NOMAD Fieldnews

Edition 8

June 1, 2007

Picture 1. Reindeer swimming across Ketkozero. May 29, 2007.

May is one of the most dynamic months of the year in the Kola in terms of weather conditions. When it begins, winter still dominates, towards its end, temperatures may reach up to +20°C and buds on the branches of the birch trees are growing fast, soon to open.

An equally dynamic rhythm can be observed in the life-cycle of the reindeer herd. An important succession of events occurs in May. Its beginning is marked by the annual migratory movement away from the forest and towards the tundra zone. In the second half the most important event of the reproductive cycle occurs, calving.

Picture 2. A fragment of 250 head passing on the last ice of lake Ketkozero, a day before the lake opened fully on May 15, 2007. A northeasterly wind is blowing sidewise from the northeast (right side of the picture).

As we watch the herd at this time, it continues to follow the same migration pattern as described in the previous two issues: fragments of varying size are passing across the line of the Iokanga river-lake system. Weather conditions are one of the primary factors shaping this movement, wind direction being most important. The fragments are prone to move across the Iokanga line when the wind comes from the north or northeast. With such wind it either blows directly in the face of a migrating column, or comes at an angle from their left side as they move (see Picture 2).

The herders always stress this point saying that the reindeer would never go but against the wind. The general direction of the migration, from southwest to northeast, is

imprinted in the numerous reindeer paths with which the migrating columns have marked the trek since times immemorial.

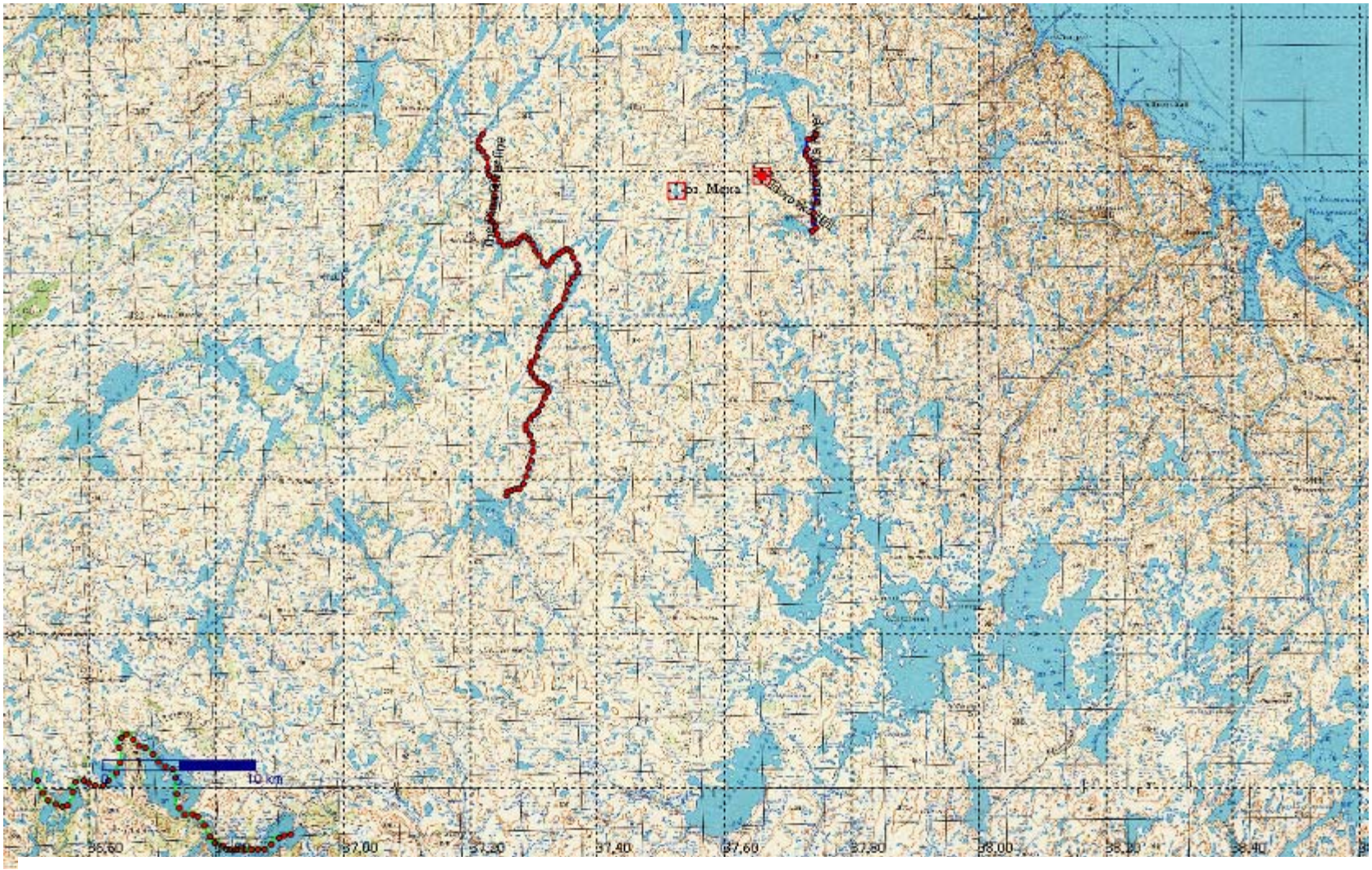
Picture 3. The same column as in the previous picture climbing Vas'ka Gora, a 304 m high hill, rising above Ketkozero Lake. All reindeer groups consistently follow the same paths and roads, clearly imprinted on the terrain. No calves are as yet seen with this mainly female group on 14 May.

Compared to the previous month, in May we have observed an increase in the number of reindeer fragments passing across the Iokanga line on their way to the Barents Sea coast. In the second decade of May the head of this movement had gone some 60 to 70 km to the northeast of the line and was grazing in the area between the upper parts of rivers Pina and Sidorovka. By mid May this spearhead part of the herd had reached as far out as the Sidorovka hill, deep into the open tundra zone (see map in Picture 4).

At the same time, groups of deer are still seen in the territory close to the Iokanga line, on both of its sides. The migration to the open tundra is thus showing a considerable spread over time and distance. While the head of the composite herd of the right side of "Tundra" has moved into open tundra pastures already at the beginning of May, the middle and tail end, consisting of fragments of varying size, is spread all along the intervening distance to the forest zone. We may expect that fragments shall be passing across the Iokanga line all through June with buck fragments lagging behind even into July. Thus, the final stage of this migratory movement may be expected to end only when the impact of bloodsucking insects reaches its full force in July.

The calving of reindeer in the Kola is known to take place in the period between the middle of April and the middle of June, peaking in mid May. The length of the period, however, as well as the dates of the culmination of calving, when at least 80% of all females are giving birth in a couple of days, may considerably vary. What we have seen this year suggests a considerable spread of calving, beginning with births in late April. Another feature which is becoming noticeable is that it is difficult to speak of a peak at all: numerous fragments have shown little or no presence of calves till the end of May. Only one very small female fragment that we saw showed anything like a peak state: seven does with six calves were spotted on the northern side of lake Oreshka. The date was 24 May. This fragment was too small, however, for any general conclusions to be drawn.

Following a pattern, which we have observed during previous fieldwork, the reindeer herders of the right wing of "Tundra" appeared in the spring migration territories only by the second decade of May. About that time two senior herders from Brigades 8 and a young herder from Brigade 1 undertook a short journey on snow scooters to the open tundra. With snow cover rapidly receding and one scooter badly damaged, this party had to hurry to get back to base while using the machines was still possible. Back to base by18 May, their activities were limited to locating the herd and observing its movements in the area Lake Pinozero to Sidorovka Hill (see map in Picture 4).



Picture 4. The Iokanga River, Pina River and Sidorovka River lines.

By 20 May the main part of herders of Brigade 8 had gathered at their Lake Kolmiavr camp. Two older herders are taking care of the sledge deer, kept in the surrounding swamps. Another pair are busy fishing in the rich Ketkozero Lake. The movement of small groups of deer on the southwestern side of Iokanaga is also followed, and some occasional subsistence hunting carried out. The brigade all-terrain vehicle is expected to arrive any day now, bringing planks and other materials for repairing the main cabin of the base. The arrival of the *vezdehod* is eagerly looked for, because the brigade leader with the senior herders are planning to go back to Lovozero on the return journey and enjoy their official annual leave. Thus, as far as the herders are concerned, the reindeer may consider activities targeting them to be over soon. The rapidly fragmenting herd shall thus be free to roam unchecked in the open tundra, on its way to the Barents Sea coast.

The River Rova Fence

While "Tundra" right wing brigades, No 1, 2, and 8, have shown little interest in calving or calf-marking activities, the adjacent Brigades No 1 and 3 of the neighboring cooperative "Olenevod" (of Krasnoshchel'e) have indicated a determination to gather their herd and control it during the summer. As the migration refers to what has formed in the last decade as a composite "Olenevod"-"Tundra" herd, our task was to see how its Krasnoshchel'e part was faring. Consequently, we carried out a survey of a length of the fence dividing the two former state enterprises during the current period. We followed the fence from its beginning in the lower reaches of the river Rova, to the foothills of Isakievski Sobor hill (353 m). This trip was made from 24 till 28 May.

The fence was recently repaired and was working effectively, by what we could see. We located at least three fragments of 30 to 50 head each looking in vain for an opening in the fence, so they could follow the general southwest-to-northeast migration. No calves were to be seen with these fragments, although at one spot we came across a recently thrown placenta. The does that we saw were still wearing their antlers though – a sign they had not given birth yet.

Picture 5. A placenta, which a female deer has thrown after giving birth. The place is a reindeer herd path along the fence, dividing the spring pastures of cooperatives “Tundra” and “Olenevod”. 25 May, 2007.

Satellite phone link with the NOMAD Field Station

The station has the use of a Globaltel satellite phone through which we can be accessed by e-mail messages to the following address: <79542130947@sms.globaltel.ru>

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