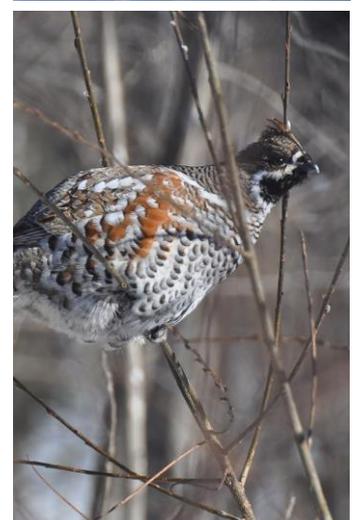
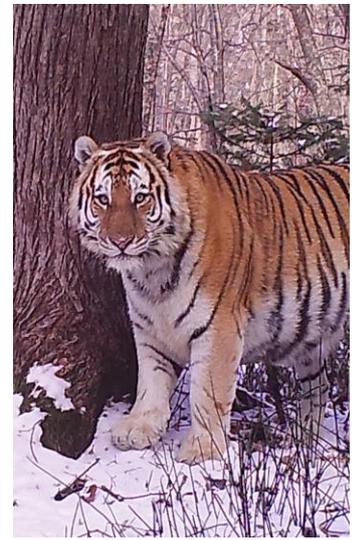


## Siberian Tiger Winter Tour

**Destination:** Russia **Duration:** 14 Days **Dates:** 27<sup>th</sup> Nov – 10<sup>th</sup> Dec 2016

-  Following a male Tiger's tracks and watching where he scent marked and slept
-  Having the expert guidance of Alexander, a leading Russian tiger expert
-  Seeing 20 species of birds including winter resident birds such as Hazel Grouse
-  Being involved in a vital tiger census by counting tracks and setting camera traps
-  Finding tracks of a young female Tiger and her 2 cubs for the first time
-  Exploring the immense Taiga forest that spans 2/3 of the northern hemisphere
-  Seeing stunning pics & vids of Bucksa and her 4 cubs at cliff relaxing and playing
-  Learning about the indigenous Udeghe people from one of their elders in Gvasyugi
-  A total of at least 4 different Tigers all being active within 5km of our base camp
-  Meeting Zhorik the injured but playful Tiger; rescued from a circus & living in Utyos



### Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Alexander (Forest Reserve Director & Guide)  
 Sergey (Base Camp Cook)  
 Nikolai (Transfer Vehicle Driver)  
 Ivan (Base Camp Assistant & Fire Manager)  
 Igor, Misha, Valeri & Arkady (Base Camp Assistants)  
 Viktor (Russian – English Translator)  
 Eduard (Uytos Rehabilitation Centre Manager)  
 Costantin & Anatolin (Alexander's Eco-tourism Students)

### Participants

Ms. Lesly Cupitt                      Mr. Brett Murray  
 Ms. Julija Grinberga                Mr. Andrew Murray

### Overview

<b>Day 1:</b>	Khabarovsk
<b>Days 2-12:</b>	Forest Reserve
<b>Day 5:</b>	Utyos Centre
<b>Day 7:</b>	Udeghe Village
<b>Day 13:</b>	Khabarovsk
<b>Day 14:</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 either the Amur tiger or Ussuri tiger and in the local Udeghe language Amba); a forest that is covered in a blanket of snow and ice for 6 months of the year and then a rich and diverse temperate boreal 'jungle' in the summer. At first glance in the winter this seems like the last place that a tiger would be found, however they have spent a considerable amount of their evolutionary history in the forests of eastern and central Asia. The evolutionary history of the tiger starts in China around 2 million years ago and the tiger quickly moved north and reached the Russian Far East, Japan and Korea around 1.5 million years ago. They remained here for some time, spreading west and as far as Turkey (for some reason tigers never made it further west and into Europe and they didn't cross the land bridge connecting Asia with the Americas); whilst some walked the land bridges connecting Sumatra, Java and Bali to SE Asia at the same time as many migrated northwards. The tiger has is and always has been a truly Asian species, born and bred in this vast continent.

It is ironic that the most closely associated country with the tiger (India) is the one that they arrived in the latest. Tigers only made it to India round 12,000 years ago, this is known because fossil evidence suggests that they never made it to Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka was attached to India via a land bridge until around 12,000 years ago. Since evidence of tigers has been found throughout India from around then it is clear that they would have made it to Sri Lanka if they had arrived when they were still connected. As tigers have spent most of their history in cooler climates they are more at home in the temperate forests than the sub-tropical ones of India, a fact that is highlighted by their dislike of the heat and their love of bathing in the heat of the dry season. So despite the Russian winter seeming so alien for a tiger to call home, they are very at home here and arguable more so than in India.

So it is here, in the frozen forests of Far Eastern Russia where our search for one of the most elusive and endangered animals in the world would take place. Whilst seeing a wild Siberian tiger is extremely difficult we would be helped in this task by Alexander and his team who run the 20,000 hectare reserve around 200km south of Khabarovsk. This reserve and the surrounding forests are home to a very high density of tigers (a density so high that it rivals densities in some of India and Nepal's most productive national parks); one of the main reasons for this high density of tigers is the prey base. Even though finding any wildlife in these forests in winter is tough there are lots of deer and wild boar around and whilst hunting occurs here (during hunting seasons) it has been less so than in other areas and so the numbers of prey still remains high. Our time in the reserve would coincide with one of the two annual censuses that are conducted in the reserve the numbers recorded here are vital in the ambitious yet achievable target to double the wild tiger numbers throughout their range by 2022); by counting the tracks and also by collecting pictures and videos of the tigers from remote camera traps the team are able to build a picture of the current population. The presence of adult male and females using the same areas are great and a litter of cubs is the perfect reward for many hours of tracing tracks in the freezing conditions. By spending time with the team in the reserve and becoming part of the tiger's continued fight for survival here you will be given a unique view into tiger conservation in a part of the world that is seeing genuine tiger conservation success. Most of the tiger populations around the world are decreasing, plagued with poaching and surrounded by huge and growing populations the tiger's days seem numbered in many countries they exist in. But in Russia the numbers are increasing, from around 40 in the 1940's to 450 or so today (320-350 adults with the rest being cubs and sub-adults). This is in part due to increased conservation since the 1950's when the first ever census of tigers (anywhere in the world) was conducted and the government realised the peril that the tiger was in, part the fact that Vladimir Putin loves tigers and has set up numerous new parks and reserves and has implemented new patrols and anti-poaching measures and also part that Russia is so vast and the population so low, that there are still places where wildlife can live in complete ignorance of people. As the wonderful and passionate Russian tiger specialist Dale Miquelle says 'Nowhere else do so many tigers live around so few people'. All of these factors contribute to an increasing number of tigers and with lots of forest habitat around there is scope for a vastly larger population here. But most of this incredible work is only possible with the help of people like us, the eco-tourist and that is what sets Alexander alone, his ideology the eco-



tourism here will provide enough income to support conservation and research and will also provide alternative income to the hunter that are currently the only people who pay the reserves for their use. So we would try and see if we could find a Siberian tiger, however this tour is about contributing to their continued survival and also to understand a very different tiger to the one that is usually covered in documentaries and books. To see huge tiger tracks in deep virgin snow is an incredible experience and one that will live long in the memory even if we are not lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the incredible and hardy animal that inhabits these frozen forests.



## Day 1 **Khabarovsk / Forest Reserve**

*Arrival*

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

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

### Transportation:

Private 4x4  
vehicles.

This morning Viktor met Lesley, Andrew and Brett after breakfast and took them to visit the local museum nearby to the hotel as we had a couple of hours to kill whilst last minute preparations were made. Then at around midday Olga, Viktor and Martin met Lesley, Brett and Andrew in the hotel in Khabarovsk and once we were all together we loaded up Nikolai's vehicle and drove the short distance to Alexander's apartment where we met Alexander and visited the nearby supermarket for any alcohol and snacks we would like to take with us. From here we split, with Nikolai taking Martin, Lesley, Andrew and Brett to the reserve and Alexander and Viktor waiting for Julija to arrive as her flight had been delayed a couple of hours from Moscow, we would all meet up for dinner at the base camp. Today was not too cold (only -15C) despite Khabarovsk recording record cold temperatures for a November just up to a few days earlier, we didn't know what temperatures or snow fall to expect when we arrived in the forest but hoped for enough snow to track.

Along the way we didn't see very much, of course some of the hardy winter birds were seen from the road, including a huge mixed flock of large-billed crows and carrion crows which roost along a section of road a few miles out of the suburbs of Khabarovsk. This is a commonly used roosting site and the 100 plus strong flock (or murder (the collective noun for crows)) looked imposing as they perched in the leafless almost lifeless trees either side of the icy road. At around 1pm some light snow began to fall but there looked like there was going to be few centimetres in the forest which is sufficient for good tracking. On the approach to the reserve from the village we passed the barren snow covered flat marshes and silver birch forests which marked the start of the taiga forest and the reserve. We didn't see any tiger tracks on the drive through the forest into the base camp, but we did have great views of an Ural owl which was perched in a tree just next to the road and then took off and flew away a short distance into the forest and then further away and out of sight. We arrived at around 05:30pm and Julija, Alexander and Viktor at around 08:30pm. They had seen a red fox along the road as well as an Ural owl (possibly the same one) as well as fresh tiger tracks on top of the first vehicle's tyre tracks. The tiger was a young male and it was encouraging that a tiger had been active in the reserve in only the few short hours we had been around. In fact when we arrived Sergey (Alexander's son) and camp cook, told us of a large male tiger named Obor who is regularly found around the base camp. His tracks had been seen just 100m or so away from the base camp this morning and then he was heard roaring nearby.

With thoughts of the tigers being close at hand we had dinner which Sergey had prepared for us. The meals here are a great selection of locally foraged and produced food. The vast majority of the food we consume in the reserve comes from the surrounding forest, during the hunting season the wild boar 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. The other members of Alexander's team that we would be spending time with were Ivan, Igor, Valeri, Arkady and Misha, as well as two of Alexander's students from Irkutsk university gaining practical experience in the forest, they were Anatolin and Costantin. Also in the base camp we have traditional banya (Russian sauna and integral part of the culture here) which would be available for use every night, but we would have a full briefing and tour tomorrow morning, tonight we retired to our animal themed log cabins for our first night in the icy wilderness of the Russian Far East.



## Day 2 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp with tea and snacks taken in the forest.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle  
and walking.

This morning the temperature was only -12°C and there had been snow overnight with around 5cm falling and continued to fall throughout the morning adding another 5cm during the course of the morning. At 09:00am we met in the camp dining room and had a hearty breakfast prepared by Sergey. The camp's resident Eurasian nuthatches were very active this morning (as they usually are) flying back and forth from the small feeders near the main cabins and their nest holes and also searching in between the recently cut and chopped logs for firewood. These freshly cut logs are home to hibernating insects and beetle grubs which are welcome food for nuthatches.

After breakfast and once we had got our cold weather gear on we were given a guided tour by Alexander around the base camp. Throughout the tour and the following days the enthusiasm for the forest and its wildlife that Alexander has shines through and is not lost in translation. In fact there were many times when he would talk about tigers and the wildlife in the reserve and you would understand everything before Viktor had translated anything!

The camp itself had started life as a geologist's camp but in 1993 Alexander took over the reserve and wanted to do more biological research in the forest. No body knew the tiger population here when he first arrived and the numbers of wild boar and other ungulates were decreasing and the trend for all wildlife around here looked very bad. Since then Alexander has worked wonders in protecting the area and raising awareness and now the tiger numbers as well as the ungulates are increasing. One of the things that sets Alexander's base camp apart from other base camps in the forest is his better and larger cabins for tourism as well as a very nice banya. We were shown these cabins, the banya as well as the other buildings that make up the base camp. The idea behind the better and larger cabins being that he could feasibly run a research station here throughout the year and not just have some people here some of the time of the year as other base camps operated. As he showed us around the base camp he explained about the different trees and plants that are found in the forest and many of which he has planted in the base camp so that the camp can make the most of these species. As we were being shown around we were introduced to Alexander's favourite dog; Zidane; he is the father of Suscha's little puppy and Alexander's pride and joy. The dogs here are kept in cages as a precaution against tiger attacks. Tigers in Russia compete with wolves and they have evolved a seeming dislike for wolves and as a result all things canine. In the wild they would actively kill and try to disperse wolves from the forest (to reduce competition) and this can manifest itself in dog killing, which is not just distressing for the dog owner but can lead to a tiger spending too much time around a settlement where it may one day take a human or itself be killed. In fact many of Alexander's stories about tigers occurred within the perimeter of the base camp, including one where a tiger took one of his puppies from just 5m in front of Alexander as he stood in the entrance to the kitchen.

One of the most fundamental things that shines through at the base camp is that nothing is wasted, cigarette butts are saved and burnt as fuel, ashes from the fires are saved, mixed with salt and left as mineral salt licks for the deer at certain strategic locations in the forest and the tea leaves and tea bags are taken from the kettle and buried, these then attract worms that are used in the summer for fishing. It is very humbling to see people here live in harmony with the forest in a way that is so completely lost in most of Western society. We were shown the various cabins that are themed to particular animals in the reserve, *izybur* (wapiti), *medved* (bear) and *kaban* (wild boar) as well as the banya and how it works, the chicken coop, 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 shown where our water comes from, direct from a frozen over stream at the back of the camp and it is so cold, refreshing and delicious he claims he could bottle it and become very wealthy (however during our stay we would boil the water first – just to be safe). He also explained about the old banya that he wants to convert to be either a small bee farm in the summer or a rescue shelter for orphaned bear cubs to hibernate over winter. Currently a neighbouring reserve is run by a bear scientist and he keeps many orphaned cubs over the first



two winters before tagging them and releasing them to fend for themselves once they are sufficiently old enough. Another wonderful aspect of Alexander's knowledge and respect for the forest is born out of his love and compassion for the indigenous people who live in the forest and always have done. A little Buddha style wood carving has a great place in the base camp, this is Podi the Udeghe people's god of nature and rubbing his belly is good luck. As the snow continued to fall and we were shown various natural artifacts collected by Alexander and stored in his own cabin, we were told that in the last year no less than 6 cubs had been born in and around the reserve and the numbers were increasing wonderfully. We were also shown the official animal of the reserve, the rather innocuous Eurasian nuthatch (not the tiger or bear that inhabit the forest but this small forest bird), the reason being that Alexander loves the nuthatches never ending work ethic as it is constantly busying itself in search of food.

After this introduction to the base camp and a small insight into the way that the local people use the plants here we headed out to check one of the roads heading in and out of the base camp, we found female tiger tracks and a very conspicuous scrape. The scrapes are made when the tiger is scent marking, they rake their rear paws over the ground and collect a small pile of dirt, leaves or in winter snow and then either urinate or defecate there in a prominent location to act as a marker to all other passing tigers that this territory is occupying. These tracks and the scrape were around 2-3 days old and as well as searching for tiger evidence we also changed a couple of memory cards in camera traps here and setting up a new one in hope of more tiger activity over the coming days.

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

Driving along we saw several 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. This is a strange behaviour for the Asiatic black bear and the reason they spend so much time in the trees is the presence of tigers; that are predators of the bears. Obviously during the winter the Asiatic black bears as well as the brown bears that also live here are hibernating, but the reserve in summer and autumn is also the best place in the world to see this endangered bear species.

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

On our return to the base camp and after dinner we went to Alexander's cabin and watched the videos and pictures from the camera traps we collected and changed today. They showed 4 different tigers on them and showed that there are plenty of tigers around, Alexander also showed us some of his wonderful collection before we retired to bed and prepared for a full day in the forest tomorrow.



### Day 3 Forest Reserve

#### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

#### Food:

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

### *Tiger Tracking*

#### Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.



At  $-17^{\circ}\text{C}$  this morning the temperature was continuing to fall and there had also been another 2cm of snow overnight. This amount of snow would not be enough to have covered any tracks completely and after breakfast we set off towards a very prominent rocky cliff around 25km away from the base camp. This rocky overhang is very popular with all of the tigers in the area as a scent marking area. Recently a female called Bucksa has been using the cliff with her litter of 4 cubs. The cubs would be around 1 year old now and around 70-80% of their mothers size. So to find evidence of 5 large tigers together would be hugely encouraging and awesome. The drive to the cliff was uneventful with no fresh tracks seen, the sun had come out and the skies were very clear and once we arrived at the cliff there was some recent logging activity. A logging commission had been established and few kilometres away with the logs being dragged to the main road in front of the cliff for collection by large logging trucks in a few days. We were unsure as to if this level of human disturbance had impacted the tigers in the area at all. But when we walked up to the cliff to change the camera traps here we found some tiger tracks from a couple of days ago. However the snow of the last week would have hidden any tracks previous to that. But at least one tiger had been here whilst the loggers had been around. Walking up to the top of the cliff Alexander showed us some evidence in the snow that the four cubs and Bucksa had been here and so we were confident that the camera traps would reveal some really interesting footage. The cliff top also allowed us great views out over the forest beyond, here the dominant white birch from lower down in the marshy and previously logged areas was replaced by a selection of different birches, larch, linden, Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut, Korean pine and cedar amongst other species. This is the true tiaga forest and all primary forest.

From here we headed back to the base camp and beyond towards an old research and study centre around 10km away from our base camp. Along the way Alexander changed out more camera traps, hoping to find the identity of the tiger that walked along the road in between our two vehicles on the day we arrived.

Finally back at the base camp in the evening and after dinner we went to Alexander's cabin to check the camera traps we had changed today. We didn't see the tiger that had followed our first vehicle two days ago, the tiger must have come onto the road and gone back into the forest in between where the camera traps were set up. But at the cliff we had the most amazing videos and pictures of Bucksa and her 4 cubs lying and sat together watching over the cliff towards the road and forest beyond as the sun set behind them. This was from the late October and early November and there was very little snow on the ground so the orange colours of autumn, the sun set and the tigers coat just glowed through the videos. Also present around the forest and on the camera traps were raccoon dogs, Eurasian lynx, Asian badger and a very large male brown bear as well as few other tigers. The last tiger at the cliff which was caught on the camera trap was on the 26<sup>th</sup> November and was an adult male.

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## Day 4 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp with tea and snacks taken in the forest.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle,  
Snow mobile &  
Walking

This morning was a little colder with the temperature at  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  the clear skies had lasted all night and some of the residual heat had been lost over night. This morning after breakfast we took the snow mobiles and went deep into the forest to check another commonly used tiger route which ends at an winter cabin. These cabins are located throughout these forest reserves and are free for hunters and trappers to use during winter. The hunter or trapper will be given a permit for a certain number of animals they can catch; whilst out in the forest they are welcome to stay at these cabins and they are kept in good repair. Along the way we changed camera traps and found a scrape from a large male tiger just around 1km from the base camp. This is Obor's territory usually but recently another male called Martin had started to encroach on Obor's realm. Hopefully the camera traps would reveal the identity of the male. Once we arrived at the winter cabin we met an old hunter who was here to relax and escape the city for a few days and Sergey prepared some fish stew and a small BBQ before returning to the base camp. The winter cabin is a nice place to watch some of the hardy forest birds from as seeds are left for them on the window sill and marsh tits, Eurasian nuthatches, Eastern great tits, greater spotted woodpeckers and pine buntings are often seen here.

Then after meeting up again back at the base camp we drove down the main road towards the research centre and quickly we found some tracks from a male quite close to the base. This is very possibly the same male who left the tracks near the winter cabin as well. Shortly after finding the tracks we found a scrape and some urine, these tracks were very fresh. They were certainly made this morning and possibly as recently as an hour or two. Alexander was wondering if a kill had been made nearby as the tiger had gone into the forest and come back out and then went back in, clearly spending a good amount of time around here. We followed the tracks to see where he had come from and found where he had lay down in the road. The impression of the tiger left in the snow including his legs, tail and where his breath had melted the snow. Further along we found tracks of a female too; female is unknown at this point, but a female called Rochelle often uses this area and she had a cub reach maturity earlier this year and so she would be coming into oestrous around now. The tracks suggested that they had spent some time together and could indicate mating or at least courtship behaviour. We worked out that the male had walked up the road towards the



base camp and the female had come from the other way and was carried on walking away from the base camp, we found another area where the male had lay in the snow again further along and then when checking the camera traps we found he had passed an area around 10km from the base camp at 2am this morning. So by the time he had made it to the first scrape and tracks we had seen this morning, after sleeping in the road for a while twice, it was likely to have been around 7-8am this morning when he was close to the base camp. It was good news that a possible mating pair of tigers was only around 1.5km away from the base camp. It was good to see him scent marking and scraping along the way as well and the camera traps confirmed that he was Martin and not Obor. A little further along we found a scat on the road, Alexander took it back to the base for his students to analyse but it looked like it was either a wapiti or Siberian roe deer that had been eaten as the fur was definitely not wild boar. This made it less likely that a kill had been made near the base camp (where we first saw the male's tracks coming in and out of the forest); the male may have come in and out of the forest because of the scent of the female being around, or even having heard calls from the female. We then reached the disused research station around 12km from the main base camp. Here an old man named Valeri lives and keeps an eye on the place; Alexander visits him regularly and asks about tiger sightings, and because he is here in his little wooden hut year around, probably sees more tigers than anyone else. They regularly walk past his house, mostly because he has had a habit of keeping dogs here and not looking after them and so they were regularly killed and eaten by tigers. So all of the tigers in the area know to make a pass by his house to see if there is an easy meal to be had. Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the last 2 years was killed because of his negligence Alexander told him he is not to be trusted with another dog but he had a new dog this trip and luckily this dog had learnt to hide underneath one of the buildings to avoid the tigers at night. Martin just hoped that when he returns in February next year the dog has survived the winter, but past experience would suggest this would not be the case. Alexander regularly meets with Valeri as well as all of the other residents and users of the forest in order to maintain good communications and also get an idea of any recent tiger movements or poaching activity; it is a great way to have many eyes in the forest. On this occasion Valeri hadn't seen any tigers recently and there were no fresh tracks around his base.

We carried on around this road which takes us around the back side of Big Ambine (one of the two hills that are located either side of the base camp), along this road there is usually lots of wapiti and wild boar activity and as well as finding this Alexander, Viktor, Lesley and Julija saw three wild boar running off from the road and into the forest. There were not many tracks around here and the recent snow had covered any recent tiger tracks so we turned back and headed back to the base camp for dinner and to check on the camera traps (that revealed it was Martin who walked up and slept on the road this morning).



## Day 5 Utyos Rehabilitation Centre

## Tiger Tracking & Sightseeing

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

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

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle & Walking.

This morning was unseasonably warm with a temperature in the morning of only  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and with the sky overcast most of the heat was being retained. There had been some snowfall over night and around 2cm had covered the ground and continued to fall as we had breakfast. After breakfast at around 10:00am we departed for the Utyos Rehabilitation Centre, we take the mountain road (which is the same as the cliff, but we would head much further today), Alexander often calls the rocky cliff the 'Post Office' as the tigers leave important messages here and as nearly all of the tigers in the area and many that pass through sporadically visit to scent mark. When a tiger scent marks the act itself may seem rather trivial to people, scraping the soil or scratching a tree coupled with urination or defecating; however the scent released from inter-digital gland, pre-orbital and anal glands as well as chemicals in the urine are full of hormones and pheromones. These chemicals last between 7-21 days depending on the conditions and can tell other tigers information such as the sex, age, dominance, physical fitness, reproductive state and also when the animal last ate (and possibly much more than that we do not understand yet). This information allows animals of the same sex to avoid occupied territories and also know if the individual holding the territory is fit enough to repel an attack by a rival for the territory and it also tells individuals of the opposite sex of sexual receptiveness for mating. Alexander has camera traps set here and since March 2014 he has caught over 15 different tigers on the



camera traps. This area may be single most important area in the whole northern Khabarovsk tiger's range for tigers. As we passed the cliff there were no tracks to indicate a tiger had been up there since we were last there so we didn't disturb the area any further, Alexander likes to not visit this area often as to not potentially put tigers off by the increased smell and presence of people. So we carried on to Uytos, along the way we saw several Ural owls, including a couple who stopped for very nice views close by the road.

At Utyos we would see the work being done by a handful of people in Far Eastern Russia (largely self-funded; although they do receive international support from various NGO's including the British based David Sheppard Wildlife Foundation and the Russian based Phoenix Fund), who dedicate their lives to protecting tigers that have come into conflict with humans, tigers that would ultimately face a certain death without any intervening help; and whilst here we would also be able to see one of these incredible tigers in the snow of the Russian Taiga forest. Along the way we would be visiting different tigers' territories and a couple of transects that are very valuable to the overall tiger censuses. After a short stop at the large village of Bitchoi to visit the shop we carried on. This is the largest village around here and we bought some drinks and snacks before heading off and travelling through several smaller and more traditional villages on our way to the rehabilitation centre, these villages were once thriving communities but since the fall of the Soviet Union the villages have been abandoned by the government and since then many of the farms have been bought by the Chinese and Koreans, during the summer growing season the owners bring their own Chinese labourers in and so the local people are left with even less space for growing, as well as less job opportunities and the spiral continues to deepen.

Most of the crops grown here are potatoes and corn however in the winter these fields are pristine and snow covered. During the winter the major source of income for the local people is selling the cedar cones that they can find during the autumn. Interspersed between the villages were small stands of forest and we searched these stands of forest for birds such as eagles, buzzards, hawks and owls. But with limited luck today unfortunately.

When we arrived we 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 and missing canine meant that Vladimir could not risk releasing this tiger back into the wild. So he built a large enclosure on his land, this was the birth of the rehabilitation centre and from this he started to rescue other animals (tigers, bears, foxes, lynx and deer) any animals that were reported orphaned or injured on roads or by hunters were taken in by Vladimir with the aim of helping them recover or grow to independence age before being released into the wild. Some of the animals however are too badly injured or too dependent on people to ever be released and so they are kept at the rehabilitation centre and given as good a life as they can provide. They also become very important ambassadors for conservation and education around here. The most famous of these was of course the tiger that started all of this, named Lyuti he was probably the most famous Siberian tiger in the world and also the most photographed, he also helped to raise much needed money for conservation and research into Siberian tigers during the 21 years he was kept at the centre. Vladimir himself died after a tree fell on him in 2005 and when Lyuti died in 2012 he was also buried with Vladimir and as is tradition in Russia the tombstones have pictures of the deceased on them. Vladimir's is probably the only tombstone in the world that has a picture of a Siberian tiger on it next to him. Before arriving at the centre we visited the small cemetery and saw the grave and beautiful tombstone. Since his death the centre is run by his son Erdo Kruglov, he was not here today so one of his staff showed us around. Currently the centre is home to a two Siberian roe deer and a Asiatic black bear cub. In the winter of 2014-15 they also has two Siberian tigers which had been caught as they were hanging around a village. They were caught at around 20 months old and were most likely orphaned by poachers. Without their mother around to make sure they take the correct prey (wild boar and deer) they are likely to take 'easier' prey such as livestock, dogs and possibly people. Being so close to a village the authorities decided that they are best captured and placed in the rehabilitation centre until they are old enough and conditioned to their natural prey and then released into a protected reserve far away from villages. This is where Utyos comes in, there are a couple of such centres in the Russian Far East but Utyos has the best record in terms of successfully rehabilitating tigers. It is always a risk when releasing a top predator into the wild, they sometimes get too used to people and seek them out, and they sometimes get too stressed out and do not live a normal wild life. However the alternative of leaving them involves a far higher chance of them coming into contact with people in a negative way. The general consensus with Siberian tiger rehabilitation is that is if it increases their chance of long term survival by a fraction of a percent then it is worth doing. These tigers (and all tigers that they are planning on releasing) are kept off display, they have the bare minimum human contact and are kept in enclosures around 1km away from the rest of the centre, the overall point is to make them hate people, the idea is that they do not have any happy memories about people and so when released they stay away from people as much as possible. Only by doing this will they stand a chance of living a good and long life in the wild. There is a live video feed from their enclosures and they can see the tigers and they are monitored 24 hours a day. The tigers are provided with live prey around once per month, so that they can hone their hunting skills and remain as wild as possible. They are also provided food that contains vitamins, medication and things that the tiger needs to ensure it is parasite free and healthy before release. These two tigers where released in the spring time (2015) and by all accounts have been doing well and there has been no further reports of them causing problems.



We then went to meet the famous tiger Zhorik. At 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 in the centre's headquarters. Around the rehabilitation centre there were many bird species around including Eurasian bullfinches, marsh tits, greater spotted woodpeckers, northern ravens and azure-winged magpies. But most amazingly were the tracks of a young male (possibly one of Kia's cubs from last year) walking from the forest and right into the carpark and towards Zhorik's enclosure. The tigers come straight into the centre and it goes to show that the tigers live in and amongst villages around here. This is how they can get themselves in trouble with poachers and also how problems can arise by taking livestock and possibly (and very rarely) people.

On the way back we found another Ural owl and then spoke to a hunter walking through the forest, this hunter had made his own rifle and was quite interesting, the only other animal we saw on the remaining drive to the base camp was a hazel grouse which we disturbed, they sleep half buried in the snow at the side of the road and we spooked this one to fly into the trees nearby. Snow had been falling on and off all day and it continued to fall into the evening and night and tomorrow it was likely to be warmer still and we would decide on what is best to do depending on how much snow falls overnight and the temperature in the morning.

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## Day 6 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

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

### Transportation:

Private vehicle,  
Snow mobiles &  
Walking.

This morning the temperature was colder but still not the cold temperatures that are expected at this time of year (-13°C) and we would head to the river for some ice fishing. Overnight around 10cm of snow had fallen but the clouds of this morning and the threat of more snow cleared as the morning wore on and by the time we were at the river the clear blue skies made for a perfect day. Along the way we stopped by a fallen tree to collect some beetle grubs for bait, the intimate knowledge of the forest coming to the forefront as the guys here knew exactly which tree to look in and using the chainsaw and axes knew how to find the large beetle grubs. Down by the river we found fresh tracks from a young adult otter on the frozen river, going in and out of the ice free water all the way along the river in the direction we were heading. Once we set up the fishing a little later on Juljia staked out a location beyond us to see if the otter would come back out, but it didn't. Using a large drill to cut into the ice and a simple rod we tried to catch some fish, however the fish were not biting today. What did surprise us was that Misha managed to hook (somehow) large freshwater mussels. In the end he managed to get around 6-7 of these, which we tried both raw and roasted over a camp fire. Whilst we didn't manage to catch any fish it was a beautiful part of the forest and one that we enjoyed spending some time around before heading back from lunch. On the way back we passed fresh wild boar tracks that were not there when we came down this morning, it was good to know the wild boar are active and around. We also investigated a little further down the road and found some female tiger



tracks near the bridge here, we changed the camera traps nearest these tracks and the tiger had walked down the road away from the base camp last night. What was particularly cool about this was that on the camera traps the last picture before the tiger was of Andrew and Brett and whilst it had been a while in between pictures it is always nice to know that you have been sharing the wilds with such an incredible predator and that no living thing had passed by between you and a majestic tiger. On the way back we didn't see anymore tracks and just a hazel grouse next to the road which took off and disappeared into the trees as they have such a habit of doing. We took it easy this afternoon and tomorrow we would have a long day as we would head to the local Udeghe village.



## Day 7 **Gvasyugi Village**

## *Tiger Tracking & Cultural Sightseeing*

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

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

### Transportation:

Private vehicle.

This morning the temperature was again a mild  $-14^{\circ}\text{C}$  and 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 250. This village is of cultural importance as it is the home of Valentina, the village elder and one of the most prominent members of the Udeghe culture. She has single handily translated their language and alphabet into Russian and also published many books on the Udeghe language; in an attempt to save the language from extinction. She has also established the museum at the village and teaches the young women in the village the traditional and important beliefs and skills that would have otherwise been lost. Skills such as producing their stunning traditional dress and knowledge of how to perform their dances and songs were on the verge of being forgotten as the modern world, alcohol and other temptations start to have larger and larger impacts on their daily lives. The sad part is that once Valentina dies (she is 81) who will take this over, who will be the protector of the Udeghe's culture? It is hoped by Valentina, Alexander and Martin that if more people visit here for the tiger tracking and experience the wilderness as well as the Udeghe culture that the next generation will be value and profit in their culture and the surrounding forests. So that both are protected and secured into the future.

Driving along the forest roads and then the main roads (as the quicker road is a mountain pass and with the temperatures not being as cold as they should be and the recent snow fall we had had we were not sure if risking the mountain road would be a good idea, so we took the longer way around on the main roads instead) to the village we would once again be looking for signs of tigers and other wildlife. Early on we found some tiger tracks around 1km away from where we were fishing yesterday, the female tiger had crossed the road and come from where we had been fishing, possibly she was around and listening to us as we fished or she was passing through and investigated the area we had disturbed. The curiosity of tigers is amazing, but they are so cautious and wait until well after we have left the area before they check it out. She had also lay down on the road and allowed us great views of the body impression in the snow including where the tail had curled up and she had lay on her elbow which had left a deep mark in the snow. The skies were beautifully clear today and we hoped this would continue and the temperatures would drop over the next few days. Further along we found wild boar tracks, it was very possible that the female tiger had been tracking the wild boar around the forest, then Alexander, Viktor, Brett and Andrew in the front car spotted a large male wild boar on the road ahead. He didn't stay on the road for very long but it was great to see a large male here. There were many other wild boar tracks around but no hare tracks (which is very unusual in this area of the forest), we then found tracks of the forest's largest hare predator as an Eurasian lynx had crossed the road and jumped over the large and deep tracks left by the logging trucks in the road. The only other tracks we saw before reaching the village were of a Siberian weasel foraging on a frozen pond, zig zagging from one bush to another in its search for mice, shrews, voles and other small animals to feed on; and many Siberian roe deer tracks in the more open grassy areas nearer the village. Just before the village we had



great views of a beautiful azure-winged magpie perched in the open just next to the road, we watched as the bird came down to a small stream and bathed quickly. This species is strange for having a distribution which is the Asian Far East (China and Russia) and then southern Spain, with nothing in between. Whether this was a more widely distributed species which is now long gone from the middle areas or if Spanish merchants brought some back with them in medieval times we do not know. But it leads to some speculation from ornithologists.

Then heading to the village on the main roads we didn't see much, we made a small stop for coffee and perosky (a sweet or savory stuffed pastry) before making it back into the forest nearer to the village. Around 2km from the village the first car stopped as a Siberian weasel had been spotted on the side of the road in the forest, we all then saw the weasel cross the road to the other side and watched as he stood up on his hind legs and watched us drive by from the protection of the forest. This is a cool orange coloured mustelid with a black eye mask, they are not the most commonly seen species and to see one in the open and have good views is really good.

We then arrived at the village of Gvasyugi; the village was started in the 1930's when three local tribes merged and formed the permanent settlement. On arrival at the village we were immediately met Valentina and firstly she presented Alexander with a signed book about the importance of local rivers to the Udeghe people which he had helped to produce, providing many of the pictures for it; after this we were treated to some traditional songs and dances performed by women and children from the village in their traditional dress. 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 and strange looking instruments made from a type of woody reed which is hollow and can be played by inhaling through the reed. 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. We were also treated to the song and dance of the sowing of their traditional dress and Valentina sang a lullaby from a fairy tale. The tale tells of a mother singing this lullaby day and night for 7 days and 7 nights and within this period the baby grew up. 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 also heard a song about a famous Udeghe explorer who travelled through the forest to the sea and went through many trails and tribulations to get there, one of them being attacked by a bear. The final song was a more modern interpretation of a fire dance and was quite a change of pace but the children doing the dance clearly enjoyed the dances and enjoyed meeting and hearing about us and where we had travelled from to get here. We then visited their museum in a nearby building

We then had a tour of their museum, the museum is made up of two sections, first the outdoors section which contains traditional style buildings, store huts and a shrine. The use of bark as insulation, roofing and walls was particularly interesting and the little shrine was complete with an idol to the forest god Amba. Also in this small section was a very small cone shaped wooden hut that is where a woman would have traditionally gone to give birth. She would also stay there with her new-born baby (completely isolated from anyone else) for 2 weeks. Inside the museum (the second section) we were shown the traditional dress, some carvings, equipment such as spears, arrow heads, idols and masks. Also in the museum room where the very few and limited texts on the Udeghe people, including Valentina's own publications. They also included some interesting rock art information, from a cave in the north-east from 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 lunched at the cultural centre a traditional meal of greyling soup with rye bread. The fish were caught in the nearby Khor River.

After the late lunch we started our journey back towards the base camp, the snow was making for some interesting and difficult driving conditions as we finally made it back to the forest and close to the base camp, but we didn't see any fresh tracks along the way back and finally arrived back at the base camp well after dark and rested after a good long day.

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## Day 8 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All our meals were served at the base camp.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle &  
walking

Today was officially the warmest it had ever been on a Royle Safaris winter trip here, the thermometer was on 0°C this morning and would get well above freezing as the day progressed. This meant we were limited to what we could do, we cannot use snow mobiles when the temperatures are above freezing as the snow is not stable enough and after such a long hard day of driving Nikolai and Alexander were having an easier day today. A morning off was welcomed by most and Julija helped Sergey making the traditional dumplings for lunch. The warmer weather had



certainly increased the bird activity as the Eurasian nuthatches, eastern great tits and marsh tits were very active around the log pile this morning. At around 09:50am snow started to fall and the real worry would be that it could rain with the temperatures being so warm and the rain really distablises the snow and makes all moving around the reserve very hard work. Luckily it didn't rain and after lunch Ivan took everyone into the forest to have a walk and visit a tree that is regularly used by a Asiatic black bear for hibernation. This is a beautiful part of the forest and is some of the most pristine primary taiga forest in the area. In this area there are less silver birch and instead you can see true taiga forest. The taiga forest is continuous for hundreds of miles to the north (until the Arctic tundra takes over and is distinguished by its absence of trees) and stretches from Scotland and Iceland through Scandinavia, Russia into Canada and even as far east and south as New England in the USA. Here at the reserve the taiga is at its most southerly and it mixes here with the more temperate Manchurian rain-forest that is more prominent along the Sikhote Alyn mountains and the coast of Primorye.

It is this habitat that is preferred by the tigers and it is only here in the surrounding forests of the reserve; in the farthest north-west of the tigers distribution; that you get the tiger living in the taiga. It is this mixing of the forests here that results in the more Asian species such as tigers, leopards, Asiatic black bear, yellow-throated martens and musk deer sharing the same habitat as northern boreal species such as brown bears, Eurasian lynx, wolves, wapiti, sable and Siberian roe deer. Most of the forest that we have been travelling through since arriving at the base has been heavily logged in the past (prior to Alexander acquiring the lease in 1993) and the secondary forest growth is dominated by silver and 3 other species of indigenous birch trees, there is also the *Schisandra* vine, thorny arelia, oaks, walnuts, cedars and pine trees. The major difference in what is true taiga forest compared to the secondary birch dominated forest around here is that the most common tree is the larch and taiga has much higher tree diversity. The whole basis for the rich ecosystem here is founded in the presence of large seed bearing trees such as cedar, Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut and Korean pine. These massive and slow growing hard woods were naturally the first to be targeted by the loggers in the 1950's-1980's and there are very few stands remaining. The odd Manchurian oak, Manchurian walnut or Korean pine still can be seen in the forest and Alexander has a small stand of Manchurian oak in his reserve that somehow remained unknown to the loggers. These acorns are the main source of food for the wild boar which is the number one prey animal for tigers. The whole ecosystem is dependent on the presence and masting success of these few species but in particular the tiger's continued survival is inextricably linked with the Manchurian oak. So seeing some areas of primary taiga forest is very refreshing and gives hope that the thriving tiger population here can continue to be thriving into the future. In this area the amount of Asiatic black bear nests in the trees are very high and there is one particular tree which is hollowed out and the usual hibernation spot for a bear during. The Asiatic black bears like to hibernate inside hollow trees and can squeeze into surprisingly small spaces, whilst the brown bears prefer caves and holes further up the hills and slopes. The black bears are also heavily preyed upon by tigers and tiger often check the hibernating trees for sleeping bears. Several of the more well-known hibernating trees can be found to have tiger scratch marks on the outside where tigers have attempted to get into the tree. We would have no real safe way of knowing if the tree was occupied by a bear, as it would be rather foolish to wake up a hibernating bear but it certainly could be currently occupied. Also in this area there were many large-billed crows and a couple of northern ravens in the skies and cawing away. This could be an indication of a tiger kill around here. It is closeby to where we had seen the male tiger enter and leave the forest from the road just a couple of days ago, so maybe the tiger was still in the area and had been hunting.



## Day 9 Forest Reserve

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All of our meals were served at the base camp with us having some snacks at a camp fire in the forest.

## Tiger Tracking

### Transportation:

Private vehicle &  
Walking

This morning was much colder than usual with the temperature at  $-26^{\circ}\text{C}$  and finally we were getting the really cold temperatures of the winter here. The skies were clear again and we were going for a good walk into the forest and towards a mineral rich area which is used heavily by animals (deer and wild boar mainly) during the summer and autumn to benefit from the salts and minerals in the earth here. In winter Alexander leaves ashes mixed with salt and also salt licks here for the animals and thus has higher densities of the tiger's favoured food around here. We would first drive around 12km to the closest area of road to the mineral lick. Along the way we found fresh tracks heading up and right passed one of our camera traps, however the tracks were not from a tiger, but instead from a male



Asiatic black bear. The recent warm weather clearly being a factor in why the bear was not hibernating yet. It is really unusual to have bears still active in December.

Once we arrived where we would start walking we split the group so that we would not be walking in one large group and potentially scare away any wildlife long before we had a chance of seeing it. So Martin, Viktor, Ivan, Lesley and Anatolin would be in one group and Alexander, Brett, Andrew, Julija and Costantin in another and we were due to meet around 2.5km into the forest for a camp fire, some tea and snacks. Martin's group found many sable tracks some very fresh from this morning and others from the last couple of days showing that the sables were heavily active around here and the main reason for this being the high presence of mice, vole and shrew tracks also around the trail. We also attracted a northern raven, who followed us and cawed noisily to attract its mate to the area. They are not stupid and recognise people as predators who leave food for them inadvertently at camp fires and after hunting. So just like packs of wolves and lone tigers, humans develop a following of crows and ravens when they are moving through the forest. We first walked through the lowland marshy areas which are dominated by grasses and silver birch trees and then just a small increase in elevation (only around 50cm) and the difference in the water table changed the whole structure of the forest to be more typical taiga forest. Once we entered the taiga we found very fresh tracks from two male wapiti who were coming from the mineral lick area and we also found tiger tracks from 2 days ago. The first tracks were crossing our pathway and heading away from the mineral lick and then around 200m further up we found the small female's tracks coming back towards the mineral lick area and towards where the other group had been walking parallel to us. Again these tracks were from around 2 days ago, but it would be interesting when we met up to see if they had seen the tiger leaving the circle we were making or if the tiger was still in the small circle we had walked (around 2km by 1km in area).

Once we had made it to the predesignated meeting point Ivan and Anatolin got straight to work with making a stove, camp fire and seating from one tree. Shortly after we had prepared the camp fire the other group arrived and we exchanged stories about what we had seen and it appeared that the tiger was close by and with 2 cubs. This was the first confirmed evidence that Alexander had that this female had a litter. They had seen her tracks and the tracks of two cubs which are only around 5-6 months old close by. They were fresher than the other tracks and from this morning, it prompted Alexander to get the rifle from Costantin and make sure it was cocked and ready just in case. If running into a tiger is a scary enough prospect then running into a mother with new cubs is very dangerous and just for extra reason to be wary the heavy presence of crows and ravens suggested that they also had a kill to defend. In the end we didn't have any encounters with the tigress and her cubs but it is great to know that they were around and close enough to have heard us as we had our sausages and forest tea and were possibly watching us from the security of the deep and thick forest. As well as the tiger tracks they also found many wild boar tracks (mostly leaving the area) which would also suggest a wild boar kill site close by and also the impression of a large owl in the snow, the snow marked by the wings and feathers as the owl dived down into the snow to capture a rodent which was scurrying around in its network of tunnels in the snow.

After our camp fire and warming up we walked back towards the road and stopped at the mineral lick area, hunters (for deer and wild boar) had constructed a high seat for staking out the area and killing the animals. Alexander would look into removing it another time, but there were no fresh tracks around the mineral lick and so we headed back and not seeing anything new on the way back we made it back to the base camp in the late afternoon and rested for the rest of the day.



## Day 10 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp with tea and snacks taken in the forest.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

The temperature continued to fall as the clear skies prevailed and this morning it was  $-31^{\circ}\text{C}$  in just two days the temperature had dropped over  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$  which is just incredible really. At around 10:30am we drove towards another forest base camp so Alexander could touch base with some friends, hear of any recent tiger sightings or tracks as



well as hopefully treat us to one of his friends (another Alexander) playing a Russian accordion. The road would take us past the cliff and we would be able to check for recent tiger activity. Along the way we had very fresh tracks from a wild boar that had ran off the road as it heard us approach and some wapiti activity along the side of the road. They use their front hooves to dig away at the snow to get to the grasses and vegetation underneath and this was clearly seen in some areas along the way. We reached the other base camp and Alexander was there but his accordion was locked in one of the cabins and the person with the keys was out hunting in the forest and so we left and headed to another winter cabin nearby and continued our search for tiger evidence. Along the way we had fantastic views of a perched hazel grouse just next to the road and at around 3m height. This is by far the best hazel grouse sighting and allowed for great pictures. Andrew also spotted a male grey-headed woodpecker along the way, this is one of the rarer species of woodpeckers around and so another good sighting. Arriving at this winter cabin we walked up the steep track leading to it and along the way we found tiger tracks from the day before yesterday, a female tiger had been around here only around 20m from the cabin. The cabin is currently being used by a hunter, he was not there when we entered and made some food and tea, but it goes to show that the local people share the forest with tigers and despite the presence of the female tiger around he still went out alone into the forest to look for wildlife or set his sable traps. Alexander prepared some traditional Russian food, this was frozen roe deer meat cut thinly which is eaten with bread, salt and raw onion and washed down with a shot of vodka.

After an hour of warming up and eating in the cabin we tidied up and left to start heading back, we stopped briefly at the cliff to add another camera trap at the top, Martin and Alexander quickly walking up and installing it. The fewer people the less disturbance in the sensitive area. Closer to our base camp Alexander stopped at his neighbour's base to collect some honey, whilst here we heard of a local who was there and was complaining that last night a tiger had taken his dog. This is the kind of problem that occurs here and Alexander is blamed by default. He had also had to hear from the hunters and accordion player at the first base camp we visited today that there is a distinct lack of game to hunt and this is because of tigers. As Alexander is known to study the tigers and activity protect them as well as their prey base to increase their numbers he is blamed for all tiger related incidents. The irony being that historically there has never been fewer tigers in Russia as there are now and so any impact they have on the wild prey stocks is far less than it would have been before humans started influencing the habitat. But the hunters see the tiger (and all other predators) as rivals to their hunting and so dislike them and Alexander has to find the common ground between pleasing the local people and also continuing his work as highlighting that you can live in harmony with a thriving forest if you just subtly adapt the practices that are no longer sustainable as the human population increases. The problem with tigers taking livestock, dogs and occasionally people is a harder issue to deal with and one that takes a long time through education, removal of problem tigers and long term monitoring, but Alexander quickly agreed to give this local one of Alexander's dogs next puppies which was a good short term solution to this individual's dislike of the tigers.

Once back at the base camp we had our dinner and watched the final instalment of a series of Siberian tiger related documentaries that Martin brings with him and shows some evenings.

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## Day 11 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp with tea and snacks taken in the forest.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

With the temperature hovering at  $-31^{\circ}\text{C}$  again Martin, Lesley and Julija went for a walk into the forest and towards the nearby winter cabin at 8am. The beautiful morning light changing from indigo, to light blue and then pinkish rose as the sun started to rise beyond the surrounding hills. It was very cold and our eyebrows, eyelashes and Martin's stubble started to have icicles form on them. We walked for around 30 minutes but taking pictures was hard as our fingers were so cold, operating the camera was difficult. There were no tracks on the way there other than sable and some small mammals such as mice and shrews, but on the way back we had very fresh squirrel tracks crossing the road and heading up a tree, we couldn't find the culprit but he couldn't have been far away. We turned around as we heard a loud branch snapping, like it had been stepped on, it came from around 30-40m into the forest and as there is a brown bear still not hibernating around here we stopped and turned back. The sound sounded like a large animal was moving clumsily through the forest as it concentrated on us, it is more likely a bear than a tiger as a tiger is more likely to have stopped and remained stock still watching and listening to us until we had moved away before carefully continuing. As we were all very cold and breakfast was nearly ready it was a good time to turn around and head back anyway.

After breakfast we spotted a Eurasian red squirrel on the snow and then climbing up a tree nearby the road, we watched as the dark grey and white bellied (despite appearing as rich red in most of Central and Western Europe) quickly climbed up the trunk and jumped from branch to branch in an attempt to get away from the vehicles. Nearby to the squirrel we also had great views of a greater-spotted woodpecker foraging on a dead tree. Banging his bill against the tree searching out insects buried inside the wood. This morning we found plenty of hazel grouse around, they never really spend very long in view and fly into the forest where their plumage is perfectly coloured to make



them disappear. We carried on past the research centre and up the mountain road on the back side of Big Ambine, we found lots of wild boar and some wapiti tracks, it is great to see that the wild boar are being active. We set some camera traps along the way and even drove half of the way up Big Ambine on a road that is usually used only as a snow mobile trail. We didn't see any new tracks but did set up a new camera trap here and then started to head back towards the base camp, stopped along the way to speak to Valeri again. These five minute conversations with Alexander every few days being just about the only contact Valeri has with another human all winter long. At around 3pm Alexander took Andrew and Julija up a nearby hill to watch the sunset over the forest, the sunsets here are very pretty but the cold temperatures and increased wind up there meant that it was still hard to get pictures. But they managed it and the results were wonderful, as were the views and the sunset itself. Tomorrow is our last full day in the forest and we would collect a few of camera traps' memory cards that we had set up earlier on the trip to see what we had caught on them. A good way of rounding off the trip before heading back to the city and beginning our journeys home.



## Day 12 Forest Reserve

## Tiger Tracking

### Accommodation:

Forest Reserve  
(Wooden Cabins)

### Food:

All meals were served at the base camp with tea and snacks taken in the forest.

### Transportation:

Private vehicle,  
Walking & Snow  
mobile.

Today would be our last full day in the reserve and with packing to be done and also exchanging of photographs for everyone, with Alexander having to compile all of the camera trap footage for us to share it would be a more laid back day today. The temperature was also very cold, at  $-29^{\circ}\text{C}$  at breakfast, so we waited for the sun to get higher in the sky and warm the air up before Sergey and Ivan took Lesley, Julija and Viktor to the winter cabin. Along the way they checked the trail for tracks but finding no fresh tiger tracks they didn't check the camera traps and bring back the SD cards. Instead they enjoyed some time at the cabin, watching the birds attracted by the seeds left for them, with Eurasian nuthatches, eastern great tits, marsh tits and greater spotted woodpeckers all being prominent there today. Sergey made some food and tea and they enjoyed the midday sun in the frozen forest.

On their return we all gathered in the dining room for the start of our farewell celebrations, a lot of food for lunch and then for dinner coupled with some wine, beer and cognac and singing around the dinner table. Alexander also presented everyone with a signed copy of his Siberian tiger book, a limited edition version which was presented by Vladimir Putin at the Global Tiger Conference in St Petersburg in 2010 to all of the heads of state where tiger currently live. We then headed to Alexander's cabin to look at the pictures from recent camera traps and also the ones that he, Julija and Andrew had taken over the course of the last few days. It was a relaxed day and a great way to end the time in the forest and at the base camp. Tomorrow we would be up earlier than usual to pack the vehicles, say our goodbyes and then head back to Khabarovsk. Of course along the way we didn't know what we may or may not bump into and it would be our last chance to see a tiger in the flesh. Also the weather can cause potential problems (although the forecast was good for tomorrow) so setting off with plenty of time is always the best idea.

## Day 13 Khabarovsk

## Travelling

### Accommodation:

InTourist Hotel (3\*  
Hotel)

### Food:

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

### Transportation:

Private vehicle &  
Walking.

With the temperature steady at  $-29^{\circ}\text{C}$  for the second day straight we had breakfast as normal and then finalised our packing and loaded up the vehicles. We would be travelling back to the village with Sergey and Ivan as well as dropping Arkady and Anatolin along the way at 09:30am and heading back to civilisation in Khabarovsk. Along the way we found very fresh prints of the large brown bear that was still refusing to hibernate which is very unusual heading into December to have any bears still active. The potential for this large brown bear to become aggressive is very real and they hoped that he would start his hibernation soon. Further along we found tracks of wapiti, wild



boar and also great examples of Siberian weasel, red fox along the perfectly still and picture perfect snow covered pools eitherside of the road towards the village. After dropping Arkady and Anatolin off we carried on towards the village and dropped Ivan and Sergey off at their homes for a few days off.

The rest of the journey back to the town was largely uneventful and we made it back at around 14:00, we then had a few hours rest and enjoyed hot showers and then in the evening everyone except Lesley who had an early flight to catch met for dinner in a nearby restaurant booked for us by Viktor. After our Georgian food with Alexander and Viktor we big farewell and headed back to the hotel.

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## Day 14    **Home**

## *Departure*

### Accommodation:

NA

### Food:

No meals were included today.

### Transportation:

Private Vehicle &  
International  
Flights

This morning Andrew, Brett and Lesley left early with Olga to catch their flights home with Julija and Martin leaving in the afternoon.



5	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
6	Large-billed crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
7	Azure-winged magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
8	Greater spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
9	Black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
10	Pine bunting	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>
11	Rustic bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
12	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
13	Eastern great tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
14	Siberian jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>
15	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
16	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
17	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
18	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
19	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
20	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluca</i>
21	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>
22	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>

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