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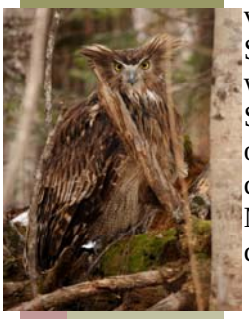

BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #1

Prospects in Olga & Ternei

By Jonathan Slaght

I have been in Russia for about two weeks and have covered a lot of ground in that time. After a few necessary but wasted days in Vladivostok getting registered, I traveled north with Sergei to meet up with Kolya and Shurik, all of whom I worked with last year (see 2008 Field Summary on project website). Our first order of business was to scout out potential fish owl capture sites in the Olga area, specifically at the Minearalnaya and Vetka territories that we discovered in 2006.

We pulled into our campsite just after midnight on February 2nd, and I was reminded of the professionalism of the field crew when no one needed to be told what to do. Kolya began setting up the stove, Shurik took a bucket and went to the river for water, Sergei and his chainsaw scouted the woods for firewood, and I followed him, hauling logs and chopping wood, which Kolya then brought to the stove. Within the hour we were warm inside the GAZ-66, drinking tea, and ready for sleep.

The next morning we walked the banks of the Mineralnaya River, at its confluence with the Avvakumovka River, and quickly found fish owl tracks. In order to maximize output, the field team split into several groups on February 5th. Shurik and Kolya stayed at the Mineralnaya territory to feed the birds there and prepare them for capture, and Sergei took me as far as Dalnegorsk. There, I caught a 2am bus to Ternei, where I have been for the past four days. I am here to assess site occupancy of owls pairs discovered here in 2006

A new addition to the field team this year is Andrei, who has been involved in fish owl fieldwork since my departure from Russia last spring. Andrei, in his 50s and stout and jovial and bearded, is a former military parachute instructor with more than 1000 jumps under his belt. Andrei should be joining me in Ternei in a few days.

On our drive north, Sergei and I took a quick side trip to the Vetka territory. Both nesting attempts at this territory since 2006 have successfully fledged one chick, which is pretty amazing given the nest tree's location. It is less than a kilometer from the village of Vetka, and only a few meters to the side of a well-travelled foot path used by fishermen to access the Avvakumovka River. In essence, the nest tree is in a worst-case-scenario type of location in regards to potential disturbance. Sergei and I discovered, however, that the Vetka pair no longer need to worry about curious fishermen, because sometime in the last year the nest cavity had been destroyed. Typically, fish owls nest in cavities created when a large limb or main trunk breaks off a large tree, and decay creates a depression large enough for a female to sit in. In the case of the Vetka nest tree, this cavity was created at the fork of two large branches. As the cavity continued to decay, the ability of the trunk to sustain the weight of the remaining branches decreased. The wind can be ferocious

Figure 1. The former Vetka nest tree.

Blakiston's FISH OWL Project • Проект по сохранению рыбного филина

Quick Statistics (2006-2009)

Number of Fish Owl Nest Trees Discovered and Revisited	10
Number of These Fish Owl Nests Naturally Destroyed	3

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2009 Fish Owl Update #1: Prospects in Olga and Ternei

in Primorye, and it looks like the tree tried to weather one more storm than it could handle. One of the branches broke off completely, while the second one cracked and will likely be brought down with the next strong wind (Fig. 1). As a result, the cavity walls are completely destroyed and the tree is no longer suitable for nesting. This discovery led to an alarming realization: of the fish owl nest trees that we have discovered since 2006 and subsequently revisited, a full 30% of them have been destroyed by wind and natural senescence. This might explain why some fish owls maintain several nest trees throughout their territory: they never know when a nest is going to disappear.

""I strapped on my skis, and Tolya gave me a hunk of roe deer and a pink salmon"

In the middle of January, a few weeks before I arrived in Russia, an unreasonable amount of snow fell on the citizens of Ternei. At the end of the two-day storm, the confused population was under six feet of snow. The snow has subsequently settled to about four feet, and in the woods it's not so hard to get around as I have a good pair of backcountry skis, which Russians use in lieu of snowshoes (Fig. 2). For wildlife though, the snow is a very serious issue, and it is thought that the wild boar populations will be particularly devastated by this storm.

On February 8th I scouted the Serebryanka fish owl territory and found evidence of site occupancy; both tracks in the snow along the river and feathers clinging to branches near the nest tree. Two days later I went to the Faata territory, and similarly found evidence of fish owl presence. I stopped to visit Tolya, the recluse who lives alone on the fringe of the Faata pair's territory on the bank of the Tunsha River [If you are not familiar with Tolya, I recommend going back to the 2007 and 2008 field summary archives to read up on him; he is a real character]. After confiding that the Egyptians used levitation to build the pyramids, Tolya remarked that a pair of fish owls had duetted two nights prior just across the river. This is an interesting development because the Faata female had abandoned her mate and territory last year to breed with the Tunsha male on a neighboring territory. Perhaps she had returned, or perhaps the Faata male had found himself a new mate. The Tunsha territory, which I checked the day prior, seemed to be occupied as well based on the good condition of the nest cavity, so this development is indeed curious.

I had some time to kill before skiing back to the main road to meet my ride to Ternei, so I joined Tolya for a few cups of tea and more stories about Egyptians and Atlantis and energy and specific vibrations. When it was time to go I strapped on my skis, and Tolya gave me a hunk of roe deer and a pink salmon. I followed an old path for about a kilometer to the main road, which was intersected by tracks of red, sika, and roe deer, fox, and the trough of a single boar where it plowed though the deep snow.

I have completed initial scouting and believe that we are in a good position to quickly recapture fish owls at the Serebryanka and Faata territories. With any luck, the next field update will be a catalog of these successes.

Figure 2 Dr. Ivan Seryodkin, bear biologist and field coordinator of the Siberian Tiger Project, displays a piece of honeycomb left behind after an Asiatic black bear raided a bee hive in a Korean pine at the Tunsha fish owl territory.