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The Hidden Russia: The Quirkiest News of 2014

By Alexey Eremenko

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In one of the year's oddest tales, a Siberian hunter stumbled across a pink flamingo … near the Polar Circle.

Military incursions, a plummeting ruble, homophobic violence and corruption: News from Russia makes life here seem like an endless stream of rights abuse and calamity. But it is not.

Russian mystics have long speculated about a true, hidden Russia, with its own Avalon in the invisible town of Kitezh, with wise holy men traversing the land and demure maidens waiting for their warrior champions.

The Moscow Times is not prepared to confirm any of the above theories, but it has reported on a different, stranger nation, full of injured crocodiles, lightning chasers and naked women.

To mark the end of a generally strange year, we offer a roundup of the most odd, quirky

and unexpected news from Russia in 2014. Based on content, the list is split into three main sections: "animals," "just dark" and "miscellaneous."

We are looking forward to 2015, if for no other reason than to bring you the next installment of the list.

I. Animals

1. Accountant Injures Crocodile

Ever wondered who is more dangerous: financiers or apex predators? Well, now you know: financiers.

The proof came courtesy of a circus troupe touring northern Russia, whose crocodile Fedya was injured by the group's portly, 120-kilogram accountant. The woman landed on the reptile after a hitting a particularly nasty bump in the road. Both were snoozing at the time. Thankfully, early fears of Fedya having sustained organ rupture proved unfounded.

2. 'Pygmy' Piglet

Be wary of friends bearing gifts lest those gifts happen to be pygmy pigs — for they may not actually be pygmy. This unlikely scenario happened to a Muscovite couple that received what was presented as an adorable pygmy piglet some five years ago — only to watch it grow into a 120-kilogram sow.

Though Nyusha the Vietnamese potbelly was the star of the neighborhood, her cowardly owners abandoned her when moving out — possibly because she barely could walk under the crushing weight of her own lard. The tale has a happy ending though: The hefty swine was ultimately whisked away to an animal shelter and put on a diet.

3. Putin's Unruly Tiger

President Vladimir Putin really loves animals, the bigger and more dangerous the better. In May, he personally released several collar-tagged Amur tigers into the wild, but did they accept the favor with grace and dignity? No.

Kuzya the tiger was accused of swimming across the Amur River into China to wreak havoc on the local pigs and chickens, before swimming back to the motherland, fat and happy.

Meanwhile, Chinese negotiators are said to be coldly wringing the arms of Russian petroleum suppliers eager for contracts. Surely a coincidence.

4. Whiskered Bolshevik

How does a cat become a registered communist? By ransacking a posh seafood store, and gorging on and/or damaging more than $1,000 worth of squid, caviar and other delicacies. Obviously.

The plunder, captured on video earlier in December, has earned Vasily the cat from far-eastern Vladivostok membership in a minor Communist Party, which touted his raid as

revenge on the "fat bourgeoise." Perhaps fearing a counterattack from the establishment, Vasily has since disappeared.

5. Flamingoes in Siberia

So you are a hunter walking around a frozen lake near the Polar Circle, and a pink flamingo falls into the crunchy snow at your feet. True story!

This happened to a hunter in Siberia's Evenkia district, who nurtured the flamingo back to health. So perhaps there is something to be said for global warming — though not from the perspective of at least one unlucky flamingo.

II. Just Dark

1. Lovelorn Panties Thief

What do you do if your girlfriend asks you for a gift of underwear, and you are penniless? For a man in Udmurtia, the answer was clear: steal.

In October he carried away four sets of used panties from a female neighbor's house — and had just enough time to present them to his girlfriend before police busted him and indicted him for theft. It remains unclear whether his girlfriend was impressed with the gift.

2. Sledgehammer to Latecomers

A salaryman's nightmare came true in the Samara region in November, when a local railway employee beat his subordinate to death with a sledgehammer for showing up late to work — and reportedly for mouthing off to him.

3. Obama-Possessed Cat

A man in Voronezh literally ripped his cat into pieces on a public street because voices told him that an "evil monkey impersonating [U.S. President] Barack Obama has possessed the cat, and the Russian bear must protect Russia," local news site Communa.ru reported earlier this month.

The outcome was even darker: Psychiatrists released the 29-year-old man after an inspection, and he went home to axe-murder an elderly couple living nearby. This time, he blamed neither monkeys nor Obama.

4. Welding Shells to Tractors

Darwin wept. And he had good cause to, after a man in the Leningrad region found a World War II-era artillery shell and tried to weld it to his tractor as a counterbalance. Boom. The man is now deceased.

5. Hunting Bears With Trains

People hunt foxes with dogs and horses, but hunting a bear with a train? Only in Russia.

And indeed, in northern Norilsk, train drivers filmed themselves chasing and ultimately crashing into a young bear scampering down the train tracks, too panicked to turn aside.

The bear miraculously survived, but the men at the helm face criminal charges. So for once, justice has prevailed, kind of.

III. Miscellaneous

1. Remove Penis From Ruble

Porn is prohibited in Russia (not that this stops anyone; as you may recall if you read The Moscow Times devoutly this year, Russia is the world leader in anal porn searches) — but fancy finding pornography on the country's money!

A populist lawmaker said in July that the 100-ruble banknote bears a picture of penis, which must go. It does indeed, as it depicts an antique-style statue of a nude Apollo, which adorns Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, though you really need to squint to see it.

A popular joke on Twitter points out that the ruble's inexorable plummet began around the time of the lawmaker's attack on Apollo. "Do not upset the deity," the tweet warned. Too little, too late, Twitter.

2. Lengthen Policewomen's Skirts

It was summertime, and the weather was hot, so many policewomen across Russia acted with utilitarian efficiency by shortening their skirts.

But was the Interior Ministry happy with the increased visibility of thighs across the nation? No. It said short skirts undermined police authority, and threatened disciplinary action against officers who donned them, as well as against their male colleagues who showed off their biceps by slashing their uniform tops into muscle tees.

It is now moot point, however, as winter has come.

3. Fleeing Evil Spirits

... in the nude, across the snow. This was the remedy against evil possession practiced by a woman in Siberia's Nizhnevartovsk, who walked bare-naked across town to a church, carrying a baby in her arms.

Both were thankfully left unharmed, by frost and demons alike, even with the thermostat hovering around negative 12 degrees Celsius.

Miscellaneous in Pro-Russian Rebel-Held East Ukraine

4. The Great Chicken Escape

Revolution! Freedom! Chickens on the loose.

Strictly speaking, it did not happen in Russia — rather a territory held by pro-Russian insurgents in eastern Ukraine in September, when a bombing and ensuing power failure caused the gates of a poultry farm to open, turning thousands of chickens free-range.

The birds were bewildered, judging by videos of the liberated farm. And eggs and chicken prices in the area plummeted, local news reports said.

5. Catching Lightning in a War Zone

The Moscow Times' favorite: Two inventors film themselves making and using DIY kits to capture lightning and blow up microwaves in a fashion as spectacular as it is educational.

And they do it in a war zone in eastern Ukraine.

Luhansk natives Alexander Kryukov and Pavel Pavlov gather millions of views on YouTube with their experiments, ongoing despite war and insurrection. The Moscow Times wishes them the best luck and the biggest lightnings in 2015 — and a merry Christmas and a happy new year to all our readers.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

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