

NOMAD Fieldnews

Number 15

30 September 2007



Picture 1. Great moment! Finally a fragment of about a hundred deer coming towards Porosozero.

On 15 September, three parties of reindeer herders were sent further out to the north to scout the territory deeper into the tundra. Shortly after, on the 16th and 17th, several small fragments, of about fifty to hundred head each, approached the corral fences. The few herders who had been left in camp did their best to round up these groups, but



Picture 2. A group of deer is turning back, alarmed by the wings of the corral at Base 1.

their attempts failed because of their small number. “We are too few to be able to drive them into the *tandra*”, a senior and very experienced herder, known by the nickname Kamrad said. “To get them they have themselves to decide to walk in”. The deer decided otherwise however and turned back to the forest line, from where they had come.

The next day seemed even more promising for corralling. One of the scouting groups of four herders spotted a *kusok* of about hundred head coming slowly from the northwest, i.e. from the direction of the forest. Shortly afterwards, a smaller group of about fifty animals were seen approaching the *tandra* from the northeast, the tundra side. At this end there was only one person left to intercept whatever deer chose to come. This was the old-age pensioner from Brigade 1 Aleksandr Sorvanov (Ded’ Sasha) who was supposed “to do something” singlehanded, should the need arise. In spite of the energetic efforts of



Picture 3. Another hope of getting deer into the corral is fading.

the herders, who were spread rather thin on the ground, the deer simply walked away, each group turning back to where they had come from.

When all scouting parties met in camp on the next day, the unanimous conclusion was that there were simply too few deer migrating towards Porosozero and thus the prospects for a successful round up were dim. The reading of the situation was as follows. The groups we have been seeing were of those deer that had previously migrated to the forest belt in search of mushrooms. They were returning now to the tundra where the rut was or would be taking place. From the opposite direction, some “mushroom pickers” were still coming from the tundra, trying to break through the line along the Iokanga and get to the forest. But eventually these would also go back to the tundra to engage in the rut. As Ded Sasha explained it, the productive males (*hirvasa*) needed open space (*chistye mesta*) in

the tundra where they would keep their harems to themselves, chasing away competitors. Once the rut was over the *hirvasa* would let go of the harems and then the migration would roll forth like a wave (“*poidet valom*”). The time when this could be expected to happen was after mid October.

In the meantime the problem of catching sled bulls remained, but the passing fragments were too elusive and, moreover, they would soon disappear. The only possible strategy which looked right in this situation was to wait till the migration finally took place in earnest, .i.e. to wait for another month. The scarcity of pre-rut fragments moving towards the forest zone or coming back from it was explained by some informants with the general delay in the seasonal development this year. The fact of the matter was that the summer did not begin till after mid-July, so everything seemed like happening a month



Picture 4. A driving sed slowly coming into shape.

later than usual. The herders were unhappy with the situation as the so urgently needed reindeer transport could not be obtained, and also meat for the pot had been lacking for far too long. To carry on herding on foot and without meat was seen as unbearable and demeaning, so tempers were running rather short. Only the presence of the Head of the Herding Department, as well as that of the two brigade leaders, of Brigades 1 and 8, could keep things in some order. Privately though many critical remarks were being passed, while, at the same time, it was considered pointless to try and change the situation – one had to wait till the deer came.

Meanwhile, free from chasing the deer, the herders engaged in various private jobs, the main one of those being the making and repair of sleds. At any given time at least two or three herders could be seen behind one of the store houses, masterfully engaged in carpentry. Another main task was fishing or hunting for fresh food – both activities bringing in meager results with the exception of one more productive deer hunt which we were able to register and from which we were also handsomely provisioned. Fishing however was invariably poor as Poroszero with its deep waters and stony bottom was lean in fish unlike the very rich shallower lakes down along the Iokanga.

The so far unsuccessful attempt to corral some bits from the pre-rut “mushroom migration” tend to fit in a pattern formed by a series of herding experiences we had observed during the year. With the diminishing of human contact with the herds, the reliance on megastructures, like fences and corral enclosures, increased, as has been emphasized in previous issues (see NOMAD 13). So far we have observed only Brigade 1 of Krasnoshchel’e (NOMAD 9) making an attempt to resume some form of close herding. The other brigades in our field of vision, Lovozero’s 1, 2, and 8, seem to have given up close herding entirely. Absence of continuous contact with the deer and the consequent “wilding” of the herds diminish chances for accurate prediction of reindeer behavior. The strategy to invest in ever longer fences seems also to be the response to the steadily diminishing number of herders in recent years. By the time of writing, “Tundra” brigades which were nine in number ten years ago, are now one less, with another on the brink - the most distant Brigade 9.



Picture 5. Serezha Mal'tsev braves the autumn weather in yet another attempt to get some fish. "Fish from our lake is good only for slimming", herders from Brigade 1 jokingly complain.

The leaders of the Cooperative as well as the herders explain these adverse developments with the perennial problem of difficult recruitment and a deficit of experienced and able herders. This complaint is all too common over the greater part of the Russian Subarctic. Observing events from close to the ground in our particular location seems to suggest some unexpected explanations. There is a general expectation than sooner or later the Cooperative herd shall fall into private hands or be "privatized" as the herders say. As we were dodging unsuccessfully the passing fragments, news reached the camp that a much vilified former director of "Tundra" had become the owner – together with another businessperson – of the Swedish slaughter-house in Lovozero. This sensational event was clearly pointing to what was to be expected in the future. Trying to forestall developments, the brigade leaders seem to welcome old age pensioners, preferably close

kin, and general workers in their teams. This might prove to be a prudent policy at future decisive moments when the fate of brigade herds may have to be decided.

In a situation in which the emphasis of herding is shifting rapidly to fences, one can feel the growing unpredictability of herd movements. This unpredictability exists at the best of times but now, with herders spending minimal time in contact with the herd, it is indeed very palpable. Reindeer herders are finding it more and more difficult to solve the constant multifactor equations, in which there are so many variables: grazing opportunities, wind direction, presence or absence of mushrooms during the mushroom time, the demands of the rut, as it is at present, etc. Enquiries about when an event could be roughly expected to take place, like the current buck-catching, elicits more often than not very vague answers like “We shall see” (“*Posmotrim kak budet*”), “It depends on the weather” (“*Kak pogoda*”), “As it happens!” (“*Kak poluchitsia*”), or even “Who knows!” (“*A kto znaet!*”).

In terms of meat production, the primary goal of the Cooperative, the growing uncertainty of herding, as well as diminishing herd numbers, have been steadily drawing a downward curve all through the last decade. Recognizing that this is a stable trend for the near future, the Swedish “Norfrys” as mentioned above, finally decided to pull out of what had been thought to be a very lucrative operation fifteen years ago. The herders saw this development from a somewhat different angle. “They have skimmed the milk and are now pulling out” (“*Sniali slivki i seichas ubiraiutsia*”), was the dry comment of a friend from Brigade 2.

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