



Tiger Trekker

WCS SIBERIAN TIGER TEAM FINDS HOPE THAT TIGERS CAN, AND WILL, SURVIVE **BY JOHN GOODRICH**

THE SEREBRIYONKA IS in full flood. As I paddle my kayak through the river's mouth into the Sea of Japan, steep waves break over the top of my boat and slap me in the face. Once in the open sea, I turn north. Now, with just a stiff chop at my back, I can relax into an easy paddling rhythm. Within ten minutes, I enter the Sikhote-Alin Zapovednik (reserve). Five hundred feet above the sea tower magnificent granite cliffs crowned with an oak forest tinted gold by autumn's first frost.

Switching on my receiver, I hear the faint, satisfying *beep . . . beep . . . beep* of Olga's radio signal. Judging by her movements over the past several months, she's traveling with cubs. But despite our tiger team's best efforts, we've found no tracks to prove it. Olga was captured and fitted with a radio collar in 1992, when she was a year old, still a cub herself.

Now, she is nearly 12 years old, and this would be her sixth litter.

On a radio-tracking flight earlier this

morning, we located Olga on the coast. If she has walked along the beach with cubs, pawprints in the sand will show it, and I am determined to find them. By gathering data on cubs born to radio-collared tigresses, we hope to learn how far and through what types of habitat tigers disperse. Their movements will shed light on what human disturbances, such as logging and development, constitute barriers to dispersal. Our goal is to better connect protected areas with dispersal corridors.

This is the first time I've tried radio-tracking the tigers from my Feathercraft Kahuna. It will mean a half-day paddle instead of a two-day walk to reach Olga.

Within a few hours, I've paddled ten miles of coastline, and Olga's signal still comes in strong. A few hundred yards farther, and I listen again—this time her signal comes from the south, so I paddle back and align my kayak with the beep, at a spot where a waterfall cascades down the cliff-face. Olga is somewhere on top of that cliff. There's no access here, so I head 50 yards north to where the cliff gives way to sandy beach, then go ashore to look for tracks. Foxes, otters, and raccoon dogs have walked in the sand, but no tigers.

I'm tempted to camp here for the night, in this spot protect-

ing close to humans for 12 years and has given birth to six litters of cubs to boot. That gives me hope.

Recently, John Goodrich was back in the U.S. for a few weeks helping to train Russian officials in anesthesia techniques for tigers at the Omaha Zoo. John is coordinator of Sikhote-Alin research projects and has lived in Terney, Russia, since 1995.





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— JOHN GOODRICH, WCS SCIENTIST

ed from the wind by the cliff and from the sea by a granite reef. There's even a freshwater creek flowing into the sea. But Olga is too close for comfort, and my presence might disturb her. So, I collect a few scallops along the reef for dinner and paddle north a half-mile to the far end of the beach, where I pitch my tent. I roast the scallops over a driftwood fire and sip a cold beer, keeping the receiver on. Olga barely stirs. I can tell because the signal beeps at a slower rate than when she's on the move. After dinner, I crawl into my tent.

During the night, the sound of something running along the hill above awakens me, and then rocks tumble down the slope. Ghoral, small mountain goat-like animals, begin scolding. I lean out of my tent, and point the radio antenna up the hill. Olga is within 100 yards. I surmise that Olga's prowling on the hilltop has spooked the ghoral in my direction. I lie on my back for a while and stare up at the stars, listening as her signal fades off to the north.

The next morning I open my eyes in time to watch the sun climb out of the sea. After it warms my tent, I get up to collect firewood. I cannot believe my eyes. In the sand, are Olga's tracks. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, while a smile spreads across my face. Olga, not ghoral, had disturbed my sleep last night. She had walked down the dark beach, stopped, and stood still, maybe 50 yards from me. Likely, that's when she noticed the tent, but she continued on—walking, not

stalking—directly toward me, until, less than ten yards from my door, she turned and walked up the hill. When it became too steep for walking, she ran, and that woke me up.

She was alone, without her cubs, but it's normal for a tigress to leave her cubs when she goes off hunting. I backtrack her all the way to the place where I first came ashore the previous evening. There in the sand, I find what I'm looking for—tracks showing where the cubs had walked and inspected all the treasures washed up by the sea, where they had chased each other and rolled and romped, as well as the imprint of Olga's body circled by the cubs' tracks.

I notice a trail cut through the vegetation at the edge of the beach. Following it, I come upon the remains of a ghoral. Typical of most tiger kills, all the meat is gone and only the skull, bits of hide, and four leg bones are left. Also typical, the remains have been scattered by the playful cubs.

I follow the trail to a brushy, boulder-strewn slope above the cliffs, and find where the family had rested the day before. It's likely the cubs are here somewhere. I search the crevices and nooks among the boulders, and find many places where the cubs have been. Finally, I discover a deep, narrow crevice between two boulders, deeper than my flashlight beam, and too narrow for my body. It's an ideal hiding place for cubs and I assume they're tucked away in there.

I hike back down to the edge of the cliff and sit at the top of the waterfall overlooking the sea under a crystal autumn sky, content to contemplate the day. Often over the past seven years, my work has been fraught with frustration, discouragement, and heartbreak, watching so many tigers I've tracked for years, tigers that I know better than my own housecat, succumb to poachers' bullets, or disease likely transmitted by dogs, or hit by cars. . . . The fight to save this dwindling species and the forest it roams sometimes seems futile.

Indeed, just the previous week, I kayaked 20 miles of the Bolshoy Ussury River to collect a radio collar cut off a tigress by poachers. They had attached the collar to a plastic bottle and thrown it in the river so it would float far from the scene of the crime.

Thick snow blankets the Kamchatka Peninsula in early spring, when brown bears (above) emerge from their dens. Left: The author stands at the entrance to a —deserted, we hope—bear den.

