

THE MAGIC OF THE TIGER

John Goodrich



PICTURE THIS: IT'S LATE DECEMBER and you are in a winter paradise in a faraway place on the coast of the Sea of Japan in the Russian Far East. You are staying in a small cabin on a small bay where Haunta-mi Creek winds its way across a sandy beach to meet the sea. You've just arrived, having hiked down along a trail through a long, marshy meadow where you saw red deer and roe deer and wild boar. You are here with a purpose: to radio-track a 450-pound male Siberian tiger named Zheny. From his signal, you know that he is resting in an oak grove less than a kilometer away; a pair of ravens perched on top of a larch tree marks precisely

the place where he lies. Maybe he's on a kill, or maybe the birds are just hanging around, ever hopeful. It's just after 4:00 P.M., and the sun is almost touching the hills across the bay. The sky is a dozen shades of blue and purple, beginning to fade to orange in the southwest. It's cold, with a stiff breeze, so you're in a hurry to split some wood and get the cabin warm. But then a red deer barks in the woods across the meadow, so before you shatter the calm with a swing of the ax, you turn on the radio receiver. Sure enough, he's moving. There's not a chance that he is going to walk out onto the beach in broad daylight—that's just a

foolish dream—but, hopeful fool that you are, you climb to the watchtower on top of the cabin to have a look.

You raise your binoculars and immediately, as if your gaze were drawn to the spot by some unseen force, he's there. Big as life, walking through the meadow along the edge of the woods. He's huge, the size of a red deer, and magnificent, thick orange-and-white coat glowing in the setting sun. A tear runs down your face because you never imagined that you might see something so beautiful that was alive and free. He moves with graceful ease. He's in no hurry, walking slowly but not hunting—maybe he's just enjoying a stroll along the coast? Then he ducks back into the woods, gliding through underbrush, but instead of disappearing into the forest he turns and continues along the meadow's edge.

Thinking that he'll never hear you at five hundred meters against the noise of the wind and the waves, you utter a few words of awe. He freezes, snaps his head around, and locks his big yellow eyes on you, white face set off against orange body. You also freeze, hardly breathing, and wait, praying he doesn't bolt. But he's known you were there all along, and, after making sure you are keeping your distance, he continues on his way, as slowly as ever. Suddenly, he turns sharply to his right and crouches as if drinking. Then he stands and does a flehmen, turning his head from side to side several times. After maybe fifteen seconds, he crouches and drinks in the scent again—three sniffs and three flehmen before he continues on his way, having spent about four minutes examining the scent. And now you know his purpose—he's following a female who passed this way sometime earlier. (Tomorrow you will find her tracks and determine that she moved through about a day earlier than Zheny.) Twenty meters ahead, he pauses to scrape and then sprays a bush with urine another fifty meters farther on. He approaches the end of the meadow, turns, and walks down to the beach. As he strolls along the sand you wonder if he finds the activity as peaceful as you do, or if he's just following the path of the tigress before him. After a few hundred meters, he reaches the far side of

the bay, where the beach gives way to a steep, rocky shoreline. He continues on, picking his way among the rocks. A red deer spooks and bolts seventy-five meters above him, but he barely takes notice—too busy keeping track of his tigress.

This is truly a dream: a tiger walking along an icy beach flanked by towering snow-covered cliffs, silhouetted by the deep orange of a long since set winter sun. Finally, he reaches a point where the cliffs drop straight into the ocean and, after spraying them twice to mark his passing, he turns up the hill and disappears back into the forest, forty-five minutes after he first appeared.

You are a conservation biologist fighting to save the last of the world's tigers: a difficult and thankless job. But a few times a year, you get an experience like today's, from which you return to the battle with renewed energy, with the hope that your grandchildren will have the opportunity to watch his grandchildren walk the same beach.

JOHN GOODRICH received a Ph.D. in zoology from the University of Wyoming in 1994. In March 1995, he moved to Terney, Russia, and began working as the field coordinator for the Hornocker Wildlife Institute's (HWI) Siberian Tiger Project. HWI later merged with the Wildlife Conservation Society and John is now the field coordinator for Sikhotealin research projects, which have included brown bears, Asiatic black bears, Eurasian lynx, wild boar, and red deer, in addition to Amur tigers.