Johann Georg Gmelin Encyclopedia Article

Johann Georg Gmelin

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Johann Georg Gmelin

1709-1755

German Explorer and Botanist

During the period from 1733 to 1743, German botanist Johann Georg Gmelin explored a wide area of Siberia. These expeditions yielded numerous plant specimens, which he later described in his writings. Also significant was his identification, in 1735, of permafrost, a permanent frozen layer of earth that exists in northerly regions.

Born in 1709, Gmelin (pronounced gMAY-leen) became a professor of chemistry and natural history. Like many German-speaking scientists of the eighteenth century, he was drawn eastward by a job offer from the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences in Russia, where he became a professor at the age of 22 in 1731.

Two years later, Gmelin began to travel much further east, as he embarked on what turned out to be a decade's worth of exploration in Siberia. His journeys took him through a number of towns and regions, including Tobolsk, Semipalatinsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, and Yakutsk. Traveling eastward as far as the Lena River, he then began making his way back toward St. Petersburg, along the way collecting enormous numbers of specimens from the taiga and tundra.

Gmelin spent four more years at the St. Petersburg Academy, writing the vast work later published by the Academy in four volumes as *Flora sibirica* (1747-69). In 1749 he took a position as a professor at Tübingen in Germany, where he remained until his death in 1755. Gmelin published *Journey across Siberia,* his diaries of the ten-year expedition, in 1751. Translated into numerous languages, the book became a best-seller. Gmelin's nephew, Leopold Gmelin (1788-1853), later became a famous chemist and author of a definitive textbook in that discipline.