

# Sent to Siberia

Polly Clark's research into the rare Amur tiger was funded by a grant from the SoA's Authors' Foundation

research

**O**bsessed with animals, I left school early to become a zookeeper. The career didn't last, but my fascination did – and with tigers, above all. The outlandish beauty and untameable wildness of these creatures ignited something within me and they began populating my thoughts and poems.

Most recently they became the central force of my second novel, *Tiger*. To write it, I needed to find them in the wild. People who want to research tigers usually go to India: there, they can be easily seen in reserves, and the temperatures are bearable. But for my novel I was specifically interested in the Siberian or Amur tiger.

There are several sub-species of tiger, all originating in Asia and each adapted to a specific environment. The Amur tiger is the largest naturally occurring cat in the world and its habitat is one of the most hostile on earth. It lives wild in the forests of the Russian Far East, a swathe of land to the north of Mongolia, China and North Korea. These forests, known as the taiga, are the largest in the northern hemisphere – and one of the last pristine ecosystems in the world, an area of unique biodiversity where the Siberian ice plains meet the warmer climate of East Asia. At one time there were upwards of 30,000 tigers in the Far East, which gives an indication of the vastness of the wilderness they ruled – a male or 'king' Amur tiger controls a territory of up to 500 square miles, within which are the territories of up to five females. Now there are just 500 Amur tigers left alive, all confined to one finger of land alongside the Sea of Japan, through which runs the Amur river, after whom they are named.

When I knew I was going to write a novel about these tigers, I knew I had to go. The problem is that it is almost impossible to see an Amur tiger in the wild. Sooyong Park's story is salutary. His 2011 memoir, *The Great Soul of Siberia*, details his devoted attempt, over several years, to film these tigers in the wild. He describes how he dug himself a grave-sized hole in the taiga and lived in it for six months at a time, and only then, half mad with solitude, managed to capture the tigers on film.

Even if you do find one, there are attendant dangers. The Amur tiger holds a grudge like almost no other creature – apart from humans. Because the male has such an enormous territory to patrol, it is impossible for it to monitor boundaries at all times, so it relies on creating a climate of fear to prevent infractions. It remembers and punishes every transgression of its boundaries. If you try to kill an Amur tiger, meanwhile, and do not succeed, it will remember you and devote itself to finding and killing you. This extends to its

immediate kin, and – legend has it – to theft from its kills as well. In such a vast and hostile environment, where food is scarce, control must be maintained at all times. Revenge became a central theme of *Tiger*.

I wanted to create real tigers in my novel, not symbolic ones, so it was vital to bring to life the landscape within which they live. The Amur tiger is a toweringly successful example of adaptation to a highly specialised environment. With the addition of its perfect camouflage, it expresses a masterly solution to the problems of survival in the taiga. I could only know it, and thereby evoke it, by experiencing its habitat.

## A male or 'king' Amur tiger controls a territory of up to 500 square miles

A poor traveller at the best of times, I set about, with some reluctance, trying to find a way to undertake the research. There are no holidays to the Russian Far East. No fun safaris. No one wants to go to the taiga: the temperatures in winter are often as low as  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and there are no concessions to the comforts of tourists. Observation is by following the tracks in the snow and setting camera traps in places frequented by the tigers; it is hard, expert work, full of trial and error. There is no phone signal, so even if you did experience an animal sighting there would be no way of sharing it on Instagram. You have to *really* want to go; you have to be willing to cross the globe at great expense and endure sub-zero temperatures for a creature you won't ever encounter in the flesh. It is less a research trip than a pilgrimage.

Through the internet I found Martin Royle, who puts together highly specialised tracking trips to the taiga. He is a pioneer in the field, bringing the first ever eco-tourists to the region. He informed me that only 100 non-Russians had visited the remote camp to which I was journeying. It lies five hours by truck along crater-filled logging trails from Khabarovsk, the nearest city. At the camp there was no mains power and no sanitation.

Even as I discussed the trip with Martin and handed over the deposit, I could not imagine being there. I avoid extremes in life; the process of writing already feels so extreme to me. The funding received from the SoA's Authors' Foundation frequently stopped me backing out: knowing that others believed in my project drove me forward when my conviction wobbled. There were moments – particularly as I searched the internet for high-risk insurance that covered gunshot wounds and wild animal attacks – when I secretly hoped the trip

Further information about the Authors' Foundation can be found on p.67.



Polly Clark's trip to Russia's Far East was organised by Royle Safaris. *Tiger* was published by riverrun in May. Photos © Alexander Balatov.

would turn out to be a scam. But it wasn't. All the preparations worked out, and I was going.

In *The Great Soul of Siberia*, Sooyong Park asserts that 'In the forest, intuition is science', and the truth of this is nowhere more evident than in the process of tracking. Tracks, and their surrounding circumstances, give essential, often life-saving, information in a hostile environment. The depth of the tracks in the snow, the way the weight has been distributed, as well as the size of the pad offer precise data on the identity of the tiger and when it passed by. If the track is sharp it is very recent; if blurred, the sun has melted it – an experienced tracker can tell how many suns, how many days, have passed. The sun melts the print (not much, it's never warm in the winter taiga), then the night temperatures freeze it again. It begins to fade, like so many copies. More clues are contained in the branches pressed or broken by the tiger's movement.

So informative are tracks that the snow in the taiga is called the white book. I did not anticipate how these tracks would inspire the very structure of my novel. Intellectually, I understood that for as long as new snow does not fall, prints remain, crossing each other and affecting each other. A predator coming across the tracks of prey will change its course to follow. I saw this countless times on the forest floor. This entwining of narratives only became a powerfully felt experience, however, when I was confronted by the sheer scale and complexity of the interlinked tracks. Each set appears alongside others in space but not in time. In the long perishing winter, when very little changes, it is cycles that govern life, not linear time.

Four narratives form *Tiger*, all converging, ultimately, and all linked by the tiger's own journey. *Tiger* is a kind of epic (it is impossible to write a small-themed book about Russia), and had to find its coherence outside normal constraints; I needed the structure of the environment to tell the story of that environment. This was a profound gift from my trip.

Another gift came from the people of the taiga. Living alongside the animals in this remote forest are small, parallel communities. Russian men gather in forest camps, surviving by hunting, logging, and now, fledgling eco-tourism. (The old industries of mining have died in the Far East, but the taiga still offers a subsistence living, and tigers are now strongly protected

in the region, which gives opportunities for work in conservation.) There are also the Udeghe, the originally nomadic people indigenous to the area. They still survive in the taiga, although their distinctiveness as a tribe has been diluted by intermarriage with ethnic Russians, and their nomadic way of life, under threat since this resource-rich region was first mapped in the nineteenth century, was finally banned as part of

## The snow in the taiga is called the white book

Communist collectivisation. While there is some effort now to bring the Udeghe language back to life, these people – who once worshipped the bear and the tiger as lords of the forest, foraged for ginseng and medicinal herbs, and wandered the forest hunting deer and sable – now find themselves in a forlorn position and, like other Russians, are leaving their villages for the cities.

We visited their village at the time of year when the men are away hunting and the women stay in the village to fish. I interviewed one of the women, who pronounced that she was Udeghe first, Russian second, and her own daughter was learning the language that had been lost.

My interpreter, who was Russian, explained that it was highly unlikely she would say anything negative to a westerner, via a Russian interpreter – but translation was not necessary to see an ancient culture struggling to survive.

In my novel, a band of Russian hunters, and an Udeghe huntress and her daughter have their own stories woven into the drama. The tiger's tale cannot be told without them; nor can theirs without the tiger. I learned that the health of the tiger population demonstrates the health of the forest, on which all depend: the fortunes of both Russians and Udeghe are inextricably linked with that of the forest's apex predator. This interdependence of people and the environment was something I felt with visceral force, and it was a privilege to see it for myself. As the Udeghe know, no forest is truly alive without its presiding spirit – and no novel either. The tigers of my novel command a dynasty, then are lost to the forest. Their return is a story of hope, which ultimately is what *Tiger* is about – for the wild, and for the survival of vulnerable creatures, both animal and human. ●

