

AN EXTRAORDINARY GIFT

By Svetlana Soutryina



One of the delightful things about our work, in my opinion, is that sometimes we receive surprising and simply extraordinary gifts. This May brought us an enormous surprise. But, everything in due course.

Over the 18 years of the Siberian Tiger Project, we have come to learn that, on average, tigresses usually have a litter every two years – during this time the cubs have time to grow up and learn all they need to live independently, and their mother is then ready for her next set of little ones. So when Galia's – one of our radio-collared tigresses' – cubs turned two years old and left their mother in search of their own territory, we began to watch Galia's movements with particular interest. We didn't want to miss her meeting with a male tiger and the birth of her next litter.

But a half a year went by, and then a year, and still, there were no cubs. Every time our tigress spent a few days in one place, we thought, "Perhaps she has a den there..." Every time that we couldn't hear Galia's radio-signal for a few days in a row, we hoped, by way of explaining her disappearance, that she had given birth in some remote corner of Sikhote-Alin Biosphere Reserve. More than once we went in search of our "disappearing" tigress, but, as if on purpose, she would immediately reappear, her signal strong, and we understood that, as before, she still had no cubs. We knew that males periodically visited Galia's home range, and a few times we saw her tracks next to those of a male, but still... no cubs...

At the end of December, Galia spent a few days together with one of our radio-collared male tigers. Counting off 107 days (the usual length of pregnancy for tigresses), we waited impatiently for the beginning of April. But in the beginning of April, and in the middle of April, Galia traveled about her home range as usual, never dallying long in any one spot. Apparently – once again! – there was something she hadn't liked about her suitor.

Well, nothing to be done but continue to monitor our fastidious striped lady and hope that, sooner or later, she would find a mate she considered worthy to be the father of her children.

While taking Galia's location on the first of May (that is, while determining her location according to her radio-signal, with the help of an antenna and receiver), we walked out on the edge of the catchment area of a small stream in the southern part of the reserve. Walking around a small crag, we noticed tiger tracks on the sandy soil next to some rocks. Examining the tracks more closely, we saw that Galia had not just approached the rocks, but, as far as we could tell, had carefully examined them, had wriggled in between them. What is this – a display of feline curiosity, or was she looking for a place to den? By this time, however, we had already given up hope for the latter.

But the next day, our tigress was in the same place. Looking through our binoculars at the place where Galia was – according to her signal – we saw that there were also a number of rocky outcrops there. We convinced ourselves that she had just killed a deer or was resting, warming herself in the sunshine. We were simply afraid to think of anything else – after all, we had already been mistaken so many times! Over the next few days, Galia stayed in the same place.

The next events I leave to the description of Nikolai Rybin, long-time Siberian Tiger Project field researcher: "On May 6 Volodya Melnikov and I headed out to work. Taking Galia's location, we determined that she had left the area she had been since May 1, and was now four kilometers downstream. We decided to investigate the area where she had spent the past few days, in order to find the remains of a kill or other signs to explain her long delay in one place. Upon arriving at the site of her previous locations, we began to thoroughly examine the area. And in a few moments I heard a whispered gasp from Volodya. 'Cubs!!!' I ran up to him and looked through a gap in the rocks where he was pointing. Three small striped orange lumps lay in a small rocky recess, almost blending in with the dry oak leaves covering the ground below them. We were looking at them from above, and they didn't even suspect of our presence. We saw a passageway leading into this recess from the opposite side, through which Galia was able to get into and out of the den. After our first shock and surprise, we became conscious that while the discovery of such small cubs was an enormous stroke of luck, we must act very carefully so as not to disturb either the cubs or their mother. At such a time it is critical for a tigress to feel

completely safe. We took a few quick photographs (so that no one would doubt that this time, they really did exist!) and left the den as quickly as possible.

We ran down the slope, crossed the stream and climbed up the opposite cliff. The excitement and tension gradually wore off. After our little run we sat down to have a rest, a smoke, and look again at our photos. Only now did we really begin to understand that, finally, Galia had CUBS.”

And this is the gift we received from these first days of May. Looking at the photographs of the new cubs that day, I still couldn't believe that it had really happened. We had all been waiting for this event for so long... That same evening it began to rain, and falling asleep, I imagined Galia lying in the dry and cozy den, licking her cubs and keeping them warm.

For the next few days Galia stayed in the same place, meaning that the brief presence of people hadn't bothered her – she didn't move the cubs to another place, and she didn't abandon them. Now, driving by the spot where a view of the mountains opens up from the road – the spot that Galia chose as the first home for her new children – I feel sorry for other people, also driving by, who can't even begin to guess that a striped family rests quietly nearby. And I dearly hope that in time all three little striped bundles will grow up to become such beautiful, strong and intelligent animals as their mother. But whether or not this occurs depends a lot on us – on people.

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