

NOMAD Fieldnews

Number 17

31 October 2007

After the Rut



Release of the harems

On 16 October we noticed the first fresh tracks of fragments returning from the rut. The general direction was southeast to northwest, or, in terms of the topography of the area under observation – from the upper reaches of River Tichka to Porosozero Lake. The line of the migration ran upstream along the eastern side of the Iokanga river/lake system. The herders' comment to this observation was that the productive males (*hirvasa*) had finally released their harems, previously held at one spot while the rut was in progress. The general duration of the event was estimated to have been about a month, with a beginning in mid-September. Regarding the trek of the after-rut movement, the herders' opinion was that the deer would not dare cross water at this time being apprehensive of thin clear ice that they might not be able to notice. Only when the ice on the lakes became covered by snow they would go over it.

The weather was rather mild, however, for any such fears to arise in the herds. Apart from a very brief spell with temperatures below zero on 11-13 October, when the lakes froze in their shallow parts, day temperatures kept being rather high all through October: +6 – +8 with warm southerly winds and frequent drizzles. Nevertheless, we could not detect any presence or tracks on the western bank of the lake; all tracks and observed presence was along the eastern banks, heading in the general direction of Kolmiavr-Porosozero. It looked plausible then that crossing over the Iokanga line was indeed not in the plans of the animals, not before they reached Porosozero. It could be, then, that the reason for the deer to be so determined to cross over to the forest zone exactly on the northern side of Porosozero Lake was that there the Iokanga was only a shallow stream and the system line could be easily waded. Whether fear of thin ice was involved in this tactic remained an open question given the prevailing very mild weather.

Fragments at close range

On 18 October we saw a small fragment of about fifty head resting on the western slope of Vaska Gora. Soon afterwards a larger fragment of about a hundred animals slowly emerged on top of the Vaska Gora ridge. The animals were coming from the southeast. Grazing unhurriedly they walked down the northwestern slope.

Wishing to observe the deer at closer range we made a big detour behind the low hills that lay in the line of vision of the animals. We came out at the easternmost end of Vaska Gora and headed to its top walking against a fresh southerly breeze. From this elevated position we could see that the bigger fragment was moving at an angle of about 20 degrees to the breeze which was blowing from behind the animals. Thus, not for the first time we were registering deer movement *with* the wind (*po vetru*), contrary to an often heard statement from the herders that the deer would never go with a wind that is blowing “against the fur” (*naprotiv shersti*). In our experience the deer would often disregard wind direction in favor of other concerns. From what followed during this particular contact with the animals, this opinion received rather strong confirmation.



Looking down at the bigger fragment from Vaska Gora. Wind direction is from left (south) to right (north), as is the movement of the deer.

After we had gained the top of Vaska Gora we crawled for about twenty meters to avoid detection and crouched behind some huge glacial boulders. The fragments were directly below us. The bigger fragment gradually stopped and spread at the foot of the hill. The time was around three in the afternoon and thus the pausing for rumination and rest was in tune with previous experience as well as herders' opinion: between two and four in the afternoon movement usually ceases.

Just then, the smaller fragment, which had sat for about an hour not far away from the larger group, decided to end its siesta. Grazing on the way, the deer slowly walked upslope through a birch grove. They were moving exactly with the wind. Above the birch grove and overlooking it there stood a group of rocks. The animals were thus heading straight below a spot where a predator could be easily lying in wait for them and could not be detected neither by vision nor by smell.

Wondering not a little at this over confident behavior of the deer we skirted a small ravine that separated us from the convenient rocks towards which the fragment was heading. We tried to move as huddled down to the ground as possible using bushes and rocks for cover, but still came into view of the deer once or twice. They did not see us, however, so we could make the rocks ahead of them and take position for shooting with still and video-camera.

After about ten minutes the first animals of the group slowly emerged from below. There was a full grown male, then another younger again male animal and then females with this year's calves. As more animals appeared we could see also castrated bucks among them looking rather fresh compared to the *hirvasa*. One of these last, grazing very close to us, had his head low to the ground all the time and was visibly limping. We read that as a sign of exhaustion after the rut. The rest of the fragment, some thirty head or so were females with this year's calves grazing side by side with them. The calves had gained their full weight of about 30 kilos after the summer. Their pelts were rich brown color and thick looking. The antlers of the mothers were reddish after an evidently recent shedding of the skin. There was only one rather smallish white calf in the group. It must have been born very late, possibly in mid- or even late June.

The fragment was feeding on the rich wet lichen that covers much of Vaska Gora. Our conclusion was that this lichen was a strong attraction in favor of which the fragment disregarded wind direction. A young three year old male (*urak*) detected some danger nevertheless, possibly by seeing a flock of partridges suddenly take flight. The flock could have been alarmed by a predator trying to get to the herd against the wind, just as we had done. The buck raised his tail as a flag of alarm, but then lowered it and went on grazing. Neither he, nor we could detect anything; perhaps an wolverine had slinked away, having smelled or seen us.



Stalking a fragment. The wind is blowing from left (south) to right (north).

Poor sled-buck catching

During the following days more fragments came into view gradually attracting the attention of the herders. This was a good chance to exchange news with them and hear their opinion about what was happening.

The most important bit of news was that the sled-buck campaign at Porosozero had finally born some fruit, but in a rather miserable way. All in all, only four draft teams had been caught. One of them belonged to the Krasnoshchel'e Brigade 1, one – to “our” Brigade 8, and the rest went to the hosts at the Porosozero Base, Brigade 1, and to Brigade 2 (Liavozero). This was then the result of an effort which had begun at the end of August and had lasted for just under two months. The explanation was that there were too few people for a successful round up, that the deer were getting less and less each year,

and also, according to critical opinion from the Krasnoshchel'e herders, that deer there were enough "but they (the Lovozero herders) were not able to catch them." Whatever the truth, the results were very unsatisfactory.

Human fates and movements

The sled buck catching was over the time being, activities being called off around 16 October. The greater part of the herders went to Lovozero, some called by tragic events. The brother of Vladimir Filippov (Volf) from Brigade 2 had died. Another brother had also died – of Valentin, the camp worker who had moved from Brigade 8 to Brigade 9. Ivan Terent'ev from Brigade 8, who brought the sad news to us, remembered that Valentin's younger brother had died in a fire a year ago, when a new private hotel on Lovozero Lake rather mysteriously burned down. Ivan himself lost a relative in that incident. A total of three persons had died in that fire.

Illness had struck also Petr Terent'ev (Petka) from Brigade 8, one of our closest friends. Petka had pains in the lungs and left for Lovozero to seek medical help. Aleksandr Filippov (Kamrad) from Brigade 1 had some serious stomach pains so he also left. The mother in law of Aleksandr Chuprov (Zeba) from Brigade 1 was ill so he left to Lovozero from where with his wife went on to St. Petersburg where the old woman lived. He himself complained of pains in the spine and later stayed in Lovozero for treatment. Other herders simply wanted to see their families and also left for Lovozero after two months of repairing fences and waiting for deer at Porosozero.

Of those few who stayed behind three got positioned in the forest zone in anticipation of the late autumn migration. Egor Sorvanov (Zhora) from Brigade 1 was left to live by himself in a tent by Rova Lake. Here the fence, separating Krasnoschel'e and Lovozero grazing grounds (see NOMAD 8: The River Rova Fence) had a gap. It reached one end of the fence and continued from the other. Zhora's task was not to let the migrating fragments get through this opening in the fence. Two senior herders from Brigade 8, Vasili Khatanzei (Diadia Vasia), and Ivan Chuprov (Diada Vania) were sent deep into the winter grounds to the hut at River Kuliok. Here they would wait for the fragments to



Same fragment as in the previous photo. A young productive male (urak) with a released harem. He has seen some movement in front of him, but cannot catch the scent. Note the raised tail. Three females (vazhenki) and two this year's calves are grazing beside him.

coalesce and be then gradually pushed to Belaia Golovka and eventual round ups. In the absence of available draft teams these herders had been deployed by *vezdekhod* which subsequently drove on to Lovozero.

Birds and rodents

As noted at the beginning, the weather in October remained rather mild for the season. This confirmed the general conviction that all seasonal events tended to be delayed by a month or more. As noted in the previous issue, the tundra partridges could not adjust to the rhythm and remained dangerously exposed in their white winter feathers. They had donned them at the beginning of October and by the time of writing had been very visible for nearly a month. The birds resorted to hiding under bushes for most of the day. In the previous issue we noted the staying of partridges very close to the tent in daytime. On 31 October, Yulian was cutting firewood by the lake with partridges sitting close to him all through. The birds would go out in the open only in the evening and feed practically in the dark. With the change to winter time on 28 October this was after 16:30 when twilight began. With overcast skies by five p.m. it would be practically dark.

A pair of late swans are still with us, having the whole of Ketkozero Lake to themselves.

Towards the base of the trophic chain 2007 has seen an explosion of the field mice population. The ground, especially over the swamps, is drilled by innumerable holes. Mice are attacking our store of diminishing provisions day and night and special care has to be taken to protect our food from them. During the night the activity of the tiny animals increases and the rummaging and scratching over wrapped up food can go for hours. Ivan Terentiev's comment was: "This means they get rabies soon" (*Oni blizko do beshenstva*). This certainly made our sleep sounder...



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