

INSECTS

Eleven days from St. Petersburg, Sergei Lunev, Volodya Chumak, and I were well into the swampy flatlands of western Siberia. It was the summer of 2001, and we were driving across Siberia in a converted Renault step van that had formerly delivered eggs and sour cream and sometimes didn't start. Every night, we were camping out. In a country without fences or "No Trespassing" signs, we had an abundance of places to camp, but each one required a certain amount of searching nonetheless. Sergei sometimes spent an hour or more in the evenings looking—stopping, getting out, walking around, then trying somewhere else. He wanted ground that was dry, not too low, not too many trash heaps, near water if possible, away from the road but not too difficult to get to. When he was satisfied with his find, he would pronounce it a "khoroshoe mesto"—a good place.

The country's swampiness did not manifest itself in great expanses of water with reeds and trees in it, like the Florida Everglades. There were wide rivers and reedy places, but also birch groves and hills and yellow fields. The way you could tell you were in the swamp was, first, that the ground became impassably soggy if you walked at all far in any direction; and, second, by the mosquitoes.

I have been in mosquito swarms in beaver meadows in northern Michigan, in boreal wetlands in Canada, and near Alaska's Yukon River. Western Siberia has more. On calm and sultry evenings as we busied ourselves around the camp, mosquitoes came at us as if shot from a fire hose. Usually mosquitoes cluster in a cloud around their targets, but as Volodya made dinner I observed a thick and proximate cloud surrounding him head to toe, and then a whole other sort of candidate swarm around that inner swarm, and then more in all directions, minutely enlivening the sky.

With such astronomical numbers, Siberian mosquitoes have learned to diversify. There are the majority, of course, who just bite you anywhere. Those are your general-practitioner mosquitoes, or G.P.s. Then, you have your specialists—your eye, ear, nose, and throat mosquitoes. Eye mosquitoes fly directly at the eyeball and crash-land there. The reason for this tactic is a mystery. The



A REPORTER AT LARGE

# TRAVELS IN SIBERIA—II

*The path of poets and prisoners.*

BY IAN FRAZIER

Passengers waiting to board the Trans-Siberian Railway in Krasnoyarsk. Phantoms thronged

along the railway, which was first completed in tsarist times. Photograph by Carl De Keyzer.

MAGNUM