

# NOMAD Fieldnews

Number 11

31 July 2007



**Picture 1.** The sun setting over the small Mar'ia Lake at the foothills of Mount Mar'ia Gora.

In the last decade of July the weather remained unstable. Strong southerly gales alternated quickly with colder northerly winds, the weather changing very rapidly from oppressively hot with temperatures reaching up to +30 degrees centigrade, to cooler days, with frequent but short rainfalls.

Blood-sucking insects gained finally their full force and their pressure quickly reached culmination. Gradually the midge (*moshka*) became prominent, besides the mosquitoes, as well as the skin flies pestering the deer. Covering the trek under these conditions became a serious task, especially when boat and rucksacks had to be carried across insect-thick marshland. Our trip in the summer pastures was generally marked by such conditions, with only brief respites on elevated stony ground and wind blowing in our faces. A lot is also to be said about the shelter from rain and insects various herders' cabins provided: at Tichka Corral, the tiny fishing cabin at Mar'ia Lake, and the cabin at Mount Devin Corral.

During this part of the trip we did not register events that would not correspond with the already described pattern of summer grazing of the herds of "Tundra" and "Olenevod" (see previous NOMAD Fieldnews). On our way back, however, we collected data that completed our understanding, adding important details of the behavior of the reindeer in the summer and the impact of humans on it.

We put special attention on the several reindeer herding facilities, such as corrals and fences, that were strewn at intervals along the migration trek route. These "mega-structures", observable in their entirety only from the air, had been erected by "Tundra" and "Olenevod" at various periods of sovkhos and post-sovkhos history. We decided to take "pictures" of them by tracing the outlines with GPS in hand, as ordinary photographs could register only separate segments. In addition, the recorded GPS tracing could be situated on computerized maps, which we did at the base camp after return. All of this allowed a fairly precise and detailed picture of how the various mega-structures were situated on the terrain in relation to migration routes. The method provides a good look at the most solid, material presence of human impact on the reindeer herd in a historical

perspective and in this way became an important data collecting device in our research activities. In the present difficult and uncertain condition of reindeer herding in the Kola, the existing herding mega-structures provide most valuable data for the researcher of local peoples' changing predictions and perspectives on reindeer behavior and habits, and their ideas and technical solutions about how humans can possibly control them.



**Picture 2.** A segment of the fence, controlling the direction of the spring migration of the herd of Brigade 1 of “Olenevod”, that goes along Iokanga River. Vladi is mapping the fence with the help of a GPS receiver.

During this part of summer grazing research we made a second visit to the spring-summer camp of Brigade 1 of Krasnoshchel'e, situated on the right bank of the Iokanga, approximately halfway between Lakes Kalmozero and Mogil'noe. We were eager to see whether their plan for controlled summer grazing had been carried out. Had they managed to turn the tide and stop further getting of their herd out of control? (See Fieldnews 9).



**Picture 3.** The living hut of Brigade 1 herding camp at Iokanga River. Cooking stove and oven in the kitchen.

At Brigade 1 camp, consisting of one solid hut and several auxiliary buildings, we found the brigade leader Nikolai Kanev and the male camp worker, Petr Terentiev as the only inhabitants. The brigade, as it turned out, had left for Krasnoshchel'e in late June, and

these two volunteers had remained at the camp to “keep it going”, as they said, and also do some repairs: principally renovate the bath hut.

As we learned from Nikolai and Petr, the rest had gone back by the brigade *vezdekhod* on June 25, after corralling and calf-marking at Mount Devin Corral. After these activities, the herd had been released to roam free for the summer in the general area of Babozero-Enozero and further out to the coast. This meant that the previously stated intentions of the brigade for controlled summer grazing had not materialized. Thus the attempt for resurrecting pre-sovkhoz traditional Komi grazing, we had described at length in Fieldnews 9, had failed. “It did not work out” (“*U nas ne poluchilos*”), sighed Nikolai.



**Picture 4.** “It did not work out” (“*U nas ne poluchilos*”). Nikolai, the brigade leader, Petr, and Yulian discussing the summer grazing experiment.

the brigade leader. As we had observed during the previously described driving of the herd across Iokanga River (Fieldnews 9), the reindeer herd in its present state is difficult, even close to impossible, to control with the available human resources of the brigade.

There was also the strong factor, perhaps the most decisive concerning this experiment, of the majority of herders wishing to retain their summer vacation of two months, and especially avoiding spending “empty July” in the tundra. The berries would ripen only in mid-to-late August, fish was pointless to catch as it was difficult to keep even salted in hot weather, there was no meat as the herd was far away. Thus the “sovkhos tradition” of having summer holidays like all other state employees was difficult to depart from. “Going back to our grandfathers ways”, as Vas’ka Kanev, the brigade leader’s brother, had so much wished for the brigade to achieve, had proved not possible, or at least for this summer.

We had to conclude that controlled summer grazing had proved to be an impossible task even with the best of intentions of the leaders of the brigade. Apart from other factors, perhaps the problematic fording of the Iokanga in June (Fieldnews 9) had contributed to demoralize the majority of herders, convincing them that important skills and habits had been irretrievably lost during the sovkhos period. “Monkey’s labor” (“*martishkin trud*”) was the curt comment of one of the herders after the fording. He found it utterly pointless to try to do something the deer had been doing by themselves for so long.

There was some good news though. Nikolai and Petr described how with controlled spring grazing of the brigade herd, lasting till late June, more deer than usual had stayed for the summer in areas closer to the spring pastures, in the region between the upper reaches of rivers Tichka and Elvan. Around 20 July they had spotted small clusters and individual animals in the same area, as we also did after them.

Coming closer to the Iokanga line and to the periphery of the forest zone in the last decade of July, we noticed that mushrooms had begun sprouting in the birch forests. The

appearance of mushrooms is a very important event in the seasonal cycle of the reindeer, apart from our own delight for the chance to add to our pretty basic diet. Mushrooms are one of the critical sources of the protein, which reindeer need to consume in late summer and autumn, stocking up for the long winter months. The appearance of mushrooms, principally of the *Boletus* species, (*krasnogolviki* and *podosinoviki*) was a sure sign that once insect pressure let up a bit, the migration would turn back to the forests. It has to be



**Picture 5.** A female deer staying in the spring pastures during the whole summer. Such deer periodically would search stony ground and wind exposed hills for respite from insects. These “non-migrators” are consequently the first to utilize the first mushrooms, appearing towards the end of July.

reiterated though, that despite high insect activity in the second half of July, we met occasional reindeer that had evidently remained on the close to forest side of the Iokanga river – i.e. they had not bothered to migrate out into the tundra at all.

We expect that “early deer”, coming from the tundra, would become more and more frequent during the first half of August, before the mass-scale autumn migration take place in its second half. A zig-zag migration is also to be expected, when temporary relief from insects brings forward deer from the tundra, but once insect-pressure, especially from flies goes up, the clusters turn back. The August “zig-zags” can be expected to draw a fairly segmented and complicated migration pattern.

### **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>

### **Text and photographs:**

Yulian Konstantinov,  
Vladislava Vladimirov