

MARCH
9, 2009

Ready For Amgu

By Jonathan Slight



Following our textbook capture at the Faata territory, our efforts on the Serebryanka River were hampered by an apparent absence of fish there. I spent three days wandering the frozen river with my auger and rod in search of fish with which to fill our prey enclosure. After many ice holes drilled, many hours wasted, and not a single nibble, it became clear that more was at play here than my admitted incompetence as a fisherman. I began asking around Ternei why fish were not biting, and the general consensus was that the Serebryanka becomes the river equivalent of a ghost town this time of year. Andrei and I decided that the best course of action would be to drive back to the Faata territory, ski the 800 meters from the road to Tolya's fishing hole on the Tunsha River, "work" there for a few hours, then hustle back to release the live fish at the Serebryanka capture site. This handily resolved our fish deficit, as each trip yielded upwards of forty fish, and Tolya enjoyed our company (Fig. 1).

Apparently Andrei really likes wolves, or at



Figure 1. Fishing for science: Andrei with Tolya at the ruins of the WWII hydro-electric station.

least metaphors about them, because he has a mix tape of Russian songs dominated by wolf-related themes. We listened to this tape exclusively for the first week of our twice-daily commute to the Serebryanka capture site, after which I began to poke around the glove compartment for other options. It turns out that lyrics like, "you may think I'm a dog, but really I'm a wolf" become tolerable when the alternatives are dance remixes of Eminem songs, and melancholy love ballads by The Carpenters.

By 01 March, our prey enclosure had been set and filled with fish for two nights, but neither of the Serebryanka pair had fed there. Later, on the same night that we received news from the Olga capture team of the successful tagging and release of the Mineralnaya male, it appeared that a fish owl had hunted less than a meter from the Serebryanka prey enclosure. However, a new problem had materialized that prevented the owl from accessing our fish: severe overnight frosts, which froze our prey enclosure in place and put a layer of ice between the owl and our wriggling lures. We guessed



Figure 2. The Serebryanka male snags a fish from our prey enclosure. Still shot taken from our infrared camera.

BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #3



Quick Statistics (2007-2009)

Total Number of Individual Fish Owls Captured To Date	10
Total Number of Captures To Date (Incl. Recaptures)	16

Sponsors: Funding for the 2009 field season has been provided by the University of Minnesota, Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund, National Birds of Prey Trust, Columbus Zoo, Minnesota Zoo, Denver Zoo, Bell Museum, and a Wildlife Conservation Society Fellowship. Links to these organizations and other information about fish owls can be found at the project website (www.fishowls.com), or you can write me directly at jon@fishowls.com with specific questions.

2009 Fish Owl Update #3: Ready for Amgu

that he might return the next night to investigate, so on 04 March (my wife Karen's birthday), we set up a remote infrared camera, and recorded the Serebryanka male as he spent nearly six hours at our prey enclosure, eating all twenty fish (Fig. 2). Even after he had cleaned out the enclosure, he sat on the bank watching intently, as if wondering when the magic fish box would again begin producing snacks. We were ready to trap.

There has been an annoying trend this winter among the hooligans of Ternei; namely they've taken to stealing vehicles then abandoning them on the road leading to the Wildlife Conservation Society's office, where we are staying. Several mornings our trips to the Serebryanka territory have been delayed as we've had to negotiate these unwelcome obstacles.

Despite significant and untimely car problems, which involved walking 6 kilometers of road with a car battery, we were able to set our trap on time. After listening to the Serebryanka pair duet at dusk from our blind, the male made his way to the capture site and was momentarily pleased that the prey enclosure had been refilled. Again, Andrei's snare trap worked like a charm, and the bird was quickly in our hands. After weighing and measuring he was released, and our primary task in Ternei for the 2009 field season had been completed.

The plan was to leave for Amgu on 08 March, when Kolya and Shurik from the Olga capture team arrived in Ternei with our recently-modified GAZ-66 truck. Unfortunately however, the significant repairs (new engine, entirely-rebuilt living quarters) did not directly translate into smooth operation,

and the GAZ-66 has had three major repair problems in the twenty-four hours it has been in Ternei. Problem One was resolved, Problem Two is being held at bay by a length of wire, and Problem Three requires a new part not found within a 150-kilometer radius of Ternei. Plus it's a holiday weekend, so stores are closed! Realistically, this will set us back a few days, and if lucky we will head north on 10 March.

"Andrei seems to view careening off an icy road as an unavoidable inconvenience inherent to driving"

Andrei seems to view careening off an icy road as an unavoidable inconvenience inherent to driving, an activity he engages in with surprising calmness and frequency. Therefore I

am particularly relieved that Sergei will soon be rejoining our team, and I will subsequently be riding shotgun with him for the Amgu leg of our trip.

On our last day of fieldwork in Ternei area, Andrei and I walked in on the Tunsha territory to see if the pair is breeding there this year. The wind was wild, and the snow was falling heavy and wet, adding additional stress to one of my already-cracked skis, which snapped about halfway across the river valley. All the same we continued, and found the nest tree apparently unused: either the Tunsha pair is not breeding this year,

or they are nesting elsewhere. The weather worsened on our hike back to the road (Fig. 3). As we drove to Ternei in the white-out conditions of a blizzard, listening to The Carpenters lament lost love at ear-bleeding volume, I asked Andrei if he had any songs about wolves...



Figure 3. Jon walking out of the Tunsha River valley, with broken skis, in a blizzard.

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