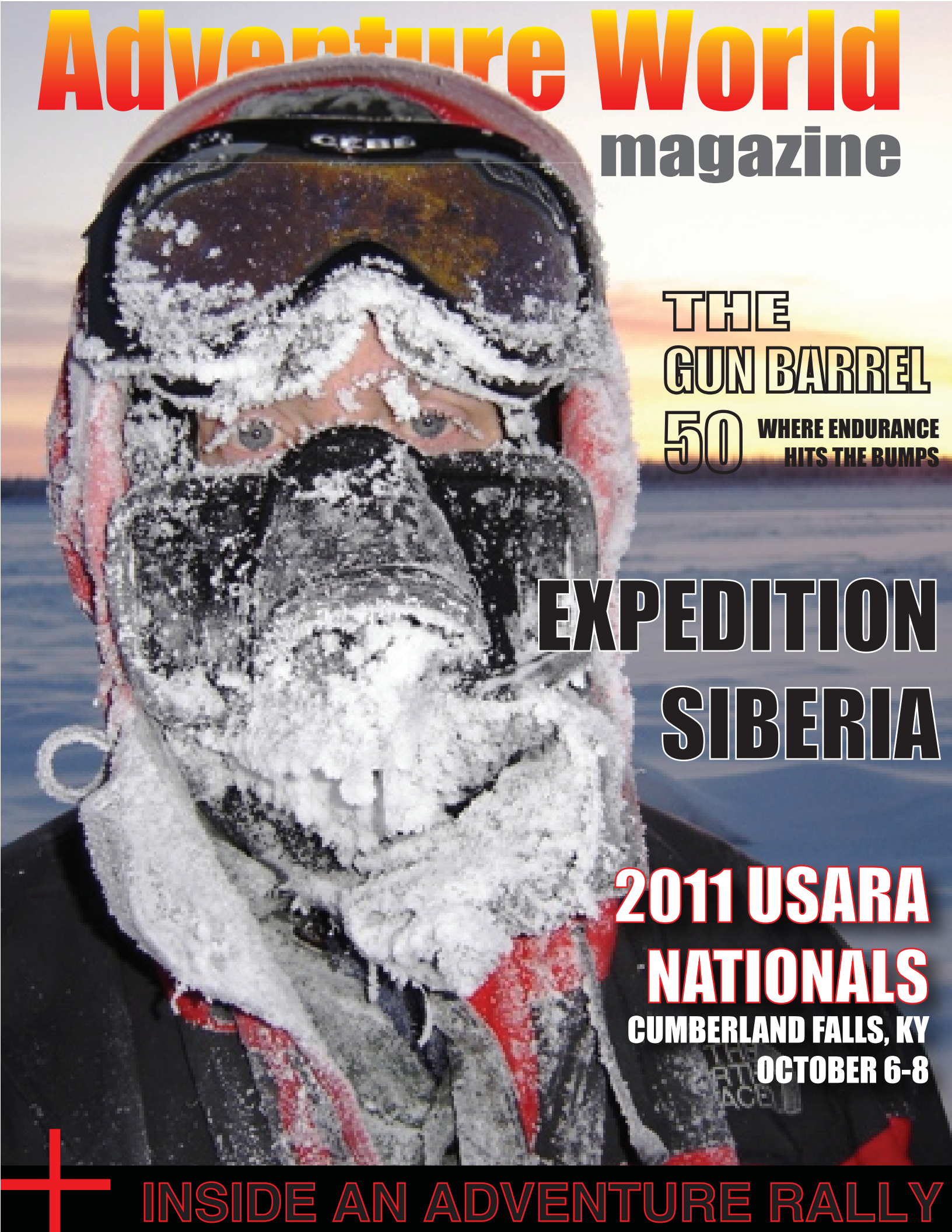
Adventure World magazine



THE GUN BARREL 50

WHERE ENDURANCE HITS THE BUMPS

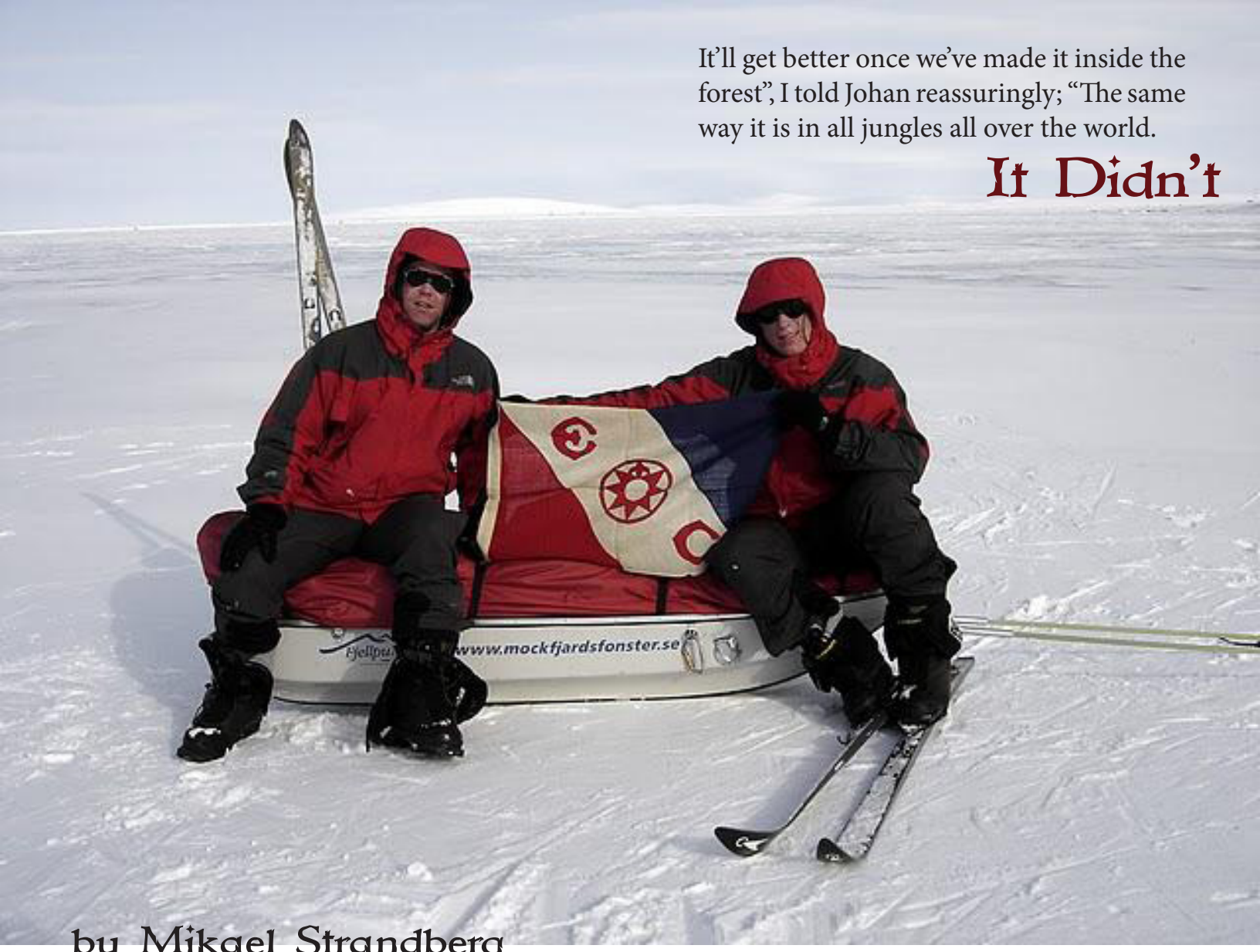
EXPEDITION SIBERIA

2011 USARA NATIONALS

CUMBERLAND FALLS, KY

OCTOBER 6-8

INSIDE AN ADVENTURE RALLY



It'll get better once we've made it inside the forest", I told Johan reassuringly; "The same way it is in all jungles all over the world.

It Didn't

by Mikael Strandberg

Expedition Siberia

"Mike!" Johan whispered anxiously," Look out!"

As I turned around I saw a big brown bear standing on the beach only 20 metres away, between us and our canoe, intensely sniffing and staring at us. It was one of the most beautiful bears I've ever seen. His fur was radiant in the sun, his rams were grey from age and he seemed startled by our presence. At that moment I had no idea whether it was the same bear I had shot at from the canoe ten minutes earlier or if it was another one. The first bear had fallen over, having been hit at least three times in the area below his left shoulder and before I had time to reload, he slowly crawled into the thick taiga. This one, however, took a step forward, stopped again and stood up on his hind legs, sniffing even more eagerly. I took a quick look at my young partner Johan and I suddenly realised that he was unarmed. The Russian authorities had allowed us to bring one rifle only and at that moment I remembered the words of my wife Titti before setting out on the Expedition:

"Don't ever forget that you have the same responsibility as any parent regarding Johan. It is better you die if things come to that."

"Maybe you should have a go", I said calmly to Johan and handed him the rifle as I took a step down from the steep bank and out of the thick forest.

My appearance startled the bear initially, but suddenly the giant charged off up the steep slope, turned around facing us and came at us with determination.

"Whatever you do, don't miss", I told Johan quietly as he raised the rifle.

The bear suddenly stopped 10 metres away from us and stood up on his hind legs again. Johan shot the bear in the stomach; the giant fell backward, rolled down the bank and straight into the fast current of the river. Stunned, we watched the bear being swept away. We had killed for nothing and I felt more miserable than ever before. And painfully hungry. Our expedition down the Kolyma River, located in the far north-eastern part of Siberia, was only one month old, it was the end of August and we were already on the verge of starvation.

"We better stay sharp and focused" I advised Johan with an exhausted voice whilst he reloaded. "We still don't know if there's another bear around. If there is, it's badly injured and therefore very dangerous."

It was useless advice. Johan, only 21 years old and on his first expedition, was full of adrenalin. He trembled from excitement, concentration and nervous tension. I grabbed an axe from the canoe, in the hope of using it as some kind of defence weapon if needed and together we went cautiously into the dense taiga. We spent an hour doing a thorough examination of the area and concluded that it was the same bear and that his odd behaviour had to do with him being badly injured from me shooting him from the canoe. (A Swedish authority on bears, after having heard measurements of its paws, estimated that it was a male bear weighing around 400-450 kilograms.)

"No meat, no fur and no food", Johan said downheartedly when we returned to the canoe, ready to continue down the river, "And we don't seem to catch enough fish. Maybe we're not good enough trappers?"

"Don't worry", I answered reassuringly, "if we keep working hard, sooner or later things will change."

But, in reality, I knew if we didn't get some hunting and fishing done within a week, we would never make it to our final goal in Ambarchik Bay, 10 months and 3500 km of travelling further north.

One of the less important aims of the expedition was to investigate whether our ability to hunt and fish would be sufficient enough to survive the wild Siberian taiga and tundra along the Kolyma River. More important, however, was to make a full record of this unknown part of our world. This was a vital task, since in the course of our extensive research work we did realise that not even the Russians or the Siberians themselves had a comprehensive picture of the area along the Kolyma River. The obstacles were the cold, the distance, the size and the isolation. The area was untouched, remote and unknown. The main aim was to build a bridge between our cultures, widen the western world's knowledge about the Russian and Siberian way. We wanted to find the Russian and Siberian temperament. We believed this could provide a perspective on the way of life in the future. We also wanted to ascertain how the area had been affected by the enormous changes in society that have been the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. And we knew 3.5 million people had lost their lives in Stalin's concentration camps -- known as gulags -- along the river. Another genocide which had to be documented thoroughly and quickly. The documentation of the native people was another important issue. The Yakuts, the Even, the Chukchi and especially, the Yukahirs, of whom only 400 individuals had survived the Soviet era. All of them living in one of the coldest inhabited places on earth. Therefore, another specific aim was to examine if the native people along the Kolyma were genetically different to us Western Europeans when it came to their ability to cope with this extreme cold. And, during our research work we became conscious about the fact that polar travel throughout its short history, a record full of frostbites and death, had been dominated by people being brought up and living in cities. We believed that people like ourselves, born, bred and still living in the North Scandinavian outback, were much more physically tolerant when it came to handling the cold and hardships of the polar areas. For this reason, we had used the old lumberjack tradition of putting on enormous amounts of extra weight in the shape of fat,

before the arrival of winter, so that day in the beginning of August when we first put the canoe down the river, we had put on 20 extra kilos each. However, it was all gone by the time we had the hunting incident with the bear, after only a month of paddling. All due the fact that we had been pushed to our limits, both physically and mentally, since the first day we put the canoe down into the river at the beginning of August.

"Johan!" I shouted in panic, "I am stuck under the canoe!"

At the same time Johan, with all his strength, managed to pull the canoe away from me, I went under the rapids and was quickly pulled away by the strong current. It tossed me around like a piece of paper and I would have drowned if I hadn't been lucky enough to end up on the sandbank which we had tried to avoid crashing into and which had forced us to jump out of the canoe to try to change direction.

"Are you ok?" Johan asked exhausted.

"Yes," I answered terrified, "but I am scared stiff every second we spend in the canoe. If the canoe turns, we're dead."

"We better not turn over, then", Johan said quietly, which made us laugh and relax for a moment.

We pulled the overloaded canoe up on the bank and took a short break, to give us some time to sharpen our concentration, whilst enormous masses of water passed us on both sides. Rain was pouring down and it was the third day on our expedition and our lives had immediately turned into a constant struggle for survival. A nasty typhoon had hit this unpopulated, untouched and very wild mountainous area and this reality made the water level of the river rise 7 metres in a couple of days. We had expected a fairly calm river, with relatively easy paddling, since it was in the beginning of the autumn, where we could put up camp on the banks of the river and spend the evenings fishing and hunting. Instead the typhoon had turned it into a torrent of a wide river full of fast moving logs, violent rapids and unpredictable sandbanks which were hard to spot whilst we steered through high waves.

"Time to concentrate fully again" I told Johan as we pushed the canoe out from the sandbank straight into another rapid.

I was terrified every single second as I was sitting in the front of the canoe. Our survival depended a lot on the knowledge of my young comrade and his ability to steer through the rapids, avoiding getting run over by fast moving logs or getting stuck on a log that's come to a halt. We didn't talk at all. That would have meant a dangerous loss of concentration. I just sat in the front and waited for his screaming instructions when we hit a stretch of high waves.

"Paddle harder!"

At that moment I paddled for my life. After a couple of hours of paddling we saw a cloud of water spray and heard a thunderous noise ahead of us and we realized that something even worse awaited us. Amazingly enough we spotted a stretch of calm water to our left and I yelled in a slight panicky voice "We have to get out of the canoe and check that stretch out now!"

Johan yelled back "Look out! I will turn the canoe around and when I scream paddle, we need all your strength to make it!"

To my amazement he managed to turn the canoe in a nasty rapid and we ended up front to front with the current and we crossed the river, paddling like mad for what seemed like ages. Eventually we made it over to the side of the river. We hadn't come across such calm water since we began paddling. For a short moment it felt like we've entered a sanctuary of peace. At least until that second cloud of mosquitoes arrived and wreaked havoc amongst us. We tied the canoe to a tree and entered the taiga. It was our first contact with the wild Siberian taiga and it was a nasty surprise. We were true forest people, but we were used to the easy cultivated Scandinavian taiga, where one can travel easily and right now we couldn't move forward even one single step.

"It'll get better once we've made it inside the forest", I told Johan reassuringly; "The same way it is in all jungles all over the world."

It didn't. It was almost impenetrable and it took us one hour to advance only 100 metres ahead. And it took the same time to return to the canoe. We never got to see what waited ahead of us.

"We just have to give it a try and hope for the best", I said, "And if we keep our concentration, we'll get through."

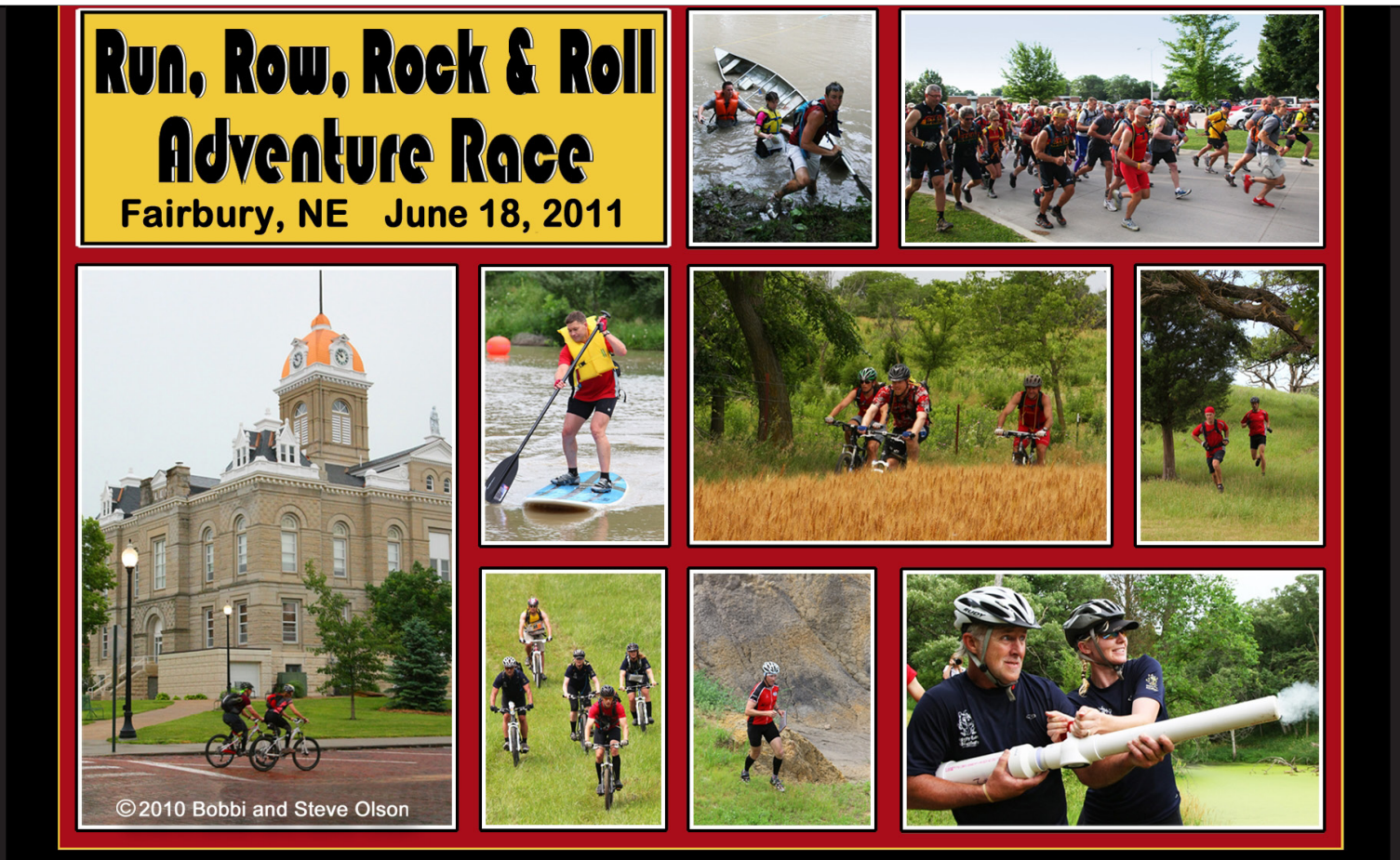
We tried to traverse the river once again, since we figured we had a better choice of routes from that side. But once we made it to the middle, the current and the rapids were too strong. We ended up in the worst possible route through the rapids. Before I had a chance to yell out my feelings of terror, we went into a series of high waves, which were above us one moment and below us the next. The waves just tossed us around, uncontrollably, and the canoe moaned from the damage it was taking. Suddenly, just as I was sure we'd had it, we were through to the other side.

"I have never been as scared as that in my twenty years of extreme exploration" I told Johan in terror and relief.

"I love it!" Johan yelled happily, "I want more of this!"

If I would have had my rifle next to me at that moment, I would have shot him! Luckily, he didn't say anything more for the next two hours. We just went through one series of rapids after another and after five hours of avoiding turning over, we were too knackered to continue. We stopped at the first high ground we could find; a muddy opening in the taiga with clouds of mosquitoes waiting for us. It took us two hours to carry all our equipment a few hundred metres inland to avoid getting flooded, but once we started pitching the tepee, we realised we wouldn't get any sleep the upcoming night either. The level of the river was rising quickly. At 7 p.m. it got dark and we set our alarm clock ringing every fifteen minutes to remind us to check the level of the river. At 11 p.m. we knew that we would get flooded during the night. And we were well aware that paddling in the dark would kill us instantly. We just had to hang on somehow until the brake of dawn. In the dark we packed the canoe, attacked by uncountable amounts of mosquitoes, gnats and flies and we stood in the dark next to it until water reached above our knees at 3 a.m. at which point we took our seats, tied it to a sturdy tree and waited. It was a demanding wait, as we were freezing cold from being constantly soaked to the bone. As soon as dawn arrived, we took a deep breath, untied the rope and we set off fully concentrated for another day of uncertainty.

We didn't get any sleep for ten days and the lack of proper rest made it difficult to stay focused. We had many near-accidents every day. Most difficult of all, however, was the lack of food. Even though we carried 350 kilograms of equipment, only a small percentage was provisions like rice, pasta, cooking oil, wheat flower, lots of salt, sugar, 30 portions of dried frozen food, coffee, teabags, stock cubes and oats. And our original idea was that we would fish and hunt not only to survive in the present, but also to collect enough meat and fish to dry as stores for the upcoming



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winter. The flooding, of course, made this impossible. And when we encountered the brown bear, after 4 weeks of troublesome and demanding paddling, it was pure survival instinct that made us shoot. We had pretty much run out of all supplies, except salt and pasta. Even though, we tragically took a life, lost a big amount of meat and good fur, it sharpened our instincts dramatically. After that, things started to pick up. The flooding stopped and just a couple of days after loosing the bear, we caught fifteen kilograms of trout and local fish in our net, shot two massive hares and a pheasant. During the next two months, September and October, we caught over 150 kilograms of fish in our nets and very few of them were caught with western lures or flies. Every day, a couple of hours before darkness, we took turns being the hunting dog with the sole purpose of forcing giant Siberian hares out of hiding. It was dead easy. After we established the areas where they hid, one of us took the role of a barking dog and went off into the dense taiga. The one with the rifle took position waiting eagerly for the dog to do its work. It was some of the most interesting hunting I've ever done. When the human dog barked once it meant a hare had been spotted, two barks, that he was coming straight for the spot and three barks in row meant that the hare should be in front of the shooter at that moment. During this time we managed to hunt enough game and catch an adequate amount
of fish not only to survive, but also to put on additional body weight to face one of the coldest climates on earth – the Kolyma Winter.

"That's another frostbite" Johan stated through his facemask in despair, "That means I've got one on every finger."

He was having another bout of diarrhoea. It was the third time in an hour he had to squat down and pull off his trousers and his three sets of gloves. On every occasion he had experienced that burning feeling followed by numbness in one of his fingers -- the first stage of frostbite. I could barely make him out in the eternal darkness of mid-Winter as I shivered violently; the same way I had every day since we left the settlement of Zyryanka four weeks earlier, in the middle of November.

"I think we better move on", I whispered.

I then exhaled, coughed and heard that familiar tinkling sound of my breath turning into a shower of ice crystals, which locally was referred to as "the whispers of the stars". It was -70°F and it was impossible to form a decent thought or even daydream. Or feel any worries. By pure survival instinct, we knew we had to keep moving. Therefore, we continued with great effort in the darkness, pulling our 330 pounds each behind us. Even though the river was covered with only a couple of inches of snow, it still felt like pulling the sledges over sand. It didn't help that we were walking, not skiing, since our ski bindings had broken when the temperature dropped below -58°F, as with most metal parts of our equipment. The heavy load made us sweat profusely the whole time, but we just couldn't stop and have a break. Every time we did, we seemed to pick up more frostbite on fingers or cheeks, and it felt like the liquid in our elbows and knees froze and we shivered uncontrollably. Consequently we kept moving in complete darkness, hour after hour, steadily putting one foot in front of the other. The darkness didn't matter since our eyebrows were always iced up, imparing our vision. But, as long as we kept moving, at least it made us aware that we were still alive. Until that dreadful moment it was time to get inside the tent.

After sixteen hours of walking it only took us a few minutes to pitch the tent, but it took at least an hour to get the stove going. Some nights it didn't work at all. Poor quality Russian petrol was the problem. It froze solid. As a result, we carried the petrol bottle under our armpit the last hour of the day to keep it warm. We always knew when it was usable because the bottle would leak. It still took an hour to get the stove going since it was completely frozen and we had to pour petrol in a cup and light it to defrost the stove. We both had to keep busy during these attempts in order to keep the dangerous apathy at bay. The cold still made us tremble, sometimes almost hysterically. When the stove finally worked, we could momentarily form a thought, but unfortunately this relief just made us more aware of how cold it was. Once inside the sleeping bag, we knew we had at least six hours of unrelenting pain to cope with. Not due to the frostbites thawing, but because it took at least three hours to regain control of our bodies. During this terrifying time we lay on our backs, bodies arched, just
trying to keep the shivering away, resting as much as possible. We hardly slept at all. Sharing the sleeping bag with the facemask, the PDA, satellite phone, torch, spare batteries, boots, stove and gloves didn't help. As usual, it was dead silent outside, even if we at times had heard a lone howling wolf in the distance or the odd explosion when a tree detonated from the cold. We didn't thaw out completely this night either.

"It is time to get up", I said through my breathing hole in the sleeping bag; "Four days to go before we reach Srednekolymsk."

"What time is it?" Johan groaned and my answer was a simple one: "I don't know. Does it matter? It's dark all the time anyway."

As quick as I moved cold snow fell into myface just to remind me of the torture I was in.

It was pitch black and it always took some time to find the torch. I'd slept on it most of the night. When I switched it on, still inside the sleeping bag, I noticed as usual that our breath had formed giant stalagmites of snow hanging down the tent roof. And when I heard Johan moving, I realized I had to try to get out of the sleeping bag. It felt almost impossible. The body was still stiff; every muscle ached, my cheeks, nose and hands were burning, I felt no energy at all and I found it hard to concentrate. Johan was first as usual out of the bag and immediately put his down jacket on, followed by his facemask and then started the struggle to get his boots on. He was very weak after days of diarrhoea, but still worked heroically hard and did everything purely by instinct. He handed me the stove by routine. To work it I had to remove a layer of gloves and I had problems getting the lighter to work, even though I'd kept it in my underpants all night. My hands were too stiff. And the stove was frozen solid. Johan gave it a try with no luck.

"I think we have to give breakfast a miss today", I told Johan; "We forgot to take the petrol bottle and stove into the sleeping bag last night."

The only positive aspect with not being able to cook was that we didn't have to suffer condensation, which iced everything up badly. We didn't waste any time getting out of the tent. It took us just a few minutes to get all the equipment out of the tent, dissemble it and pack everything together in the dark. This routine was followed by one of the coldest moments of the day, when it was time to take the down jacket off and start moving. It took at least three hours to feel relatively warm. During this time the face, nostrils and eyes were covered by ice again, making breathing difficult and we coughed pretty much continuously. To save batteries we travelled in darkness all day. Three days later we reached the Yakut settlement of Srednekolymsk.

We spent January thawing up in Srednekolymsk. Temperatures were constantly below -60°F and amongst some of the nicest and most generous people on earth we put on a lot of weight needed for the remaining 1500 kilometres to reach Ambarchik Bay before the end of April. We sampled their local delicacies like stroganina, frozen raw fish eaten like ice-cream, maxa, frozen raw liver eaten the same way, cooked moose nostrils, stewed moose heart, fried liver from wild caribou, cooked moose muzzle with pasta, raw frozen horse testicles and much more. And the local people gave us a healthy perspective regarding extreme cold. Some of them had amputated fingers, arms and legs. Almost all had scarred cheeks and had lost the tip of their noses. And, as they told us, it could have been worse. We could have been unfortunate prisoners in one of Stalin's gulags whose remains dotted the Kolyma. Many prisoners froze to death within two weeks.

Even though we encountered temperatures below -55°F most of February, travelling was a holiday in comparison with the dark Mid-Winter travel. We froze badly throughout the month, but at noon every day the temperatures rose to -30°F and that was enough to thaw out and we could even stop for a short brake without getting frostbite. We pulled the sledges from early morning until a couple of hours before darkness, having encountered no problems to form thoughts during the day, and then we pitched our tent and spent a couple of hours trying to get the stove working. Eventually it did. Equipment continued to brake in the cold, but we came across trappers almost every three or four days and their log cabins gave us enough warmth to do decent repairs. In March we had plenty of daylight and temperatures rose to -40°F even in the night and we experienced day temperatures up to 0°F! We reached the tundra in April and travelled quickly over the sastrugi and made it to our goal in Ambarchik Bay at the end of April 2005.

Much time has passed since we returned back home to Sweden. It hasn't been easy returning. I miss Kolyma every day. Not the hardships, the suffering or the extreme cold, but the people. They are the best people I've come across during 25 years of exploration; generous, funny, intelligent, knowledgeable, open-minded and extremely warm. All the goals we set before the Expedition have been fulfilled and we've discovered a lot of unknown information. I think the most important thing I've brought with me back home, is an understanding of the major difference between humans and other species: communication.

Jag skriver mer sedan…