

MARCH

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BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #4

Amgu in March

By Jonathan Slight

Despite the ominous start to the Amgu portion of the field season (see the end of Update #3), we made it to Amgu in five hours and without serious incident on the night of 09 March. The only glitch with our GAZ-66 was that, on the icy Kema Pass, the horn inexplicably began blaring and would not turn off until Kolya, irate and swearing, disconnected the wire. There are five of us on this leg of the capture season: me, Andrei, Sergei, Shurik, and Kolya. Kolya, who has been working as a driver and cook for Sergei

Surmach and his team of fish owl researchers for more than ten years, is surly, but in a harmless, endearing way. He is easy to rile up, and impressively indifferent about basic sanitation and personal comfort. He spent six months in prison for 'hooliganism', and is heavily tattooed, most notably with

the words "We Stomped" across one foot, and "Siberia" on the other, in recognition of the years he spent clearing forest for the ambitious Baikal-Amur Railroad project in the 1970s. Now in his late 50s, Kolys putters around camp with grease-stained hands, tinkering with the GAZ-66, skinning potatoes, and bellowing at us to stop sitting around and catch some owls al-

ready. His soft side becomes evident in the presence of songbirds. Everywhere we make camp he puts up a birdfeeder and the birds, mostly Eurasian nuthatches and Willow tits, come in droves. He talks to them, smiling a mouth of gold teeth, and after a few days the birds are landing on his shoulders, chattering and chasing each other away, as if jealous of his time. Shurik, as part of his friendly but ongoing rivalry with Kolya, says that the birds like Kolya because of his filth, and that they are attracted to the

bits of boar fat that stain his clothes.

We made camp on the edge of the Leonovka River, about 15 km west of Amgu, in the same place where we captured the Leonovka female last year (Fig. 1). Our goal at this territory was to recapture the female, and to capture the

male. After setting prey enclosures with fresh fish, we fanned out in the river bottom to search for the Leonovka nest tree.

The Leonovka territory has long been an enigma for us; Sergei and I spent two weeks in the spring of 2006 chasing the resident pair around the Leonovka and Amgu River bottoms,



Figure 1: The Leonovka River following a snowstorm. The Leonovka pair hunt here by perching on the snow-covered rocks, and watching as fish swim by in the shallow water. Our capture site is just downstream.



Quick Statistics (2009)

Of Our Seven Monitored Pairs, Number Nesting	2
Of Our Seven Monitored Pairs, # With Year-Old Juveniles	3

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trying to find their nest tree, but with no luck. Sergei was here in the 1990s with Japanese fish owl biologist Takeshi Takenaka, and they were given a similar run around by the resident pair. Sergei like to tell a story of that expedition, when Shurik free-climbed an old broken-top cottonwood, which he and Sergei were fairly certain was the nest tree. So high was their confidence that direct evidence to the contrary was not immediately understood. When Shurik reached the dark cavity some 10 meters from the ground, he yelled down with confusion that he found 'hair', and tossed some down for Sergei to investigate. As Sergei held the clump of Asiatic black bear fur, and began to understand that Shurik was poking his head into a hibernating bear den, Shurik called down that warm air was wafting out of the cavity. Sergei bellowed for Shurik to scale down as quickly as possible, and the bear was not roused. So, for more than a decade and not without incident, the Leonovka nest tree had eluded science. Then on 10 March, it took Shurik less than an hour to find it.

To me, female fish owls sitting on the nest always appear calmer than they should be. It seems that fish owls spend a fair bit of time avoiding humans at all cost, so I would think panic a good response to direct eye contact with awful devils such as us, who catch and poke and hold. Once confronted however, fish owls seem rather casual about the whole affair. At the Granatnaya territory last year, Shurik scaled a neighboring tree and found himself at eye level with the Granatnaya female, who we had tagged about a month earlier. She looked at him for a moment, then deciding she had better things to do, looked away. Now, as we stood at the base of the old and massive cottonwood that was our long sought-after prize, the female sat in her cavity motionless and disinterested, betrayed only by her ragged ear tufts as they jostled back and forth in the breeze.

The excitement at finding the Leonovka nest was muted by the realization that our tagged female was sitting firm, and we will not be able to attempt recapturing her until May or June, when her young chick has fledged and a capture attempt is safe. So, we refocused our efforts on her mate. He found our prey enclosure quite quickly, and we set our trap the next day. After scaring a mink away from our enclosure with a stick, the fish owl came in and was easily captured (Fig. 2). Like most male fish owls he was calm and docile to handle, and after release he sat in a nearby spruce and hooted at us for an hour or so before flying off.

We were able to identify her primary hunting spot, about 2 km further down the Amgu River than we had previously searched. On 16 March, the day after catching and tagging the Leonovka male, we made camp on the bank of the Amgu River, on the fringe of the Granatnaya pair's territory, and set a pair of prey enclosures teeming with Dolly Varden trout. The speed with which our lures were discovered was a surprise, literally ten minutes, and even more unexpected was the unobstructed view we had of fish owl hunting behavior right from camp— not just of one bird but of the entire family: the resident pair and last year's juvenile. Their chosen hunting spot was a wide section of the Amgu River, about 30 meters across, very shallow, and



Figure 2: The Leonovka male, bummed out that the free fish weren't really free.

right on the edge of the village itself. There, with a background chorus of baying village dogs, logging trucks and ocean static, the Granatnaya family began their evening hunt. The female glided in first and low, then rose to perch on a white birch. Then the silhouette of her mate as he passed her without a glance and perched some 50 meters down river. Last, the Granatnaya juvenile landed screeching and impatient next to the female.

For a few moments they all sat motionless, their forms fading into the background of snow and tree as dusk became night. At almost the same time, both adults dropped to the icy bank of the Amgu River and walked towards the water's edge, where they watched for fish. The juvenile, a year old and almost as big as its father, fluttered down to its mother's side. With begs ignored it flapped down river to its father, who passed along a fish from the recently-discovered enclosure. The family hunted actively for the first hour or so following dusk. Once satiated, they all sat on the snowy banks above their chosen fishing holes, and scanned the water lazily for fish.

Although we had been in the Amgu area for almost two weeks, we had not gone into the town itself until the afternoon of 18 March, when we drove to Vova Volkov's banya (sauna and bath house) for a well-deserved wash. As we rode pungent past the Amgu dump, two White-tailed sea eagles lit from the half-eaten carcass of a dog, recently exposed by the melting snow. The eagles flung themselves into the air surprised, with heavy wings and sagging talons, before accruing enough momentum to veer out of our way, and circle back to defend their treasure from the descending crows.

With every trip to Amgu I am taken aback by how rugged this frontier town is. We passed grizzled, bearded men in home-sewn coats chopping wood and smoking filterless cigarettes, and women in thick felt

boots and shawls, who stood back off the wide, muddy road to watch silently as we passed (Fig. 3). In almost every yard, among the rusty debris of a society apprehensive to throw anything away, hunting dogs barked, and fishing nets hung from the walls of hastily-constructed sheds.



Figure 3. Amgu in spring.

Vova Volkov's banya was exceptionally hot, and after a few hours of good steam I welcomed the cold wind off the Sea of Japan as it blew wet and salty through Amgu on our way back to camp for captures. We set two traps that night, excited that the birds

appeared to partition hunting areas, and ambitiously hoped to capture both the male and female at the same time. Within an hour of the owls flying in to hunt we reminded the Granatnaya pair what jerks humans can be, as we got all three! First the female, who we quickly processed and released, and then the male and juvenile at the same time in different traps (Fig. 4). We processed the female and her mate, and let the juvenile go with a warning (leg bands). This young bird will disperse from its natal territory sometime in 2009,

and we don't want to tag an owl we won't be able to find later.

Our next stop will be the Saiyon territory, some 20 km north of Amgu, where we have a tagged male.



Figure 4. The Granatnaya male (L) and juvenile (R) pretend not to know each other, while Sergei and Jon ponder their dumb luck at catching three fish owls in the span of an hour. Photo by A. Katkov.

