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During the last two years there have appeared in the Societ press articles about an unknown giant animal which has been seen more than once in lakes of the Sordongnokhsk plateau in Yakutia. S.K. Klumov refers to this animal in his article "Are there unknown large animals still living on earth?"[1] In that article Klumov records the wholly unknown flora and fauna of this region of Yakutia.

In July and August of 1962 an ichthyological expedition worked on the Sordongnokhsk plateau under the leadership of F.H. Kirillov, a senior scientific assistant of the Yakutian section of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the SSSR. Among the party, in addition to the

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[1] See Priroda, 1962, No. 8, pp. 66-75.

personnel of the Section, there was also a group from Moscow (the authors of this article), who joined the expedition during the time of their summer vacation.

The expedition was provided with the necessary apparatus for ichthyological investigations. Our group had also light diving equipment and apparatus for above-water and underwater cinematography.

The objective of the expedition included collection of materials indicating the composition, distribution and main features of the biology of the fish fauna of the largest lake of the Sordongnokhsk plateau -- Lake Labynkyr -- and an evaluation of its fish stocks. In addition, the lakes of the Sordongnokhsk plateau feed the headwaters of the Indigirka River and their aquatic fauna to a considerable degree determines the commercial potential of this river. Along with these objectives, collections of the flora and fauna of the plateau were made.

Our group intended to verify the unusual facts and hypothesis put forth by V.A. Tverdokhlebov in his article "A region awaiting investigators"[1], namely: (page 84) the

[1] See "vokrug Sveta", 1961, No. 2, pp. 38-43.

fact that there lives in the lakes of the Sordongnokhsk plateau an animal called "the devil of Lake Labynkyr" which Tverdokhlebov had seen; the hypothesis of a comparatively recent (a few hundred years ago) catastrophic event on the plateau, as a result of which the headwaters of many rivers were separated from the Okhotsk Sea drainage and were diverted towards the Arctic Ocean; and the hypothesis of a very recent retreat of the glacier from the plateua (some tens of years ago). From the facts V.A. Tverdokhlebov and S.K. Klumov deducted the possibility that a teriary flora and fauna occur on the Sordongnokhsk plateau.

Does an unusual long red moss ("Sphagnum moss of Tertiary age") grow onto, plateau? Is there also something that looks "not unlike an ordinary fish, with orange flesh", which Tverdokhlebov caught? In addition, we intended to investigate the "graveyard" of human skulls, described by Tverdokhlebov as being on the southern shore of Lake Labynkyr.

On June 22 our expedition arrived at Oimiakon, whence we were taken by helicopter and set down on the north coast of Lake Labynkyr. There we pitched our camp.

At Ust-Nera and in the village of Tomtor we tried to obtain new information about the mysterious animal of the Sordongnokhsk plateau. Tverdokhlebov had listened to stories told him by two local inhabitants, V.V. Vinokurov and his son; but Vinokurov had died, and his son had drowned in the previous year. To tell the truth, after the publication of Tverdokhlebov's article there had appeared among the local inhabitants many enthusiasts who were interested in the "monster", or "devil" as the local people called it. In May 1960 a group of students of the 10th grade of the Tomtor school ha had made a journey to Lake Labynkyr; however, they could not tell us anything pertinent. An exception was the story told by a chauffeur, (page 85) many years ago, when he was a member of a brigade of fishermen, he had been sent to one of the distant lakes of this region. The name of the lake he did not know. From Oimiakon he travelled many days to get there. Throughout July and August the catching of fish proceeded without difficulty, but at the beginning of August three or four large animals began to come up out of the water around the fishermen's boasts, which they could frighten away only by shooting at them. This continued for about a week. Then they disappeared and were seen no more.

Judging by the length of the journey to the site of

this fishery; these events might have taken place on the Sea of Okhotsk. However, our informant insisted that the water in which they were fishing was fresh. The geologist of the Indigirka Geological Survey have verified that legends similar to those recounted by Tverdokhlebov can be heard in many regions of Yakutia.

The Sordongnokhsk plateau is a rolling portion of the upper Kolyma mountain country, lying between 1000 and 1200 m above sea level. It contains the watershed lying between the sources of the Indigirka-Kuidusun and Tuora-Yuriakh. To the north the plateau is limited by the Tinne-Yurye mountain range and on the south by the Suntar-Khayata. In the broad valleys which dissect this plateau a great many lakes were left after the disappearance of the glacier. The largest of these are Labynkyr and Yastrebinoe.

Tverdokhlebovs' suggestion that the disappearence of the glacier from the plateau was quite recent (some tens of years ago) seems to us very questionable. One of his arguments is the fact that growing in the hollows are "trees only a little exceeding a man's height in size, which are no greater than 20 - 30 years of age". (page 86). Actually the trees (listvennitsy) in the hollows are of that height, but

they are more than a hundred years old as their annual rings show. Under the severe climatic conditions of the high mountain region the growth of trees is very stunted in the bottom of the boggy hollows, and their annual increment is very small. The authors have encountered such trees not only on the Sordongnokhsk plateau but also in the valley of the Indigirka, and north of the Krasnoyarsk region as well. In addition, in the morainic hollows, on the plateau, on the south bank of Lake Labynkyr, and along the shores of Lake Yastrebinoe, peat bogs are found with peat layers up to a meter thick. Such a thickness of peat could be developed only over the course of thousands of years under the conditions of the northern summer. In fact, just a develop a soil layer and dover the plateau with mosses and higher vegetation after the melting of the glacier would require hundreds of years. Almost the whole plateau, except for steep slopes, is covered by mosses and lichens. Grass is found only along the river valleys. At Lake Yastrebinoe we found a meadow of golden poppies. We did not succeed in finding any of the long red moss of which Tverdokhlebov wrote.

The woody vegetation on the plateau consisted of dawrs (air listvennitsa only). In dry places there was a thick growth of spreading cedar ground cover (kedrovio

stlanik). There were many bilberries, blueberried, cloudberries and cranberries.

Of birds that winter on the plateau we observed nutcrackers, Siberian jays and ptarmigan. Ducks were seen and almost completely lack water vegetation. Black-throated divers (Arctic loons) were considerably commoner than ducks were. On an island in Lake Labynkyr are found a large nesting colony of herring gulls. At the time of our visit to this island on July 5, the nest still contained unhatched eggs. Among birds of prey, we encountered here the white-tailed eagle and the peregrine falcon. Of mammals we saw many chipmunks and squirrels. In stony taluses gornostai (marmots?) live. We saw wild reindeer (sometimes even whole hers of them), bears and rosomakhi.

The natural surroundings of the plateau are considerably different from those of the Oimiakon valley. When you come down from the plateau, in spite of the fact that you are travelling northward, nature becomes much kinder. Here there are spreading meadows and popular groves. The trees (listvennitsy) near Tomtor are considerably higher than there on the plateau. Just after leaving the plateau we first encountered capercillie.

In winter the plateau is apparently frequently visited by hunters and fishermen. On Labynkyr, in addition to the winter hut on the north bank near which we pitched our camp, we observed the remains of one other hut; while on the south bank we found a well preserved winter yurt of the Yakuts. On Lake Niznee, 8 km from Lake Vorota, there is a newly constructed winter dwelling. Everywhere in the river valleys and on the shores of the lake we found the framework of chumy (tents?).

The lakes of the plateau are rich in fish. In our nets we took pike, burbot, char, whitefish, lenok and grayling. In the shallow water there were many minnows. These species of fish are common to all northern Yakutian lakes. The unknown fish with the orange flesh descibed by Tverdokhlebov is the common char, which is found in northern USSR from the Kola peninsula to Chukotka.

Lake Labynkyr, with which the legends of a mysterious animal are associated, we examined especially carefully. It is a dammed-up sector of the valley of a former river, bounded by two moraine walls. The lake extends from north to south and is 15 km long and 4 km wide. The Labynkry River that flows through it is a tributary of the Tuora-

Yuryakh River; it is deep and quiet to the south near its confluence with the lake of the same name, but small and rapid northwards.

At the end of June when we approached the lake a co considerable part of it was covered by ice. However, after a few days the ice melted. We sometimes navigated the lake using a specially constructed raft. On the south shore, where according to Tverdokhlebov a graveyard of human skulls should have been found, we disembarked and made an effort to find it. For the distance of a kilometer and a half from the mouth of the Labynkyr River we inspected both banks of its valley. However our search was in vain. It is possible of course tha that the graveyeard had been covered up, since the edge of the valley was a live talus slope. In different parts of the lake we made dives under the water. The transparency of the water in the lake was quite high -- visibility was 10 - 12 m. The bottom was covered by a thick layer of mud. Looking on the bottom in 3 - 4 m of water sparse growths of water plants were found.

F.N. Kirillov studied in detail the species composition of the fish inhabiting the lake, and samples of the bottom mud and of the plankton. Tverdokhlebov's hypothesis

of a recent change in the alignment of the plateau towards the Arctic Ocean was not supported from the biological point of view. If the Sordongnokhsk plateau, as he suggests, has formerly sloped toward the Pacific Ocean, we should have expected to encounter in its waters an aquatic flora and fauna typical of the Pacific drainage. However, the studies of Lake Labynkyr, conducted by F.N. Kirillov have not confirmed this.

We made a journey on foot to Lake Vorota, where Tverdokhlebov saw the strange animal. It is situated 20 km east of Labynkyr and is not connected directly with that lake. Our path lay over the tundra-like (from the steepness of its walls and its bogginess) valley of Zagornoe Creek, along Lake Yastrebinoe and beyond it through the pass by way of the Mandychan river. In several places the stream was covered by snow bridges, which in these places last all summer. It was interesting to find that the ice of the most recent layer, s situated about 300 m from Lake Yastrebinoe, was salty to the taste; although the stream itself was fresh. This might be explained by a flow onto the ice from large springs of mineral water.

After passing four lakes joined by channels to the Mandychan River, we arrived at lake Vorota. Perhaps most re-

markable of these four was Lake Nizhnee, whose surface water temperature, in spite of its considerably depth, was 22°, whereas in the remaining lakes of the plateau it was 7 - 10°.

Lake Vorota is rectangular, extending from south to north, 3.7 kn long and about 0.9 km broad; the depth in its central portion reaches 60 m. To the west and east it is faced by mountains with steep crumbling talus slopes, while the northern and southern shores are lower. Unlike most lakes of this region (page 78) the depression occupied by lake Vorota is of tectonic origin. It is a graben that cuts transversely across a not very high isolated mountain range rising above the plateau (from which the lake has received its name). The slopes of the depression are steep both above water and below.

In the northern part, where our camp was pitched, the lake has a single outlet about 2 m broad and 20 - 30 cm in depth. On the southern shore the rather shallow dried-out channel of a creek joining Vorota with lakes lying above it is entent. Apparently the inlet has dried up long before our arrival, since the mouth of the creek was blocked off by a bar about 1 m high.

Here too we dived down to the bottom in search of the unknown animal. The water was even more transparent than in Lake Labynkyr, the range of visibility being 12 - 15 m. The bottom was covered with much, and on it we saw a number of cracks leading out to the depths, apprently representing the results of a rather recent exposure.

For two days we made continuous observations with binoculars over the surface of the lake. The weather was clear and bright.

Intense gusts of wind play upon its surface, in which varied mirages are developed. Because of these gusts and the reflection of the sun's rays on the water it was difficult to distinguish real phenomena from illusory ones. Several times we too were convinced that an object having a specific form appeared at the surface of the water and then disappeared, but it was caused by the waves. These forms resembled those seen in 1953 by Tverdokhlebov and Bashkatov.

If Tverdokhlebov had really seen a killer whale (kasatka), so large an animal would have been easitly detected by us on the surface of this body of water, which is easily inspected from any bank. There is little chance that

the animal could have escaped from the lake. As mentioned, the depth of the channel joining Vorota with the lake below it is only 20 - 30 cm in all, while the fluctuations of its level, according to our observations, are of about the same magnitude.

Consequently as a result of our journey we can say that we did not find any direct confirmation of the facts which Tverdokhlebov had put forward. However, our observations did not disprove the possibility of the existence of large animals in lakes of the Sordongnokhsk plateau, since owing to the inadequate time available we could not explore the plateau sufficiently, and particularly the bottom of its larger lakes. The expedition was insufficiently supplied with specialists. It is necessary to continue the (page 89) investigations begun on natural life in this region, which is interesting from the standpoint of biological isolation. Future expeditions must be multi-purpose ones, manned by biologists of different specialties, geologists, paleontologis ogists and geographers. It would be desirable to make detailed underwater studies of the lakes of the plateau, and especially lake Vorota.

It may be expected that new studies will not only

decide the question of the existence of a strange animal, but it will also erase another of the few remaining "white spots" on the biological maps of our country.