

The Scotsman

Feature about Siberia trip and introducing Tiger

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It was my second day in the Russian Far East researching the Siberian, or Amur, tiger for my novel. Beneath a hard, white sun, our little band set out into the snowy forest to follow tracks the guide had spotted. As instructed we followed them away from the direction of travel, back in time. It is very dangerous to follow a tiger directly; when it senses you it is highly likely to take it as a threat and double invisibly behind you. We were piecing together the story of where the tiger had come from, gleaning details from the prints and other disturbances in the forest. Tracking is intense, forensic work.

Then, in a small clearing, at rest in the snow – a boar's heart. It was the size of a man's two fists and not yet frozen, which meant the tiger we were tracking had killed the boar very recently.

One of the guides picked the heart up and there was debate among the men in Russian. While I didn't understand their words, I knew what they were discussing. The heart is one of the first parts of a kill that the tiger eats. Why had it left this one? Was it nearby, having been disturbed? And should we – modern (but hungry) people in a frozen primeval forest – take any notice of the ancient legend: *never steal from a tiger's kill or it will come for you?*

Just ahead, the boar's ransacked corpse was picked almost clean by crows. Its ribs gaped like a shark. There was virtually nothing left but this heart. I was still reeling from the long plane trip from the UK across eleven time zones, the five hour truck journey into the taiga, the isolated camp with no sanitation, phone signal or reliable power. For a moment I saw myself as if from above. A tiny group, armed with ancient guns and unconvincing flares,

far from communication or any rescue, standing before a gruesome murder scene, holding its greatest prize. Cold bit into any fragment of exposed skin, a blistering cold, more like fire. I realised I was afraid.

But this is good, excellent, in fact, I told myself. Just what's needed. The writer's job is to recreate the splendour and fear of this scene for the reader, for in this terrible manifestation is another kind of heart: the heart of my story. I glanced at my companions and sensed that they too were trying not to acknowledge our vulnerability at this moment. It was like a loss of pressure on a plane, the peculiar silence, the giddy drop, the persistent social force against showing fear. We waited while our guides contemplated the scene, taking pictures, measuring prints, one holding the all important heart all the while. These dilemmas – whether to obey a legend, whether to believe one's own unease, whether to go with one's 'civilised' or 'wild' instinct and what those really mean – are central to the story of *Tiger*. I was right. This *was* an excellent trip. I just wasn't enjoying myself.

Tiger follows the dramatic fortunes of a dynasty of Amur tigers in the taiga, entwined as they are with poachers, conservationists, and the struggling tribe of indigenous people who persist alongside, the Udeghe. One tiger is captured and ends up in a zoo in the UK, not an ordinary zoo, but one eccentrically dogged in its belief that interaction between keepers and tigers should be encouraged. I was very interested in John Aspinall's famous vision for the relationship between human and captive animal: he encouraged play between keepers and animals in his zoo, even after two keepers were killed by tigers. One of my characters, Frieda, struggling with addiction and the aftermath of a vicious attack by a stranger, forms a special bond with her orphan tiger, and becomes part of the campaign to reintroduce its cubs back into 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. I began to ask myself, as many people had

asked before I left, why put yourself through this? What is so necessary about the Siberian tiger? This is, after all, one of the most hostile environments on earth. I am a poor traveller and this is not a tourist destination. This was not a fun safari. A key selling point of the (expensive) trip was that you would never see a tiger in the flesh.

The Amur tiger is the largest cat in the world, and it is the apex predator of an entire continent. But – and this is why I am so powerfully interested in it – unlike almost every other creature on earth, except for humans, the Amur tiger has an immense memory and capacity for holding a grudge. Revenge is vital to its survival.

At one time there were upwards of 30,000 tigers across 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 5 females. Now there are just 500 left wild, all confined to one finger of land alongside the Sea of Japan, through which runs the Amur river, after whom they are named.

The king tiger spends his days patrolling the boundary of his territory. But this is so enormous that he cannot possibly police it effectively in person. Instead he maintains control by creating a climate of fear, and ruthlessly punishing any infraction he comes across. If you try to shoot and only injure an Amur tiger it will remember you and devote its days to stalking you out and killing you. In his non-fiction account, *The Tiger*, John Vaillant describes one such encounter where the tiger’s determination to avenge its injury persists even when the unfortunate poacher moves out of the forest in fear. Months later, driven back in by the need to hunt, the poacher is sure the tiger will have forgotten. I won’t spoil the end of that story for you, but this ferocious sense of entitlement extends to a tiger’s kin, and also – so the Udeghe traditionally believe – to its food.

Which brings us back to our Russian hunter guides, a heart in their hands, a clash of ancient and modern thinking; of instinct and machismo; of need versus reverence. Even as I

felt silly for voicing my unease, I said, through the interpreter, to the lead guide, 'Shouldn't we leave the heart behind? Isn't it dangerous?'

He laughed at me, because he had to. 'Sergei wants to make soup out of it. He doesn't want to waste it.'

'Won't the tiger come for it?'

Our guide leader shrugged, said something in Russian that the interpreter did not pass on. He turned from us and examined the stripes of the forest, squinting beneath his frosted eyebrows. When you are in the taiga, with its cedars, black shadows and white underbelly, you understand that the tiger's camouflage is perfect and total.

'Sergei,' he called. 'I think the heart's been out too long. It's not good to eat. I think we should leave it.'