

# NOMAD Fieldnews

Edition 6

May 3, 2007



**Picture 1.**

Toward the end of April the migration continues along the already described pattern: small groups of deer slowly advance from the Keivi Ridge towards the basin of River Iokanga, following a general SW to NE direction. Till the first days of May these groups are using the increasingly open, southern looking patches along the right side of the Iokanga Basin, hesitant to cross the lakes or the river itself.

It has to be mentioned at this point that the weather conditions of late winter-early spring have been rather special. March was a month of rising temperatures and early thawing, while April was much colder. In early May it is still one or two degrees above zero during the day, and minus five to ten during the night. Snow cover during the winter was generally thinner. Early spring is thus characterized with an abundance of snowless patches, especially on the southern sides of hills, while lower ground has retained a hard

snowy crust. All of this makes movement of herds fairly easy, while grazing of shrub and lichen immediately below the Keivi Ridge is abundant. This may explain to a considerable degree why the herd is so fragmented. The other side of this is all-year free grazing and late corralling. Availability of open patches also explain why the animals are not seeking yet the open tundra to the NE beyond the Iokanga. In this light, and contrary to assertions of herders during this and previous fieldwork that “the herd is eager to escape to the Barents Sea coast as early as possible”, we cannot see that the fragmented herd is quickly advancing. It rather moves in a slow step, keeping to the good pastures that opening swamps and low hills present.



**Picture 2.** Predators are only one of the parties, interested in the reindeer herd in the spring territory in April. An wolverine (*rosomakha*) tracks along Ketkozero Lake.

A further reason for the present pattern of the migration may be seen in the relieved human pressure in the region in the second half of April. As described in previous issues, the reindeer herding brigades have devoted their attention to Belaia Golovka (an area approximately 70 to 100 km to the NW), where some minor herding activities are still being conducted on two segments of the herd, and, secondly – to the village of Lovozero, where the main parts of right wing brigades are still positioned. April, a good month for getting to the tundra, especially this year, is thus traditionally used for village-centered activities, as preparation to getting to the camp. This is the medical check-up (*medosmotr*), loading up with products for the summer (*otovarka*), as well as recreational and family activities after the March round ups.

The leaders of Brigades 1 and 8 have spent the second decade of the month scouting over the right wing summer pastures, close to the Barents Sea coast, and searching for groups of deer, allegedly roaming there. The purpose of their journey has been explained to us as a last desperate attempt of Cooperative “Tundra” to collect and drive into the corral, and subsequently to the slaughter house in Lovozero, some more reindeer. The annual meat plan of the enterprise has been under-fulfilled: thousands of heads, planned for slaughter, could not be provided by herders this winter. The mission of the leaders to find a fragment with which to augment the situation has proved fruitless, as we learned later. Vladimir (Vovka) Khatanzei, leader of Brigade 8 said there were no deer to be seen. Instead, close to the ancient summer settlement (*pogost*) of Varzino they met two persons on snow scooters. “They must have been looking for some lake to buy”, Vovka concluded. The topic of a growing number of rich city persons from Murmansk and the south appropriating or renting parts of the tundra, formerly an undisputed herders’ territory, is increasingly being circulated at camps and with great bitterness. Outsiders are coming into the territory.

Our team witnessed an accident that put into focus such other actors’ interest in the reindeer herd.



**Picture 3.** While reindeer herders are away from the spring pastures, regrouping their forces in Lovozero, “bear hunters” take advantage of the migrating herd.

Following the large herd that we could locate with great effort near River Rova (see NOMAD Fieldnews 5), eager to monitor its movements, on April 24 we heard and then saw a group of five snowmobiles, heading in the general direction of Maria Gora. Looking through the binoculars we saw them on foreign new looking machines, with hunting rifles on their shoulders. As only licenses for bears can be given at this time of the year we decided they were on a bear hunt. Judging by the new and expensive machines they most probably were city persons. Whether they saw us or not was impossible to establish, but in any case they did not stop and continued with great speed on their way.



**Picture 4.** Alcohol drinking is an essential part of the “male entertainment” of hunting. Note the ears have been cut off, which prevents identification by ear-marks.

Suspecting that the hunters would meet “our” herd, we decided to follow their trek. Despite own experience and the gruesome local stories of the cruelties of poaching, we still felt a chill at the view of a freshly killed female reindeer that suddenly appeared at the side of the hunters’ trek.

The problem of poaching has always been a part of the reindeer herding situation in the Kola Peninsula, not in the last place as an important part of the discourse of herding. As underlined many times in earlier works, however, its importance is multi-dimensional. While poachers of reindeer, in the common sense of the word, have always existed, the phenomenon of poaching has been of greater weight as a symbolic designation and explanation of the ever increasing process of hidden privatization of the cooperative herds by reindeer herders themselves. Not less considerable is its function to focus and define

“evil” in a society undergoing transformation and economic difficulties. Growing poaching in post-Soviet reality illustrates “evil” as unbridled and cruel capitalist appropriation, qualifying negatively economic and political “pro-market” changes.



**Picture 5.** The killed female deer was to give a birth in a week or so.

The problem of poaching has been transferred to a new level of importance during 2005, when the hunting authorities in the region suddenly turned their attention to reindeer. They publicly accused the two reindeer herding enterprises, SKhPK “Tundra” and “Olenevod” in putting marks of ownership and slaughtering in their winter corrals wild reindeer, a resource that officially belongs to the state. The accusation was based on a regulation from the 1970s, according to which all adult reindeer that have no ear-marks

are to be considered wild. The contra-argument of the reindeer herding cooperatives, based on the assertion that domestic and wild reindeer can easily be recognized by a number of differences in their exterior, could not help in the debate.

The consequence of the appearance of the state controlling agency (*Rosjel'khoznadzor*) as a major new stakeholder has resulted in a swiftly mounting hunting pressure on the cooperative herds. The main problem of “Tundra” and “Olenevod” is also a result of the present system of herding: because of the absence of calving and spring corralling with marking of calves, as well as the unsuccessful winter corrals, many reindeer that rightfully belong to the cooperatives are left without earmarks and can thus be claimed by hunters as wild deer. The pressure is very much encouraged by the policy of the current leader of the hunting inspectorate in Lovozero, who is eager to sell ever more reindeer hunting licenses.

The outlined changes point out to the claim of new economic actors with interest in reindeer. Until now domesticated and, unofficially, the greater part of wild reindeer used to be an exclusive resource of the cooperatives. The currently developing situation shows new ways of impact of state agencies (in this case the hunting inspectorate) on reindeer herding in the Kola. A further interest in the case is important, because of its potential to transform reindeer herding back to a more control-bound herding methods, a change that previous efforts could not achieve.

We have reported this incident to Lovozero Rayon authorities, responsible for Kola Nature preservation. We have yet to see what the consequences of this move shall be.

**Text and photographs:**

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