

Last Favor for a

MISSING TIGER

*In a Russian wilderness
gone berserk, there was something the poachers
didn't know*

By Daniel Zatz

FILLING WITH RAGE, biologist Dale Miquelle dug into the snow and pulled out a radio collar. It was the same one he'd fitted on a wild Siberian tiger the summer before. The clean break told him the bad news: Someone had cut the collar with a hunting knife. The tiger was obviously dead.

The animal was a big female, and she'd become very important to Miquelle. He'd named her Lena, and, for four months, he'd followed the beeps from the collar's small radio transmitter through the forests of a preserve in the Russian Far East. He'd seen where Lena hunted, how far she ranged, where she slept.

Now Lena was gone, her bones, hide and meat carried off by poachers. They'd sliced off her collar to keep from being followed themselves. But, as I was about to find out, Miquelle knew something the poachers apparently didn't—a secret that would enable him to do one last thing for Lena.

Last November, several days after Miquelle found the collar, I flew to the town of Terney, headquarters of the joint Russian-U.S. research project where Miquelle works. I'd heard that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and free-fall of the Russian economy had touched off a scramble to sell the region's rich resources. There were reports that animal parts, in particular, brought huge prices in the black market and that a great poaching free-for-all targeted tigers, bear, deer and other animals. As a Western photojournalist, I was fascinated by this trade, and I

hoped to catch at least a glimpse of it on a trip to the Russian Far East.

My journey proves grueling, perhaps a sign of what's to come. I take, in turn, a plane, a train, a bus and finally a helicopter to reach a remote logging camp near the tigers' forests. Only then do I board a small plane bound for the research headquarters in Terney.

Shortly after takeoff, a snowstorm whites out the mountain passes through the Primorskiy region. My pilot tries an alternate route, hugging seaside cliffs as the foul weather forces us ever closer to the salt spray below. Finally the cliffs give way to a valley, and, shaken, we bump down into a small airport: Terney at last.

A little bus takes me into a town of some 5,000 people. Wooden cottages line its broad streets. Pigs and cows wander around downtown. I check into a hotel that features outdoor privies and rooms with torn flooring, peeling wallpaper and sagging beds.

Its saving grace is a kindly old lady who works at the check-in desk. Hanging on the wall beside her is a slab of plaster that captures two huge paw prints. "Tiger?" I ask. She tells us of one time many years ago when she

caught a glimpse of one of the lithe cats in the woods near Terney. "It was such a beautiful sight," she says.

I soon find that not everyone shares the babushka's reverence for wildlife. A slender, bearded man, who identifies himself as a helicopter mechanic, approaches our translator and tries to in-

terest him in the bulk purchase of some bear gallbladders.

Just outside our hotel, a clean-cut young stranger in a handsome brown leather jacket stops us to show off his merchandise: furry, round scent glands from a musk deer. "We shoot animals not because we like to shoot them," he explains, "but because we want to live better, like human beings." Then he points to his white Toyota sedan, one of the few cars on Terney's snowy streets.

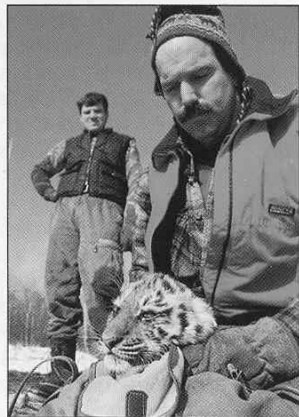
Slaughter and reverence are the twin themes of the story of the Siberian tiger. The largest subspecies of tiger, the Siberian has unusually long, pale fur. Early in this century, its domain in the Russian Far East fell into turmoil. As White Russians fought Red in a bloody civil war, thousands of armed men took to the forests. When people found a tiger, they didn't hesitate to shoot. Biologists estimate that tiger numbers dropped dangerously low, to fewer than 100.

After the Communists took power, they declared the tiger endangered. Hunting it was banned, and the Soviets sealed the country's borders to the big Asian markets for animal parts. The species began a slow recovery.

In the chaotic final years of the Soviet Union, cash-poor Russians scrambled for foreign investment, and their leaders, at least, were prepared to sacrifice tiger habitat along the way. Overseas logging companies scouted the forests of Primorskiy, and the Korean company Hyundai planned to clear-cut old growth on the Bikin River in a 30-year contract that would permit logging the fringes of key tiger territory. Perhaps most important, logging would create more roads that poachers could use.

As borders opened to South Korea and other Asian countries, so did the pipeline to the black market in tiger parts. The result was predictable. The average Russian earns less than \$500 a year, but a tiger's meat and bones, sold in Asia where they are prized as a medicine, can bring as much as \$3,000. Russian biologists estimate that poachers killed as many as 50 tigers in 1992. That's a 400 percent increase from the death toll estimated five years before.

Laws forbid such hunting, but laws don't do much to help Anatoly Astafyev, director of the Sikhote-Alin Biosphere National Preserve, where Lena lived. The morning after my arrival, I walk down Terney's main street to visit him in the small corner office of a low wooden building. Miquelle is there too. An Amer-



After poachers killed its mother, a Siberian tiger cub (above) gets a helping hand from U.S. biologist Dale Miquelle. In trouble in the wild, Siberian tigers are secure in captivity (left).



IGOR REVENKO

ican biologist, he was recruited by the U.S. directors of the research team: Maurice Hornocker from the Wildlife Research Institute of the University of Idaho and Howard Quigley from Frostburg State University in Maryland.

Astafyev controls the preserve more strictly than any Western government controls its national parks. Only a few scientists have permission to enter this protected area, and the average citizen is prohibited from taking even a casual stroll in it. At least that's what the law says.

"Now many people are involved in the poaching," he laments. "There's very great demand, and it's hard to control." Astafyev has 24 preserve guards but only 11 vehicles. Some of his staff make their winter patrols on foot, trekking 16 to 19 kilometers (10-12 mi.) a day with ancient rifles slung over their shoulders. These foot patrols must somehow chase poachers—cruising, for example, in a Toyota—around 3,380 square kilometers (1,300 sq. mi.).

But there is little time to talk. Astafyev has a plane to catch—to the huge port city of Vladivostok to give his first press conference. I go too.

Under the Communists, Vladivostok had been a closed city with a major nu-

One of four cubs rescued after the poaching incident, this 10-week-old orphan became a feisty handful—and a conundrum for scientists who had to decide what to do with the litter.

clear submarine base. Even during the early years of *glasnost*, the area remained off-limits to most foreigners. But within the past two or three years, Vladivostok opened up and has emerged as one of the wildest cities in the Russian Far East.

"Russia is a place where the Mafia rules," says graffiti painted on a wall we pass on the way from the airport. Gangsters thrive in Vladivostok's new status as a trade hub to Asia and North America's West Coast, handling everything from Japanese cars to walrus ivory.

American aid workers in Vladivostok told us how the newly opened Peace Corps office nearly lost its driver to a band of thugs who tried to hijack his car on the highway leading north out of town. He was saved only by last-minute intervention from the Russian militia.

I too find a Wild West atmosphere. As I drive through downtown Vladivostok, a group of militia men rush wildly down the street, as if in hot pursuit of somebody. I don't know why, but they halt

traffic and beat on the car in front of me with a night stick until the driver judges the moment right and speeds off into the night.

When I visit the town's main hotel, as a bitter wind sweeps from the hills, the parking lot is full of seemingly unemployed young men hanging out in heated cars. Just a few of the local gangsters passing time, explains an American who lives at the hotel.

For gangs, the animal trade is one of the more lucrative rackets and, increasingly, one of the best organized. So Astafyev and Miquelle have come to Vladivostok to speak of a different ethic. They gather about ten Russian journalists around a long, narrow wooden table in the conference room of a downtown office building.

The scientists announce a \$100 reward for information leading to the arrest of Lena's killer. Then Astafyev and Miquelle make an all-out effort to convince the journalists of the importance of conservation. Miquelle has been studying Russian only for the year he's lived here and speaks through an interpreter. The depth of his feeling, however, needs no translation.

"I think the tiger could be—should be—a source of great pride for the Pri-

morskiy [region]" Miquelle pleads. He argues that tigers are worth far more money alive than dead. He's worked in Nepal, and he's seen people from all over the world come to view the tigers, putting thousands of dollars into the local economy. Perhaps one day Terney could attract such tourists.

The journalists seem to get interested. They ask a lot of questions, and a lively discussion follows.

When we return to Terney, Miquelle takes me to the preserve. The scene along the highway is reminiscent of his native New England: brilliant sun on snow, hardwood forests on low, rounded mountains. I have trouble imagining tigers in such a landscape. But this was Lena's home.

Here in the tiger's haunts, Miquelle provides more details about Lena's secret. What the poachers may not have known is that the tigress they'd killed had recently given birth. Miquelle had seen four cubs near where he found the radio collar. They were ten weeks old, waiting for a mother who would never return.

The cubs were far too young to hunt on their own and, if left in the wild, would certainly die. But the research project was supposed to be tracking tigers in the forest, not baby-sitting captives. Moreover, the preserve had no experience—and no money—to devote to such a task.

By the next day, however, the staff at the preserve had decided that only one option was open to them. Miquelle returned to the spot with eight Russian colleagues for a first-of-a-kind tiger roundup. Saving Lena's cubs was the last thing he could do for her.

With fresh snow on the ground, the trackers easily followed the cubs' prints. But when approached, the youngsters scattered, snarling, hissing and lashing out with unsheathed claws. By the time the operation was complete, the uncooperative cubs had scratched each of the researchers.

When I visit the preserve a week later, Miquelle leads me to a small wooden hut known as the summer cook house. In a pen inside the building lie the four tiger cubs, about the size of cocker spaniels. They huddle under a table on a bed of straw piled on top of an old mattress.

To begin the morning's work, Miquelle enters the pen, wielding a forked sapling to maneuver a cub toward preserve guard Victor Veronin. The tiger hisses like a cobra, revealing sharp-pointed, triangular fangs. Veronin grabs the cub and, with help from Miquelle, carries the furious, struggling animal outside of the pen.

Biologist Olga Zaumislova, working with Miquelle, begins rubbing the lower part of the tiger's stomach, mimicking the way a mother cat would nudge and lick it, stimulating defecation. "Be calm; don't be excited," Zaumislova coos to the cub. Soon its snarls turn to purrs.



Survivors of their ordeal, two living cubs (above) were sent to the Omaha Zoo. Like the adult photographed in Colorado (right), they are safe but captive—relicts of a species in peril.

After the massage, Miquelle decides to weigh the tiger, a simple procedure but one the wild cub will not tolerate. To keep it from slashing them and the scales, researchers fit the protesting animal into a rucksack. The cub weighs just under 9 kilograms (20 lbs.).

After the scientists tend to the other three cubs, we go back to Veronin's cottage to sip tea and snack on biscuitlike cookies. Talk turns to the cubs' future. Miquelle thinks the four might go to a North American zoo where they could expand the gene pool in the captive breeding program to ensure the species' survival. However, Zaumislova dreams of raising the young tigers to adulthood, then releasing them into the wild in the

project's first reintroduction. "There are already enough tigers in zoos," she argues.

"Impossible" is the opinion of Eugene Smirnov, another preserve biologist. He feels that tigers growing up so close to humans would probably hang around villages when released, feeding on livestock or even attacking people.

I must leave before a decision is made, but not before I get a final taste of just how tough the future may be for tigers and other wildlife here. Two days after my visit to the preserve, Smirnov gives me a lift to the town of Plastun, where I can charter a flight out of the area. Driving through the preserve in the evening, we come upon a minivan creeping along the side of the road. I ask Smirnov what they are doing.

"They are hunters," he says.

"Are they hunting tigers?"

I ask as we pass the van.

"Deer is most likely," Smirnov says, "but if they see a tiger, they will take it, I assure you."

When we arrive at the airport in Plastun, I spot our pilot beside his plane, talking to a man topping off the fuel tanks. The man wears a brown leather jacket, and, as I walk closer, I recognize him as the seller of musk deer

parts, from Terney. He greets us and smiles cheerfully. With help from my translator I learn that he is not some lowly fuel jockey, but the traffic controller for the airport.

I stare at the translator in amazement. He just smiles at me and says, "You know, my friend, this is Russia. It's a crazy place."

As for the cubs, I learned later, two died because of birth defects. Last January, the other two were shipped to Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo in the United States. Not free. But safe, at least, from this crazy place. ■

Daniel Zatz is a photographer who has shot video footage for various nature productions, including National Geographic Explorer. To comment on the logging of Russian wildlife habitats and about the lack of control for poaching, write to Alexei Yablakov, Ecological Advisor, Moscow Center, Kremlin, Russia; or Hyundai Corporation, CPO Box 8943, 140-2, Kye-Dong, Chongro-Ku, Seoul, Korea.