

SOCIETY PAGES



JOHN GOODRICH (ABOVE/LEFT); BART SCHLUEYER (R)

Cat Capture

All in A Day's Work

IN MARCH, WCS'S Siberian tiger team recaptured Lidya and Olga to change their radio collars because the batteries were due to fail. It doesn't sound too difficult: Find the tiger, dart it, lower down on a winch because the helicopter cannot land in the forest, change the collar, take blood for disease and genetic analyses, take weight and measurements, make sure you are away from the tiger before she wakes up, get winched back up to the helicopter, and go home.

As I was descending from the helicopter, however, I noticed that Olga was not heavily sedated, and I suddenly understood what a worm on a fishhook must feel like as it is lowered into the water. This was the fifth time we had captured Olga (see "Tiger by the Tail," February 2002). At 11, she is fine, fat, and in good physi-

cal condition. Indeed, the capture was difficult because after having been darted from a helicopter four times before, she knows how to avoid our darts. She often hides her rear end (where the darts hit) under logs or brush piles, leaving her head exposed. Inexperienced tigers often do just the opposite.

Olga is showing signs of age: sagging skin, light fur, and protruding bones. She is the symbol of tiger conservation in Russia. Holding her head on my lap as I changed her collar was perhaps the greatest honor of my career. Because of our work here, Olga's territory will likely soon become a protected area, and she will be able to live out her old age and raise her last cubs with high-prey densities and with little fear of poachers.

John Goodrich