

Real Life Experience: I Was Attacked By A Wild Tiger



It was a chilly autumnal morning in October 2009 when I woke in my tent in Primorsky Krai, Russia, near the border with North Korea and China.

My team of six had been catching wild Siberian tigers with snares and putting radio collars on them before releasing them, so we could better understand their behavior and protect the endangered species.

I'd been working as a tiger biologist for 14 years and had tagged about 70 tigers with my team. Each morning, we'd travel in pairs to check the snares – they consisted of heavy-duty cables attached to a tree. Each was equipped with a radio transmitter that would alert us to a capture so we could anaesthetize the animal as quickly as possible to minimize their stress, before fitting a collar and releasing it back into the wild.

This particular morning, there had been no alerts of a capture, but we still had to follow protocol. As we were one team member short, I checked one trail of snares on my own while my colleagues travelled to check the others.

I grabbed my coffee and my bear spray, and headed out, leaving my wife and toddler, who were visiting me, in the tent. Everything seemed fine. Then, as I approached the last snare, about 2km from camp, I heard a deep, low growl, and immediately knew that we'd caught a tiger.

I wanted to get close enough to estimate its weight and sex before heading back to retrieve the rest of the team. I put my coffee down and inched forward, confident the tiger would be tied to the tree, unable to attack. I took out my handheld signal flare, just in case.

I inched closer. When I was about 40 meters away, the tiger tried to run away. But he was tied to the tree, unable to flee. I then started to slowly walk away; having seen he was an adult male weighing about 400lbs (181kg).

But when he realized he couldn't run away, he charged. At that moment, he got free. I popped the flare, waiting for it to light, fully aware I could die at any moment.

I could see every detail as he came for me, running at 30mph, roaring, with 3in claws extending from paws the size of dinner plates reaching towards me with each lunge. He hit me square in the chest and I flew back about 10 meters.

Down on the ground, looking into the maw of the roaring tiger standing on my shoulders, I put my left hand up defensively. He bit through it several times. Bones crunched. I could hear them, feel them.

I realized I still had my flare. With the flame alight, I jammed it right under his chin. He immediately took off.

I started running back to camp. I could feel myself going into shock. Everything around me started going hazy. But I refused to survive a tiger attack only to die of shock. I bent down to lower my head between my legs and yelled to increase blood flow to my brain.

My wife heard me and tried to reach me on the radio to find out what was happening. When there was no answer, she came running to me, our toddler on her shoulders. I remember seeing my daughter and feeling worried that she might be upset by all the excitement, and that I wouldn't be able to explain to her what was going on.

When we got back to camp, our veterinarian did some first aid on my hand, then took me to hospital, where I needed to have multiple surgeries. I had about four bite wounds that went clean through my hand. After a week in the hospital, I returned to work, and have continued to protect wild tigers ever since, now working as the chief scientist for [Panthera](#), a global wild cat conservation organization. Luckily, I've made a complete recovery.

Before the attack, I had anxious dreams about being attacked by a tiger or a bear. But, since then, they've stopped. I had faced the worst and survived. I've not had PTSD or nightmares, but I often recall the charge, reimagining each moment in vivid detail.

I feel incredibly lucky to have lived through what could have ended my life. And it didn't scare me away from my job. Protecting tigers has been the greatest honor of my life and I'll continue doing it for as long as I can.