

VLADIMIR

Named for the elderly Russian farmer who wants to help him, Vladimir is one of only 350 Siberian tigers left in the wild.

Because most of the tigers in the Russian Far East live outside protected areas, the Siberian Tiger Project, a joint Russian-U.S. endeavor, works with local people to find ways that will allow humans and tigers to coexist. Initiated in 1992 by the Hornocker Wildlife Institute (HWI), the project has radio collared 27 of the big cats to gather data on tiger ecology, which will be used in devising a conservation plan for the species. That mission has been strengthened with the recent merger of HWI and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Author and field researcher Dale Miquelle coordinates the WCS Russian Far East Program. John Goodrich is field director of the Siberian Tiger Project.

"There's a report of two cubs down on a farm at Zolotaya Polyana," Astafiev announces, as he pulls up beside our parked jeep on the dirt road. He catches us just as we're about to head off on foot to collect a kill by the tigress Ledy, which John located two days ago.

Nine times out of ten, we arrive at such reported sites to find that, well, yes, there had been tigers, and they were sure to come back, but the last sighting was a week ago, but gosh, "you've got to do something." Nonetheless, we have to check out all reports.

We send Sasha Reebin back to Terney, our home base village, for the capture equipment (just in case) and ask him to find Boris Litvinov, who commands the "Tiger Response Team," which we helped train and work closely with. The team has legal responsibility for handling encounters between tigers and people in the Russian Far East. They're a good group of guys who provide us the legal "roof," as they say in Russia, to do our job.

It takes us nearly an hour to get to

Zolotaya Polyana, an opening in the forest with a number of dachas. We manage to find the decrepit looking building that might be described as a farmhouse. People are outside, apparently waiting for us.

"We hear there are some tigers around here," I begin. This is when they tell you how you just missed them, they're sure to come back, and it was only a few days ago that we were being terrorized. Instead, I get: "Yes, do you want to see him?" A woman comes hurriedly forward, "He came here for help. You have to give him some medicine."

Then the whole family—a guy pushing 70, the woman of age 40 or so, and three kids, ages 16 to 20—leads us around to the rear of the house. The house sits on the embankment of the Shepton River, its foundation exposed on the back, with a doorway leading into the cellar. A bedspring has been laid on end in the opening, with a metal pipe propping it in place, apparently to hold in the tiger.

John and I peer through the coils. In one corner we see a pile of pine cones (it being a good nut crop this year). A tarp hangs from a post, hiding much of this corner, but visible to one side of the tarp is the huge head of a tiger.

"Oh my God," is all I can say. Frozen in place, I'm waiting for the tiger to charge, obliterating the flimsy excuse for a cage door.

The family nonchalantly crowds around, excitedly telling us the story of how, last night, they saw a tiger walking at the edge of their yard. Later, the man heard noises coming from the cellar, and had gone down there with a flashlight. Fumbling around, he heard a growl. He, of course, left quickly. In the morning, he put up the bedspring.

There is another tiger, too, they inform us. They saw it this morning, not 30 yards from the house. While they're talking, I watch the tiger. His eyes blink from time to time, but otherwise he shows no reaction to all the people standing just outside the entryway. I think to myself, "If he walked in here

BY DALE MIQUELLE

last night, he has the strength in him for one last rush, one angry attack.” This family’s attitude dumbfounds me. They’re not the least bit frightened that a tiger is in their cellar. On the contrary, they’re talking as if one of their dearest pets has fallen ill and needs veterinary attention. I think they’re nuts.

I ask everyone to back off and return to the front of the house. This is a potentially explosive situation. The man leads John and me to the edge of the yard, and shows us tracks from last night. John notes a couple of places that suggest a second tiger walked nearby, but then slunk back into the low oak shrub fields surrounding the yard. The man also shows us the fresh tracks that a tiger made this morning, 20 yards or so from his/her son/brother/buddy in the cellar. Now, not only do we have a tiger of unknown status in the cellar, there’s another one lurking somewhere nearby—possibly a defensive mother. John doesn’t think the head was as big as it looked to me, so maybe it is not a full-grown adult, but an older cub.

Sasha shows up with the immobilization gear, but without Litvinov (in Vladivostok) or Khubotnov (not home), so we send him off immediately

“No he isn’t,” says Sasha.

The tiger has moved. Now we know he is still mobile, and expect him to come lunging out from one of the corners.

Sasha leans out the rear door to get a better view. I wait for that explosive roar and powerful rush of an enraged, frightened tiger. John and Zheny walk up on each side of the car and look through the bedspring, flares and rifle ready. No tiger. Only then do we realize there’s a second cellar room. The cat must have retreated behind the far wall.

Now what? You can’t walk in there, in the dark—it would be crazy. John suggests we get a cage, bait it, place it in the doorway, and wait. Not a bad idea. If the tiger can walk, he’s probably hungry, and if he’s hungry, he’ll go into a cage for food. But if he’s really sick, as we suspect, he needs help right away if there’s any chance to save him. We ask the family, “You don’t, by any chance, have a trap door to the cellar?” (Most root cellars in Russian homes are accessed through such a trap door).

“No, but we can make one,” comes the almost gleeful reply. Within minutes, they have a chainsaw revved up and begin ripping through the main floor boards. As the Russian saw roars

upstairs, I realize how stunned I am by the lengths to which this family is going to help this tiger.

Sasha and I stand below, once again expecting to see a tiger come roaring out of the blackness, hell-bent on escape. Our task will be to try to contain him. *How* is not clear. But we see no sign of movement, despite the ruckus.

They cut the hole, but not quite in the right place, and there is the standard argument about who is at fault before they expand the hole. John can see the tiger now. He’s not responding to the activity, so Sasha goes upstairs to try and dart him. The hole is small, and Sasha has to wedge himself in up to his waist, hang upside down, and shoot the dartgun with one hand. He is expecting the tiger to leap at him in response to the dart, and now, with Zheny down at the doorway with me, we are again expecting the tiger to come crashing out. But, Sasha later says, the tiger only flinched slightly.

In a few minutes, we walk in, flares and rifle prepared, but the tiger is immobilized with drugs and sickness. We carry him out into the light. He is a young male, but fully grown, with the huge head that I first saw lying on the pine cones, and fully developed, shiny,

Canine distemper wiped out half the Serengeti lion population, and we’re concerned about an outbreak in the tiger population here.

to find Zheny Tsarapin (another member of the Tiger Response Team). Meanwhile, we try to keep people from walking out back (“There’s no danger from him,” they insist), or venturing out from the farmyard, where another tiger may be waiting.

It’s after 1:00 P.M. when Sasha returns with Zheny. John and Sasha prepare the darts while I try to explain this surreal situation to Zheny.

Sasha recommends that I back my car up to the doorway, so he can shoot the dart gun from the rear window. This sounds like a safe plan. When I’ve backed Sasha into place, he starts scanning the cellar room and says he cannot find the tiger. I can’t see back there from the driver’s seat, but I reply, “What do you mean you can’t see him. He’s right there on the pine cones.”



clean teeth. He is the first “bag of bones” that I have encountered—every rib and limb bone is traceable through the skin and coat—his pelvis sticks so far beyond his emaciated muscles in the hindquarters it is almost grotesque. On all legs the hair has been lost, and there are small wounds (our crew has seen this phenomenon in two other animals—apparently a fungal infection associated with a dietary deficiency).

We collect blood, take body measurements, and weigh him in at 186 pounds—a healthy animal of this size should weigh at least 250, maybe 300 pounds. I have the blood tubes in my hand, and need to label them. I ask the old farmer, “What’s your name?” and he tells me “Vladimir.” I write the name of this tiger on the tubes. One of the young boys explains to his elder that

the tiger has been named after him, and he seems pleased.

Initially, we planned to bring the tiger to Plastun village in the back of Zheny's pickup, where he has a cage that is nearly ready. But Terney is not that much farther, and we could take him straight to Litvinov's, where there's a holding cage.

The warm midday sun is gone, and we're afraid this tiger won't hold up well in the freezing wind in the back of the pickup, so we fold down the back seats and slide him into my jeep. We will have our hands full if he decides to get up in the next hour.

I try to negotiate the icy roads as fast as possible. Sasha is in back with the tiger, constantly testing it—ear twitches, jaw resistance, breath rate—for any sign of recovery from the drugs. With two miles to go to Terney, Sasha advises another dose of ketamine. We stop for the shot, then drive on into town.

Reaching Litvinov's, we rush to fill the cage with hay, wire a dish into the corner, and transfer the tiger. Meanwhile, John and Sasha pump a few liters of saline solution into him subcutaneously to fight dehydration. Ideally, we would have this patient hooked up to an IV, but that is impossible given a wild tiger and existing supplies. Even before we can cover up the cage, the people start arriving. "I've never seen a tiger in my life. Can I have a look?" Word travels fast in Terney.

I boil up some meat dumplings, and John and I eat our first meal of the day, then check on the tiger. He's lying in the same position, his breathing labored. It's hard to tell where the effect of the drug leaves off and the sickness takes over.

In the morning, the cat has changed positions, but it doesn't look as if he has drunk any of the chicken broth that Tamara Litvinova cooked last night. She threw in a few pieces of boiled chicken, but we can't tell if he ate them.

Neither John nor I think this animal is simply starving to death. We both think of the canine distemper that is killing half the dogs in Terney (one of the dogs at the farm was dragging both hind legs, and we later learned that the dog died the day after our visit). We know the story of how canine distemper wiped out half of the Serengeti lion population, and are concerned about an



DENNIS DEMELLO/WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

With an animal as rare as the Siberian tiger (an adult, page 45, and a cub, above), the future of the species depends on the survival of every individual wild animal. Opposite: John Goodrich (in the foreground) and the author radio collar a tiger named Fedya.

outbreak of distemper in the wild tiger population here. There have been reports of distemper in zoo tigers. Fedya, another collared tiger, has eaten five dogs this winter, and at least one of them reportedly had symptoms of canine distemper. John suggests that the greatest value of this animal may be in providing information about his illness. In any case, we realize that it will require heroic efforts to save this life, and we are not equipped for it.

In the afternoon, we prepare to send Vladimir to the Krai Veterinarian Clinic in Ussurisk. We give the crew who will drive there a list of questions to be addressed, and suggest that a virus culture be taken to look for distemper.

We shift Vladimir to a smaller wooden crate and place it in the back cabin of another truck. A month ago, this same crate had carried two tiger cubs to Vladivostok to the Moscow Zoo (abandoned by their mother, and captured by our team, they were also victims of this tough winter).

Just before the truck leaves, we search for remains of the boiled chicken

in the cage, to find that the tiger had eaten and readily chewed up the bones. I warn Kolya Reebin to be careful opening up the back cabin—after all, the tiger found the strength to walk to the rear room of the cellar yesterday and to eat chicken last night.

My optimism, and concern, prove unnecessary. A third of the way to Ussurisk, they stop to check on the tiger. He's not breathing.

The pathologist has a fresh corpse to examine. And we are hopeful that, in time, we will learn more explicitly what happened to Vladimir. I can't stop thinking about that woman back on the farm who kept saying, "He came to us asking for help. We've got to do something for him."

It is reassuring to know that such people are still out there, living with tigers, in an accepting, almost loving way. It was those people who had the right attitude toward this tiger, and it was I who had it all wrong. I feel as if we let her, and of course, him, down. This time, it seems, there was nothing we could do, and I apologize to both of them.