

Vladimir

February 19, 2001

We were just about to head off to collect a kill of the tigress Ledyia that John had located two days before, when Astafiev pulled up. We had just left him, performing the mandatory introduction of the latest film crew (a Canadian group producing a series "Champions of the Wild") to the director of the Zapovednik, so it was odd that he appeared out here so quickly.

"There's a report of two cubs down on a farm at Zolotaya Polyana." Nine times out of ten you arrive at such a site to find out that, well yes, there had been tigers here, and they were sure to come back, but the last sighting was, well, last week, but gosh, you've got to do something. Nonetheless, we have to go check such reports out. The film crew, of course, was game. We sent Sasha Reebin back for the capture equipment (just in case) and asked him to find Litvinov or one of his team (this is the Tiger Response Team of Primorski Krai, whom we've helped train, and who we work closely with, and who has legal responsibility for such situations - a good group of guys that provide us the legal "roof", as they say in Russian, to do our work).

It takes nearly an hour to get to Zolotaya Polyana, where there are a number of dachas for people from Plastun village. We managed to find the decrepit looking building that might be described as a farmhouse, and people were outside, apparently waiting for us. I got out and approached them.

"We heard there is a report of some tigers around here" I asked. This is normally when they tell you how you just missed them, they're sure to come back, and it was only a few days ago that they were terrorizing us. Instead I got:

"Yes, you want to see him?" and then the woman came hurriedly forward and said "He came here asking for help, you have to give him a shot" and then the whole family (or I should say the whole lot of people, because it was hard to figure out who was related to whom and how - an elder guy - looking like he was getting towards his 70's, a not unattractive woman in her 40's and 3 kids 16-20, perhaps. When I mentioned to John later that I couldn't figure out the relationship of all these people he dryly replied "Better not to think about that") proceeded around the back of the house, with our entourage in tow. The house sat on the embankment of the Shepton River, and therefore the foundation was exposed on the back side, with an opening in the foundation for a door into the cellar. In place of a door, however, was a set of bedsprings laid on end to cover the doorway, and a metal pipe leaning against the bedsprings, apparently to hold in the cub.

John and I peered through the bedsprings. In one corner was a pile of pine cones (it being a good nut crop this year). A tarp hung from a post, hiding much of this corner, but visible to the side of this tarp was a huge head of a tiger. "Oh my God" is all I could say. I was waiting for the tiger to charge at us, obliterating the flimsy excuse of a cage door. The family was nonchalantly standing around, excitedly telling us the story of how they had seen a tiger walking at the edge of their yard last night, about how the old man had heard some noise down in the cellar late last night, and had gone down there with a flashlight, fumbling around to hear the growl of a tiger. He of course left quickly, with no bad consequences, and this morning put the bedsprings up. But there was another tiger too they said, that they also saw this morning, not 30 yards from the house. I'm looking at the tiger the whole time,

whose eyes are blinking, but is showing no reaction to the 9 people standing just outside this entryway, and thinking that we don't have any idea what his status is, and that if he walked in here last night, he certainly has the strength in him for one last rush, one angry attack. And I am dumbfounded by the attitude of this entire family. They are not in the least bit frightened that a tiger is in their cellar – on the contrary they are talking about it as if it is one of their dearest pets that fell ill and needs veterinarian attention. I think they're all nuts.

I ask everyone to back off and return to the front of the house. This is a potentially explosive situation. The old man takes John and I out to the edge of their yard, and shows us tracks of where the tiger was seen last night, but John notes that in a couple of places there are tracks that suggest another tiger walked nearby, but then slunk back into the low oak shrub fields surrounding the area. And they show us tracks where, this morning, the other tiger was just 20 or 30 yards from his/her son/brother/buddy in the cellar, seemingly waiting for him to get up and move on out of here. So now John and I are thinking that not only do we have a tiger of unknown status in the cellar, but there is another one lurking someone nearby – potentially a defensive mother. John didn't think the head was as big as it looked to me, so maybe it is an older cub.

Sasha shows up with the immobilization equipment, but without Litvinov (in Vladivostok) or Khubotnov (not home), and we send him off immediately to find Zheny Tsarapin (the other member of the response team) in Plastun. Meanwhile, we try to keep people from walking out back (“There's no danger from him”, insist the family members) or walking out from the farmhouse, where another tiger may be waiting.

It's the first break in the miserably cold weather of this winter, and we lounge in the sun as John eats his Snickers bar, and Gary Marcuse of the film crew gives me a power bar. We had been assuming there'd be a huge lunch at Blogadatna, where the film crew was staying, after our walk into the kill site.

It's after 1 pm when Sasha returns with Zheny. John and Sasha prepare darts while I try to explain the situation to Zheny. I find myself having a hard time making sense of the situation to Zheny – it's just too surreal.

Sasha recommends that we drive my car around back, and back up to the door so he can shoot the dartgun out of the rear window. This sounds like a safe plan. Of course, the film crew wants to be down there, so we get them as far away as we can, and they do a good job of staying out of the way. I've got Sasha backed right up to the door now, and he is looking through the rear window, but not finding the tiger. The tiger has moved from his spot on the pine cones. Now we know he can still move, and expect him to come lunging out from one of the corners that we cannot peer into. But no tiger. Now Sasha is leaning out the reardoor to get a better view, but no tiger. Now John and Zheny walk up on each side of the car, and are peering through the bedscreen, flares and rifle ready, but no tiger. Then they realise that there is a second room built into the foundation. The tiger must be behind that wall.

Now what? We all agree you can't walk in there, in the dark, it would just be crazy. John thinks we need to get a cage, bait it, and place it in the doorway, and just wait. 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, and within minutes they are ripping out their flooring, and have the chainsaw revved up to cut through the main floor boards. As the Russian chainsaw roars upstairs, Sasha and I stand below, expecting to see a tiger come roaring out of that black back room, hell bent on escape. No tiger, and no sign of movement by him, despite the raucous just above him. I am stunned by the lengths to which this family is going to help us, to help this tiger.

They get the hole cut, but of course, not quite in the right place, and there is the standard arguments about who is at fault before they expand the hole to get it right. John can see the tiger now, who is not responding to the light or people above him, so Sasha goes upstairs to try and get a dart in him. The hole is small, and of course not in the right place, and Sasha has to wedge himself into the hole 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, I am again expecting the tiger to come charging out. But, Sasha later says, except for a slight flinch, there was no response.

In just a few minutes, we walk in, still cautious, with flares and rifles prepared, but the tiger is immobilized, both with drugs and sickness. We carry him out into the light. He is a young male, but fully grown, with a large head and fully developed but shiny clean teeth. However, he is the most emaciated animal I have ever seen. He is the first real “bag of bones” that I have seen – almost every bone in his body is traceable through the skin and coat. On all legs the hair has been lost, and there some small wounds on those legs (this same phenomenon was reported in two other animals that were in problem situations).

We collect blood, make body measurements, and weigh him in at 186 pounds – a healthy animal of this size would weight at least 250, maybe 300. 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 dad (?) that the tiger has been named after him, and he seems pleased.

Now, what do we do? Our initial plan was to bring him to Plastun in the back of the pick-up, where Zheny has a cage that is nearly ready. Terney is not that much further, and we could bring him directly to Litvinov’s, where they have constructed a cage just for this type of scenario (although no one, I mean no one, could have scripted this particular scenario). We’re afraid this tiger won’t hold up well in the freezing wind in the back of a pickup, so we fold down the back seats and slide him into my 4-runner. We will have our hands full if he decides to get up in the next hour.

We get out of there as fast as we can, and try to negotiate the icy roads as quickly as possible. Sasha is in back with the tiger, constantly testing it – ear twitches, jaw resistance, breath rate. When we are only 5 km from Terney, Sasha thinks we need to provide a supplemental dose of ketamine. We stop quickly for the shot, and then drive on into Terney. We stop at the Vet’s and ask for a quick assessment. “Yes, he does look sick,” is the response. The usual quality health care of Terney. We quickly make the final touches to the cage, fill it with hay, get a dish wired into the corner, and transfer the tiger. John and Sasha pump a few liters of saline solution into him subcutaneously. Ideally, we would have this patient hooked up to an IV, and be feeding him glucose and a saline solution, but that is simply impossible given a wild tiger and existing supplies. Before we can cover up the cage, people start arriving “I’ve never seen a tiger in my life. Can I have a look?” Word does indeed travel fast in Terney.

I boil up some pelmeni, and John and I eat our first meal of the day, and then return for a final inspection just before dark. The tiger is laying in the same position, breathing labored. It is hard to tell where the effect of the drugs leave off and the sickness takes over. Prospects look bleak.

In the morning, he has changed positions, but there is no indication that he has drunk any of the chicken broth that Tamara Litvinova cooked up last night. A couple pieces of boiled chicken were thrown in, but it is impossible to tell if he ate them (later, we learn, surprisingly, that he did eat). John calls Kathy Quigley for vet advice. Neither John nor I think this animal is simply starving to death, and we are both thinking of canine distemper that is killing half the dogs of Terney (one of the dogs at the farm was dragging both hind legs behind him, and we later learned that he died the next day). We know the story about

how canine distemper wiped out half of the Serengeti lion population, and are concerned about a potential outbreak of distemper in the wild tiger population, since there are reports of distemper in zoo tigers. Fedya, another collared tiger, has eaten at least 5 dogs this winter, and at least one was reported to have symptoms of canine distemper. John suggests that the greatest value of this animal may be in its ability to provide information about the illness afflicting it. In any case, , we realize that it will require heroic efforts to even attempt to save this life, and we are not equipped for it.

In the afternoon, preparations are made to send Vladimir to Ussurisk, where the Krai veterinarian clinic exists, and is also, coincidentally, the home of the person who does necropsies of tigers for the Committee for Environmental Protection. With the crew driving down we send a set of specific questions to be addressed, including doing a virus culture to look for distemper.

We load a smaller, wooden crate into the back of the Ural truck. Just a month ago, the crate had carried two tiger cubs to Vlad for transfer to Moscow Zoo. It is not strong enough to hold a healthy adult tiger, but it should do for this one. The main advantage is its smaller size, which allows the tiger to ride in the warmth of the back cabin of the truck.

It is at this point we search for remains of the boiled chicken in the cage, to find that the tiger did eat, and readily chewed up the bones. Just before they leave, I warn Kolya Reebin, who will be traveling down, to be careful opening up the back cabin- the tiger found the strength to walk to the rear room of the cellar yesterday, and eat chicken last night, but the rest of the time is an almost comatose state. Perhaps sometimes he comes out of it, in which case he could be capable, and therefore dangerous, for short periods of time.

Such optimism, and concern, were unnecessary. Just outside of Dalnegorsk, just a third of the way to Ussurisk, they stop to check on the tiger. No movement and no 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. But I can't stop thinking about that woman back on the farm, who kept saying "He came to us humans 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 the tiger, in an accepting, almost loving way. It turns out that those people had the right attitude towards this tiger, and I was wrong. I feel like 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.

Dale Miquelle