

Kytalyk National Park, Yakutia (June 18-22, 2021)

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Kytalyk (Кыталык) National Park, almost 20,000 km² in size, was created in 2021 in one of the flattest parts of the Eurasian tundra, along the Indigirka River of northeastern Yakutia (a.k. a. Sakha Republic). Named after the Yakut word for the Siberian crane, it is just a fraction of a much larger nature reserve of the same name that stretches all the way to the Arctic coast, but other parts of that reserve are even less accessible. More than half of the park is lakes and rivers. Some lakes stay frozen for more than 9 months; the permafrost is up to a mile deep. Hunting pressure is minimal: nobody lives in the park permanently since local Even nomads moved to cities in the 1990s. A few teams of fishermen stay in the park in winter for commercial ice fishing (for whitefish). In the reserve up north there are six family clans of Yukagir reindeer herders. The park is visited by up to 6 tourists per year, most of them birders. In addition to ~70% of the world's Siberian cranes, it is inhabited by large populations of tundra swans, lesser white-fronted geese, Baikal teals, all species of eiders, Ross's gulls, and other spectacular birds. Mammal diversity is low with less than 20 species recorded, most of them rare.

Since leaving Russia in 1997 I've been generally avoiding travel there. I've already been almost everywhere in the country. Recently it has become a paranoid, corruption-based police state ruled by a sociopath where nobody is safe; as a somewhat public figure with known political views I am particularly at risk. But I made an exception for Kytalyk. I first tried to get to that area back in August of 1991, but my budget was critically low, so I sneaked on a plane from Yakutsk to Chokurdakh without a ticket. Usually it worked, but this time I got caught and was forced to return on the same plane. In 2018 I got a grant to install satellite transmitters on Ross's gulls, the only long-distance migrants among birds for which the main migration routes are still a mystery. So I tried to get to Kytalyk in 2019, but couldn't due to a typo in my restricted area entry permit (the restrictions were later lifted). In 2020 there was the coronavirus pandemic, so I had to wait for another year. By that time the grant had expired so I had to run fundraisers to get money for satellite tracking. Russia kept changing its quarantine requirements for travelers from abroad almost every month, making them less and less logical, so until the very last moment I didn't know if I'd make it to Kytalyk on my third attempt. Unfortunately, the gulls were absent at their nesting sites after a very hot and dry spring; we'll try to install the transmitters again in 2022. During my stay the weather was also hot (up to +30°C), and mammal activity low.

To get to Kytalyk you need to make arrangements with the park (npkytalyk@mail.ru) or join a birding tour (info@ecotravel.ru). Then you take a 3-hour Yakutia Airlines flight from Yakutsk to a small, mostly Yakut town of Chokurdakh on Indigirka. It's better to fly to/from Yakutsk with Yakutia Airlines as well, so that you don't lose your return ticket if you get stuck in Chokurdakh due to a flight cancellation (Yakutia Airlines are so unreliable that it's nearly unheard of for their flights to land on schedule. Delays of up to 2 days are a norm; some people got stuck for a week). Tickets to Chokurdakh must be purchased exactly 3 months in advance; Western credit cards don't work so you need someone in Russia to do the booking for you. Grab a window seat! Upon arrival, expect border guards to check your passport and ask about the purpose of your visit; just say "Kytalyk" (y stands for an open vowel a bit like *i* in "will"). Chokurdakh time is two hours ahead of Yakutsk time and eight hours ahead of Moscow time.

From Chokurdakh it's three hours by motorboat (mid-June to September) or snowmobile (October to May) to a research station (кордон, 70.8244N 147.4897E) on Byoryolyokh River (locally called Yelon') or two hours to a small "birder's cabin" (орнитологическая станция, 70.8295N 147.8436E) on a remote lake. In dry years, the cabin is inaccessible after late June. The habitat in both places is similar: flat shrubby tundra with lots of lakes and low hills; lakeshores and steep slopes are the best mammal habitats.

The climate of the area is extreme: the air temperature can drop below -60°C in winter and oscillate unpredictably between -2°C and +30°C in summer. Winters are sunny and dry with only occasional snowstorms. Summers are mostly hot but plagued with long cold, rainy spells; it can snow in any month. Biting insects emerge in amazing numbers from early June till September; be sure to apply mosquito repellent before the plane lands in Chokurdakh because once the door opens it will be too late. The sun doesn't set from mid-May until late July and doesn't rise from late November until late January.

Chokurdakh, a typical small town of the Russian north, looking half-abandoned, with a statue of Lenin on the main street, stands on a hill with stunning views of the mighty (no kidding) Indigirka and its vast floodplain. You can easily walk around the town, but to drive you need high clearance. The town might look a bit like a garbage dump, but it is surrounded by one of the greatest remaining wilderness areas of the planet that you can explore by boat, snowmobile, ATV, or by driving on the frozen river. There is a short (1.5 km) road into the tundra starting at the western end of the runway (70.6206N 147.8696E). In the tundra and in the town, you can find **Middendorf's** and **Northern red-backed voles** and, in some years, **Eurasian collared** and **Siberian lemmings**; **variable hares** and **ermine**s are also possible. The best places for rodents are the cemetery along the road and a slope (below 70.6405N 147.8933E) a short walk from the road's end; from the slope you can continue walking to the town's best birding spot at 70.6469N 147.9341E where introduced **muskrats** are said to occur. An even shorter road starts at 70.6217N 147.9132E and descends into the floodplain with good **narrow-headed vole** habitat.

Just two km up the river there are the first groves of stunted larches where **Laxmann's shrew** and **red fox** are possible. Twelve km up the Indigirka are rocky hills with larch woodlands inhabited by **Eurasian least** and **flat-skulled shrews**, **Eurasian lynx**, **sable**, **moose**, **northern pika**, **Siberian flying squirrel** (now rare due to the sable's recovery), **wood lemming**, and **gray red-backed vole**, as well as Siberian salamanders and numerous forest birds.

Travel outside the town should never be taken lightly. You must always be ready for a few extra days in the tundra or on a riverbank and expect freezing wind and lots of spray if moving by boat. In my case the trip to the park took six hours instead of two because the boat driver got lost twice; he ran out of gas on his way back and had to be towed. Always carry sunblock, rain gear, sunglasses (if there is snow), and mosquito repellent (if there isn't). The mosquito repellent has to be 98% DEET. A hat with a mosquito net is a good idea. Once every few years all fieldwork gets cancelled because mosquitoes make it impossible. In 1974 a mosquito outbreak killed almost all mammals larger than voles; even bears were found dead with airways blocked by masses of insects, and people had to take motorboat rides just to have a cup of tea without choking. Blackflies become abundant by late summer. Watch for mammoth tusks and other Ice Age remains in eroding riverbanks (mining for them is a big business mostly run by crime syndicates); Byoryolyokh River is famous for an immense mammoth graveyard upstream. If stopping at an abandoned cabin, look for **least weasels**, **ermine**s and **northern red-backed voles**.

Once in the park, expect to walk a lot: your chances of seeing larger mammals are proportional to your hiking mileage. There are no roads or trails. During the snow-free time walking is only possible in rubber boots. The research station has no showers, but steam room is operated weekly; there is a power generator and cell phone reception. The cabin has no stove, no toilet (just go onto the tundra and use an ax to dig a hole in the permafrost), and no electricity; using a cell phone requires a hike to a nearby hill. You must bring all food from Chokurdakh, where it is expensive. You can drink directly from any lake or river in the area except the Indigirka below Chokurdakh, and swim in any lake in hot weather.

I stayed at the cabin. **Tundra shrews** could be seen around midnight by sitting quietly in willows along the lakeshore and listening for rustling sounds; the density was low, and no shrews fell in pitfall traps in 9 trap-nights. Other shrews might be present, but nobody has studied them here. **Arctic foxes** are common (there is a den on the hill above the cabin) although their numbers are expected to plummet once **red foxes** move in from the south. **Wolverines** are increasingly common; I saw one from the hill near the cabin and a friend of mine once watched another one from another hill as Siberian cranes tried to chase it from their nest. **Brown bears** visit the cabin a few times per summer; there were some tracks around. **Reindeer**, once abundant, got nearly hunted out in the 1990s when powerful foreign-made snowmobiles became available; the population is still below 1% of the former levels. **Wolves** are nearly absent as a result. Reintroduced **muskoxen** are thriving but seeing them usually requires a few hours' hike from the cabin, although there were some old tracks on the nearby lakeshore. **Variable hares** are abundant in some years. 2021 was the first good year after a long gap: hare droppings were everywhere, and I saw a hare less than 1 km from the cabin. **Siberian lemmings** are common in some years (2017 was the last good one); check for **brown lemmings** as recent studies suggest that both species might occur here. **Eurasian collared lemmings** are always rare. **Tundra**, **Middendorf's** and **northern red-backed voles** are

increasingly common. I didn't see any lemmings and failed to lure a **northern red-backed vole** from under the cabin by leaving bread outside (other people have succeeded) but saw a **tundra vole** at the lakeshore and a **Middendorf's vole** on a slope about 3 km to the north, which was all dug up by them.

Addendum: Yakutsk

Flights to/from Chokurdakh are so unreliable that it is better to plan to spend a day in Yakutsk on your way there and at least a couple days on your way back as a precaution. In Yakutsk you can look for birds and small mammals (such as **Siberian weasel**, **Siberian chipmunk**, **Eurasian red squirrel**, and **Korean mouse**) of larch forests in the Botanical Garden (take bus #20 and ask where to get off for Botanichesky Sad (Ботанический сад). Mammoth Museum (Музей мамонта) is worth a visit. Other options include taking a hydrofoil trip to the incredibly scenic Lena Pillars (Ленские Столбы) up the Lena River, or getting a few km out of the city to see beautiful, lush *alms* meadows where **long-tailed ground squirrels** live, and Yakut people graze their horses and cattle (recently the traditional cattle industry has been all but ruined by Korean soymilk imports). Birders can spend a morning exploring the channels of Lena River floodplain. There is a 24-hour restaurant with free wi-fi at the 2nd floor of the airport.

If you have a few days, you can make longer hydrofoil trips up and down the Lena or take a minivan taxi to the infamous Kolyma Highway (КОЛЫМСКИЙ ТРАКТ): the taxi to Ust' Nera (Усть-Нера) costs around \$100. It's better to get off in the mountains around 63.1680N 139.3434E, explore them for a while looking for wildlife such as **wolverine**, **wolf**, **lynx**, **bear**, **snow sheep**, **Kamchatka marmot**, and **northern pika**, and arrange for the taxi to pick you up on the way back. You can also take a taxi south to the Aldan Plateau (Алдан) with more diverse fauna including **Siberian musk deer**, **Siberian roe deer** and **Siberian elk**, or west to Mirnyi (Мирный) to see a giant diamond mine and **northern bats**.

If for some reason you are stuck in Yakutsk and can't fly out, you can take a train to Moscow (6 days) or Vladivostok (2-3 days). You can also take a taxi to Blagoveshchensk (Благовещенск) on the Chinese border for around \$50. All long-distance taxis can be arranged at the airport. The train station, called Nizhny Bestyakh (Нижний Бестях), and the roads to Ust' Nera, Aldan, Blagoveshchensk and the rest of Russia are across the Lena; there is a ferry in summer and a hovercraft taxi at other times.

Mammals list:

1. Tundra shrew	<i>Sorex tundrensis</i>	Kytalyk (70.8286N 147.8421E).
2. Arctic fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus lagopus</i>	Kytalyk (70.8295N 147.8436E).
3. Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo gulo</i>	Kytalyk (70.8150N 147.8834E).
- Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos collaris</i>	Kytalyk (70.8274N 147.8562E) tracks only.
- Muskox	<i>Ovibos moschatus</i>	Kytalyk (70.8274N 147.8562E) tracks only.
4. Variable hare	<i>Lepus timidus kolymensis</i>	Kytalyk (70.8274N 147.8562E).
5. Northern red-backed vole	<i>Clethrionomys rutilus jochelsoni</i>	Chokurdakh (70.6222N 147.8678E).
6. Tundra vole	<i>M. oeconomus koreni</i>	Kytalyk (70.8284N 147.8454E).
7. Middendorf's vole	<i>Microtus middendorffii middendorffii</i>	Kytalyk (70.8624N 147.8218E). also Chokurdakh (70.6405N 147.8933E).

Birds list:

Kytalyk: *Lagopus lagopus*, *Cygnus cygnus*, *C. columbianus*, *Anser albifrons*, *A. erythropus*, *A. fabalis/serrirostris*, *Anas clypeata*, *A. acuta*, *A. formosa*, *A. crecca*, *Melanitta deglandi*, *Clangula hyemalis*, *Mergus serrator*, *Botaurus stellaris* (heard only; first record for Indigirka Basin), *Grus leucogeranus*, *G. canadensis*, *Pluvialis fulva*, *Limnodromus scolopaceus*, *Calidris temminckii*, *C. acuminata*, *C. minuta*, *C. pugnax*, *Phalaropus lobatus*, *Stercorarius parasiticus*, *C. longicaudus*, *Larus hyperboreus*, *L. smithsonianus/vegae*, *Sterna paradisaea*, *Gavia pacifica*, *G. arctica*, *G. adamsii*, *G. stellata*, *Buteo lagopus*, *Falco peregrinus*, *Riparia riparia* (first record for the park), *Corvus corax*, *Lanius cristatus*, *Phylloscopus borealis*, *Prunella montanella*, *Motacilla flava*, *M. alba*, *Anthus cervinus*, *Acanthis flammea*, *Emberiza pusilla*, *E. rustica*, *Calcarius lapponicus*.

Chokurdakh: *Aythya marila*, *Mergus serrator*, *Limosa lapponica*, *Tringa erythropus*, *T. glareola*, *Gallinago gallinago*, *G. stenura*, *Phalaropus lobatus*, *Calidris temminckii*, *Larus smithsonianus/vegae*, *L. roseus*, *Sterna paradisaea*, *Asio flammeus*, *Falco columbarius*, *Delichon urbicum*, *Corvus corax*, *Turdus eunomus*, *T. iliacus*, *Luscinia svecica*, *Oenanthe oenanthe*, *Locustella lanceolata*, *Phylloscopus trochilus*, *P. borealis*, *Motacilla flava*, *M. alba*, *Anthus cervinus*, *A. gustavi*, *A. hodgsoni*, *Carpodacus erythrinus*, *Acanthis flammea*, *Emberiza pusilla*.