

# Life in the windiest spot on the globe

by David Lewis and Mimi George  
for the Tundra Times

*Editor's note: David Lewis and Mimi George are affiliate professors in anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast. In August 1988, they took 11 Eskimos from Gambell in the schooner Cyranu to stay with their Soviet relatives at the Siberian Yupik village of Novoye Chaplino.*

*They returned to Chukotka in July 1989 with Roger Antogham of Gambell to share the subsistence and cultural activities of Soviet Eskimos and Chukchis for 11 months in villages, hunting camps and tundra yarangas.*

*Now back in Alaska, they are writing a book and making an educational video.*

*This is the first in a three-part series the pair has written for the Tundra Times on the life of reindeer herders in the Soviet North.*

Many people believe the windiest spot on the globe to be somewhere such as Mount Washington or Cape Horn.

They are wrong. The place where the winds of the world congregate is Perival Basa, the Base in the Pass at the apex of Kolyuchinskaya Gulf in

Arctic Chukotka.

There, the dread "Northern Master" that roars in from the North Pole across the frozen ocean is funneled down the 60-mile length of the gulf, accelerating all the while, until it smashes over the base, driving blinding drift snow 50 feet into the air.

For part of December and all of January such blizzards were our almost daily portion. The temperatures were 35 and 40 below; the wind chill unimaginable.

"It is in storms like this that the wolves love to walk about," explained the Chukchi herdsman Kuttagin, leader of the 5th Reindeer Brigade as we reclined in the warm reindeer skin inner chamber of his yaranga. And come they did that very night, silently up wind, to kill a young deer and panic the herd. The skeleton crew of Kuttagin and his two cousins was too small for one of them to always be with the deer throughout the polar night.

"The wolves must live, too," remarked Kuttagin matter of factly as he gazed down at the carcass in the pale light of the unrisen sun the next day during mid-winter beyond the Arctic Circle. "If they become too greedy we will hunt them with snow mobiles."

Here was the age-old wisdom of the

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tundra, knowledge shared by Eskimo and Indian, that all living things and the very land itself are kin.

"You had better follow the tracks back to the yaranga," he advised. "I know this country. It was my father's," he said, indicating the rolling hills around us. "It is where I herd deer and pitch my yaranga. It will be my son's land, too."

Kuttagin set off on foot into the murk in search of the 1,500 deer that had fled into the teeth of the storm while we groped our way back to the yaranga, not daring to miss for a moment the drifting-over tracks, for we were not then wearing skin clothing and could not have survived the blizzard very long.

While we were helping to gather the herd together two days later, Kuttagin

told us the special characteristics of each animal — old deer who taught the young, deer trained to pull sleds and breeding deer from other areas.

Senior herders know every individual of a 2,000 deer herd and their precise "family relationships."

Kuttagin and his wife gave biscuits to two deer who came running to meet them.

"These are the brothers, Lekkuk and Kitak," they explained. "Their mother taught them to do this. The other deer like salty biscuits, too, but their spirits are too afraid to come to us."

Always with the Chukchi there are such constant reminders of the spiritual ties between herders and their deer. Every effort is made to nurture the spiritual relationship.