following the tracks down the road there was some blood in the tracks and then it rested again and there was less blood this time. A little further along we found tracks of a second tiger, this now looked like it was the female Rachelle with her subadult male cub. She had had a litter of 4 cubs and they were all at dispersal age now. Alexander has not found any evidence of the other cubs for a while and is unsure if they have survived and have just dispersed or if they have died. Only this male has hanging around with her now. Then a little further along we found tracks of a male tiger as well. This would almost certainly be the male who fathered the cub (as there is no aggression here and the three tigers spent some time together) or it is at least a male who had mated with Rachelle and the cub could have been his.

There was also a huge amount of wapiti activity feeding along the road, clearing the snow to get to the vegetation underneath. We saw several wild boar tracks as well. But no really fresh tiger tracks today. We arrived back in time for dinner and relaxed after a good long day.





## Day 7 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

Breakfast and dinner were served at the base camp with a packed lunch at another base camp.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle & walking

This morning was -29°C as we had breakfast, the injured tiger we had found evidence of last night had weighed heavy on Alexander's mind and today we would investigate further. Finding out if we could piece together his movements, how he was injured and how bad the injury is. Along the way we made a brief stop at an old linden tree that had many large holes bored into it. These holes are made by a large beetle whose grub lives in the wood, feeding and fattening up on the rotting wood for 5 years until large enough to change into the adult beetle and emerge as one of the largest insects in Asia. Before we arrived at the area we had seen the tiger tracks we met a couple of hunters here for the weekend, they had shot a hazel grouse and were walking along the road looking for more when we passed them and stopped to chat.

We then reached the road and it wasn't very long before we spotted very fresh tracks of two tigers (Rachelle and her male cub) on the road. They were heading towards the study centre and the way we had come, they left the road and headed deep into the forest, possibly turning around as the study centre currently has a small logging company there and the amount of human activity (not to mention the gun shots that would have rang out after the hazel grouse was shot) will have put off any tiger from staying the open and around here.

Following these tracks back we found where the injured tiger had lay down on the road. We could clearly make out the sphinx position of the male as he lay in the middle of the road. He had melted the snow to ice, his paws, legs, elbows and heels all clearly visible. As was where his injury was, the left forearm seemed to be the location where the most blood was coming from. However he wasn't walking with a limp (from what we could tell of the tracks) and so it clearly wasn't that incapacitating. Further along we found more areas where he had stopped and rested, laying down, sitting down and once where he had clearly rolled over and placed his injured leg in the snow, the blood stained snow showing the movement. In between the occasional scrape, urination and a scat (which seemed not have been digested very well) the frequency of stops from this male suggested that he was suffering with the injury and was not 100%.

Carrying on we got out of the vehicle and walked along the road, Nikolai and Sergey going off into the forest to investigate yet another tiger's tracks. This one being another adult female, she was here last night and hunting, her tracks crisscrossing the road as she searched for wild boar. We left Nikolai and Sergey to their exploration and we headed back towards the car and slope where we had heard some ravens cawing. This is the general direction of the injured tiger and we suspected he had made a kill here and it could well have been where he was injured. So we followed the tracks back and found an area of Korean pines with many sleeping holes from wild boar. A large sounder of boar had been here sleeping and feeding when the tiger had found them. We could clearly see the bounds of the tiger as it surprised the young boar (maybe 1 year old) who was sleeping under a tree. The kill was quick and the tiger hadn't dragged the boar anywhere. In fact the boar was not fully eaten, only some of the flesh was eaten and we even found the heart intact. It seemed like this was an opportunistic kill as opposed to a kill made out of hunger. We also noticed that there was not much or any blood here, certainly not the blood you would expect if the injury had occurred in this battle. However there was some blood in the tracks coming up to the kill. So piecing together what had happened is that the tiger uninjured 2 days ago found the wild boar and killed it, ate some and then walked off towards the road and away. It then got injured in a location and by a way that we have not determined yet, before coming back here last night for a feed. Then the tiger left again and walked onto the road, found his mother and walked down the road until it heard the presence of people and entered the forest again.

We set up a couple of camera traps around the kill and road nearby and hoped that the tiger would come back. They were all definitely in the area and whilst at the kill there was a good chance we were being watched or at least within 50m or so of a tiger, some of the tracks were very fresh. It was very possibly the third tiger of the day (the second adult female) that was around here.

So we headed back to the base camp for a late lunch as it had already got to 3pm, we collected the SD card from a camera trap that the injured tiger and Rachelle had walked past to confirm their identity, but the card had been corrupted and we couldn't get it to work for some reason. So we would have to wait a little longer until we could be 100% on what we suspect was happening and what had happened with these tigers up there.

Once we were back we ate lunch, enjoyed the banya, Allison probed Alexander for information on the tiger poaching problems in Russia (for her studies) and we retired for the evening. Tomorrow we would be further exploring the area we had an early morning walk a couple of days ago. This is a route that Alexander has not been down properly for 3 months and we needed to see if there were any tiger tracks around as well as visiting the winter cabin.



## Day 8 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

Breakfast and dinner were served at the base camp with a packed lunch at another base camp.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle & walking

This morning was the coldest so far with the temperature down to  $-31^{\circ}\text{C}$  at breakfast. We waited until 11am before we left on the snow mobiles. This was to wait for the temperature to rise a little bit, our destination was a small winter cabin in the forest around 5km along a snow mobile trail.

This particular cabin is located along a very well used tiger trail with numerous prominent scent marking trees along the way. This and many other cabins located throughout these forest reserves and are free for hunters and trappers to use during winter. The hunter or trapper will be given a permit for a certain number of animals they can catch or hunt or fish; whilst out in the forest they are welcome to stay at these cabins (leaving them as they found them) and they are kept in good repair.

This cabin is in better condition than many as Alexander knows us tourists visit here and there is an old cabin nearby which only stopped being used around 7 years ago (which gives you an indication of what many of the cabins are like nowadays), in fact this cabin has a broken window and last winter was used by a brown bear to sleep in! The other winter cabin is a nice place to watch some of the hardy forest birds from as seeds are left for them on the window sill and marsh tits, Eurasian nuthatches, Eastern great tits, greater spotted woodpeckers and pine buntings are often seen here.

The main reason for trying this trail was that Alexander thought that there maybe Rachelle and her injured male tiger cub came over this way. This is the back side of the hill we found the kill on yesterday and is in the general direction the tiger tracks had headed.

There was no fresh tiger evidence however there were some tracks from at least 2 different tigers from a few days ago. We would know more when we got the camera trap memory cards back to the base camp and looked at them this evening.

After arriving at the cabin, we walked further along the trail, looking into the forest and exploring further in search of tiger evidence, we then had some lunch here prepared by Sergey at the winter cabin. We spent some good time here and walked around checking various scent marking trees and clearing the trail for further snow mobile use. The tigers like to use the trails created by cars and snow mobiles as they compact the snow together and makes it much easier for the tigers to walk on them. So by creating these trails we are increasing our chances of getting more sightings in the future.

Later on back at the base camp we checked the SD cards collected today and found that on the 27<sup>th</sup> November (the first day of the trip) a large male tiger (whom we identified as Achkarik) walked past the scent marking tree, sniffed it but didn't spray and he was followed just 2 minutes later by another large adult male. We couldn't identify this one on the pictures but it was interesting that there were two adult males so close to each other. Then on the 30<sup>th</sup> November another male (possibly the same as the second male) came back the other way.



## Day 9 Utyos Rehabilitation Centre

## Tiger Tracking & Sightseeing

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

Breakfast and dinner were served at the base camp with lunch eaten at the rehabilitation centre.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle & Walking.

This morning we had an earlier start than normal (as there was much driving to get done today) and the temperature was suitably low ( $-32^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). After breakfast we loaded the vehicles and left the reserve via the village to go to the nearby rehabilitation centre for wildlife in the region. We took Sergey with us as he would be meeting up



with another Sergey (one of Alexander's friends and a colonel in the Russian army), who were going to complete some of the tiger census routes today.

Along the way to the village we fresh tiger tracks from a male right next to a camera trap, we knew we would have some great footage from here to have a look at in the coming days. And then we found more tracks, these from the subadult male who was hanging around the village and killing dogs. We didn't see any other tracks of note before meeting Sergey and bringing them both and the snow mobile (they would be using) to the rehabilitation centre where they started their census from.

After a short stop at the large village of Bitchoi to visit the shop we carried on. This is the largest village around here and we bought some drinks and snacks before heading off and travelling through several smaller and more 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 and Koreans, 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 we searched these stands of forest for birds such as eagles, buzzards, hawks and owls, but without luck today.

At Utyos we would see the work being done by a handful of people in Far Eastern Russia (largely self-funded; although they do receive international support from various NGO's including the British based David Sheppard Wildlife Foundation and the Russian based Phoenix Fund), 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.

The centre also currently has a wild caught tiger, we would not be able to see this tiger as she is here as a potential man eater. There had been an attack and fatality of a human around 3 weeks ago in the nearby Bikin River valley, the tiger was hunted and captured and brought here. DNA samples were taken from her for assessment and if they are a match to the DNA found on the body then she will be taken to a zoo or humanly put down. Unfortunately there is no evidence anywhere in the world to support the release of a man-eating big cat back into the wild. The chances of she doing it again are too great and an increase in human deaths from tiger deteriorates the attitude people have to tigers and retribution killings can increase as a result. It is better for all parties (including tigers themselves) for the problem animals to be removed. However if she is not responsible then she would be tagged and released. In case she could be released she is kept well off display and has zero contact with people, so as to remain as wild as possible (hence why we couldn't see her, as the DNA results were not back yet and her fate not decided).

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 and missing canine 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 for conservation and research into Siberian tigers 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. Before arriving at the centre we visited the small cemetery and saw the grave and beautiful tombstone. Since his death the centre is run by his son Erdo Kruglov, he was not here today so one of his staff showed us around.

Currently the centre is home to a two Siberian roe deer and a couple of Asiatic black bear cubs and brown bear cubs which were hibernating and so off limits to us today.

In the winter of 2014-15 they also has two Siberian tigers which had been caught as they were hanging around a village. They were caught at around 20 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 enclosures around 1km away from the rest of the centre, 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 they can see the tigers and they are monitored 24 hours a day. The tigers are provided with live prey around once per month, so that they can hone their hunting skills and remain as wild as possible. They are also provided food that contains vitamins, medication and things that the tiger needs to ensure it is parasite free and healthy before release. These two tigers were released in the spring time (2015) and by all accounts have been doing well and there has been no further reports of them causing problems.

The last wild tiger (before this current potential man-eating female) the centre had was an adult female in December 2016, she had been hanging around a local village and had killed a couple of dogs. After being brought here she was kept in the large semi-wild enclosures and they were awaiting confirmation as to where she could be released. Then a storm came along and knocked a tree down and onto the fence, the tigress escaped and luckily hasn't been reported as causing problems with the locals anymore (hopefully she has associated the fences, being captured, tranquilised etc with people and will stay away from now on) and so they have no plans to recapture her.

So after some tea to warm up we went to see the famous tiger Zhorik. At 7 years old this 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 and it should work equally well for tigers as well as other mammals like rhinos, elephants, jaguars, polar bear and many others.

We had lunch at the centre and then departed, making a shop stop before entering the forest, leaving the snow mobile trailer at the colonel's car en route. In the forest we didn't see many tracks of anything, the logging vehicles (here to log a neighbouring base camp to Alexander's) had cut up the road a lot and removed much of the snow meaning tracking here was very hard. So we headed directly towards the tiger's 'post-office'.

This is a small rocky cliff that protrudes out of the forest and has become a very special place for all of the resident tigers in the area. Every passing tiger leaves important messages here with scent marking. When a tiger scent marks the act itself may seem rather trivial to people, scraping the soil or scratching a tree coupled with urination or defecating; however the scent released from inter-digital gland, pre-orbital and anal glands as well as chemicals in the urine are full of hormones and pheromones. These chemicals last between 7-21 days depending on the conditions and can tell other tigers information such as the sex, age, dominance, physical fitness, reproductive state and also when the animal last ate (and possibly much more that we do not understand yet). This information allows animals of the same sex to avoid occupied territories and also know if the individual holding the territory is fit enough to repel an attack by a rival for the territory and it also tells individuals of the opposite sex of sexual receptiveness for mating.

Alexander has camera traps set here constantly since March 2014 he has caught over 15 different tigers on the camera traps. This area may be single most important area in the whole northern Khabarovsk tiger's range for tigers. On getting here the group hiked up from the road to the cliff, using the well trodden trails of various tigers, some of the trails are so well used that the tiger's prints have frozen and are now like ice carvings along the ground.



There were so many tiger tracks around here and the area even had the faint smell of urine from the numerous scent marking over the last few days. We checked the camera traps we collected later at Alexander's and found that Bucksa had been here, she is one of 2 adult females that regularly use the cliff. She had a litter of four cubs which were all raised to dispersal age earlier this year. So she is out on her own again and the camera trap footage suggested that she could be pregnant again. Which is great news.

The second tiger was a large male who we identified as Achkarik, he was there only the day before and so it was certainly his urine that we could pick up at the cliff. He sometimes comes this far, the core of his territory is Alexander's reserve and being 20km away this is at the edge of his range. He will have had to come through sections of Obor, Martin and Handsomes' (three other male tigers) territories to get here.

Just before leaving the cliff we met up with Sergey, the colonel had dropped him off a few kilometres away and we had walked to meet us. We then departed back via the mountain pass and hoped we would make it. Along the way we saw many wild boar and Siberian roe deer tracks as well as Bucksa's tracks (from this afternoon) and then the tracks of a female and cub along the road. This is possibly Khia the other resident female of this area as her last litter was over 2 years ago and so she could have young cubs by now. But most amazingly were some Asiatic black bear tracks heading down the road towards base camp, following them were the ski marks of Arkady. He skis for miles and miles each day and we followed his tracks all of the way back. The number of bear tracks we had seen (the two Sergeys had also seen fresh brown bear tracks today on their census, as well as evidence of 4 different tigers) is very unusual. In the past it is not unusual to see some bear tracks, but usually one late hibernating bear or an early riser in March, but this was numerous bears all still fully active well into winter.

We arrived back in time for dinner and then went to Alexander's to look at the pictures (as described above) before Yanai, Justin, Alexander and Victor retired to the banya for a traditional Russian experience with the beating of birch branches and excessive heat before running out into the snow to cool down. What a great and long day.



## Day 10 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp in between excursions into the forest.

### Transportation:

Skiing & Walking.

There had been some snowfall overnight, but less than 1cm and the clear blue skies heralded another cold temperature  $-34^{\circ}\text{C}$  was read this morning at breakfast. After breakfast we would be taken by Arkady on the traditional Udeghe skis into the forest, skiing is a great experience and in the presence of master of the skis Arkady a great way to see the forest intimately.

Along the way there were some wild boar tracks and areas where they had been feeding and sleeping as well as many Siberian roe deer tracks and fewer wapiti tracks. Arkady took them to see a couple of his sable traps, the traditional winter activity of many local people in Russia is to head into the woods and set a few traps and catch some sables for their pelts. The pelts are worth a lot of money and managed correctly the fur trade on this level has not led to any noticeable declines in sable numbers.

On returning to the base camp the group was taken through their paces with some rifle shooting practise. A small firing range has been set up and everyone had a go, Polly coming out on top with a bullseye on her first ever attempt. After lunch we departed in the vehicles for a frozen section of the River to try some ice fishing, with the expert help of Sergey we hoped to catch some fish or at least some large freshwater mussels to cook up and eat.

On the way down we stopped to collect the camera trap we had not collected yesterday, this is where we found fresh tiger tracks and knew we would have some good pictures of this male. We then carried on to the river, we left the vehicles and walked the few hundred meters or so into the forest and to the frozen River. To fish here we first used a large cork-screw like drill to create a hole in the ice before lowering a simple rod with some bait attached down into the hole. We ended up with one small fish, apparently there had been people fishing here easier today and the fish could have been scared off, or that was Sergey doing his best to comfort us after failing. However it is a great experience and a nice part of the forest to explore and spend time in, a camp fire was made and some snacks eaten before coming back to the base camp in the evening.



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## Day 11 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp in between excursions into the forest and one group had lunch in a nearby café.

### Transportation:

Private vehicles and Walking.

The temperature had decreased again today and we reached the coldest of the trip so far at  $-36^{\circ}\text{C}$  however the skies were still blue and clear and so it is likely that the temperatures will continue to decrease tomorrow. Today after breakfast we would be splitting into two vehicles and both would be exploring different areas all day on the tiger census. Nikolai had Sergey, Martin, Allison and Yanai in one vehicle going a long way today and then Alexander took Viktor, Polly and Justin would be exploring another area of the reserve.

So at 10am Nikolai's car departed for the mountain pass, we nearly slid down into a small stream and had to evacuate the vehicle and Sergey and Nikolai dug away and pushed and got the car back on the road and we carried on towards the post office. We collected a few camera traps along the way and went up and down a few different roads. All of these roads make up the census routes that are done twice a year to count the tigers and also the ungulate species here. We had seen tracks of 3 different tigers around the cliff, two subadults and one adult female. These are likely to be the nearly dispersed cubs of Bucksa and Bucksa herself as this is slap bang in the middle of her territory.

Further along we found tracks of a large male tiger, Obor was often spotted around here and having not been seen for a few months we feared he had died. But these tracks suggested he was still around and back in this area. We also had great views of a fluffy Eurasian red squirrel moving around the trees, scurrying up and down the trunks and bounding from tree to tree in front of the vehicle as Sergey had hiked a small way into the forest to collect a camera trap. Other than some birds such as Eurasian bullfinches, large-billed crow and Eurasian magpie we didn't see much in the way of wildlife. But evidence of 4 different tigers is always amazing and they were all from within the last 24 hours, with Bucksa and one of her cubs being made this morning and possibly within the last 1 hour or so.

We then left the forest and had some lunch in a café in the village Simedea before carrying on around to the village, picking up some food and then reentering the forest and arriving back at the base camp after dark after a roundtrip of around 100km and all day.

The other vehicle had a slow day in terms of a tiger tracks with just the tracks of Achkarik moving along the road from the study centre to the honey farm. We know they are his (apart from them being a large male) because is the only known tiger who walks over the large wooden bridge on this road, all of the other tigers (male and female) cross the river instead. His tracks had some blood in them and so it was possible he had cut his paw in a recent hunt, it is not uncommon for tigers to injure their paws. Deer and wild boar fight back when they are fighting for their lives and antlers, tusks and hooves can all inflict injuries. They also continued around to the back side of the Little Ambine mountain and beyond the study centre but without any further tracks.

They came back to the base for lunch and then hiked into the forest to a yew tree, yews are rare here and can live for many hundreds, possibly thousands of years. The hike was through some of the reserves most beautiful and pristine forest. It was in the general area of Rachelle and her injured cub, however we didn't find any sign of them and haven't for a few days now. They have not come back out of the forest on the base camp side of the mountain and so they are likely to still be in the forest, possibly on another kill or have left via a road we have not managed to get to yet.

After returning from the hike they Arkady took them on a twilight drive, but again the tigers remained elusive and there were no fresh tiger tracks around.

We all met back up at dinner and exchanged stories before preparing for our final day in the forest tomorrow.

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## Day 12 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served at the base camp.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicles.

Today is our last full day in the forest and once again the temperatures remained very cold, however for some reason it felt colder today than yesterday even though it was a degree warmer at  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . After breakfast we loaded into the vehicles and went to investigate the two kill sites we had visited at the start of the trip. We wanted to collect the camera traps and also see if the tigers had been back, particularly to the second wild boar we found which still had quite a lot of meat left. The tiger tracks we had been following were all still from around that area and it was likely that they were still around, and had been feeding on the carcass. Possibly even made another kill.

The first kill we investigated was the least likely to have had any further tiger activity as it was nearly all eaten when we found it on the first day. So we checked the area and didn't find anything unusual or exciting. We then came



back to the base camp for lunch before heading out again straight after for the second kill, this is the one we hoped and expected to see some evidence of tigers since we had last been there. It was also interesting for us to see as we wanted to know more about the injured cub and whether the injury was still causing problems or if we could find his tracks without blood in them. Driving along the road we didn't find any tracks and when we got to the wild boar kill on the hill the boar carcass had been moved around and nearly all of the meat had been picked off the bones. This was the work of several ravens over the last few days. Their tracks were all over the snow and their presence were all over the camera trap we left here. It was a little strange that no tigers (or other scavenging mammals) came here to feed on the meat left over. We carried on walking up the hill and explored the area further, but didn't see any more tracks and then returned to the base camp.

This afternoon we packed up our luggage so we could leave tomorrow morning and then had our farewell meal. So at 07:00pm we all gathered in the dining room for the start of our farewell celebrations, a lot of food for dinner coupled with some wine, beer and vodka (and other alcohol we could find), jokes, stories, toasts and merriment around the dinner table. Alexander also presented everyone with a signed copy of his Siberian tiger book, a limited edition version which was presented by Vladimir Putin at the Global Tiger Conference in St Petersburg in 2010 to all of the heads of state where tigers currently live. What a wonderful way to end the trip and round off our adventure into the frozen forests of the Russian Far East, the last realm of the striped gentlemen in this stunning habitat.

Tomorrow we would be up earlier than usual to pack up our belongings, load up the vehicles, say our goodbyes and then head back to Khabarovsk. Of course along the way we didn't know what we may or may not bump into and it would be our last chance to see another tiger in the flesh. Also the weather can cause potential problems (although the forecast was good for tomorrow) so setting off with plenty of time is always the best idea.

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## Day 13    **Khabarovsk**

### *Travelling*

#### Accommodation:

InTourist Hotel (3\* Hotel)

#### Food:

Breakfast was served at the base camp with lunch and dinner in Khabarovsk.

#### Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

With the temperature at -28°C it was getting a little warmer, there had been some snow overnight. In fact the snow had started slowly at dinner last night and around 1cm had fallen overnight. But the sky was clearer today and it got nice and blue as the day wore on.

After breakfast we all finalised our packing and loaded up the vehicles. We would be travelling back to the village with Sergey and all the way to Khabarovsk with Arkady so we all loaded into the vehicles and headed off. There were no fresh tracks of tigers on the road, some wild boar, Siberian roe deer tracks were the only tracks we saw and

The rest of the journey back to the town was largely uneventful, with the exception of a large colony of crows (mostly large-billed crows but with some carrion crows as well) present along the sides of the road on the outskirts of Khabarovsk, also in the trees were 3 very large and regal looking white-tailed eagles. Unfortunately being a main road we cannot stop here and just had to see them through the window as we drove along. We made it to the hotel and checked in around 14:00, we then had a few hours rest and enjoyed hot showers, and Justin and Polly going for a walk around to the river and some of the orthodox churches. Then in the evening we met up with Viktor for dinner in a nearby Georgian restaurant. Afterward we headed back to the hotel for our final night of the tour.

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## Day 14    **Home**

### *Departure*

#### Accommodation:

NA

#### Food:

No meals were included today.

#### Transportation:

Private Vehicle & International Flights

Early this morning Allison left for the airport with Olga early to catch her flight with Martin, Justin, Yanai and Polly all on the same flight to Moscow in the afternoon leaving at around midday from the hotel.





9	Pine bunting	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>
10	Rustic bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
11	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
12	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
13	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
14	Eastern great tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
15	Siberian jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>
16	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
17	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
18	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
19	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
20	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
21	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
22	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>

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