

## Siberian Tiger Winter Tour

**Destination:** Russia **Duration:** 14 Days **Dates:** 20<sup>th</sup> Feb – 5<sup>th</sup> Mar 2015

-  Having a young male tiger watch us in the forest and follow us a few hours later
-  Having the expert guidance of Alexander, a leading Russian tiger expert
-  Seeing some winter resident birds including Ural owl & Rough-legged buzzard
-  Being involved in a vital tiger census by counting tracks and setting camera traps
-  Roman seeing a large male tiger on the road when alone on a snow mobile
-  Exploring the immense Taiga forest that spans 2/3 of the northern hemisphere
-  Seeing various Siberian roe deer and also a foraging sounder of wild boar
-  Learning about the indigenous Udeghe people from one of their elders in Gvasyugi
-  Seeing the seldom seen mountain hare as well as red foxes in mating season
-  Meeting Zhorik the disabled but playful tiger who was rescued from a circus

### Tour Leader / Guides

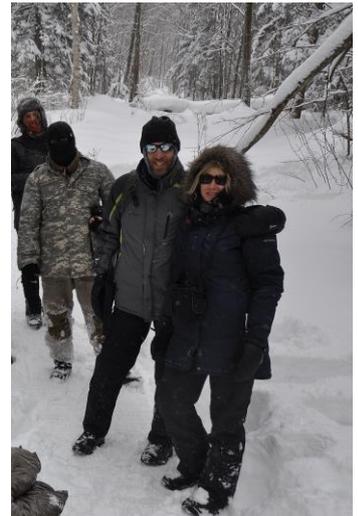
Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Alexander (Forest Reserve Director & Guide)  
 Sergey (Base Camp Cook)  
 Nikolai (Forest Reserve Guide)  
 Ivan (Base Camp Assistant & Fire Manager)  
 Roman (Base Camp Assistant & Ski Guide)  
 Andrei (Base Camp Assistant)  
 Viktor (Russian – English Translator)  
 Eduard (Uytos Rehabilitation Centre Manager)  
 Vaseli (Extra driver for Gvasyugi village visit)

### Participants

Mr. Jason Grubber  
 Mr. Graham Mitchell  
 Mrs. Julie Mitchell

### Overview

<b>Day 1:</b>	Khabarovsk
<b>Days 2-12:</b>	Forest
<b>Day 6:</b>	Utyos Centre
<b>Day 9:</b>	Udeghe Village
<b>Day 13:</b>	Khabarovsk
<b>Days 14:</b>	Home / Khabarovsk
<b>Days 15:</b>	Home





# Day by Day Breakdown

## Overview

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

So it is here, in the frozen forests of Far Eastern Russia where our search for one of the most elusive and endangered animals in the world would take place. Whilst seeing a wild Siberian tiger is extremely difficult we would be helped in this task by Alexander and his team who run the 20,000 hectare reserve around 200km south of Khabarovsk. This reserve and the surrounding forests are home to a very high density of tigers (a density so high that it rivals densities in some of India and Nepal's most productive national parks); one of the main reasons for this high density of tigers is the prey base. Even though finding any wildlife in these forests in winter is tough there are lots of deer and wild boar around and whilst hunting occurs here (during hunting seasons) it has been less so than in other areas and so the numbers of prey still remains high. Our time in the reserve would coincide with one of the two annual censuses that are conducted in the reserve (and at this very special moment in tiger conservation February 2015 marks a global tiger census. This is only the second time ever such a grand undertaking has been attempted and it marks the half way mark on an ambitious but 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 subadults). 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*

Both Jason and Graham & Julie had arrived in Russia prior to the start of the tour. Graham and Julie had been in Moscow and Vladivostok for a week prior and Jason arrived the day before. So it was easy for Martin (staying in the same hotel as Jason) to meet him and for Graham and Julie to be collected from their hotel and all meet in Alexander's Khabarovsk apartment. Seeing Alexander in the city and confined to a small apartment is a little akin to seeing a tiger in a cage, his infectious enthusiasm comes out when you mention the tiger and the other wildlife of the taiga forest but when he is in the forest he comes alive. After everyone had arrived at his apartment we had a small briefing, some Russian tea and met our Alexander, Nikolai (who would be our 4x4 and snow mobile driver) Viktor (our interpreter) and Olga (who prepares the visa support documents needed to visit Russia and also arranges the ground logistics) and final preparations were made for the stay in the forest. We then loaded up the cars and made a trip to the local supermarket to buy any last minute snacks, alcohol and other supplies we may miss when isolated in the forest for the next 12 days. Martin, Graham, Julie and Nikolai were in one vehicle with Alexander, Jason and Viktor in the other vehicle. This would be the configuration for all of our vehicle safaris and transfers throughout the tour. Most of the journey was uneventful, driving out of the sprawling and industrial city of Khabarovsk and into the rural areas that dot the southern boundary of the taiga forest before entering the forest as we closed in on the reserve. Some of the hardy winter birds were seen along the way including a huge mixed flock of large-billed crows and carrion crows. This is a commonly used roosting site and the 100 plus strong flock (or murder) looked imposing as they perched in the leafless almost lifeless trees either side of the icy road. Other birding highlights on the drive to the forest included a distant white-tailed eagle and a Eurasian sparrowhawk seen by Jason. It was a wonderful sunny and unseasonably warm day today. Earlier in the winter they had had more snow than had been recorded since the 1960's in November and more had fallen since, now the temperatures were recording record temperatures for Khabarovsk with 3°C being recorded in February and this being the 'warmest' it has ever been during February. With all of this unusual weather it would be interesting to see what affect (if any) this would have on the wildlife. The only eventful thing to happen before we reached the reserve was that Nikolai's rear windscreen shattered, a small rock had bounced up off the road and shattered the glass. However it held together quite well and with some duct tape we managed to repair it well enough until he would return to the city after the tour. The last hour or so was on a road that is only a road in the frozen winter, during the summer the area we drove through is a marsh and as a result there are a couple of wooden bridges to cross. We crossed the barren snow covered flat marshes and silver birch forests until we reached the taiga forest that marks the start of the reserve. There was a huge amount of snow on the ground and the going was a little tough on the vehicles as the road had not been driving on for a while and so the snow was loose and powdery, making it difficult to gain any traction. Early on we found old tracks of a tiger and fresher tracks of a large sounder of wild boars. Then about 30 minutes into the forest we found male and female tiger prints. The female had walked along the road a couple of times and the last time as accompanied by a male and they left the road together and head down an old snow mobile trail towards a hill marking the border of the reserve. They were walking towards a wild boar kill that Alexander had found a week or so ago and he suspected whether one of these tigers had made the kill and was now in mating mode as it is unusual (although not unheard of) for adult males and females to associate when the female is not in oestrous. There was a camera trap down this pathway and in the next few days we would come here to collect it and hopefully see the tigers responsible for the tracks. Alexander knows that this is part of the territory of a female who has had a litter for 2 cubs who are approach-ing dispersal age and so it is highly likely that she is coming into oestrous again and advertising her presence and readiness to mate with scent marking prominent trees with urine and anal gland secretions, leaving scats in obvious locations as well as scratching trees and leaving scraps in the snow, the latter two methods release pheromones from her interdigital glands (glands that are located between her toes). All of these olfactory queues are like beckons to males in the area that she is



track and as they were made during the same night and they were not on top of each other it was guesswork ready to mate and we did also find many scrapes on the road as we drove further on following her tracks. These tracks were around 2 days and there were many tracks going back and forth along the to decide which direction she and the male had moved off to. We hoped that as we followed the road towards the base camp that they had walked past a camera trap so we could get a better idea of their overall direction and exactly when this occurred, as well as identifying the tigers. As well as leaving a nice trail of tracks, scrapes and a huge scat (full of wild boar hair) she lay down in the road twice, one impression was very good and the legs, tail and head were marked in the snow. You could also see where she had sat up, listened to the forest, maybe even making calls out to a perspective mate she had heard or detected and where she had swished her tail in the snow the dirt from the fur was sprinkled on the pristine snow. All that was missing where the stripes and we stood and looked into the intimate life of a tiger. A little further on we could make out where she had rolled in the snow and more dirt was present, she was obviously cleaning her fur from this dirt and the snow is a good way of doing this. The scats were collected by Alexander, he sends them to Moscow University to his students there, they are used for genetic analysis and they tell him the individual that it belonged to as well as the relatedness of that tiger to the others on record. From this he can develop a comprehensive family tree of the tigers in the reserve and surrounding areas. We came across a second scat, this one also full of the coarse hair of wild boar. As these large scats are nearly always left within 3 hours of the tiger feeding (and they usually sleep for a while straight after a feed), there was a good chance that the tiger had made a kill nearby. We carried on further towards the base camp and found fresh wild boar and wapiti tracks on either side of the road. We followed the tiger tracks along the road for several kilometres and around 3km from our camp we came across a fresh (1 day old) Siberian roe deer carcass on the road. The tiger had eaten all of the animal except for the legs, judging from the tracks we could see that the roe deer had been resting on the road and was unaware of the tiger approaching down the road, the tiger too must have been unaware of the deer as it never changed its pace or stride pattern until they would have been able to see each other at a distance of around 10m. Here the roe deer fled into the forest and up a slope, the tiger ran after it and intercepted the deer around 30m up the hill, the kill was made up there. Probably very quickly as the roe deer was a small one and even adult male roe deer are not difficult for an adult female tiger to bring down. The deer was then dragged down to the road and the tiger fed here. Judging from the melted snow where she lay the tiger stayed for several hours and consumed the whole animal in one sitting. Tigers can eat around 40kg of meat in one sitting and as this roe deer was significantly smaller than that it is not hard to imagine the female eating the whole animal quickly. We know this to be the case because there are no tracks of any scavengers (sable, red fox, racoon dog, mink or Siberian weasel), only the footprints and wing impressions of ravens were present on the snow around the carcass. Carrying on, as the sun began to sink behind the hilly profile of Little Ambine (Little Tiger Mountain), we saw she had carried on down the road towards the base camp and scent marks and scraped along the way. She left the road and headed into the forest at a well known stream and snow mobile track which is around one kilometre from base camp. We arrived at the base camp at around 19:00 and after being shown to our cabins, which make up the sizeable base camp located in the shadows of both Little Ambine and Big Ambine; we met the rest of the camp's staff including Sergey (Alexander's son) who is the camp cook and who had prepared a wonderful spread of local food for us on arrival. The vast majority of the food we consume in the reserve comes from the surrounding forest, during the hunting season the wild boar and roe deer are harvested and then stored in the natural deep freeze, the trout and salmon are all locally caught, all of the fruit and jams are collected from the forest as is the wonderful wild garlic condiment that is so typical of the Russian Far East. We also met Ivan, Roman and Andrei and had explained the traditional banya (Russian sauna and integral part of the culture here) which we were welcome to each evening. After our meal we went into Alexander's cabin and were shown some of the recent tiger pictures he had collected from various camera traps around the reserve. This included the female tiger whose tracks we had seen today, she walked down the road towards base camp at 17:41 yesterday, so the roe deer kill must have been made last night and if we had arrived and started the trip a day earlier would have been on the road at the same time the tiger was eating from the kill. Alexander also explained a concern he had about a potential problem tiger nearby. He had heard reports of a male tiger straying far from his known territory and wandering close to villages. This tiger has been seen to be injured and from camera trap pictures Alexander obtained from a regularly used scent marking location around 30km from base camp, the tiger has a snare caught around his neck. Whilst this snare was not set for poaching tigers (instead they are used to illegal hunt for wild boar and deer) the snare would seriously impede the tiger's ability to hunt and Alexander had noticed the tiger was already in poor condition. It is tigers like this that begin to take dogs, livestock and potentially people as they become increasingly aggressive with lack of food. When around that area we would have to be on guard a little more than usual, however the chances of having a run in with this (or any tiger) are very small. After this little warning and the rules of the camp being explained (namely to not go out after dark and also not to leave the confines of the camp without a guide) we retired to our warm and cosy cabins for the night, tomorrow we would have a tour of the camp and then head out into the forest on our forest tiger census trip. It had been a long day and as the many stars shone down and illuminated the sky with the snow reflecting their light it is incredible to think that



this frozen forest harbours a thriving population of the world's largest and surely most beautiful and elusive predator.

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## Day 2 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning we awoke to a unseasonably warm  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  and had a hearty breakfast prepared for by Sergey. The sky was overcast and the threat of snow over the next few days was ever present. Heavy snow fall not only impedes what we can do in terms of which roads we can get down and which we can't but it also makes it very hard going for the animals and many find shelter and wait out the worst of the snow. So we would head out today straight after breakfast and go to where we had seen the male and female tracks from yesterday, Alexander wanted to see if he could find any signs of them mating and also show us the wild boar carcass from around 1 week ago. He had a camera trap set overlooking the carcass to see if the tiger or another animal would come and feed on the remains. 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 for the prey animals and so more food for the tigers. 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. We stopped once again at the roe deer carcass and Martin led Julie, Graham, Jason and Viktor down the road for a walk of a few kilometres before the vehicles caught us up. Along the walk we saw marsh tits, Eurasian jay and an eastern great tit as well as a few large nests in the trees either side of the road. These nests were made by Asiatic black bears in the summer as they sleep in the trees as well as climb the trees to feed on tender leaves and buds at the top of trees. This is a strange behaviour for the Asiatic black bear and the reason they spend so much time in the trees is the presence of tigers that are predators of the bears. Obviously during the winter the Asiatic black bears as well as the brown bears that also live here are hibernating, but the reserve in summer and autumn is also the best place in the world to see this endangered bear species. Also seen as we walked along the road were very fresh sable tracks (including urine and faeces that was still wet) and also Siberian roe deer tracks and dung from this morning. We could see where the deer had been walking up the banks on the side of the road to get to the new buds that are just sprouting from the small saplings. There undulating tracks going along the road feeding on the buds before disappearing into the forest. We then drove down to the site where the male and female tracks were and started to walk along the snow mobile trail towards the hill in the distance. The track is cut through a more open expanse of forest and this is ideal habitat for hares, the Manchurian and mountain hare use this area and their tracks were everywhere, they feed on the grass and signs of their activity where all over the snow. The high level of snow was good for the hares as their natural snowshoes allow them to walk along the top of the snow and not sink all of the way down. This way with heavy snow they are able to reach the more tender shoots higher up on the plant that are out of reach for them in the summer. We crossed Durmin River, some otters had left tracks here as they use the only break in the ice to get in and out of the water during winter. As we continued to walk we had nice views of a greater-spotted woodpecker as well as seeing impressions in the snow of where a hazel grouse been foraging. We then followed the tiger tracks up the hill and into the forest, after a few minutes are walking in the deeper snow and following the prints of Alexander who had in turn followed the prints left by the tiger we walked past an old cemetery. There used to be a village here and the cemetery has now been claimed by the forest and only a few of the tombstones could be seen over the snow. We then came to the huge carcass of an adult male wild boar. Probably in life weighing 150kg, most of the body cavity had been eaten and the rump had gone as well, but the head, legs and back were all intact and gave an overall impression of the size of the animal. We also saw its large tusks, a formidable weapon that the adult males particularly use when defending themselves. It is testament to the speed, power and courage of the tigers here that adult male wild boar make up their preferred prey type, considering that the deer and even female wild boar are much easier to catch and overpower. A short way down the slope there was another carcass, this one of the very unusual and small racoon dog. This scavenger had been drawn to the kill by the smell, but had not waiting for the tiger to leave, the tiger had killed the racoon dog and eaten most of the body, leaving the head, which includes the black eye mask that gives the animal the superficial appearance of the North American racoon even though the racoon dog is a true canid. It is not uncommon for top predators to kill other predators, but it is unusual that the very sensitive nose of the racoon dog didn't also notice the smell of the tiger when approaching. Maybe the smell of the wild boar was masking the tiger's scent. But whatever the reason we could see two carcasses up close. Alexander had also set a camera trap up overlooking the racoon dog carcass, however neither the wild boar or racoon dog camera traps had anything on them. As we descended the hill a raven began to circle the kill. By now the meat was largely gone from the kill and the raven needed another larger animal to come along



and reopen the carcasses so that the remaining meat could be eaten. The raven had probably been watching the area and once we arrived had started to get active and excited about getting access to more meat. We then made our way back to the cars and then back to the base camp, it was getting towards evening and on the way back we had nice views of a Eurasian jay. We then had dinner as the snow began to fall, first lightly but as the night grew so did the snowfall. Everyone collected in Martin's cabin to watch a documentary on the Siberian tiger and one that was actually filmed here, with the fantastic wildlife cameraman Gordon Buchanan spending 4 weeks in the Far East (2 of which were with Alexander, staying in Graham and Julies' cabin) at the helm as they tried to find the wild Siberian tiger.



### Day 3 Forest Reserve

### Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature was 0°C (which is the warmest Martin had experienced here on these Siberian tiger tours) and around 3.5cm of snow had fallen overnight, the sky was once again overcast and we knew that more snow was on the way today. After breakfast we had a guided tour by Alexander around the base camp. Throughout the tour and the following days the enthusiasm for the forest and its wildlife that Alexander has comes through and is not lost in translation. In fact there were many times when he would talk about tigers and the wildlife in the reserve and you would understand everything before Viktor had translated anything! The camp itself had started life as a geologist's camp and in 1993 Alexander had taken over the base and wanted to do more biological research in the forest. He then went about building better and larger cabins, a banya and other buildings so that he could feasibly run a research station here throughout the year and not just have some people here some of the time as other base camps operated. As we 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 Alexander's one remaining dog Zidane was bounding around with a female, the female (Lera) had been brought here by one of Alexander's friends Lenid in order for Zidane to mate with her. One of Alexander's other dogs Ursa (Zidane's last offspring) had been killed by a pack of hunters dogs from the city a few weeks before. 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 of the tigers occurred within the perimeter of the base camp, including one where a tiger took one of his puppies from just 5m in front of Alexander as he stood in the entrance to the kitchen. One of the most fundamental things that shines through here is that nothing is wasted, cigarette butts are saved and burnt as fuel, ashes from the fires and 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) and *kaban* (wild boar) as well as the banya and how it works, the chicken coup, that provides fresh eggs and the big house that is usually only used in summer as it takes too much fuel to heat up sufficiently in winter. 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 of branch of a tree (without falling off and to the ground) this allows the seeds that are undigested in the dung then grow direct from 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 also encouraged to try the water direct from the frozen stream at the back of the camp and it is so cold, refreshing and delicious he could bottle it and become very wealthy. He also explained about the old banya that he wants to convert to be 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 2 winters before tagging them and releasing them to fend for themselves once they are sufficiently old enough. After this introduction to the base



camp and a small insight into the way that the local people use the plants here we climbed into the vehicles and headed towards a rocky outcrop that is known as the stronghold or the post-office. The overhanging rocks and location at the confluence of 3 of the forests small rivers, which all make very good natural territory boundaries make a perfect place for scent marking as the overhanging rocks stop snow and rain from washing away the scent and so every tiger in the area (as well as wapiti, Siberian roe deer, Eurasian lynx, Asiatic black bears, brown bears, sable, Siberian weasel and red fox) use this place. Since March 2014 Alexander has had 2 camera traps set up here and in that short amount of time has witnessed 7 different adult tigers (and three cubs born in 2014) use the post-office. This is an incredible density of tigers and the location is clearly of great importance to the local tiger population. However due to the sensitive nature of tigers if there were not clearly defined tracks heading up there we would not go and create tracks. Tigers are very weary and will avoid areas that have human tracks and we didn't want to disturb the site and the potential for tigers to use the area. But the route is also an important one on the tiger census and has many tracks that are used by tigers and with camera traps to check, replace and new ones to set up we would be kept busy. Alexander also wanted to check in on some of his friends that run other base camps and also speak to some hunters; one of which is a local musician, and as it turns out a bit of a drunk. All of the people Alexander speaks to he asks about tiger sightings, tracks etc and builds up a picture by keeping in contact with everyone around him. This also helps encourage the other reserve managers to keep a record of the tracks they see, a practice that is not always done, so it is a very important aspect of the tiger conservation here to make sure that everyone is paying attention to the tigers and it has become Alexander's job to keep on top of this. Along all of the roads, tracks and trails that we would be following for the duration of our stay we would be looking out for all of the tracks, whilst counting the tiger tracks is the main target for the tiger censuses it is also very important to count the tracks of all of the wildlife here as the tigers can only survive here with healthy populations of prey animals too. The 2013/14 censuses showed populations of 138 Manchurian wapiti, 53 wild boar, 27 roe deer and 15 musk deer inside the reserve itself and comparable (but smaller populations) in the neighbouring reserves. Whilst these are not large numbers of animals this is only from a small sample area of forest and when extrapolated to cover the whole protected forested areas around here the numbers are very healthy indeed and the density of tiger numbers supports this. In the 20,000 hectare reserve there are 15 tigers (including 4 cubs) in the greater area (encompassing another 3 forest reserves like Forest and a total area of 387,000 hectares) has a population of at least 22 tigers that have been positively identified. This includes around 7 males, 10 females (of which 7 are known or thought to be with cubs) and 5 young cubs and several around the age of dispersal; and it is this incredible density of breeding tigers (5.5 tigers/100km<sup>2</sup>) that makes this reserve by far the best place to try and get a glimpse of what is one of the rarest, most elusive and threatened animals in the Russia. As we started driving up the hill passes towards the post-office we passed a very old tree which has a large hole going down into the belly of the trunk. This is one of the more well-known Asiatic black bear hibernating sites and as we do not know if there is a bear in there or not the moment, we didn't poke our head inside. The road had been cleared by a large plough, paid by a logging commission as this road is heavily used by the logging trunks, this disturbance over the last few days and also continued for 2-3 other days is a major reason why we had so little activity around the post-office. But even with unlikely activity due to increased human presence we still had to check the roads and area for tracks. We changed a camera trap located around 2km outside of Alexander's base camp and a little way off into a very rarely used road. This road connects to a base camp that is only used in the summer and so the winter's snow has accumulated onto it, however the trail did have some oldish tiger tracks. They were made by a male tiger around 3-4 days ago and we hoped to see the tiger on the camera traps we collected. As we collected the memory card Nikolai took the snow chains off the cars as the new cleared road didn't require them and we didn't want to damage the tyres. However in hindsight this would be a mistake. Around this area there is less of the very dominate silver birch and the higher altitudes of this road are very good places to see the true taiga forest which continues up north for hundreds of miles 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 Alyn mountains. 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 and the secondary forest growth is dominated by silver and 3 other species of indigenous birch trees. With the help of past forest reserve managers (as the birch is quick growing and a favourite in the current logging industry) the forest in many parts – particularly the reserves bordering Alexander's – is dominated by silver birch. This is not the case in natural primary taiga. The major difference is that the most common tree is the larch and other than that the diversity of trees is much higher. The whole basis for the rich ecosystem here is founded in the presence of large seed bearing trees such as Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut and Korean pine. These massive and slow growing hard woods were naturally the first to be targeted by the loggers in the 1950's-1980's and there are very few stands remaining. The odd Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut or Korean pine still can be seen in the forest and Alexander has a small stand of Manchurian oak in his reserve that 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. Further along the road the forest opens up a little and the road skirts past some south facing slopes which are quite a good place to see deer, and Jason spotted a couple of Siberian roe deer moving along the slope from left to right. We had excellent views of the deer before they moved off and climbed over the ridge and away out of sight. At the first base camp we visited today the main staff (including the musician Alexander really wanted to find) had left for another camp a little further down a road that is not as often used and had not been cleared. But whilst here Alexander was given a little puppy, named Jessy by Julie, after their own dog at home (and also curiously the name of one of Jason's dogs. This dog was given as a replacement for Ursa who Alexander had lost recently and in the coming weeks was cared for by Nikolai and Andrei at the base camp. We carried on to this other cabin and saw evidence of roe deer feeding on the bark of trees along the side of the road. We also found scat that was around 1 day old and this was once again collected ready to be sent to Moscow. We then started to have difficulties in getting stuck, Nikolai's car was not as good as getting through the soft powdery snow and after getting stuck every 50m or so along a road that was around 3km in length we decided that everyone other than Nikolai would get into Alexander's car and travel ahead to the cabin, meet the men and see if we could find any more tracks before we lost the light. As it turned out Nikolai spent a few hours getting himself clear of the snow only to arrive a spot where we had come along the group of hunters, musician and others on the road and had all got stuck. They were of course all very drunk and this did not make getting out of the situation very easy, after the very drunken and somewhat amorous introductions to the musician and some pushing, laughing, winching, towing and general nonsense we decided to leave the cars and their pickle and walk the short distance to the cabin where at least we would be warm and could meet his friend Sergey and hear if he has had any tiger sightings recently. This is what we did and he welcomed us into his cabin, he was here for a few weeks with a permit to catch 10 sables, he had 6 already and their skinned carcasses met us outside the cabin and we were shown the skins inverted and stretched over sable shaped wooden plates ready for tanning. Each pelt is worth around USD \$200 and with around 40 sable needed to make one coat you can see how this little animal is so sought after by trappers. Since the 1800's over 1 million sable have been trapped from the wild for fur annually and so far we have not noticed a reduction or slowing down in their number. This is not sustainable indefinitely though and at some point even the vast expanses of the Russian taiga forest will surely notice 1 million of their sable being lost annually from the population. Sergey was very accommodating and let us share his caviar, tea, bread, roast hare, pickles and fish as Alexander spoke to him and we experienced a real Russian hunters' winter cabin. The simple and efficient way in which the hunters and loggers and general outdoors men live here in the forest is very humbling to see and experience when we consider all of the comforts and technologies that we take for granted in our lives in the western world. As the sun began to fall further in the sky we headed back to the cars and found Nikolai there and helping the drunken men, who had somehow managed to get their car even further into the snow and in the opposite direction to where it was facing earlier and in the opposite direction that they needed it to go in. We did manage to get Alexander's car out and we drove this to the cabin to turn around and waited here as Nikolai came up after us, after getting stuck a little again on the churned up road. This was just the start as the road was so badly churned up and the snow all dug out and piled up ad hoc and the track laden with big deep tracks and holes and huge clumps of compacted snow we got stuck numerous times in Nikolai's car. In fact it took us no less than 2 hours to travel 800m in these conditions. However once we got back onto the cleared road, Nikolai and his inexhaustible patience (also considering that during one of the pushes to get his car out of the snow the drunk musician had pushed his back windscreen (the one held together by duct tape) and had pushed his hand right through it) let rip with the Russian rock music and the accelerator and we quickly caught up with Alexander. Driving up the hill roads back to the base camp in the dark was a good experience and Jason in the front car spotted a mountain hare on the road as well as a pair of Ural owls, the second of which we all saw well as it flew over the cars along the road and perched in a tree overhanging the road. This large owl is not uncommon in the forest however can be hard to see, so it was nice to see a couple and well. Due to the large amount of ground we covered today, the visits to the base camp and hunters cabin, tiger tracks noted, roe deer, hare and owls spotted and of course the huge number of times we got stuck in the snow it was around 1am when we arrived back to the camp and we all headed straight for bed. Tomorrow we would take the snow mobiles out and hoped for more luck, however with more heavy snowfall predicted we were not sure how much accessibility we would have to some areas of the reserve over the next few days. However this was a problem for tomorrow and the coming days and for tonight we had a full day to recover from and Nikolai particularly needed some rest, the amount of shovelling he had to do this afternoon was immense and if he accumulated all of the shovelling he had done today into one hole he would probably have dug down 100m into the ground. Whilst it is not unusual to get stuck in the snow during in winter, that is just one of the things you have to accept when travelling in Far Eastern Russian during the winter, the amount we were stuck today was highly unusual and not something we wanted to repeat on this trip or any future trips either.

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## Day 4 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning the temperature read  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the sky was thick with snowfall, we had had around 10cm overnight and it continued to come down when we had breakfast. In fact the sky looked very unforgiving and we would



probably have heavy snow all day. It was the beginning of an anticyclone that had been predicted on the weather forecast and this usually bring heavy snow for a couple of days and then very cold clear days when the heat trapped by the clouds is lost through the clear skies and the temperatures plummet. This is very normal weather here but it is usually very normal in December and January and not so much in February which is usually the driest month of the year here. As the snow was falling very heavily and we had so many problems with the snow and getting stuck yesterday we decided to stay at the base camp until the afternoon and hoped that the weather cleared up. Around the camp Jason enjoyed some birding and spotted greater-spotted woodpecker, white-backed woodpecker and Eurasian bullfinch and got some great pictures of these hardy birds that remain in the frozen forest when their larger cousins have all left for warmer climes. During the afternoon we loaded up onto the snow mobiles and as we were getting our gear together we had great views of an Oriental greenfinch flittering around the small conifer plantation in the base camp. We went to a stream around 1km away from the base camp, this is a regularly patrolled pathway and border of at least 2 different tiger's territories. There are several very conspicuous scent marking trees along the route as well as camera traps so we checked these and collected the SD cards to see if there had been any recent tiger activity. The heavy snow had obstructed most of the tracks so we couldn't tell if a tiger had been here (unless it had literally just been through here). Alexander did show us a dead birch tree that he knows has a hibernating Himalayan black bear inside, this tree is very close to the snow mobile trail and we went up to the tree to have a look. We couldn't see inside but interestingly Alexander said that twice recently the camera trap pointing to this tree has had the same male tiger visit the tree and sniff. Obviously smelling the bear and probably wondering if there is a way inside to get the easy meal. We also saw a small flock of three Eurasian bullfinches flying along away down the trail as well as being shown the cork tree. The bark of which is spongy and also is always warm to the touch, a fact that always takes people by surprised when asked to take their gloves off and hold the tree and feel that it is several degrees warmer than the surrounding air. This bark is great insulating properties and was actually used as the insulation in the first Soviet submarines as well as being very prominent in many traditional medicines. The tree had also been used as a scratching post by a tiger and the deep claw rakes were obvious. The snow continued to fall, at a rate of around 1cm/hour and as a result many of the wildlife were remaining inactive. We didn't see anything else of note, in the evening we went through the camera trap pictures we had collected as well as other pictures and videos that Alexander had collected over the years. There was nothing fresh or recent on the camera traps we had collected today. We hoped that the snow would have cleared up by tomorrow and that the animals would be more active again.



## Day 5 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning the unseasonal warm weather continued and the temperature was  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ , snow had fallen heavily through the night and even still, there was around 8cm of new snowfall on the ground this morning. Any tracks (even an hour old, would be very difficult to find and identify). The clouds were still thick and heavy and there didn't look like an end in sight, but we would leave the base camp today and head to a nearby hunter's winter cabin today. Dotted around these forest reserves are several cabins that are used by the hunters and fur trappers as places to stay and get warm during their hunting activities. The cabin is basic but very functional and warm and would be nice place to get warm and relax for a while after the snow mobile trip along the trail to get there. As with all of the routes we take throughout this tour this one is another common tiger trail. With some very prominent silver birches to use as scent marking along the way and once again Alexander had some camera traps set up along here. So we would investigate this route and collect the memory cards from the camera traps. The snow was so deep, at one stage the snow mobile that Nikolai was driving got stuck and on getting out of the sledge Martin sank 1.6m into the snow, with the snow up to his chest it was difficult for him to get out. The soft powdery snow (that had been weakened by the rain the other day) was so soft and collapsible that the snow mobiles found it very tough going. It also rendered finding any tracks impossible. However we did arrive at the hunters cabin and Ivan was already there with the fire going and some tea on the boil. This tea would be made using *Schistandra* berries and roots as well as the chagga fungus. This fungus only grows on birch trees and recent studies suggest that it has remarkable anti-carcinogens in it. At the cabin several of the very tough winter birds come to feed on the seeds that are left there for them. Amongst the birds are many marsh tits, the dominant and busy Eurasian nuthatches, eastern great tits and the solitary coal tits. The latter two tits spend most of their time away from the seeds and instead picking fat and suet off the hides of wild boar that are hung up on the trees around the lodge. These hides and their connecting fat layers are used as bait by the sable trappers. The unused remains are prime sources of fat for the birds during winter. We stayed here for a while, enjoying some excellent BBQ wild boar and tea whilst we bird watched, surrounded by a winter wonderland scene that would be a near perfect match for Narnia. Next to this cabin is an old (50 year old cabin), that was used up until around 5 years ago. We went and had a look inside and the difference was incredible. The fact that this was used until very recently is a shock considering that the barren and basic conditions in the



cabin were stark. As the snow was coming down continuously we found no fresh tracks and the movement of animals is very low when conditions are like this. We tried to progress further down the track and see if the conditions got any better further up but if anything the snow was getting deeper and deeper and it was soon impossible for us to continue and we turned around and headed back to the base camp. Hoping that the snow would stop tomorrow and we could get further into the reserve and also see if we could see any new evidence of wildlife. After heavy snowfall like this the tigers increase their scent marking activity as the snow has washed away any sprays and covered scrapes and scats. If a tiger's territory is unmarked for 4 weeks another tiger will nearly always come in and claim this territory and with several kilometres of boundary to patrol this is a big job for tigers (particularly males) to make sure their territories are defended in the aftermath of a snow storm. So once it stopped we hoped for better luck.

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## Day 6 Utyos Rehabilitation Centre

## *Tiger Tracking & Sightseeing*

Today the sun was shining and with a temperature of  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  (the coolest today) and we would be able to visit the Utyos Rehabilitation Centre. 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. What made this particular visit very interesting is that Graham and Julie donate annually to the David Sheppard Foundation and particularly for the care of Zhorik the rescued tiger in Utyos. When signing up to donate and help this animal on the other side of the world they never expected that one day they would have the chance to see him, but today they would come face to face with this incredible ambassador for Siberian tigers) who dedicate their lives to protecting tigers that have come into conflict with humans, tigers that would ultimately face a certain death without any intervening help; and whilst here we would also be able to see one of these incredible tigers in the snow of the Russian Taiga forest. Along the way we would be visiting different tigers' territories and a couple of transects that are very valuable to the overall tiger censuses. The quick route to the centre is over the hills and past the post office, but this route is usually unavailable to us in winter, but the recent clearing of the road for the logging trucks was to our advantage today. We would also pass by the post office and be able to see if there had been any recent visits by tigers, this rocky outcrop is so regularly visited by the tigers that their trails up and down freeze into solid ice footprints and tracks during the winter. The mountain pass was very picturesque with the snow frozen to the tops of the trees and appearing crystallised against the bright blue sky. Along the way we found a hazel grouse flying from tree to tree across the road as well as young wapiti tracks from this morning. Alexander, Jason and Viktor in the front vehicle got an excellent view of a Siberian roe deer on the road, before it bolted across and away into the forest. On leaving the forests we made a quick stop in the large village of Bitchoi, 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, 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 with no luck today. In the mid afternoon we arrived at the centre and were introduced to the staff and manager. The centre was established by Vladimir Kruglov in 1991, Vladimir used to be employed to catch Siberian tigers alive using nothing but ropes and a large sack. These animals were sold to zoos and circuses and during his life he caught over 40 tigers like this. Then he caught one particular tiger for a circus but this tiger had a missing canine and the circus refused to take him. He was caught as a cub after his mother was killed by poachers however his injuries meant that Vladimir could not risk releasing this tiger back into the wild. So he built a large enclosure on his land, this was the birth of the rehabilitation centre and from this he started to rescue other animals (tigers, bears, foxes, lynx and deer) any animals that were reported orphaned or injured on roads or by hunters were taken in by Vladimir with the aim of helping them recover or grow to independence age before being released into the wild. Some of the animals however are too badly injured or too dependent on people to ever be released and so they are kept at the rehabilitation centre and given as good a life as they can provide. They also become very important ambassadors for conservation and education around here. The most famous of these was of course the tiger that started all of this, named Lyuti he was probably the most famous Siberian tiger in the world and also the most photographed, he also helped to raise much needed money 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 here with his wife to show us around and explain how the centre operates. Currently the centre is home to 3 tigers, 2 Asiatic black bear cubs, 2 brown bears cubs, a Siberian roe deer and a litter of raccoon dogs. Two of the Siberian tigers that they have here were caught as they were hanging around a village. They are 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 we could see the tigers and they are monitored 24 hours a day. We were lucky enough to see live footage of one of these tigers (a male) in the enclosure as well as being shown footage of him taking a killing a wapiti. 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 current tigers would most likely be released in the spring time when they are a little older and the hunting is better and easier with little snow cover. Along the way to the larger enclosure and the famous tiger Zhorik we past a couple of small pens housing bear cubs, one with 2 brown bear cubs and one with 2 Asiatic black bear cubs. These cubs were also orphaned by hunters and were taken in to hibernate. They are kept in small enclosures to ensure that they sleep through the winter and get into a hibernating rhythm. However they are often very active as they prefer to see what is going on other than hibernating. They are being kept here until a larger bear sanctuary can take them and they decide the best course of action for them. Once again the enclosures are small but they are not meant to enjoy their captivity and after their release they hopefully never come into contact with people again. When visiting this centre it is important to remember that this is not a zoo and the overall aim of this centre is to make sure that the animals they care for have the best chance for survival once they are released. After these enclosures we made it to the tiger, this tiger is named Zhorik. At nearly 6 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. After around 45 minutes with Zhorik we left and had lunch with the Kruglovs and watched the footage described above before starting back to the base camp along the same roads. Before leaving Jason and Martin spotted a distant white-tailed sea eagle soaring as well as some closer ravens and large-billed crows around the centre. On the way back Alexander and Nikolai got separated and Nikolai (being not as familiar with the roads here) got a little lost, missed the right hand turn from the main road and back into the forest reserves. However this was not a problem for Martin, Julie and Graham as we had the added bonus of being in the middle of vast snow covered fields where we spotted three red foxes. This is the breeding season and they are starting to move about freely looking for mates. Seeing this beautiful red coated animal against the pristine snow as a great



sight. The red fox is the most widely spread mammal in the world (after humans and invasive / introduced species such as mice, rats, cats and dogs) and the range of habitats that they survive in are amazing. From the Sahara and Middle East to the mountains of the Himalaya and Rockies to the tundra of Russia and Canada and the urban streets of London and Paris they are surely the most adaptable carnivore in the world. As well as the foxes and before we got back on the right track we found a couple of rough-legged buzzards perched on the telegraph wires lining the roads. The rest of the journey back to the camp (for both vehicles) was quiet and once we arrived we had dinner and reflected on another great day in the Russian Far East.



## Day 7 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

Today the temperature had dropped once again and at  $-19^{\circ}\text{C}$  was the coldest it had been, the snow had stopped for two days now and the snow was compacting once again. This meant that everywhere in the reserve and surrounding areas was accessible for us and the wildlife once again and we hoped to see some fresh evidence of tigers. This morning we took the snow mobiles out and visited the site of a Eurasian lynx kill, the lynx had taken a Siberian roe deer on the stream and after only eating a small amount (as lynx only do eat small amounts) the large remains of the carcass were free for any scavengers who would be interested. Alexander wanted to set up a camera trap here to see what (if) any animals were coming to scavenge. At the kill site there were many fresh lynx tracks from the last 24-36 hours (since the snow had stopped) and it was clear that the lynx had come back to feed at least once after it had made the kill. Julie set the camera trap up here and we all hoped for some scavenging species and maybe the lynx or even a tiger. Along the stream there were no tiger tracks and we returned to the base camp for lunch. At around 4pm we left the base camp again and this time went for a drive towards the village and a part of the reserve we had not been to in a few days. We had tiger tracks on the main road, they were possibly made within the last 48 hours and the tiger walked past a camera trap that Martin had set up at the beginning of the trip. So we were very confident of having some tiger footage on this camera trap. We collected the SD card and carried on down the road, following the tracks. We went to Valeri's camp, this was an old research station and prior to that a logging centre (even with its own small gauge rail line that connected the logging community with the village); this camp is made up of around 10 or so buildings that he guards throughout the year. It is a lonely existence and one that sees him come face to face with tigers and his dogs take the brunt of these interactions. He has lost at least 3 dogs including two puppies in the last 12 months. The fact that this man doesn't use any of the old and unused buildings to house the dogs, or even builds a basic cage to keep them safe (like Alexander and the other base camp managers do) is beyond the comprehension of everyone. Alexander actually told him that he is not to keep dogs anymore. When Martin was here in November 2014 we saw a wonderful little puppy and when asking what its name was and if how he would train it, Valeri's response was 'it won't live long enough to be trained; a tiger will kill him first'. Around this area we didn't see any other tracks, only lots of hare tracks as well as having excellent views of a hazel grouse perched on a branch close to the road. As we turned around and headed back towards the base camp Alexander went down the 'phone' road (the only road where phone reception is available) to arrange the Udeghe village visit in the next few days. On his way there he spooked an adult male wapiti who ran off into the forest alarm calling. Continuing on and driving down the south-western slope of Big Ambine towards the base camp the sunrise was spectacular as the orange sun was shining through the trees. On arrival back at the camp we checked the camera traps and found that on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February (day 4) a large male tiger had scent marked the tree at Martin's camera trap and investigated the camera.

## Day 8 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning was colder again at  $-26^{\circ}\text{C}$  and with very clear skies, the wind chill was making this around  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . A good sign, the temperatures were going back to normal for this time of year and the snow was getting more and more frozen and compacted, making life easier for the tigers and ourselves. Today we would go to the post office again. As we were preparing to get ready we noticed that a team of Russian forestry department officials were here. They had arrived late that night and stayed, they were on a normal patrol of the various forest reserves in the area. Their main job being to make sure that the right trees were being logged, the right hunting permits being issued, speaking to the base camp managers in case there had been any illegal poaching, logging etc and at present to get further information about the tiger with the snare around its neck. This tiger has a very strong potential to becoming a problem individual and they wanted to know its most recent whereabouts so they could investigate if it has or would be likely to take livestock, dogs or even human lives. They want to keep a track of the tiger and its movements in case they have to take action and remove the tiger in the future. So we were a little late in getting



ready to leave as Alexander was talking to them. Driving along the mountain road towards the post office we found fresh roe deer tracks from this morning, a lone individual had walked along the side of the road eating the fresh buds growing on the small trees, we also found the impression in the snow where the deer had lay down for a short while. Further along we spotted a roe deer on the slope, the same slope we had seen the roe deer previously, during the morning this south facing slope is the best place to see the deer as they warm up on the ridge. We watched as this adult female moved along the top of the slope, occasionally stopping and allowing for great picture opportunities. The light was perfect and the framing from the surrounding trees made it almost perfect, the thick greyish-brown winter fur of the deer is a stark contrast to the pristine white snow and dark brown tree trunks of the larch trees. She then moved off and above the slope as we carried on to another base camp, whilst here we found some Eurasian nuthatches, eastern great tits, Eurasian bullfinches, marsh tits as well as common crossbills and the very pretty two-barred crossbills. No body was home at this base camp so we carried onto the post office, since March 2014 Alexander had positively identified 7 different adults and 3 cubs at this one location. That (amazingly) accounts for around 5% of the global population of Siberian tigers! But once again there were no fresh tracks and as our tracks and subsequent odours potentially put off any tigers and other wildlife from using that area we decided not to go up to the camera traps at the post office and leave it for another day. On our way back to the base camp we came across a nuthatch feeding on the ground, where the snow plough had scraped down to the soil the nuthatch was feeding on the seeds that were still present underneath the snow. We then had lunch and afterwards Julie, Graham and Jason joined Roman and went up Little Ambine at the western end of the base camp on the traditional Russian hunting skis. These cross country skis are wide with wapiti fur on the underside, this fur enables the skis to glide over the snow in the forward direction but the grain of the fur stops the skis from sliding too far backwards. This slope is full of different birch trees and other species including silver birch, black birch, golden birch, cedar, Manchurian walnut, Manchurian oak and Korean pine, this high diversity of trees and especially because of the present of the large masting trees the area is quite good for wild boar. Roman and Sergey had seen fresh wild boar tracks around the slope in the previous couple of days and when they arrived in the middle of the slope and into the heart of the forest they saw 7 adult female wild boar. The boar had been foraging in the forest and when they heard and noticed the skiers they took off. They were feeding on the cedar cones and rooting around in the snow for any that are still full and lying hidden under the 3 feet of snow here. Today was Julie's birthday and Alexander had kept a large bream (a member of the *Megalobrama* genus) which we would have for dinner tonight, we are indebted to Ivan for cooking the fish for 2 hours over the open fire and the results were delicious. This fish is a rare fish from the Amur River and was given to Alexander as a present and tonight was the perfect occasion to have it.



## Day 9 **Gvasyugi Village**

## *Tiger Tracking & Cultural Sightseeing*

This morning the cold weather continued and the temperature was  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Today after breakfast we went to visit a local Udeghe village. In the world it is estimated that there are no more than 50 tribes who still live out their lives in as much of a traditional way as possible. In the Russian Far East there are two such tribes left in existence, the Nanai and the Udeghe. The Udeghe are more numerous and in the Khabarovsk Krai (district) there are around 600 (out of a total population of 2,000) and the village of Gvasyugi has a population of around 150. 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 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 78) 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 towards the village we found feathers in the road, left from a grouse that was killed by a hawk of some sort, we also found fresh tiger tracks crossing the road, these tracks were from this morning but they were not near any camera traps unfortunately. There was much bird activity this morning with many hazel grouse around as well as large flocks of Eurasian bullfinches and Eurasian nuthatches feeding on the road. We also had great views of a Eurasian red squirrel climbing among the dead trees next to the road. On leaving the forest and driving through the marshy areas before reaching the village we found many red fox and



Siberian weasel tracks. After leaving the reserve and entering the village we said goodbye to Alexander as he has tiger census meetings with other scientists, data to collect and analysis and other work to do, so Viktor and Jason were driven by Alexander's friend Vaseli. The rest of the drive was pretty uneventful and we arrived at the village at around 14:00. We immediately met Valentina and had a tour of her 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 village 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. Valentina also told us about the history of the Udeghe here and their shamanistic beliefs. We then left the museum and went to the cultural hall where some of the local women donned their traditional dress and performed traditional dances and songs for us. Unfortunately with so few Udeghe people left and with the culture dying out without practising these dances for tourists and with the help of Valentina these dances and songs are likely to be lost forever. We were shown the wapiti dance which was used during the hunting season and includes a birch bark horn being blown. Another important dance we were shown was the bear and woman bridal dance. The relationship between bears and women and bears taking women as brides is one that is common and prevalent throughout Northern Hemisphere cultures. As well as the dancing and the songs we saw the traditional instruments such as the tambourine being used for many of the dances. We then lunched at the cultural centre a traditional meal of greyling soup with frozen trout, onion and rye bread. The fish were caught in the nearby Khor River, we visited the Khor River before we left, this river is one of the largest in the area and drains into the Amur River. At the river we spotted a pair of azure-winged magpies before heading back to the base camp, we arrived back in the village in the evening. Stocked up with drinks and snacks we met Alexander and said goodbye to Vaseli. We didn't see any fresh tracks on the way back to the base camp in the forest and when we arrived back Sergey had a great dinner awaiting us.



## Day 10 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning was much warmer than usual with the temperature at  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the clouds had come in again, the threat of yet more snow was definitely in the air. This was now a concern as the heavy snow on the ground has serious impacts on the deer (and to a lesser extent) wild boar populations. If the snow is up to and covering the bellies of the animals they cannot digest their food and their guts can begin to freeze. The last time they had a heavy (unusual) snowfall the forests here lost a huge percentage of their deer and wild boar. So it is highly likely that when Martin next runs his tour here in November 2015 that the populations will have crashed. This is not necessarily bad news for the tigers in the immediate future as the carcasses provide food for the tigers in the late winter and early spring. But if the populations do not bounce back then the predators too also become affected and unlike the lynx the tigers cannot easily switch to smaller more abundant prey like hares. So this morning we took the snow mobiles, driven by Nikolai and Roman whilst Martin drove the vehicle with everyone else in to Valeri's camp. From here we all boarded the snow mobiles and sledges and were taken to a mineral salt lick in the forest. These are naturally occurring areas of mud and clay that are rich in salts and minerals and the herbivores aggregate here during the warmer months to get nutrients that are absent from their vegetation diet. Sometimes in the summer Alexander scatters ashes and salt onto the area in order to give the herbivores a helping hand. Along the way to the mineral lick we collected a couple of camera traps on the road towards the village. The mineral lick was covered in snow (as you would expect) and due to this they are seldom used in winter, but as we arrived we saw lots of recent activity, wapiti and wild boar tracks were all over place. There is a camera trap here that we collected to see how recently the animals had been here. We then left the area and headed back towards Valeri's camp and further on this road to the eastern side of Big Ambine. Along this road we found wapiti tracks from the last 2 days as well as from this morning. This is a very productive location for wapiti and their tracks and feeding places are regularly seen along the road. The small trees alongside the road are stripped of the bark which is what they are eating in the winter. We had more views of hazel grouse just resting on the snow on the road and taking off as our snow mobiles approached. Fresh female tiger tracks were also seen crossing the road and we hoped one of the camera traps we were collected had caught her (they didn't as it turned out), and on the river we had clear tracks of an otter moving



along the frozen stream. Presumably to find an entry into the river that was not frozen anymore. We set up some more traps and then headed back to the vehicle, swapped snow mobiles for the vehicle and headed back to the base camp for lunch. Then at around 4pm we headed back into the forest to check on the camera trap that Julie had set up near the lynx kill. It started to snow again this afternoon as we head out and we came across fresh roe deer tracks a sure sign that the roe deer had ran off when it heard or saw us approach. A short time later we heard a couple of very loud barks, this is the alarm call of the male roe deer. Either this was in response to us, however it seemed more likely that the barking was in response to the roe deer running into the scent of sight of a tiger. As when we had collected the SD card from the lynx kill camera trap and moved further along the path, we found fresh tiger tracks walking away into the forest and towards where the roe deer alarm call had come from. The tracks were the same female's we had seen tracks of crossing the road yesterday and they headed up the hill. Unfortunately away from the camera traps set up overlooking various scent marking trees along this route. But as we looked we did see other tiger tracks moving in the opposite direction and investigating the scent marking trees. This was an immature male by the looks of things. As Well as these two tiger tracks (one of which we were sure to have on camera traps); with the adult female moving along the pathway and then away and up the hill (and possibly to where the poor roe deer ran off to) and the young male who comes from the opposite direction and around the scent marking trees; we also found weasel tracks chasing a mouse through the snow and into some of the mouse's under snow tunnels. Imagining the lightning quick chase and manoeuvring that must have gone on during this hunt was wonderful. We also hoped that we would have something on the camera trap as the lynx carcass had been eaten some more and there were many tracks around, tracks that looked like either weasel, mink or sable. So on our return to the camp, Alexander quickly scanned the pictures and found the male tiger who had come along the pathway only 4 hours or so after we had been down their setting the camera up a few days ago. The camera trap picture sequence was us on a snow mobile followed by Graham reclining on the sledge and then the tiger following. Watching the video it was very interesting to see that this young male came up to the tree, sniffed and was interested but didn't spray itself. This is because being a young male and not holding a territory and also not being big and strong enough to fight an existing male in a territorial challenge, this male preferred not to scent mark as to remain as hidden as possible. But there was a little more disappointing news as the camera around the lynx had not worked properly and we were still none the wiser as to what was scavenging on the roe deer carcass. So Alexander wanted to go back out and set up the camera there again to see if we can get what is feeding on the carcass.

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## Day 11 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

This morning the weather was cloudy with some snowfall and the temperature was  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ , there had been around 5cm of snowfall overnight. This morning before breakfast Jason had had great Eurasian red squirrel sightings around the base camp. As the snow was due to fall continuously all day we decided to take the snow mobiles; driven by Ivan and Roman; to the hunters cabin as conditions elsewhere could be so bad that we may just be getting stuck all the time. With heavy snowfall covering any possibly fresh tracks on the way to the cabin we didn't see anything and used the stove at the cabin to get warm, also the bird watching was very good once again with many Eurasian nuthatches, marsh tits, Eastern great tits and the odd coal tit all feeding. After a while in the cabin we headed out on the skis with Roman a little further up the track, as this is easier than using the snow mobiles. This is the area that we suspected the 2 year old tiger (the male who we found on the camera traps yesterday) to be in and hoped to come across his tracks along this way. The only thing we found this morning was very fresh wapiti tracks. On return to the base camp we had lunch and the snow had pretty much stopped falling by now, after lunch Jason and Ivan went for a quick scout up to Little Ambine to see if the wild boar family had come back to the same location they were seen at a couple of days ago. They weren't and there was no fresh evidence to suggest that they had been back since we had spooked them. A little later on we all went with Alexander to the lynx kill again to check the camera traps, this time it had worked and we had caught a very large Siberian weasel that was feeding on the carcass. There were no tracks around the carcass though and snow had covered the roe deer, the head was also missing and the whole carcass had been pulled further down and under the ice partially into a hole. This was probably an otter, and otter was also the most likely culprit for the missing head too. We cleared the snow from the carcass and moved it to a more exposed area in front of the camera trap. The snow stopped falling between 5-6pm. This is when we were back at the base camp, but Roman had taken a snow mobile and driven back to the village for the night. But along the way, close to where we first saw the tiger tracks on arrival into the base camp, he came across a large male tiger walking along the road towards him. At first the tiger had not noticed Roman and the snow mobile as he had stopped a while off (around 100m), but once the tiger became aware of Roman he snarled and ran off the road into the forest. Roman waited a while on the road, but with the fading light he had to risk that the tiger had moved far enough away into the forest and it was safe for him to continue and drive past. He waited as long as he dared and then quickly moved past and sped towards the village the rest of the way. We only found this out the next day in the morning when Nikolai (who had also left to go to Khabarovsk to complete some official business – as well as get some of his car repaired), came back and met Roman in the village and was told about this. This male is almost certainly the male who was with the female (that we saw the tracks of) and with Roman only seeing him and also seeing no sign of the female around, it would suggest that they had finished mating and that the female would be pregnant with his litter of cubs.



## Day 12 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

Today the temperature had dropped a little from the last few days and was  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and at breakfast we had exciting news of Roman's tiger encounter. Being our last day here we decided to go to the post office and collect the SD cards from here. In the morning Jason and Martin had nice views of long-tailed tits in the base camp grounds and Julie had seen a grey-headed woodpecker near her cabin. On leaving the base camp we once again took the mountain road and travelled towards the logging road, on the entrance to the logging road we came across fresh young male tracks coming out of the forest along a snow mobile track and down along the road towards the base camp (around 10km away). A little further down the road we found the tracks where the tiger had walked from the post office direction towards the base camp and wondered if he had been as far as post office. We found a couple of scrapes along the road and also where he had lay down on the side of the road, his body making a near perfect impression of a tiger in the snow. We could measure his head and body length and at around 1.6m long this is a young male and probably around 18 months old. The males continue to grow and add muscle mass until they are around 5 years old. This is the age that most male tigers first breed, as they cannot outcompete older males until they are large enough to win the territory through fighting. On arriving at the post office we found that the tiger had been up to scent mark (or at least visit the rocks) and we went up to investigate, the overhanging rocks are very conspicuous and also the ideal natural location for scent marking as the overhanging rocks remain devoid of snow and rain and the scent is not washed off. The hundreds of thousands of sprays that have been left here over the years have stained the rocks a dark colour and this is very obvious. The site has been used by at least 7 different tigers since March 2014 (only 11 months ago) and Alexander will continue to monitor the location with ever present camera traps to see how the population grows, shrinks and possibly find out more about the relatedness of some of the tigers here as well as finding out the size of their territories (by working out how long it takes them to make their routes and repeat visit the post office). As we were on the cliff ravens circled above and could have indicated that a tiger was nearby, however it is likely that the only large mammals that spend this much time around the post office are tigers that the ravens were attracted by the activity and assumed that a free meal would be on the cards. ON our way back to the base camp we had two fantastic views of Eurasian red squirrels, first on the side of the road and then climbing around the trees. We could watch as the squirrels climbed very dextrously around the trees and jumped from tree to tree. Great light and stunning location allowed Jason to get some great photographed. Martin, Jason, Viktor and Alexander were in the front car and we had lost Nikolai, Julie and Graham behind us, but we assumed they had stopped for an equal amount of time for the squirrels that we had. But what had actually happened was a young roe deer was stuck on the road, Nikolai had gone running out of the car and chased the deer into the snow, the snow was so deep that the deer become stuck very quickly and easily. He hand caught the deer (who was protesting quite a bit) and released the deer into the shallower snow on the other side of the road. I doubt that the deer understood the reasoning for Nikolai to get the young female deer from the dangerous and potentially lethal deep snow and release him into the better low snow, but it was worth doing in hope that the deer can survive. Everyone then met up again at the base camp, and heard of Nikolai's deer catching skills. This is a story he will dine out on for a while, catching deer by hand is no easy matter and something that I don't think many people thought was actually possible. But it was done with the best intentions, whether or not the deer would stay in the shallower snow and survive or head back to the deeper snow we didn't know. But there is only a limited number of things we can do in this situation. Then after lunch we headed towards Valeri's camp to collect the remaining camera traps. Along the way we had great views of Eurasian bullfinches feeding and flying around the trees on the side of the road. Around half way to the camp we noticed that Zidane was running down the road after us, Alexander doesn't like to have the dogs leave the base camp, not only is it dangerous with tigers around but also these are highly trained hunting dogs and he wouldn't want Zidane to get a sniff of a deer and bolt into the forest, kill the deer of maybe disappear for a few days. So we picked him up and put him in the back of the truck as we collected the cameras. He loved being out and sniffed everything attentively and ran back and forth into the deeps snow. But on the way back he jumped clean out of the back of the truck and ploughed into the forest, Alexander stopped, called him back and we then had him in the cab with us. The dog thoroughly enjoying the ride and being outside of the base camp. It very much felt like he was having a great adventure joining the humans on 'whatever it is they do when they leave the camp everyday'. Returning to the camp with the camera traps Zidane had an air of being very pleased with himself about him. Later than night we checked the camera traps and found that we had had a visit from male tiger and he had just walked straight down the road and didn't come to the scent marking trees and at the post office another male tiger had made an appearance, this was the one we had followed the tracks of this morning. He had visited the post office at 18:14 the day before. The camera traps showed him visiting and scent marking and sniffing the sprays already left there and then in the next one us coming to collect the memory cards.



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## Day 13 **Khabarovsk**

## *Travelling*

This morning the temperature had dropped again to  $-24^{\circ}\text{C}$ , never before had Martin known the temperatures to fluctuate so much in such a short amount of time. The effect that this will have the vegetation and wildlife in the longer term is unknown and something that will only be understood in spring. But it is likely that some of the hibernating animals would be emerging early (during the 2-3 day warm period) and then possibly die of exposure when the temperatures drop again. For example we had been seeing more and more insects beginning to emerge from their winter slumber and surely they would not survive the colder periods interspersed with the warming weather. This would impact the pollination of the spring flowers as well as the food abundance of the many migratory birds that arrive back here in early spring to breed. After breakfast we packed up and said our goodbyes, to avoid the possibility of getting stuck on the open marshy areas just outside of the village we decided to head around the mountain road and the slightly longer (but more reliable road) back to Khabarovsk. Along the way we had really good views of another Siberian roe deer, this was a young female and as it was very close to where Nikolai had rescued one yesterday and that this particular deer was determined to run off into the deep snow, it seemed that this was the same deer and for some reason she was destined to get up into the deep snow on this ridge. We decided against further stress to her by chasing her to move her again and let nature take its course. At the end of the logging road we found 5 female Eurasian bullfinches all feeding and flying through the trees together. We also had a nice Eurasian red squirrel sighting as it climbed among the branches of a cedar tree and away out of sight. As we left the forest we found some tiger tracks, they looked like an adult female and she was moving into the logging reserve. Alexander made a note and measured the tracks before we headed off and through the agricultural lands and small stands of silver birch forest that span the distance between Khabarovsk and the village. We found a red fox, listening to any rodents and shrews hiding and moving around underneath the snow, in the same place as we saw one the day that Nikolai, Julie, Graham and Martin got lost and on the edge of the road we spotted a juvenile golden eagle. The large raptor allowed us to get a good view and a couple of pictures before taking off and flying off and away into the distance. A little further on Jason spotted an eastern buzzard on the side of the road, this is a species that has recently been split from the common buzzard and is now widely (if not universally) accepted as a new species. Once we arrived back in Khabarovsk, we met up again with Olga, said goodbye to Alexander and Viktor booked us a table at a nearby restaurant. The rest of the afternoon was free for people to rest, shower and explore the city and Amur River banks and then in the evening we met up again with Viktor and enjoyed a nice Russian meal before heading back to the hotel.

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## Day 14 **Home**

## *Departure*

This morning Julie, Graham and Martin all left for the airport on time to catch their flight back to Moscow and then their onwards home. Jason was staying an extra day in Khabarovsk and so left without a hitch the day after.

# Species List

## Siberian Tiger Winter Tour / February 2015

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

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Vole species (unknown)	Arvicolinae spp.
2	Siberian roe deer	<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>
3	Manchurian wapiti	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>
4	Hare species (unknown)	<i>Lepus</i> spp.
5	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>
6	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
7	Eurasian lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>
8	Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>
9	Siberian weasel	<i>Mustela siberica</i>
10	Mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>
11	Raccoon dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>
12	Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>
13	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
14	Birch mouse species (unknown)	<i>Sicista</i> spp.
15	Shrew species (unknown)	<i>Sorex</i> spp.
16	Wild boar	<i>Sus scofra</i>
17	Himalayan black bear	<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>
18	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>

February									March				
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†Roman only

### Birds (\* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
2	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
3	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
4	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
5	Bohemian waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>

February									March				
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6	Eastern buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>
7	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
8	Common redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
9	Oriental greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>
10	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
11	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
13	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus coronae</i>
14	Large-billed crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
15	Azure-winged magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
16	White-backed woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
17	Greater spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
17	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>
18	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
19	White-tailed sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
20	Common crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
21	Two-barred crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
22	Eastern great tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
23	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
24	Coal tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>
25	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
26	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
27	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
28	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
29	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
30	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
31	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>

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22								1	3	1		2	6
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	3			~15	7	1	5		3	14	2	4	
		1	2	2			2	6	2		3	7	
	6	3	4	10	2	1	7	3	3	5		4	
		2			*					*			
	*				2	4		6	1		1	2	