



JOHN GOODRICH

Against All Odds

A SIBERIAN TIGER IS RESCUED FROM POACHER'S SNARE STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN GOODRICH

FEBRUARY 21, 2004. Two Russian wildlife students are hiking through the forest in the Russian Far East counting tracks of tigers and tiger prey. They are 20 miles from the nearest town, which is another 60 miles from nowhere. Suddenly, they hear a tiger's roars and moans of distress. They stop and listen. The roars are coming from one spot and apparently from only one tiger. Slowly and silently, hearts pounding, the students creep forward. They see movement through the firs, and with a few more steps they see the tiger. He is caught in a cable snare set by poachers, one end cinched tightly around his body, the other tied securely to a tree.

The students could have slipped away and returned a few days later to collect the tiger's bones and skin, worth between \$5,000 and \$10,000 on the black market—probably more than the two of them together made during 2003. Instead, they rushed three miles through knee-deep snow to contact a tiger specialist from Ussurisky Zapovednik (Reserve).

The specialist then drove more than 50 miles over terrible roads to get to a telephone—there is no cell phone service in most of that region—and relay the information to the Russian Ministry of Natural Resources' Inspection Tiger Department in Vladivostok. Inspection Tiger, in turn, contacted Boris Litveenov,

head of their Tiger Response Team, in Terney, more than 400 miles to the north.

Litveenov's team was en route home after ten days of trying (and failing) to capture a tiger that had been killing livestock in the Chuguevsky district. To find the team, Litveenov skipped dinner, hopped in his car, and drove south. He met them an hour later, and they all immediately turned around and headed for the distressed tiger, a drive of about six hours.

Litveenov, Evgeny Tsarapkin, Victor Koodrin, and Hermann Tretiakov of the Tiger Response Team and Nikolai Reebin, capture specialist for the WCS Siberian Tiger Project, arrived at the site at about one o'clock in the morning on February 22. Nikolai quickly loaded darts with an anesthetizing agent, and the group followed their flashlight beams toward the frightened and angry roars emanating from the darkness. After Nikolai fired the darts into the cat, the team backed off until the drug took effect.

Once the tiger was safely and soundly sleeping, the team removed the snare and examined the cat for injuries. Although snares intended for ungulates sometimes capture tigers incidentally, this snare appeared to have been set specifically to catch a tiger. To the team's surprise, they found only abrasions around the animal's chest, which, although probably painful, were far from life threatening. Still, the snare had been cinched tight around the tiger's abdomen, so Litveenov, who is ultimately responsible for the animal, decided to take the tiger into captivity for observation.

The team transported the animal to Terney, the base of the Tiger Response Team and the WCS/Hornocker Wildlife Institute Siberian Tiger Project. Along the way, the tiger was dubbed Victor, after Victor Koodrin, who had driven us safely to the cat.

At Terney, Victor was released into a small enclosure. He was estimated to be an eight- to ten-year-old male, unusually fat and healthy. He weighed 385 pounds, and measured more than six feet from the tip of his nose to the base of his tail. Including his tail, Victor was nearly ten feet long. After several days of observation, we decided to put a radio collar on and release him.

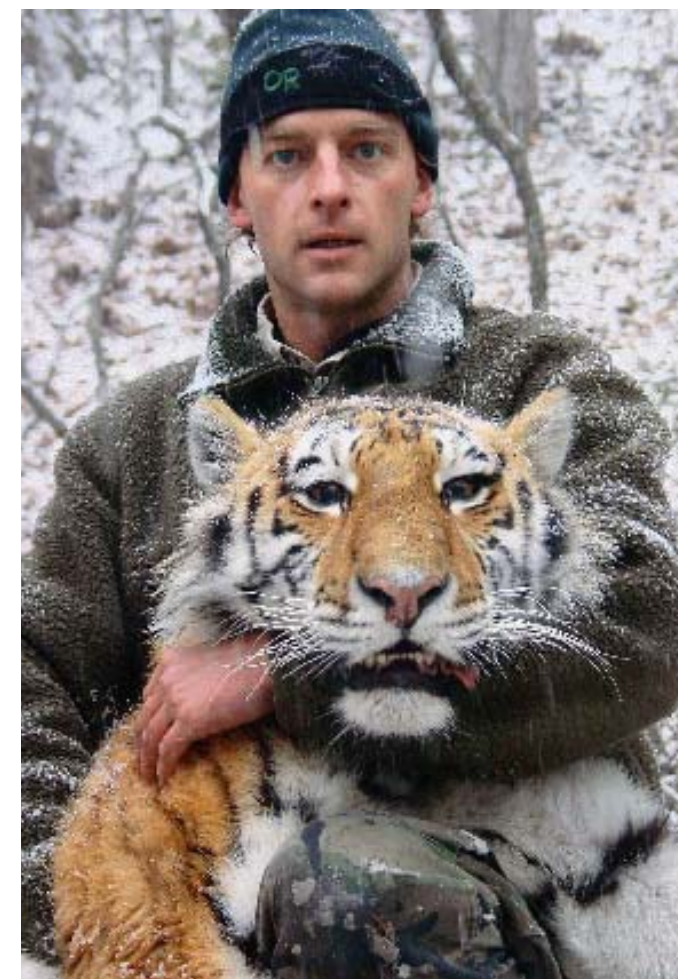
Much snow had fallen since we rescued Victor, and we worried that we would not be able to drive all the way to the spot where he had been snared. This made little difference, however, because a tiger's territory is huge—often more than 400 square miles. On February 29, Reebin, Tsarapkin, and I transported the tiger back and managed to release it about a mile from the cap-

ture site. We chose a place with good brushy cover nearby, but with enough open space so that we could sit in our vehicles and watch Victor leave his cage for freedom.

In the safety of our vehicles, we had cameras ready. A light snow began to fall as Nikolai raised the door to the cage. Victor glared at us and roared, making a great cloud of steam in the cold air. But he stayed put. Then, letting out another roar, he turned to look behind him, as if there might be some safer route of escape. Suddenly, he turned toward us again and burst out of the cage. He hit the snow and, with one great leap, disappeared into the forest.

This story is immensely encouraging. For the one or two poachers who set the snare to catch a tiger, there were several dedicated people willing, ready, and able to get the tiger out of the snare, against all odds. Perhaps there is some hope for tigers after all.

John Goodrich coordinates the WCS Siberian Tiger Project. Read more about his work and that of his Russian colleagues in "Team Tiger," page 34, and at www.savingtigers.com.



"I'm outta here!" Releasing a 385-pound Siberian tiger back into the wild is an exhilarating experience, for both the animal (opposite) and the author (right). Named Victor, after a member of Russia's Tiger Response Team, the cat had been caught in a poacher's snare set deep in the forest. This tiger is extremely lucky. Rather than having his skin and bones sold on the black market for animal parts, he literally roared out of this Land Rover and headed for the snowy woods, wearing a radio collar that will allow Goodrich and his colleagues to keep tabs on his whereabouts and habits.