

KAMCHATKA – Bystrinsky Natural Park

1st of June to 31st August of 2012



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INTRODUCTION

As recent Biologist working in the Max Planck Institute of Seewisen and desiring to travel and getting more field experience in my work come to my hands the offer of Michael requiring intrepid ornithologists for an expedition in Kamchatka. Knowing very little about Kamchatka (maybe except being home of the biggest eagle in the world) and that it was at the end, or maybe at the Start, of the World, I applied for it. Moreover at the same time I got an invitation to go and volunteer with shorebirds in the Chinese East Cost, with Fudan University which fitted perfectly in the schedule due to the unfortunate fact that from Spain the visa relations with Russia seems to be different than the ones between Russia and Germany and there was no way for me to stay in Russia for more than 3 months within 6 months.

During that time the project of Michael got more focused in the relation between birds and different vegetation types and was clear now that we were going to do bird surveys in different vegetation types. So we decided to order a recorder in order to make easier our job of sounds/ songs identification.

So after an intense migratori season in the chinese wetlands. I kept the track of the migratory birds towards the north to Kamchatka (Flying from Beijing to Vladivostok and from Vladivostok to Kamchatka).

That's how the events that brought me to Esso the 1st of June of 2012 – after a technical stop in Martha's place, in Eliseva – came to be.

ESSO

In the broken end of a branch of the dusty road that crosses Kamchatka from Petropavlovsk to Ust-Kamchatsky in the North there is the village of Esso. It's mostly a wooden village full of fenced gardened houses of different shapes and grades of maintenance, and some wooden/apartment blocks. Apparently most of those houses don't need to have thick wooden walls, as the cold winter would make believe, due to the fact of a particular warming system with big tubes and radiators fed with the thermal waters under the village (renewable, green and cheap energy). Vegetables gardens and greenhouses deserve the efforts of many of the locals that work on them during the short summer that becomes at the end an important source of food for them: food, specially fresh vegetables are not many, either diverse and not at all cheap in the many small shops of the village.

One of the details that may surprise the visitors are the jail-like boxes that effectively protect the garbage containers to prevent from curious bears that get attracted and used to its food scraps.

The local population is composed of western Russian colonies descendents as well as indigenous people mostly belonging to the Even and Koryak ethnic groups, nowadays all them living in the occidental way of life.

The population in general looked to me shaped by a high percentage of older people as a high proportion a children but a gap caused by lack of young adults that apparently leave the village to study and work in bigger cities where probably there is more work.

At least in the summer there are several festivities like the Even New Year (in the solstice), the "Fish" party, local fests and regional celebrations where local groups coming from different villages perform beautiful and charming traditional dances and delicious local dishes and beverages like the "Uha" and the "Mors". And where are sold some local handcrafts and even taught to the interested visitors how are they made.

The summer also many Russian and German tourists, and also some from other nationalities come to Esso and to the Bistrinsky park to meet the thermal pools, see the dancing performers, taste the local food and make routes in the park, often in organized horse-trips and rafting in the Bistraya.

VOLUNTEERS

I was surprised at my arrival by the warm welcoming in the bus stop by the many volunteers that we gathered this year in Esso.

In the guesthouse they were, by order of arrival: Boba and Liena (Belorussians) and Ninia and Rebeka (Germans) from the European Volunteer Service, and Mihael, Klemence, Ben, Haiko and me for the MHS project (all Germans but me).

To them we should add Larissa, a veteran volunteer that had been organizing activities for the

children (as a kind of street educator) the last three years, another veteran, Judit, that was there not as volunteer but this time working for the organization, and Anthon, the fiancé of Rebeka that came for two months also as free volunteer.

TEAM AND NATURAL PARK

So when I arrived to Esso, Michael and Clemence had been already exploring our possibilities: where, how and how often could we go to make our plots. They showed me the surroundings and we started doing waiting points and transects to test ourselves and for training.

Even if the waiting spots were supposed to be better to detect different species and fit better with the study of the vegetation types we detected much less birds than with the transects and we had not time during the summer to make enough repetitions. So we chose the transect method and made a plan, however we needed some time at the beginning to learn the birds. For this purpose the recorder was useful.

We chose 4 different vegetation types at the beginning: the flood forest, the birch forest, the larix forest and the tundra.

A 5th vegetation type very common in the Park and important for some bird species that didn't appear in our transects was the one dominated with *Pinus pumilus*, which was rejected from the beginning due to be particularly closed and difficult to walk through without struggling constantly. Also the larix forest was left at the end because we couldn't find big forests in many study-areas.

We also decided to look for those vegetation types in three different places and to do at least two samples in each place.

The transects were done walking silently straight lines of 2 km through one vegetation type paying attention and writing down all the birds seen or heard, the estimated distance to our line, the sex, age and size of the group. To help us to identify some unknown calls we used an mp3 recorder that let us to study the sounds later in the computer.

At the same transect Clemence, as Botanist, made 3 plots of 100m² that were representative of the whole transect to define the vegetation type.

In July Ben and Haiko also came to help us with the transects, making it easier for all of us.

PROJECT DIFFICULTIES AND DEVELOPING

Being the Bystrinsky Natural Park in the middle of Kamchatka we were conditioned to miss the coastal birds and proper wet lowland tundra habitats important as well for many nesting shorebirds. Certainly there are big tundra areas in the Park, but it is in the North-West region of it and we didn't find an efficient way to go there.

This is an example of one of our main problems in the Park: how to move. In the Park, as in most of

Kamchatka, there are no roads and only some mush-roots (tracks) available. Even when there are roads only the tanks, or in the best ones the 4x4 jeeps and the trucks can circulate. For the locals also the horses are some times an option. The snowmobiles and the dogs slides were out of season. Moreover we are always talking of huge distances usually too big to walk, often crossed by big rivers that were and additional problem to walk through since there were no bridges.

As we didn't have enough money to rent, as often as we had needed, any vehicle; we were forced to do our studies near the village, Esso, or in some places that the director and staff of the park invited us and where they offered to take us there. As we didn't find in the Talvalchik the possibility of studying the same vegetation types than in Esso and Ketachán, Anavgai became our third study-area.

Because the transect method we needed a big area of unmixed, more or less pure, vegetation type were we could walk for 2 km without crossing other vegetation types or getting close to the border of any other. But that was often more difficult than we expected in our study-areas, usually the forests are mixed and change easily from a vegetation type to others, and it always took us a lot of time to find proper places, which often were not easy to reach.

RESULTS and CONCLUSION

Eventually we got data from the number of birds and the species in different vegetation types, which let us to assess the density of birds and the index of biodiversity in relation to those vegetation types.

However, due to the short season and our lack of time and means, the repetitions are few and spread along the summer, each sample taken in a different moment of the breeding season and of the cycle of each specie. We observed that different species are more or less conspicuous depending on the moment: before nesting, during hitching or after the full-fledged chicks leave the nest. Moreover there are moments when some species have young birds flying around during our transects but others not. Therefore the comparisons are difficult and without statistical value. This kind of studies improve their results after series of years repeating transects on the same date and place.

At the end there were some species that we didn't find or either we found them in one place but not in other of similar vegetation type (ex: the **bluetail**). For instance the red-necked phalarope, the **goldeneye**, the black woodpecker... Some others we found them out of the transect, like the three-toed woodpecker and the **capercallie**. Those cases prove that some rare species escaped to our low number of repetitions repetitions, our method or our experience.

We are also in troubles to compare the bird data with the vegetation studies of Clemence because the bird data is too few and not good enough. We concluded that to make such a study would be better to focus on one or few species and study their behavior and use of the vegetation during all the season.

TRIPS AND GETTING TO KNOW KAMCHATKA

Happily we got also the chance of visiting other areas out of our direct project. For instance we

saw some different areas of the Bystrinsky Natural Park helping the staff of the Park building a wooden toilets, bridges and **porches**. And in the same way, with the rest of volunteers, we were invited to the **Talvalchik base camp** for one week and we enjoyed the trips around this volcanic area, and we even climbed up to the **Talvalchik** crater.

We were also lucky to help in Menedek for the Even New Year party on 21st of June and we got to know Anavgai and people of the dancing and cultural group that invited for an excursion close to their village.

They were not the only people that invited us for different trips. We got some invitations in exchange of work from some particulars. And we were kindly invited in the house of some craftsmen to learn how do they work. And I used this chance to meet in my free time a friendly craftman called Andrej who taught me how to work with the wood, the antler or the birch bark to get art out of it, and who also told us many things about the native culture and about the area and its animals. Most of the Russian people we met were not able to speak English and in my case was particularly sad not to be able to speak with them, since because our project I had no time to learn the Russian language while the three months I was there.

Finally, at the end of August, before my depart, Michael, Clemence, Haiko, Ben, Ninja and me visited **Petropavlovsk** and its surroundings.

ENVIROMENTAL PROBLEMS

Kamchatka is a huge and wild nation, but as most of our planet is facing already some conservation problems.

One of them is probably the overfishing. Many kinds of salmon come from the ocean to breed in the inland Kamchatka. Some isotope studies in Alaska proved that the salmon and the bears are important landscape engineers, bringing from the Oceans important nutrients, like nitrogen, for hundreds of kilometers inside the continent and then spreading them in the forest. Many plants and trees probably couldn't grow without this nitrogen and that would have an effect in the productivity and diversity of the whole ecosystem.

But seems to be that the fishing has decreased in some of the rivers, for instance the **Bistraya**. The main reasons would be the overfishing, in some proportion illegal fishing, and maybe the quality of water than may be effected by how the mining is conducted.

Also many shorebirds and sea birds must be breeding in the tundra and coasts of Kamchatka and in many places they haven't been studied yet. Some of them are rare and threatened species like the **Spoonbill Sandpiper** (two couples found breeding in the north of Kamchatka last year, when 100 couples compose the World population of this endangered specie) and the **Normand Grenshrink?**. Usually the shorebirds are threatened because of the habitat changes or the hunting in the wintering areas or the migratory highways.

The **over haunting** may be also a problem faced by the large herbivorous of Kamchatka. The reindeer are almost extinct in the wild, **nonexistent?** in the Bystrinsky Natural Park and only some located in some other Natural Parks. As they told me the **sheepherders** shoot them **to prevent/avoid them from** mating the domestic ones.

I didn't understand very well the situation of the **Kamchatkan snow-sheep** (Ovis...) but seems to be that this one also disappeared from part of its original **distribution area** due to the **over-hunting**.

The moose (Alces alces) and overall the brown bear (Ursus arctos piscivorus) are also the aim of the famous **trophy hunting industry** of Kamchatka. The WWF organization has a project to deal with the hunting of the brown bear in Kamchatka, which is shaping the populations because the selection of the biggest individuals (usually old big males) and the high amount of bears allowed may be increased by poaching companies.

TIPS FOR NEXT VOLUNTEERS

My experience in Kamchatka has been fun and interesting but we considered that some more tips would have been useful to study beforehand. The summer season is very short and a good organization is required for a good use of the time.

So in case someone else interested **on** birds wants to make a project I would recommend to focus in less species. Maybe is more interesting a description of the habitat and the vegetation structure, and location of the rarest species, the ones that didn't appear in the reports the last years or the ones that appeared less frequently. Maybe the species that may be affected by hunting, by lack of fishes or by other perturbations in the forest structure: maybe **capercallies**, big raptors, fishing eagles, gulls, sterna, ducks, big shorebirds, black woodpecker, white-back woodpecker, etc...

Also can be interesting to complete the register that we started of the bird songs of Kamchatka. Many birds sound different in Kamchatka than in other parts of the World and would be interesting to keep registering and making a compilation of them since nobody did it before: for it would be necessary a voice recorder and a directional microphone.

Also to make easy guides, courses of introduction to the ornithology for the local people and maybe to design Ornithological Tours or Routes for the eco-tourists to see the most emblematic species.

Is important to know that the organization is sending the volunteers specially to the Bystrinsky Natural Park in the center of Kamchatka, where they are **freely** housed, and where they are supposed to help in the tasks of the staff of the Natural Park. Therefore I guess is interesting to do the project there but also in other Natural Parks or even, maybe, if it's interesting for you, you could find a **compromise with the Park** and go to the North of Kamchatka or to the West Coast. Maybe you could do it in **collaboration with the Ornithologist**. Maybe you can find the way to work with **snow-sheeps or reindeer**.

To move, if there is no public transport and to book a taxi or horses is too expensive, could be

interesting to talk with local people, with the native people and the shepherders who are the ones that move more often and may know somebody who is taking the road that you also want to take.

Also there are **ictiolegs like Tania** who are working in the fish management of the local rivers and maybe asking them you can find a way to collaborate and make a project that could help them in the salmon conservation. Maybe conservation courses for fishers.

Anyway to work in collaboration with local people or even just to ask them for help is important to have a good knowledge of the Russian language either time to learn it.

There is a lot of work to do also with the local people and some volunteers have already been working on it, for instance **Larissa** with the children, or Michael trying to learn some traditional skills of the native and doing courses to teach them.

Personally I feel sorry about the disappearing of the native languages Koryak and/or Even and also feel that probably there is not enough interest to encourage and help the younger ones to learn them by part of the government or institutions. Maybe some volunteer interested in languages and willing to learn them could organize courses finding the help of the few people that still speak those languages, given constantly and often throughout the year (not only in summer).

For possible Spanish volunteers I am sure that you can also find people interested in learning the Spanish language if you want to give some lessons along the year.