



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

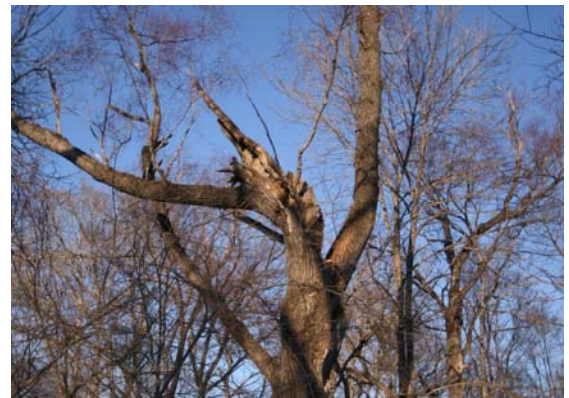


Figure 1. The former Vetka nest tree.

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



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.

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 through 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.

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



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.



FEBRUARY

24, 2009



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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2009 Fish Owl Update #2: Success at Faata

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 come 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

Angu 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.



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

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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.

Photo © A. Mukhachova.



MARCH

20, 2009

Amgu in March

By Jonathan Slight



BLAKISTON'S FISH OWL PROJECT

2009 Fish Owl Update #4

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.



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.

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,



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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2009 Fish Owl Update #4: Amgu in March

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.



APRIL

08, 2009



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.

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-



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



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

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 #5: Saiyon

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.

