Tigers

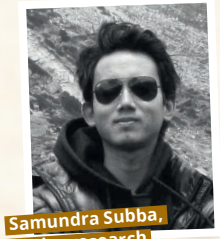
YOUR FIELD REPORT

ISSUE 29

Wild tigers can travel freely between India and Nepal along Khata Wildlife Corridor. Some even raise their cubs in the forest

Hello!

Welcome to your latest tiger update



Samundra Subba, senior research officer, WWF-Nepal

Since your last update, we've been busy monitoring the wildlife using Khata Corridor – a vital passageway between India and Nepal that you helped restore. Every year, we survey this vibrant forest ecosystem to check how tigers, rhinos and other wildlife are getting on, and this wouldn't be possible without your support. Your support allows us to train forest staff and local citizen scientists, as well as provide essential field gear and monitoring equipment, such as camera batteries and memory cards. Elsewhere in Nepal, we've been continuing our three-year survey to document the return of tigers to areas where they haven't been spotted for years. Turn over to see what we've found out. **Dhan'yavāda!**

(This means 'thank you' in Nepali!)

FRESH FACES

Thanks to you, we've been helping restore forests across a vital landscape for tigers – and they have the big cats' seal of approval!

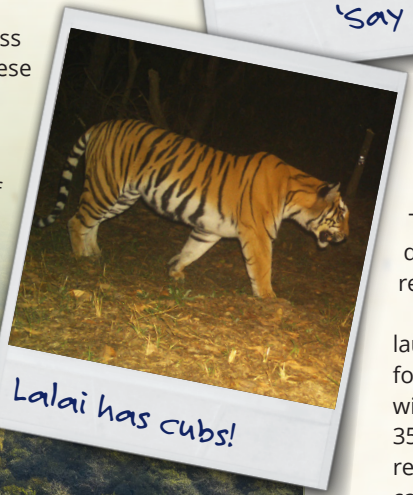
The Terai Arc is a vast patchwork of forests, agricultural land, wetlands and protected areas that straddles the lowlands and foothills of north-west India and southern Nepal. It's thought to be home to more than 1,000 tigers, but it's important to get a clear picture of exactly where these big cats are roaming. Tigers have lost an estimated 92% of their former range, but with populations growing, could they be reclaiming lost lands?

In 2023, we began a three-year camera trap survey of the central part of the Terai Arc Landscape, beginning in forests that hadn't been properly studied since 2016. We were thrilled when our camera traps snapped a pair of breeding tigers in the area – for the first time ever!

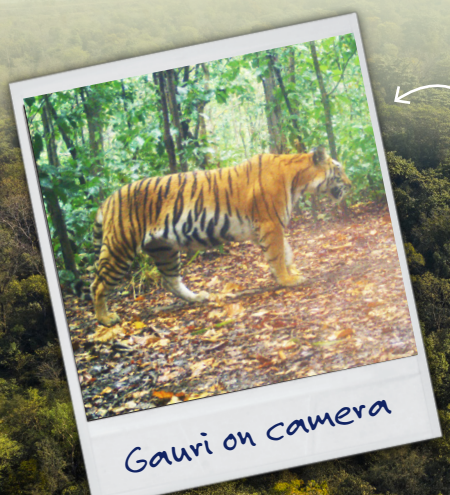
Since then, we've moved our cameras to another region, where we've made an equally notable discovery – three tigers have been spotted where no big cats were recorded during our last survey in 2015-2017. Two of them had probably wandered over from a wildlife sanctuary across the border in India. These sightings are crucial for understanding the wider distribution, and conservation needs, of tigers in this area.

Community-based citizen scientists and forest staff are trained to carry out the survey

'Say cheese!'



Lalai has cubs!



Gauri on camera

Shivapothi's daughters

Surveying the whole of the central Terai Arc Landscape will take three years

In the heart of the Terai Arc Landscape we monitor Khata Corridor, a forest you helped restore, which provides a safe route for wildlife moving between Bardia National Park in Nepal and Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India. Our latest camera trap photos revealed four adult tigers we've never seen here before.

Corridor of life

Over the years, we've come to love some of the corridor's resident big cats. We've been following Shivapothi – a tigress first recorded in 2013 – and her family, and were delighted to see two of her adult daughters, Lalai and Gauri, on camera. The sisters were in good health, and it was great to discover that Lalai has two cubs of her own. It's so rewarding to see successful breeding in the corridor.

Since the Terai Arc Landscape programme was launched in 2001, it's brought 66,800 hectares of forest back to life and helped almost triple Nepal's wild tiger population from an estimated 121 in 2010 to 355 in 2022. Years of work with local communities to restore crucial habitat is clearly paying off as the big cats expand their range. Thanks to you, we can make sure this vital landscape continues to support future generations of tigers.

Samundra

LITTLE AND LARGE

Our work to restore Khata Corridor isn't just benefiting the world's biggest cats – it's providing a lifeline for some of the smallest ones too.

Camera traps recently captured images of a rusty spotted cat, a rare species found only in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Weighing up to two kilogrammes, it's smaller than a domestic cat, and up to 300 times lighter than a tiger!

Despite their tiny stature, rusty spotted cats are formidable hunters thanks to their sensitive hearing, keen sense of smell and excellent eyesight. Like tigers, their forest habitat has been fragmented into isolated patches, and as a result they're currently classified as near threatened.

By the age of about two years, every young tiger must be ready to find their own territory to raise another family

FAMILY MATTERS

Each generation of wild tigers helps secure a future for these endangered big cats. But raising a litter of cubs is no easy task

Let's start with the good news: numbers of wild tigers are on the up across much of their range. The latest Global Tiger Forum estimated there are 5,574 of the cats in the wild – a big increase from the all-time low of 3,200 in 2010. And while your support contributes significantly to this recovery, supporting our vital work in key tiger landscapes, we must give credit to the mothers who birth, nurse, protect and prepare each new litter of precious cubs. Because raising a family is a big job for this biggest of cats.

Much of a tiger's life is spent in solitude. Before starting a family, each young female hunts alone across her territory, which might be tropical or temperate forest, mangrove swamp or grassland, in a range scattered from India to the Russian Far East and south to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. But at the age of about three or four, she becomes ready to mate for the first time (males are slightly slower to develop, becoming sexually mature a year or two later).

When a female is receptive – roughly once a month – she advertises the fact by scent-marking her territory with pungent urine, and by roaring loudly to attract a mate. If a male appears, drawn by her call and intoxicating scent, the pair circle one another, vocalising and rubbing. If the courtship is successful, they'll mate multiple times over the next few days. It's never more than a short acquaintance, though: the male won't hang around, and leaves the female's home range once she's no longer receptive.

Safe space for cubs

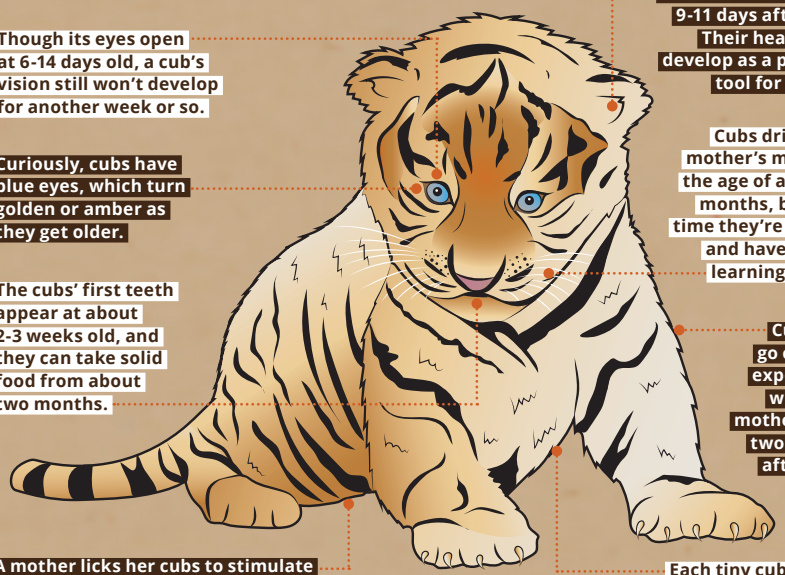
About three and a half months after mating, the female is ready to give birth and, before the critical moment, she seeks a suitable den. In India, home to by far the largest proportion of the world's wild tigers, that typically means finding a cave or a dense patch of undergrowth. Here, she'll produce a litter of usually two to four cubs – occasionally up to six – each weighing only about 1kg; that's only about 1% of her size.

Born blind, the cubs first open their eyes after six to 14 days, though their vision won't develop fully for another week or so. During

Words: Paul Bloomfield | Images: © Nitish Madan / WWF-International | © Nachiketa Bajaj / Shutterstock / WWF

NEWBORN CUBS: THE FIRST FEW MONTHS

Completely helpless, newborn tigers are totally dependent on their mother for many months after birth.



Though its eyes open at 6-14 days old, a cub's vision still won't develop for another week or so.

A cub's ears only open 9-11 days after birth. Their hearing will develop as a powerful tool for hunting.

Curiously, cubs have blue eyes, which turn golden or amber as they get older.

Cubs drink their mother's milk until the age of about six months, by which time they're weaned and have started learning to hunt.

The cubs' first teeth appear at about 2-3 weeks old, and they can take solid food from about two months.

Cubs first go on short expeditions with their mother about two months after birth.

A mother licks her cubs to stimulate circulation and bowel movements, but also to keep them clean, so that an unrelated male won't detect their odour and attack them.

Each tiny cub weighs only around 1kg at birth, when it's totally blind and barely able to crawl.

those vital first weeks, the mother leaves her helpless young only rarely, to drink and eat. And she really does need to eat: to produce enough milk for a litter of hungry tiger cubs, she must increase her nutritional intake by about 50%.

On her return to the den, she calls to her youngsters and licks them to keep them clean and to stimulate bowel movements – messy but important. Her protection and care is crucial: not all cubs will reach maturity. If all of this litter perish, she might mate again soon after and produce another, perhaps five months later.

Life lessons

The cubs first emerge from the den after three or four weeks, albeit sporadically and at their mother's encouragement. In another month or so, they're brave enough to tag along on brief expeditions. A further month on and they'll stay out in the open. This is playtime, their antics led by a dominant cub – usually a male – who's more active and adventurous than his siblings. Later, he'll probably be the first to strike out on his own.

Though weaned at six months old, and already weighing around 40kg, the cubs still need their mother to provide food and protection. Play now becomes focused on learning hunting skills, at first by targeting inanimate objects – a stick, perhaps – then accompanying the tigress on hunts.
By the time they're 18 months old, they have permanent canine teeth and are skilled predators.

After about two years with mum, the cubs must head off to find territories for themselves. For her, it's time to think about having another family. Female tigers give birth every three years on average, and each litter typically has a different father. With luck, she may produce well over a dozen more young over her lifetime – each new arrival a welcome boost to the world's small but thankfully growing wild tiger population. ■

DID YOU KNOW?

Tigers are pretty vocal during mating, with both the male and female making grunts, growls, roars, moans, snarls, hisses and gasps.

Even after weaning, and while they learn the art of hunting, cubs depend on their mother to provide food until they're about 18 months old

Illustration: Julia Young | Image © Shutterstock / Sourabh Bharti / WWF

MELTING POINT

Sea ice supports incredible wildlife at both poles, but it's disappearing before our eyes

Our planet's north pole is surrounded by a vast frozen sea. Life in the Arctic depends on this sea ice. Caribou migrate across it. Polar bears use it as a platform from which to hunt seals. The algae that forms beneath its surface supports an ecosystem teeming with wildlife, including beluga whales and narwhals.

At the opposite pole, in Antarctica, emperor penguins need 'fast' (stable) sea ice to raise their chicks on, while beneath the surface, under the ice, krill breed in enormous numbers. These tiny, shrimp-like creatures are a cornerstone of the Southern Ocean's food web, providing food for everything from fish and seals to Adélie penguins and blue whales.

Sea ice also helps cool the planet as it reflects the sun's rays back into space. But greenhouse gases caused by human activities have raised temperatures globally, which is having a huge impact in polar regions. Sea ice is forming later, breaking up sooner and becoming thinner – with devastating consequences for wildlife and for humankind.

In the Arctic, shrinking ice means polar bears are forced to spend more time on land, where hunting opportunities are limited. In Antarctica, four of the five known emperor penguin colonies in one area experienced breeding failure in 2022 when thousands of chicks died – the ice broke up before they'd grown their waterproof feathers. These and other polar species are facing an uncertain future.

It's vital that the average global temperature rise is kept below 1.5°C, otherwise the Arctic could be ice-free every summer by the middle of this century. What happens next depends on the actions we take today to reduce carbon emissions. With your support, we're pushing for urgent global climate policies to keep warming in check.

DO ONE THING!

Cut your carbon

Try to increase the proportion of delicious plant-based foods in your diet

Antarctic sea ice is vitally important for all the wildlife living on, under and around it. From tiny krill to vast whales, their survival depends on keeping global warming under 1.5°C

MAKE A CHANGE

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As well as helping to safeguard tigers, you support our other vital work to help protect our beautiful planet and its wildlife. Thank you.