

ON THE

LYNX

IN THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST, WCS RESEARCHERS TRACK LYNX TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER CARNIVORES

BY JOHN GOODRICH

IT WAS A COLD DAY in late December 1996. My wife and colleague, Linda Kerley, and I were tracking Katya, a Siberian tigress, and her nearly full-grown cub near the coast of the Sea of Japan in the Sikhote-Alin Zapovednik (Reserve) in the Russian Far East. We had been coordinating the WCS/Hornocker Wildlife Institute's Siberian Tiger Project for nearly two years. It was the winter's first snow, so we were excited about the prospect of once again being able to follow our radio-collared tigers' every step.

The tracks meandered down a trail along the edge of a line of cliffs that plunged into the sea—stunning scenery, especially blanketed with fresh snow. Our tigress and her cubs were taking their time, occasionally pausing to spray a tree with musty urine, and perhaps enjoying the scenery as much as we were.

Suddenly, both sets of tracks turned abruptly inland where the tigers had bounded off into the forest. We quickened our pace and soon came across the carcass of a freshly killed and partially eaten roe deer. The carcass was covered with leaves and snow. What was going on? Siberian tigers don't cover their kills. We examined the tracks in the snow closely. Crows, ravens, eagles, and wild boar had all been scavenging the kill, but they had not been responsible for the deer's death. Then we found the track of a small cat, and before I could finish wondering where this one-month-old tiger cub had come from, I realized we were looking at the track of a Eurasian lynx. A lynx had killed the roe deer.

It was then that we noticed that only one of the tigers had stopped to inspect the kill while the other had run on, chasing the lynx. The lynx had run a hundred yards or so before it had shot straight up an oak tree. Not easily dissuaded, the tiger had followed. Claw marks in the bark indicated it had gone nearly to the top. We were puzzled. Leaving the tree were tiger tracks but no lynx tracks, and we could clearly see there was no lynx in the tree. We continued to follow the tiger tracks to be sure the bigger cat had not carried the lynx away. It had not, and by the time we returned to the tree, it was dark and we had to leave. The puzzle remains unsolved because it snowed that night, covering all the tracks. We surmised that the lynx must have jumped from tree to tree to escape from the tiger.

Later, after cooking dinner on a wood stove in a small cabin on the seashore, we discussed the incident. The fate of the lynx was the least important question, only a small piece of a much larger puzzle. More important, the lynx had killed a roe deer, a significant prey species for tigers, suggesting that tigers and lynx compete for food, but to what extent? Could competition between lynx and tigers affect tiger conservation? How much pressure do lynx exert on tiger prey populations? Why did the tiger chase the lynx? To kill a competitor, to eat it, or just because it was available for the chasing? Evidence pointed to the first explanation: That neither tiger had fed on the fresh deer carcass suggested that they were not hungry. In addition, tigers do not normally climb trees, so there was probably more to the event than just a playful chase. Wouldn't it be exciting to put radio collars on a couple of lynx and answer some of these questions? Certainly, if lynx were significant competitors for tiger prey, they would need to be considered in our conservation plans for tigers. Conversely, lynx populations are declining throughout Eurasia and it would be important to know if lynx would be sufficiently protected under the umbrella of tiger conservation.

I researched the issue and learned that very little is known about lynx in the Russian Far East. Studies in Europe suggest that lynx could indeed be important competitors to tigers. Researchers in Poland had found that lynx annually killed about 26 percent of the roe deer population and 10 percent of the red deer population. Lynx in our area were purportedly larger than those in Europe (local hunters have reported animals up to 100 pounds), so the lynx may exert even more pressure on the red deer population and red deer are the most important tiger prey species. By learning more about lynx food preferences, we might be able to improve the attitudes of local people toward tigers. Because many local hunters blame tigers for low prey densities. In fact, the relationship is much more complex, and the impact of other carnivores, such as lynx, is rarely considered. A better understanding of the full predator-prey relationship is necessary to place the impact of tiger predation into perspective for hunters, wildlife managers, and scientists alike.



While tracking Siberian tigers, the author happened upon prints made by another cat—the Eurasian lynx (opposite). Today, five lynx are outfitted with radios so the team can study this possible tiger competitor (above).

Clearly, these issues needed further investigation, but funding, logistics, and the fact that we already had our hands full with radio-collared tigers, brown bears, and Asiatic black bears, forced me to put the idea on hold. Still, I kept it in the back of my mind and often brought it up during discussions with Dale Miquelle, director of the WCS Russian Far East program.

A few years after our first encounter with the lynx, both logistics and funding improved and we began to take a more community-based approach to our research. We have developed extensive databases on tigers and both bear species. In addition, Miquelle has launched studies of red deer and wild boar. With so much information on primary predators and their prey, 2001 was the ideal time to begin looking at lynx. We now have five with radio collars. So far, we have learned that males travel over areas as big as 100 square miles and prey heavily on roe deer and even take red deer, especially in winter. Our largest lynx weighs only 62 pounds, but who knows, maybe the big guy is out there somewhere. Most important, we are fitting another piece into the puzzle of the conservation of Siberian tigers and the ecosystem in which they live.

John Goodrich wrote about the ten-year joint WCS-Russia tiger program in our February 2002 issue.