

NOMAD Fieldnews

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Figure 1. Trying to get to the herd. Potchemvarek.

Toward the end of September it began to look hopeless to wait any further for the herders at Camp 1 to catch sled bucks. There was also the danger that if we stayed longer at Poroszero, adverse weather conditions could easily halt us there for an indefinite period of time. The winds blew up serious waves across the lake and with our small rubber canoe it was not an easy task to navigate it. With such thoughts in mind we decided that



Figure 2. Looking for the herd from the top of Big Potchemvarek Hill.

we should leave for our base camp with no further delay, giving up the attempt to participate in an eventual sled buck catching at the Porosozero *tandra*.

There was also a growing fear that we might easily lose contact with the herd fragments from the mushroom migration which had been in our field of observation before we went to Base 1. The rut was already beginning, rutting males (*hirvasa*) were spotted near Lake Spiridon (Spiridonovka) some 20 km to the north of the Porosozero camp. Other fragments could be expected to go to open spaces at some such distance from the entire Iokanga line.

For all these reasons, soon after our arrival at our Ketkozzero camp, we set off on foot in the direction of the upper reaches of River Tichka, where we expected to find fragments

of “our” herd. We reached the two Potchemvarek hills, or Big and Small Potchemvarek, some 16 km from our camp. During the summer a group of geologists had camped there and we expected to see traces of their intrusion, as well as search further off for signs of the herd.

What we saw far surpassed anything we had expected in the way of geologists’ presence in a reindeer grazing area. The two low hills bore the deep scars of generations of digging and drilling, going back, recalling herders’ stories, to the late 1950s. The Big Potchemvarek hill had been dug from end to end by parallel trenches (*shurfy*) at equal distances of about fifty meters between them. Metal tubes where the drills had gone into the rock had been left gaping all over the place as well as hundreds of meters of rusting



Figure 3. Big Potchemvarek Hill. Parallel trenches slice the hill from end to end.

pipes, drilling tubes, and all sorts of scrap. Wooden structures supporting tents belonged to the latest generation of exploration here – of the now passed summer. Not surprisingly, not a single reindeer trail could be seen anywhere near the hills. Neither could we see any deer on the close or distant horizon.

This negative impact on centuries old migration routes made us think, not without serious apprehension, about new explorations opening up. There has been recently the case of a Canadian company – “BERRIK-Gold”. They were beginning to operate in the westernmost end of the winter pastures very soon. As we learned from the herders, the Cooperative got some minimal compensation for this intrusion on their land, but how would mining there reflect on the deer? No one asked them. The Raion Administration



Figure 4. Big Potchemvarek. Vladi is looking down an abandoned shaft.



Figure 5. Localities visited during autumn 2007.

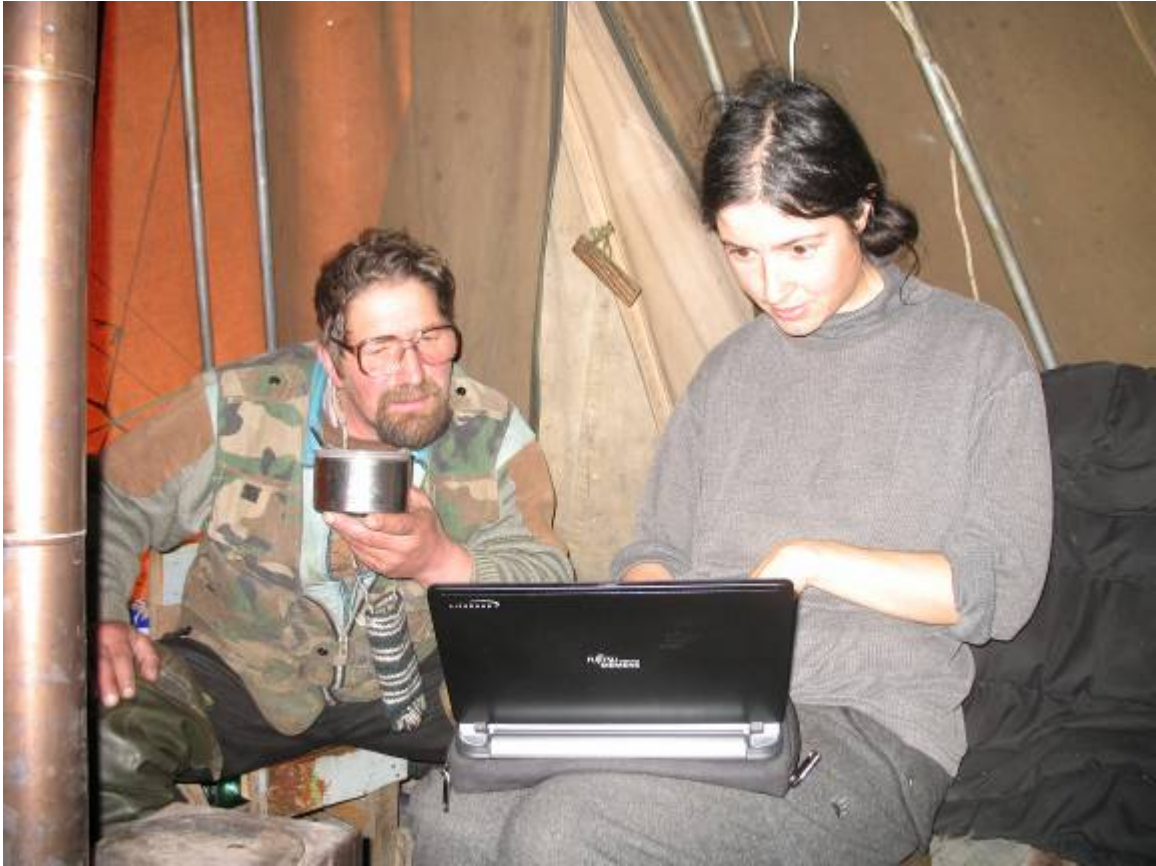


Figure 6. Vasia Kanev looking at the pictures of his brigade trying to get a herd across the Iokanga on 19-22 June (NOMAD 9).

got the lion's share of the compensation, according to herders' reports, and was glad that some serious money went into the always fragile municipal budget. "We could have scrounged some more money out of that deal", the Head of the Reindeer Herding Department bitterly commented, when we discussed the matter at Base 1, "but there was no one who could stand up to the Municipality and defend our interest."

After a few days of trying to locate the herd in the area to the east of the two Potchemvarek Hills, but with no success, we returned to base camp. To our great disappointment we had to concede that contact with the herd had been lost. Luckily, just when we were wondering what to do, a senior herder from Brigade 1 of Krasnoshchel'e, Vasili Kanev (Vasia), was passing by boat through Ketkozero on his way from the Porosozero base camp. He had left one of his brigade's herders there to wait until some

sled bucks were finally caught and in the hope that there would be Krasnoshchel'e's bucks there. We asked about how the situation looked after we had left. "There are small fragments passing by", he sighed, "but they cannot get them in". So, the situation at Poroska had remained as we had left it. We rapidly calculated that the sled buck chasing had already lasted for more than a month.

Vasia confirmed that the overall herd had gone into rutting and he advised us not to try and reach "our" part of it – the animals would be too far away and difficult to locate. "You better sit it out and wait for the fragments to pass through here", he said. "There shall be a wave of them after the *hirvasa* release their harems". They themselves were going to do just that and sit it out at their Iokanga camp till freeze up. When that happened they would try and corral their herd at Mount Devin Corral.

First snow. Bird behavior

By the way the tundra partridges (*kuropatki*) were changing their summer plumage to white winter attire we could see that the snow was not far away. Indeed, the first snow



Figure 7. A white-tail eagle gliding over the Iokanga.

fell during the night of 10 October. On 11 October we woke up feeling a strange silence. The habitual rush of the wind and the crashing of waves were absent. The wind had died down for once and the lake was frozen and strangely silent. A few days afterwards strong southerly gales began blowing once again and



Figure 8. Hiding close to our tent, a tundra partridge is clearly visible in its winter plumage.

temperatures quickly rose to 5 degrees above zero. Snow and ice disappeared and the partridges became strikingly visible in their white feathers. Their solution, or at least of some of them, was to try and get as close to our tents as possible. In the face of serious dangers from the air, they decided to abandon all fear and would crouch under a bush a few meters away from us, as we went about household tasks. Only in the evening twilight – towards six – they would leave their hiding place and go out to peck berries in the open space behind the tents. By 7 October all water fowl had left for the south: geese, ducks, and finally a big flock of swans. A gyrfalcon terrorizing the partridges left soon after this exodus, but a pair of white-tail eagles remained, as well as hawks. Thus, the partridges had enough reasons to fear attacks from the air. We thought that they must be eagerly awaiting a more serious coming of the snow when they would become invisible once again.



Figure 9. Fresh bear prints after a mother with two cubs had walked along the shore at Lake Porosozero.

Of the other predators, the bear was more visibly active. On coming back from Porosozero we could see clearly fresh prints on the western shore of the lake. Closer to our base camp at Ketkozzero we came twice across rather impressive fresh mounds of excrement. Judging by them the bear had been harvesting the *voronika* – a black tasty berry which is so abundant on open dry spaces that it is difficult not to walk on it most of the time. As no hairs could be seen in the feces we concluded that the deer must be still far away in the open tundra.

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