









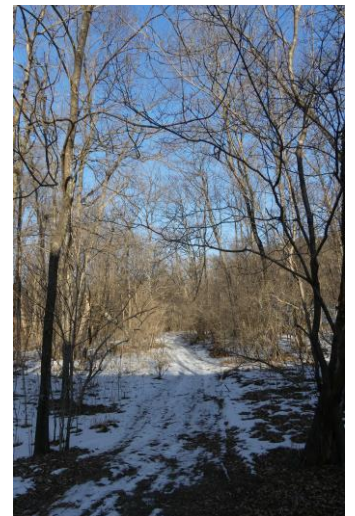
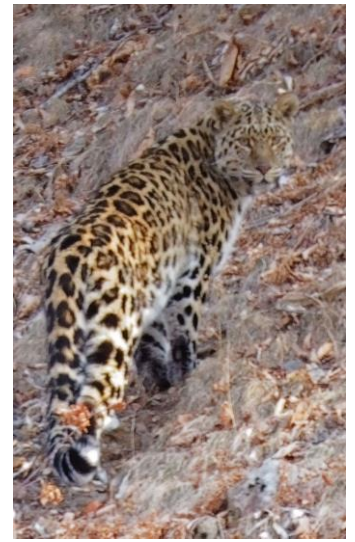


Amur Leopard Photography Tour

Destination: Russia **Duration:** 8 Days **Dates:** 12th Feb – 20th Feb 2018

-  Watching and photographing two of the few remaining Amur Leopards in the wild!
-  Having exclusive use of a photography hide designed for Amur leopard sightings
-  Watching an Amur Leopard feeding for several hours just outside the hide
-  Collecting some stunning pictures and videos of the two Leopards around the hide
-  Observing a good number of hardy winter birds in the forest around the hide
-  Becoming the first non professional filmmakers or photographers to use this hide
-  Visiting a special scent marking location where many residents leopard visit
-  Spending the nights as well as the days in the hide in the heart of leopard territory
-  Becoming part of the winter forest landscape with 6 consecutive nights in the hide
-  Following the trail of several Leopards to their favourite scent marking location



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Olga (Translator / Cook / Driver)
 Vitali (Driver)
 Yura (Kedrova Pad National Park Guide)
 Zelesna (Kedrova Pad National Park Tourism Manager)

Participants

Mr. Erik Op de Beeck
 Mr. Jens Krause
 Mr. Thomas Kimmel (unfortunately a last minutes cancellation)

Acknowledgements

Kedrova Pad National Park – for setting up the hide, baiting the station and keeping good care of us when inside the park and especially the hide. Also for allowing us access to their database of pictures, videos and research on the Amur Leopard
Azimut Hotel – for their rooms, excellent breakfasts and hospitality in general.
Olga – for organising the logistics and our visa docs.

Overview

Day 1: Vladivostok / Kedrova Pad NP

Days 2-7: Kedrova Pad NP

Day 8: Vladivostok

Day 9: Home



Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Ever since the now famous footage of a mother and cub Amur leopard walking through their winter forestscape and feeding on a small deer aired on the BBC's *Planet Earth* in 2007 this species has been highly sought after by many a wildlife photographer, film maker and die hard lovers of this enigmatic animal.

But the dream was all but impossible, the hides used to capture that footage and just about any footage or pictures ever taken of Amur leopards in the wild were off limits to all but professionals and then it was usually only Russians who gained access and then at prohibitive costs. The reasonings were sound, the local authorities didn't want too many flocking to the leopards sensitive habitat and possibly disturbing them as they clung to survival.

Their numbers danced around 30-40 for many years, but then an increase in funding (from both Russia and externally) as well as the implantation of new parks and protected reserves specifically for the Amur leopard and its cousin the Siberian tiger, lead to a boom in their numbers.

Like many big cats, if left alone and they have enough space and food they will quickly increase in number. Their relatively large litters (2-3 cubs) nearly all surviving if the mother has experience leads to a quick recovery. Today their numbers around closer to 70-80 in the wild and they continue to increase.

As does the passion of people wanting to see the rarest of all of the world's cats. At Royle Safaris we have carefully and over a long time developed the first successful wild Siberian tiger tracking tours in the world and have always been interested in taking people to try and see an Amur leopard. However walking the various trails that there are in the forests of the Russian Far East is not a very likely way to come across one. The same techniques that work for the Siberian tigers would not work for the even shier and more elusive Amur leopard. So we started to investigate the possibility of using the professional photography hide that until now had remained off limited for normal tourists or the casual wildlife photographer.

Then in the late summer of 2017 we received notice from the national park authorities that we would be able to bring some clients here and they could use the hide. We would use the same baiting techniques, be able to spend the entirety of our stay in the hide. All of which gives us the best possible chance of seeing an Amur leopard, in fact this trip now gives tourists the best chance in the world of seeing this incredible animal for the first time ever. We also decided to time the trip so that clients can also visit our Siberian tiger reserve before or after and possibly become the first non-scientist, non-Russian to have ever seen both these subspecies in the wild.

Of course the Amur leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*) is not a distinct species of big cat, however it is a subspecies of the much more widely distributed leopard (*Panthera pardus*). The leopard was once found throughout Africa (excluding the centre of the Sahara), through the Middle East towards South East Asia as far as Java and north to the Korean Peninsula and west through Central Asia (excluding the Tibetan Plateau) to the Near East and beyond into the Balklands. But habitat destruction, poaching, hunting and other human driven factors have reduced the leopard in many areas outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and mainland South East Asia. In fact the most northerly leopards that used to span the Central Asian forests have been reduced to tiny specks of protected forest along the coastal region of Primorie in the Russian Far East.

This is a very fragile existence as they are perilously close to China which is the centre of the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) industry. Whilst not as widely known or highlighted as the tiger the parts of the leopard are used in many TCM practises and of course the stunning pelt of the Amur leopard with its luxurious winter pelage is in high demand too. All of this led the tiny number of leopards surviving into the 21st Century. However as mentioned above the last few years has seen a resurgence in the numbers of leopards and they are now coming back in good numbers. They may never get back to the historical numbers and range that they once had in the Russian Far East but this is still great news.

We believe that only by people coming here and experiencing the place and contributing the conservation of the Amur leopard, Siberian tiger and their habitat (which is exactly what all of our clients here do) will these subspecies survive into the future.

Day 1 **Vladivostok / Kedrova Pad National Park**

Arrival

This morning Martin awoke to the sad news that one of our clients booked for this trip, Thomas, couldn't make it and had to go home for personal reasons. In the morning Jens arrived from Moscow and Olga collected him from the airport and brought him to Martin's hotel. Here they met and Jens used Martin's room to freshen up and grabbed some breakfast in the restaurant. Martin and Jens chatted about the trip as we waited for Erik's later flight from Moscow arrive. He was due to arrive a little after midday but due to issues in Moscow the flight was delayed and not scheduled to arrive until 17:15 now. So we made the decision that Viatli would drive Martin and Jens to the national park and Olga would wait for Erik and follow us up later.

The drive to and from the airport had proved to be quite productive for birds, on the trips today we had seen a



northern goshawk pursuing some feral pigeons, an eastern buzzard, colonies of large-billed crows, flocks of Eurasian tree sparrows, many common magpies and Martin also spotted a rough-legged buzzard and another northern goshawk perched in a tree and being mobbed by some magpies.

The drive to the national park was largely uneventful, we arrived at a supermarket nearby the park headquarters and stocked up on some snacks and then continued to the park. The main accommodation (other than the hide) is a large wooden cabin with 4 apartments with 2 rooms and 5 beds in each. Of course in winter many of the rooms are not heated and ready for guests (as so few people come here during the winter) but we would be mostly staying in the hide so one apartment for everyone was perfect. After settling in Jens and Martin went for a little walk around the forest, we found some old wild boar tracks however the snow here was very old and the tracks (which were everywhere) were very hard to decipher. We did however have some good bird sightings including Eurasian treecreeper, white-backed woodpecker, a wonderful pair of grey-headed woodpeckers, eastern tits, marsh tits, long-tailed tits, large-billed crows, common magpies and a Japanese pygmy woodpecker.

Back at the cabin we had heard from Olga they were on the way from Vladivostok and would be here around 20:30. We rested and relaxed and did our best to get over the jetlag as we waited and then on Eric's arrival we had a briefing from Zelina and Yura. Zelina works for the national park and coordinates the tourism in the park and Yura is the ranger who would prepare the hide, bait and ferry us and food back and forth to the hide.

After the briefing we had a great dinner of local seafood from the Sea of Japan, smoked salmon, wonderfully sweet prawns and amazing spider crab. Tomorrow we would depart for the hide and hopefully become some of the first foreigners to ever see the elusive and beautiful Amur leopard.

Day 2 **Kedrova Pad National Park**

Amur Leopard Photography

This morning we rose and had some breakfast prepared by Olga before Yura arrived and started to take some of our equipment (food and sleeping bags etc) to the hide. He also started up the gas heater and we started the walk towards the hide. The forest in winter is beautiful, even without a full blanket of snow on the ground the air is so fresh and crisp and the stillness of the forest allows you to fully imagine the presence of a leopard walking through the forest, perfectly camouflaged against the oranges, yellows and browns of the fallen leaves that litter the ground. Along the way Yura collected the young stag Manchurian deer that was being used as bait, hunted in a nearby forest (where permits for hunting are given and checked by a vet to make sure that it was not carrying anything that would cause harm to the leopard or any other animal), there is something pleasing about buying a deer from a hunter and placing it back in the forest for nature to consume it, instead of being eaten by people in the city.

We carried on to the hide, the walk is around 1.5km and we crossed a couple of frozen rivers, one of which was very slippery with ice so all took the all terrain vehicle (ATV) one at a time with Yura instead of risking slipping over.

Once we arrived at the hide, we set the deer carcass up on a rock in a prominent place for viewing from the hide, we also noticed very fresh leopard tracks. There were a couple of tracks in the ice (the hide overlooks a small frozen river and then a rocky bank and steep hillside on the other side of the river), the leopard had walked here after the sun had rose (around 7:30am) as the top layer of ice had broken but had not refroze which would have happened quickly if the leopard had cracked the ice whilst it was still dark. Also on the other side of the river in the dense and thick leaf litter was the clear shape of a sleeping leopard. We had missed one by a matter of hours. But at least it was promising that there was at least one active leopard in the area. The lure of fresh bait here would surely entice the leopard back also. But we were not solely relying on one leopard, according to camera traps there are currently 3 adult leopards (2 adult males and 1 subadult male) which use this particular area at least once every 2 weeks and then according to the tracks that Yura had seen recently there was a female with a cub also in the area (as well as several tigers) so our chances are pretty good that one of these cats will come along and check out our bait during the week we are here in the hide.

So after setting up the bait we entered the hide and got our bearings and set up our cameras etc. We then said goodbye to Olga, Vitali and Yura and locked the hide door to begin our visual.

The thing that they never quite master on wildlife documentaries is to accurately portray the patience needed to gain an insight into some of the world's rarer and harder to see animals. Here we would stare out at the dead deer and the hillside and wait. The hide is very comfortable, with a chemical sit down toilet, gas heater for heat and also preparing boiling water, lots of food and drink, 3 beds, sleeping bags and everything we would need. The first day or two is most likely to be fruitless as we have disturbed the area a lot with the ATV coming back and forth and a lot of people entering the hide, the setting up of the deer carcass etc. So it would most likely take a while for things to settle down and the first day was predictably quiet. We had some birds coming and feeding on the fat and frozen blood of the deer. Birds such as marsh tits, eastern tits and Eurasian nuthatches are very carnivorous whenever there is a carcass rich in fat around. The fat is very calorific and for small birds who need to survive each bitterly cold night during winter need all of the calories they can get. Also around today was a male greater-spotted woodpecker who was then chased off by the larger and more dominant white-backed woodpecker. But that was as good as it got today.



To become the first tourists ever to see a wild Amur leopard we would need great patience as well as great luck. As the sun set our clients (who had both brought infrared night vision equipment with them) took turns to stay up and monitor the carcass through the night. Whilst so little is known about the Amur leopard it is hard to know what their activity patterns are like but nearly all of the footage and camera trap pictures published are from the day, so whether or not it is prudent to have night vision and stay up all night we do not know. However this night it was a bust and so hoped for more luck tomorrow.



Day 3 Kedrova Pad National Park

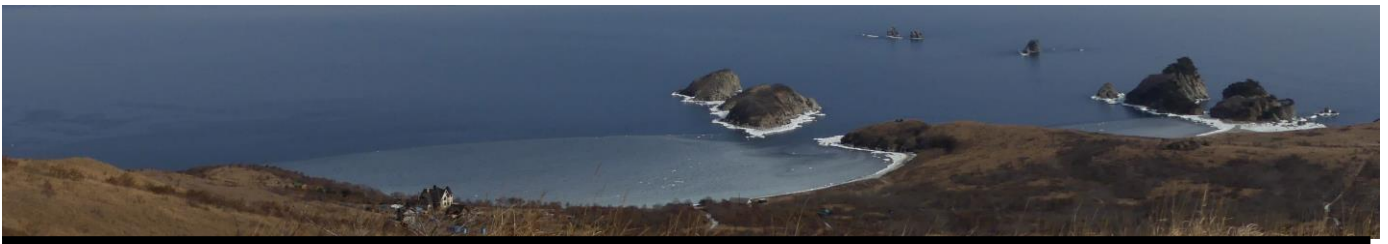
Amur Leopard Photography

This morning we awoke at just before dawn and started our watch again. However like yesterday today didn't result in a leopard, we heard several ravens cawing in the distance, maybe they had spotted the carcass and were assessing whether it was safe to go down and start to feed. We also heard some alarm calling from birds, however we couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from, it is unlikely that the birds were alarming for a leopard as leopards are too large to be a serious concern for small forest birds. But it could have been for a sable, yellow-throated marten, Siberian weasel or one of the other small to medium sized carnivores that share the leopard's habitat. The highlight of the day came in the evening with an Eurasian treecreeper on the tree trunk just outside of the hide, allowing for very good close up views of the bird as it fastidiously crept up and down the trunk looking for food. After dark our second night of waiting, watching and resting started, unfortunately the second night turned out to be near repeat of the first night. However with plenty more days to go spirits were still high.

Day 4 Kedrova Pad National Park

Amur Leopard Photography

As with all of the other days on this trip the day started with an external temperature of around -15°C and the skies were clear blue without a cloud in the sky. Once again there were some nice birds around the carcass, marsh tits, eastern tits, great-spotted woodpecker, Eurasian nuthatch but no leopard today.



Day 5 Kedrova Pad National Park

Amur Leopard Photography

This morning started with the usual radio into the base to let everyone know the hide was ok, the night had once again passed without a leopard sighting. This afternoon Martin (who had left Jens and Eric to themselves in the hide), would head out with Olga and Vitali to a view point over the Russia's only marine reserve. If clients are lucky enough to get a sighting of the leopard with days to spare there is a wealth of other things to do. However with the focus being what it is the clients decided to spend their entire time in the hide and wait patiently.

The marine reserve was beautiful, it is remote and pristine, crystal clear waters, some of which was still frozen and some which had already melted, bordered with pale gold sandy beaches. The coast here is one of the most productive in the world and supports huge numbers of salmon, tuna and other fish which in turn attract many marine predators. Whales, dolphins and seals are common on and around the offshore islands here and recently with increasing ocean temperatures (a result of global warming) the range of the great-white shark has been increasing northward. In 2011 there were 2 attacks near Vladivostok and one last year too. Sightings of this species are growing and they are now infringing on the territory of their cousin the smaller salmon shark which has not been recorded before.

We didn't see any of the marine life, we were content with coastal views and a nice northern goshawk sighting on the side of the road and a couple of tufted ducks in a largely frozen over bay.

Meanwhile at the hide, the morning started with a bang, the leopard showed up, at around 10am Jens spotted the female leopard coming down the slope directly in front of the hide. We watched as the leopard walked down purposefully but with caution and arrived at the carcass. The leopard looked very fat, maybe it had just eaten a large meal. But the position of the bulge was more indicative of a pregnant female. Which is just incredible news. The



leopard looked over the carcass, sniffed it and even took a small bite, but didn't seem to take too much interest and started to walk away. We watched as the leopard started to climb back up the slope in a slightly different direction from before. Whether there was too much human scent on the deer or the leopard was just not hungry or the leopard could feel our presence around the area we will never know. But she refused to feed on the carcass and left.

The grace and poise of the animal is remarkable, even with a huge belly the animal seemed to glide over the terrain and made short work of getting up the very steep slope and away from us.

It was probably no more than a couple of minutes, but those minutes were incredible, to become the first foreign tourists to ever see and photograph a wild Amur leopard in Kedrova Pad National Park is something very special and something that will live long in the memory.

The way the leopard sniffed and then moved on may have indicated that she would come back later today or tonight to feed properly. Certainly she knows there is food here now and so could come back at any time. So we settled back into position and waited patiently again.

Day 6 Kedrova Pad National Park

Amur Leopard Photography

Today the group was split again, into the Jens and Erik in the hide, hoping that the leopard (now that it knows there is good amount of food here) will come back and Martin who would head out with Olga, Vitali and Zelesna on one of the many trails around here to see what other wildlife could be found in the area. First we went to the visitor centre of the park and had a presentation about the leopard but also the formation of the parks here (both the Kedrova Pad and Land of Leopard National Parks) and heard about the great work being done here and that since the parks were founded in 2017 the numbers of leopards (individually recognised by camera trap ID) has risen from ~30 to ~80. Long may this wonderful progress continue. After the presentation Martin was shown around one of the most popular trails, it was an education trail and it was very well done, if this is the future of Russian national parks then the future for some of the other rare and endangered plants and animals in this vast country are looking brighter.

We then went deep into the Land of Leopard National Park to one of the hotspots of wild activity, it is a cliff face located a few kilometres from the main road. It is here under the overhangs and in a small cave at the base of the cliff that all of the leopards known from this area (and we had just seen several camera trap videos and pictures to prove this point) visit to scent mark.

Tomorrow is a local festival to celebrate the Amur leopard and Martin was invited as a guest of honour and would be interviewed, so we would be back here tomorrow for that.

In the meantime Jens and Eric in the the leopard didn't come back, in fact the whole place was eerily quiet. Even the woodpecker that had been a daily visitor seemed to abandon us today.

With hope that the leopard would return the wait continued, but today without further luck.



Day 7 Kedrova Pad National Park

Amur Leopard Photography

This morning the sky was beautiful blue and cloudless once again and Martin headed to the visitor centre with Olga and Vitali again and met up with Zelesna and the rest of the staff at the park. We enjoyed the celebrations for the leopard, this small local holiday was piggy backing on the back of the religious holiday celebrated here with lots of pancakes. There is a very famous Far Eastern festival (Tiger Day) celebrated in the second Saturday of August annually and whilst the leopard is celebrated on that day as well as the tiger. There is a hope that at least around the parks of Land of Leopard and Kedrova Pad there can be a separate festival dedicated to the leopard solely. Raising awareness is key to the longterm survival of the species and festivals and educational programmes are absolutely key to raising needed awareness.

There is so much funding pumping into these parks (from the Russian government (federal and local) as well as international NGO's) that the local people can often feel alienated. Like the tiger and leopard are so valued and loved but they as a people are undervalued. It is important to always work with the local people when looking at conservation. Ultimately if the local people around a park or living everyday with a species do not appreciate it and want to protect, any plan implemented will not work in the long term. Some of the work that has been done here to protect the leopard in recent years is a massive ecological tunnel that was constructed to allow traffic to pass underneath a well used game trail. This was due to two deaths of leopards on this road, it is this massive undertaking that further underpins the change in attitude towards protecting the last few leopards in these hills.



The day in the hide was the same as yesterday, incredibly quiet.

Yura picked up Eric at around 7pm and brought him back to the hotel for the night, Jens would stay on in the hide for the final night before we would pick him up and we would all travel to Vladivostok tomorrow.

Nearly as soon as Erik and Yura had left a leopard came down. This was a male, much larger than the female the other day and clearly a second leopard; he walked quickly and directly down the slope to the deer. Over the course of the next few hours and throughout the night the leopard stripped away the fur, moved the whole carcass off the main rock and to a lower one and then proceeded to feed on the haunch of the deer. The leopard ate the whole haunch over the course of the night. The leopard then walked down on to the frozen river and cracked through the top layer of ice. Skidding on the ice and using its paws to spread its weight out. The leopard then scent marked the ice, by scratching the ice with its claws. The leopard then climbed up onto the rocks again and sat watching over the frozen stream and towards the hide.

Jens managed to get some incredible shots and video on the night vision camera and filmed the leopard filming. After a night of watching on and off and occasionally getting sleep he hoped the leopard would be there in the morning when the sun rose.

Day 8 **Vladivostok**

Travelling

This morning Jens was up very early (having not really slept very much) and the leopard was still there, sat on the rock overlooking the hide. However the light was not very good for photographs, the camera trap Jens set up got some more incredible pictures. And then as if the leopard knew when the light was good enough for pictures, as he got up and walking away back up the hillside and out of site. It wasn't long after that when Yura collected Jens from the hide and we all met back at the main cabins and had breakfast. Jens freshened up and packed his stuff and around midday we all headed back to the city. What a story to tell, the first tourists here and the first sighting of leopard. Erik hoped his luck would hold as he (and Martin) would be departing early from Vladivostok to head to Khabarovsk for Royle Safaris *Siberian Tiger Winter Tour*.

After arriving back in the hotel, we checked in and had the rest of the day to relax, we all met at 7pm for our farewell meal with Olga and Vitali.

Day 14 **Home**

Departure

Early this morning Martin and Erik left the hotel to catch our flight over to Khabarovsk, Martin would be escorting the *Siberian Tiger Winter Tour* from there and Erik is one of the clients. After seeing an Amur leopard Erik could become very possibly the first ever non Russian, Chinese or scientist to ever see both the Siberian tiger and Amur leopard in the wild and certainly the very first Belgian.

Jens' flight was not until later that day and after check out time Olga collected him from the hotel and transferred him to the airport to start his long journey back home.

19	Eastern great tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
20	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
21	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
22	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
23	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
24	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
25	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>
26	Eyebrow thrush	<i>Turdus obscurus</i>
27	Japanese pygmy woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus hyperythrus</i>

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