

CHANGING GALIA'S COLLAR

Dale Miquelle

For the past eighteen years, WCS has been using radio-collar technology to study and conserve Siberian tigers. But when the batteries on one of our tigers' radio-collars run out – which they do every few years – it's not always a simple matter to replace them! In the early 1990s, WCS specialists developed a method to recapture radio-collared tigers from a helicopter, which allows us to replace old collars and ensure that we can continue to collect valuable information throughout the lifetime of individual tigers. WCS Russia director Dale Miquelle describes the recent helicopter capture of Galia, an adult female tiger we have known for nearly eight years.



Galia trying to hide from the helicopter along the cliffs off the Sea of Japan

“On March 31st, we set out in a monstrous Soviet helicopter to try to capture and re-collar adult tigress Galia, whom we have monitored since 2002. Her collar was due to fail any day, so it was with urgency that we flew. However, on our first day Galia outmaneuvered us. She was lying out in short stunted oak near the coast, enjoying the sun, when we first came in on the helicopter. She ran to the edge of one tall cliff, and so we backed the helicopter off, anxious that she was so close to so high a cliff – certainly not any place we would try to immobilize her. Then she ran across an area of stunted oak onto another very steep slope that ended in another cliff, so again we backed off so as not to frighten her. We decided to return by flying in from the bottom up, thinking we might spook her up and off the cliff and down into the forest – but as we rose up from sea level, staring at the cliff, she was gone! The signal from her radio-collar was booming, but Galia was not to be seen,

clearly tucked into a crevice along this cliff somewhere. Outsmarted by her, we called it a day. Round one was hers.

“The next day Galia had already moved inland 8 km up in the hills, but it took quite awhile to see her from the helicopter. She was hunkered down under a pine tree, where getting a tranquilizer dart into her would be difficult. I was up front, wedged between the pilots, doing the tracking and controlling our movements, and unfortunately seeing all as the pilots maneuvered us into position, which only reminded me why I don't like this process – to get low enough to dart a tiger, the body of the helicopter must be below the treetops. The blades of our helicopter hovered only a few feet above wildly whipping branches. No room for mistakes. We hovered and hovered and hovered, but Galia refused to give us a chance. Just as I thought it was time to call it off Kolya Rybin, our long-time capture specialist, took his first shot, and the dart delivered its dose. We waited 10 minutes, to see if another dart would be necessary. She lay down. We pushed three of our guys out, down the cable to join Galia. Before I headed back to town in the helicopter, I saw that our team was already tending to her, and I knew that all was well.



Galia tranquilized to replace her collar. We have been following Galia since 2002.



Despite her age (8 years), Galia's canines are in fine shape, although her incisors do appear worn.

Galia is not a young tigress, and the wear on her incisors shows her age, but her canines are in fine condition. By the time I got the gear off the helicopter, thanked the crew (they were good) and invited them to an evening celebration, our capture specialists had already walked out to the nearest road, waiting for me to pick them up. As a trophy, they had Galia's battered old collar in hand, exchanged for a new one that should give us 5 more years of information. Later, we learned that Galia killed a red deer within 12 hours after her capture, so the entire event was apparently not as big deal for her as it was for us!

"We also knew that Galia had consorted with a male in late December, but the expected due date had long since passed us by. Nonetheless, we had continued to closely monitor her daily movements. When she repeatedly returned to a single site in the course of a week in May, it was time for investigation. With Galia a safe distance away, our crew slipped into the site, expecting to find a



Galia's third litter: three cubs in a rocky crevice. Photo taken May 7. Cubs born approximately May 1.

kill, but instead snapped a few quick pictures of her week-old cubs – a litter of three. This is Galia's third litter, and we hope the cubs will live long and bountiful lives. But today, as a cold mix of snow and rain pelt down, I worry about them. And of course, if they survive these early days of spring, they must dodge poachers, cars, and not be tempted by livestock that surround Sikhote-Alin Reserve if they are to stay alive. But we are hopeful these cubs will grow up and become a part of a healthy tiger population in the Russian Far East."