

The Marco Polos of Ranthambhore

Proving their intelligence and tenacity yet again, tigers are literally creating new inroads that can help in the conservation of their clan. We present a report on the striped explorers from Western India.

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About 100 years ago, Rajasthan provided 50,000 square kilometres for tigers; today, this area has been greatly reduced to a measly 3,000 square kilometres. In essence, tiger ranges in Rajasthan have been reduced to 6% of their historical range. After the Sariska debacle, Ranthambhore's tigers are the only naturally occurring population in Rajasthan; and the only hope for tigers in the entire Aravalli hill ranges and many other protected areas in the state. The closest tiger habitat to Ranthambhore is Panna Tiger Reserve which is 400 km away with a diverse gene pool.

In this essay, we focus on seven different Ranthambhore tigers that left the protected boundaries of the reserve in search of new homes. During this expedition, they crossed mighty rivers, dodged numerous villages, traversed highways and train tracks, and hid in large agricultural landscapes. They revealed various connectivity alternatives for Ranthambhore that could become potential tiger habitats. These seven big cats proved that viable corridors still exist, and most importantly, they revealed the stealth of their kind – going unnoticed for hundreds of kilometres in human-dominated landscapes. Understanding such endeavours with science and monitoring are key for developing Western India's tiger landscape, which is critical for their long term survival. These stories are a tribute to their fortitude and intelligence, and their overwhelming instinct towards finding newer territories to repopulate. None of these tigers were fitted with a radio collar or a GPS tag, but they were followed by sincere forest guards, ground staff and members of field conservation organisations. This short compilation is a crux of those endless hours of reporting and data collection for the readers.

The resourceful seven used three different routes out of Ranthambhore: the Southern, Northern and Eastern corridors. However, not a single tiger happened to use the Western corridor due to lack of suitable habitat and major anthropogenic disturbance. We shall discuss



T7 from Ranthambhore explored newer territories northwards through human-dominated areas and reached Mathura before settling in Bharatpur's Keoladev NP. Today, T7 has been shifted to Sariska.

RAHUL RAO

each of these areas and their potential to turn into critical tiger habitats.

THE SOUTHERN CORRIDOR

Aravalli and Vindhyan hill ranges extend to the southern side of Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve and form many protected areas such as Ramgarh Vishdhari Sanctuary, Muknadra Hill Tiger Reserve, Bhensroad Garh Sanctuary, etc.

Broken Tail - The first wanderer

This sub-adult male, nicknamed 'Broken Tail', left the park in 2002. It was a male cub from the first litter of the famous tigress, Machali. At that time, no one ever thought that a tiger would migrate from Ranthambhore to the forests of Darra Sanctaury, near Kota. Darra forests used to have tigers until the 1960s, after which the population dwindled and vanished. In 2002, while the Ranthambhore management was trying to find the missing 'Broken Tail', some people in Darra reported seeing tiger pug marks. At first the possibilities of tiger presence in Darra was dismissed but the pug mark evidence was there. On 15th July 2003, a heart-wrenching sight cleared the mystery, 'Broken Tail' lay dead near the railway track in Darra, hit by a train in the night. He had covered an aerial distance of 140 km from Ranthambhore. The whole story was finally revealed in April, 2005, when the forest officers matched the picture.

The incident is still vivid in the eyes of Kota-based wildlife enthusiast Ravindra Singh Tomar. He was the one who clicked the historic image which showed the sad end of the tiger. The image is valuable to the history of tiger conservation and instrumental in making Mukandra hill area the third tiger reserve of the state.



The tracking team uses several signs to track tigers which have strayed outside the park, including pugmarks, scats and visual documentation.

DHARMENDRA KHANDAL



ADITYA SINGH

T38 was forced out of his territory when he was an sub-adult tiger by a dominant male tiger. His mother, T13, who was with two young cubs at that time was also displaced by this dominant male.

Broken Tail died in that accident but it revealed problems of tiger survival so far never thought of – that they need more space and connectivity with nearby tiger landscapes. The forest department established the fact that Broken Tail used various hilly tracts to reach Kota. An acclaimed documentary produced on Broken Tail by filmmaker Collin Stanford Johnson, collected evidence and proved that the tiger used this upland corridor to move up to Kota. In Rajasthan, all the forest areas are non-cultivable hilly terrain while the rest of the cultivable plain areas have been converted to agricultural landscapes. The forest maps show that upland regions are the only possible forest corridors between these two protected areas. The exact path Broken Tail used for his travel will always be a mystery but another tigress (T-35) puts more light in this regard.

T 35 – The lonely lady

It is often believed that only male tigers move out of the park but this female proved otherwise. T35 was originally from Ranthambhore’s Gilai Sagar area, who moved out to Kota-Sultanpura area and is still living there. Amazingly, she is living outside the protected area for almost four years since January 2010; covering an aerial distance of 90 km. This is neither a sanctuary nor

a tiger reserve and lacks any kind of security. She has walked alongside the Chambal and reached Kalisindh or Parbati shore which is her present address. Efforts have been made twice to shift T35 to Sariska, but both have failed. Besides, the local communities opposed the move. This is an interesting turn: the concerns of simple village folks were assuaged as the tigress took care of the blue bull and feral cattle problem that had plagued them for a long time. Presently, she is just 45-50 kms away from the Broken Tail’s last known



Broken Tail, one of the first tigers to move away from Ranthambhore and indicate the importance of corridors, unfortunately met perished under a train while crossing a railway track.

RAVINDRA SINGH TOMAR

point. Filmmakers and forest department officials often question the possibility that she is using the same river corridor or upland corridor path that Broken Tail must have used.

Sub adult male tiger (T 62) of Sawai ManSingh Sanctuary – Playing hide and seek

This tiger, T62 disappeared from Sawai ManSingh Sanctuary, also part of RTR. His disappearance from the reserve became a raging point of discussion on social media. However the tiger reappeared after six months, when it was discovered that he had killed a big bull, 50 km away from the reserve, in August 2013. Eventually, it moved further and reached a sanctuary called Ramgarh Vishdhari Sanctuary in Bundi district. The tiger is at present the only one in the sanctuary, living 65 km away from its original home.

These three tigers established that Ranthambhore is well connected to the south. Kota residents, using Broken Tail as an example, lobbied for making a third tiger reserve in the state. The Forest department also declared the upland forest area between Ranthambhore and Ramgarh Vishdhari Sanctuary as a buffer zone of RTR. This gives new hope to the increasing population of Ranthambhore’s existing tigers.

THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR

North of Ranthambhore National Park are the Vindhyan hill ranges that form part of the Kailadevi Sanctuary in Karauli district. Further beyond lie the forests of Jhiri, Ramsagar Sanctuary and Van Vihar Sanctuary of Dhaulpur district. It was the movement of a tiger through this tract which proved that Bandh Baretha Sanctuary and Keoladeo Sanctuary of Bharatpur district have some connectivity with Ranthambhore.

Bharatpur’s elusive tigress

A tigress appeared in the tiny 29 sq. km. of Keoladeo National park, Bhartpur (KNP) in the year 1999. She was spotted by Dr. Vibhu Prakash, a senior BNHS scientist and one of the first people to establish the fact that vultures are declining in India. This discovery was met with mixed reactions. Few said that the tigress was either released by a circus group or by private keepers. Many were even raising questions about the presence of the tigress in the first place. Five and half years later, on 10 June, 2005 a dead tigress was found in the sanctuary. This tigress’s connection cannot be established to Ranthambhore as there were no pictures of her earlier or at the time of her death, as her carcass had decomposed. KNP is 160 km aerially away from RTR’s tiger holding place.

T7 - In exodus mood

This sub-adult tiger left the park on the night of 20 August, 2010, and reached a village where it attacked a

DHARMENDRA KHANDAL



In 2010, T7 strayed outside the forest and attacked a forest ranger while attempts were being made to move him back into the forest.

buffalo calf. Angry villagers forced the forest department to capture it from the area, which was hardly 500 to 600 metres from the tiger reserve. The mob pushed the forest officers to approach the agitated tiger, on foot. As a consequence, the tiger attacked, and a fine range officer, Daulat Singh, was seriously mauled. He just about survived, and also lost one eye in the incident. After this attack, T7 moved further and reached the adjoining Kailadevi sanctuary. He did not stop there and reached close to Mathura refinery on 7 October 2010. If he had gone on straight, he would have reached a place about 50 km away, which prior to Independence was a famous ‘tiger shikar’ area called Kitham. Near Mathura, he got noticed by villagers who again created trouble for this displaced mighty cat. Inevitably, he attacked some of them. Intelligently enough, T7 decided to not go further and turned back to Keoladev National Park, Bharatpur. By now, he had covered a long aerial distance of 210 km. Finally scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India and the forest department team, in a rescue operation, tranquilised him by using another tiger’s recorded call to bring him out of hiding. He was then moved from the bird sanctuary to Sariska where he has been living since the past three years.

THE EASTERN CORRIDOR

The most vital corridor of the three is the eastern one, which connects Ranthambhore’s tigers to the tiger population of Madhya Pradesh. This corridor connects Ranthambhore with Kuno Sanctuary and Madhav National Park of Shivpuri in Madhya Pradesh. Other corridors connect Ranthambhore with forested areas but not with other tigers. This corridor, however, has two barriers; the Chambal River and a canal flowing along the river. Chambal can be easily crossed by tigers but the canal is a real obstacle. Nevertheless, there were two tigers that successfully managed to cross it.

COURTESY OF THE FOREST DEPARTMENT



Radio collaring of T 7 by WII team, as he was being shifted from Keoladeo to Sariska



The Datia Tiger as seen from camera traps

COURTESY OF THE FOREST DEPARTMENT



The journey of T38 revealed how tigers can use the underpass of the canal, from where the Chambal river crosses it. This was not known before.

DAULAT SINGH

T 38 – The pit stopping male

T 38 was never as famous as his sister T39, but he did make a remarkable journey in November 2010, across two months until he reached Kuno forest in the first week of 2011. He stopped for about a month at Sanwati forest block, of about 25 sq km area, which needs more management. He used the river corridor and covered 80 km aerial distance, before reaching the core area of the Kuno wildlife sanctuary. Interestingly, the Madhya Pradesh Forest department had developed this sanctuary for lions. But as fate would have it this uninvited big cat has proven that the area was favoured by tigers. T38 smartly followed the Param river course and reached Kuno. The journey also revealed how tigers used the underpass of the canal, from where the river crosses it. This information was not known to us before.

The tiger in Datia – The marathon king

This tiger is one among the three cubs of T26, who lives in Khandar range of RTR on Indala plateau. By the end of January, 2013, this male tiger left the area; but the staff was alert to any movement outside his range and a monitoring team started tracking. He was followed on a daily basis by the combined team of the forest department and the NGO Tiger Watch. This is one of the most remarkable tiger monitoring projects ever conducted in history. The tiger covered a 220-km aerial distance from its original place; starting on 23 January 2013, and reaching Datia forest, MP on 22 March 2013.

Datia is halfway to Panna, and this tiger’s journey has proved that Panna and Ranthambore can have a viable and functioning corridor.

Ranthambore has connectivity with over ten tributaries of the river Chambal. These tributaries include Kalisindh, Parbati, Morel, Mez, Kanduli, Kharad, Param, Kuno, Seep, Chakal, etc. Tigers have used these tributaries for their dispersal. When the concept of tiger corridors and landscapes was first discussed, the focus was on upland corridors. But these Marco Polos of Ranthambore, through their journeys, have highlighted that they use the riverine corridors more than the upland ones. This has realigned the focus of wildlife scientists working on tiger corridors and landscapes.

The travel routes of these tigers are not just incidences of big cats moving out. They have brought out a new dimension to tiger conservation in the country. It was thought that Ranthambore tigers are an isolated tiger population, but these seven tigers prove that the Ranthambore landscape is not disconnected with other forests. If we develop the nearby forests as tiger corridors and possible habitats, we can ensure their gene pool remains healthy. Ranthambore is a source area with healthy breeding population of tigers ready to take on vacant tiger habitats. It is high time that we look into securing the corridor linkages before they are engulfed by the ever-increasing pressures of human population. If we are able to do it, the sacrifice of ‘Broken Tail’ would not be lost. ◉