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Putting the cold in perspective

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Eco Catholic

It's very cold in the upper and lower Midwest right now. How cold can it get on a long-term basis and still support a functioning human population? For the answer, go to Oymyakon.

Oymyakon, in Russia's Siberian republic of Yakutia, is the coldest inhabited place on Earth. The village of Oymyakon (???????) only has a population of 800 people and has registered a record low of 71.2 degrees below zero in height="185" width="246" 1926. Average highs in winter are only -20 to -40F. Reports have it that it's so cold in Oymyakon that some birds freeze to death in mid-flight. The name Oymyakon actually means non-freezing water, because there is a natural hot spring nearby. The town is located 690 meters above sea level and lies in a valley between two mountain ranges (the reason for the low temperatures). The town was founded by the Mongol horsemen of Genghis Khan sometime in the 13th century.

I looked up the temperatures for Feb. 3 on the Weather Channel Web page for Oymyakon. The high today is -55 with a low of -62, and it's cloudy with a chance of snow flurries . See for yourself.

Nikolay N. Krivoschapkin, a 50-year-old driver, who was born, grew up and lived his whole life in Oymyakon, tried to describe what life in the coldest place on Earth looks like. He says: "In winter the average temperature is -51°, in summer +27°. But that's average. In December and January temperature usually do not drop below -55° -57°. The lowest temperature I've ever experienced in my life was -67.7°. I wasn't surprised, because Oymyakon is considered to be the Pole of Cold, the coldest place in the northern hemisphere with the lowest degrees, -71,2°, registered."

"Don't know how to explain. To me, it is never-ending struggle with myself and nature. In short summer period, we need to stockpile hay for cows, firewood for heating houses. Cows spend the whole winter staying in cow-houses - special barns of small size, daily we have to carry hay and water to the cow-

houses, and also clean these houses three times a day. In winter we need to chop firewood, stoke the stove. We use stove heating. Household chores we need to combine with the main job. All the housework we do manually. Our life is the constant work. We are running round like a squirrel in a cage.?

?In central, western and eastern parts of Yakutia, climate is much softer than here. There winter may have -40° or -45° only and summer may last all three months and have +30° to +35°. There any crops, potatoes, cabbages, tomatoes and other kinds of vegetables may grow, and lands are flatter. People living there have better conditions. That?s why they have many cattle and horses breed. That?s the reason why most Yakuts are based there, not here. Small indigenous nations, Evens and Evenks, prefer to live in remote northern area; they herd reindeer and hunt for living.?

?We construct all our private houses out of wood, namely larch logs. Larch can keep temperature pretty good, thanks to it, in winter it is warm inside, in summer fresh. We made stoves out of bricks, stock them with firewood. That?s the way we keep houses protected from cold. In contrast to private houses, administrative buildings ? school, kindergarten, hospital, offices, sports buildings, culture center (dom kultura, in Russian), are stone and heated by boilers.?

?We wear fur coats, fur hats and fur boots. Winter boots and coats are made of reindeer skin, and hats out of foxes and Arctic foxes. Besides, we put on several sweaters, warm underwear, and wool foot wrap rags. Without these clothes we couldn?t stand cold, especially when we spend the whole workday outdoors. With temperature as low as ?50° and without all mentioned protection layers, a man can get chilblain (thermal burn) just in 30 minutes and be frozen to death in one hour.?

?Foreign tourists often visit our village. All their high-technological parkas, sweaters, socks and boots cannot resist extreme cold. Even Japanese?s coats with electric warmers couldn?t keep warmth. When it was below ?50°, their outer clothing got frozen and numb, and when they got inside warm houses, the outfit started cracking and turned out to be useless.?

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