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BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #2

Success at Faata

By Jonathan Slaght

On February 18th, Andrei arrived in Ternei and we immediately left for the Faata territory, about 20 km north of town, to recapture the male there. Although in past years we have been able to drive all the way to Tolya's hut, where we base our fieldwork when working on the Faata, the waist-deep snow this season prevented such convenience. Therefore, Ivan Seryodkin, the bear biologist-turned field coordinator for WCS's Siberian Tiger Project, dropped us and all of our gear by the side of the road, and we skied 1.5 km across the river valley to our destination. On the surface this does not seem like much of a daunting task, but this year we decided to go high tech and monitor our trapping sites remotely with infrared cameras. Such luxury comes at a price, namely weight. Each camera, and we have four, requires a 12-volt battery; as does our wireless receiver and the monitor. We also carried a generator and 20 liters of gasoline in order to recharge the batteries. After dark and three hours later, dripping with sweat and demoralized, we had completed the necessary four trips to haul all of our gear across the valley and river

to Tolya's warm and waiting hut.

The deep snow has not only caused trouble for our work; more significantly it has been catastrophic to local ungulate populations. Their inability to move freely (Fig. 1) has caused exhaustion, mass starvation, and brought out the worst in the local residents of Ternei County. The deer have been forced onto roads, as these are the only usable travel corridors. In response, poachers have rolled in on a screaming wave of carnage, running the exhausted animals down, and killing them with everything from guns to shovels. County Wildlife Manager Roman Kozhichev, in a sobering opinion piece in the local newspaper, asked residents to wipe the blood from their collective brows and return to sanity.

On February 19th, we quickly caught about 40 fish and set prey enclosures in two areas known to be visited by the Faata male, about 700 m upstream from the hut (Fig. 2). It took us a good part of the day to haul and set up all cameras and batteries, and we were less than pleased to discover on that first night that our



Figure 1. The record-breaking snowfall could result in catastrophe for local ungulates, such as these roe deer. Photo © R. Kozhichev



Figure 2. One of two prey enclosures on the Faata River. The Faata male discovered it after four days, and we set our snare trap on the fifth night.



Quick Statistics (2006-2009)

Number of Known Fish Owl Nesting Attempts in Study Area	7
Number of Successful Nests (Hatched and Fledged Young)	5

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equipment simply stops working after dark, when the temperature plummets to almost thirty below zero. The



Figure 3. I call the green one "Tuggy": Tolya tries to start our ailing generator.

salt on that particular would came in the form of our generator, which apparently was broken, and would not have been able to recharge our batteries even if they worked (Fig. 3). It looks like video monitoring

is best saved for warmer weather, and places you can drive to.

Tolya continues to be an intriguing figure to me. Andrei has a history in the military, and he picked up on some things that Tolya said about his time overseas; nuances that eluded me. Apparently, Tolya was in the KGB for several years in the early 1970s. When I asked him specifically about it he brushed me off with a smile, saying, "that was in the past"; the same answer he gave when I asked how he lost the pinky on his left hand. He has led an improbable life: boyhood in central Asia, then international espionage, and now at 58 living on the edge of a river, baking bread using mayonnaise as he has no access to milk or eggs.

On our fourth night on the Faata River, after two nights of calling alone at dusk, the Faata male finally discovered one of our prey enclosures and consumed about half the fish there. We immediately set our trap, an ingenious construction designed by Andrei himself. Simply

put it is a snare that releases once the fish owl lands in the prey enclosure, and then the bird is ours. This is exactly what happened, and the Faata male was in our hands (Fig. 4). Because this is the third time we have handled this bird, we did not need to draw blood or band him, so processing was minimal.

The mood in Tolya's hut was mixed after the Faata male's release. Andrei and I were still high on the capture rush; but Tolya was sullen because it was clear that his guests would soon be leaving. Tolya tends to amp up the crazy when he senses our departure; and this trip to the Faata was no different. He talked long, loud, and with urgency on a variety of topics all united by a central theme. Specifically, that 'the ancients' commanded a certain mystical knowledge that has been lost over time, but their secrets can be unlocked by properly understanding the true meaning of specific objects, such as playing cards and triangles.

As of February 24th, the team in Olga will be attempting capture of the Mineralnaya male, who they have been feeding and filming for the past several weeks. Here in Ternei, we will shift our focus to the Serebryanka pair. By early March, the Olga and Ternei crews will unite and head further north to the

Amgu area, where the bulk of our 2009 captures will take place. Depending on conditions and successes, we may be there as long as a month.



Figure 4. Andrei, who resembles the bear on his shirt, allows the Faata male to flap his wings. Meanwhile, Jon recoils from the flurry of wing and wind.

