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BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #5

Saiyon

By Jonathan Slight

We arrived at the Saiyon territory on 19 March, strutting like roosters in a hen house after our successes at the Granatnaya territory. We made camp at Tyoplii Kyuch (Hot Spring), a rudimentarily-developed hot spring with a nearby log cabin that is, depending on the time of year, in various stages of disrepair. Some kind soul is constantly repairing it, while most others who visit the spring seem to view the hut as a free source of firewood, and have removed the door and window frames and some of the wall logs for their fires. The hot spring, which was blessed by a Russian Orthodox priest, sports a massive, wooden orthodox cross (Fig. 1). Also radon-rich, the water at Saiyon was not as warm as the hot springs at the Leonovka territory, and thus presented a tepid place to soak after a sweaty day of hiking. Leeches, apparently, are also fans of radon, because they were not uncommon bathing companions. This was a little unsettling but passed without incident.

Our goal at Saiyon was to recapture the resident male, and to, if time allowed, recapture the resident female.



Figure 1. A Russian Orthodox cross looms over the Saiyon hot spring.

We quickly found where the birds hunted and set our trap-less prey enclosures. We were delighted that here, as at Granatnaya, the pair seemed to hunt in different places, and that their year-old juvenile was with them. On 21 March we set prey enclosures at two sites, and quickly captured the male. We caught the juvenile two days later, weighed him, and gave him leg bands (Fig. 2). The juvenile had grown considerably since I last saw him a year ago (see the [March-April issue](#) of Wildlife Conservation Magazine for a photo). Then, at only a few days old, he was a total push over,

but now was much better at finding stray and unprotected human fingers to draw blood from, such as mine. The Saiyon female was remarkably wary, and after twice breaking our snare and escaping, the only fish owl to ever do so, she simply stopped coming in, and eluded capture. After ten long nights and no luck, we abandoned capture attempts for other work further south.

Before leaving Saiyon, we took a break from the monotony of failure to travel 20 km north to the Maksimovka River, famous to fisher-



Quick Statistics (2008-2009)

Number of Adult Fish Owls With GPS Dataloggers in 2008	3
Number of Adult Fish Owls With GPS Dataloggers in 2009	8

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men for its white-spotted char, taimen, and lenok, and famous to us for its high fish owl density. We drove along the north side of the river some 15 km to the fringes of the abandoned village of Losevka (Little Moose), where Sergei and I found a fish owl pair in 2006. Losevka was settled in the 19th century by Old Believers, a splinter group of Russian Orthodoxy that developed after a schism in the 17th century. The Old Believers moved east across Russia to avoid persecution and death, going as far as Alaska, where active settlements remain to this day. Persecution's shadow followed the Old Believers to Losevka, when after the Russian revolution in 1917 villages were forcibly grouped into collective farms. In Losevka, like other small villages in Primorye, resistance to Soviet collectivization was significant and bloody, and the government responded by liquidating villages of their adult male populations, either by imprisonment or execution. With only women and children left, villages such as Losevka slowly suffocated and died. By 2006 and abandoned for decades, all that remained of the village was a one-room school house, which a hunter from Maksimovka named Zinkovskii had converted into a hunting cabin. After the school house burned last year, along with a number of other cabins along the river as part of a out-of-control hunter's feud, Zinkovskii built a small and modest cabin where the school house once stood, and nothing of the original village remains.

We split up on the Losevka territory to look for the fish owl nest tree: Shurik and Sergei went north, and I

skied down to and east along the largely-frozen river, in the direction of the ocean. Unlike other parts of Ternei County where I've worked this year, the forest here was peppered with ungulate tracks. As I neared a bend in the river by some cliffs, three Carrion crows cawed excitedly from the forest edge, and two flew over to me, circled, then returned from where they came. I followed their flight and caught motion among the pines; a boar. Had the crows purposely alerted me to its presence, hoping to feed off the scraps a hunter typically leaves behind? I watched as the boar ambled along and out of sight, unaware that he had been betrayed. Not 200 meters downriver I saw more movement on the river bank; first his pale rump then a good view of the roe deer buck, with antlers in velvet. He appeared thin and walked cautiously; his sharp toes sinking well into the snow. Finally noticing me, the buck bolted into the forest, but deep snow changed his mind and he reversed to the river ice for better traction. I watched through binoculars as he loped downstream, then veered hard into an open section of water and flushed a Brown dipper,

which chattered upstream and past me like a bullet. The water was deep and the bank sheer; I watched with increasing concern as the buck reached the far bank, but pawed uselessly against the wall of ice and snow, wishing he had opposable thumbs, and unable to pull himself from the current (Fig. 3). I skied faster and yelling, hoping to scare some strength into him, but even as I stood on the bank, just a few feet away, he continued to tread water and lunge



Figure 2: Andrei with the Saiyon juvenile, who at a year old has mastered the art of finger-biting.

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impotently against the vertical bank of ice. The current was strong, and as he became weaker it pulled him closer and closer to the lip of closed ice downstream. It was clear to me that this deer, after weathering a beastly, vicious winter, was going to drown in the Maksimovka River on the eve of spring. Using one of my skis, I pulled the deer closer to the bank and, leaning over, grabbed him by his velvety antlers and hauled him onto the ice. I left him there exhausted and motionless; only after I was a good distance away did I see him flick his head and look in my direction. About an hour later, after finding the Losevka pair's nest tree, Shurik followed my trail down river, and described seeing a buck and wet tracks moving away from the river. With that news I had some hope that the buck might actually survive, but then the snow came hard and the snow came long. After two days and a knee-deep layer of fresh snow, I doubt that the already-weakened animal had the strength to best what I hope was winter's last blow.

Upon leaving Saiyon, our goal was to spend a few nights at the Leonovka nest tree, monitoring the male's prey delivery to the incubating female. To our horror, we found the nest abandoned and full of snow. What

had caused the Leonovka female to abandon her egg? We immediately set our traps and caught her in two days, discovering that she was quite thin, although not dangerously so. Incubating an egg requires a great deal of energy and personal sacrifice, so perhaps she did not have it in her this year. With any luck, next year we will find her again on the nest.

"The buck pawed uselessly against the wall of ice and snow, wishing he had opposable thumbs"

With our primary capture season complete, we packed up camp and moved our caravan south, driving slowly through the slush and mud of the thawing road, 300 km to Ternei. On 06 April, the capture team had a banya and banquet, then dissipated

to their respective villages for a few weeks break. Then in May, after I am already back in the United States, they will attempt one more capture in Olga, at the southern end of our study area.

This was a highly successful field season; we captured ten individual owls, which is twice as many as we captured in 2008.

Thanks for your attention this field season, and be on the lookout for 2010 Field Updates next February!



Figure 3: A roe deer buck rests on a peninsula of thin ice; trapped and on the verge of drowning in a deep section of the Maksimovka River.

