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## Record of a Tiger *Panthera tigris* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Felidae) in Saptari District of eastern Nepal: implications for conservation and habitat connectivity

Gobinda Prasad Pokharel<sup>1</sup> , Chiranjibi Prasad Pokharel<sup>2</sup> , Ashish Gurung<sup>3</sup> , Bishnu Singh Thakuri<sup>4</sup> ,  
Ambika Prasad Khatiwada<sup>5</sup> , Aastha Joshi<sup>6</sup> , Birendra Gautam<sup>7</sup> , Mithilesh Mahato<sup>8</sup> ,  
Naresh Subedi<sup>9</sup> & Madhu Chetri<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1-7,9-10</sup> National Trust for Nature Conservation, P.O. Box 3712, Khumaltar, Lalitpur, Nepal.

<sup>8</sup> Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, P.O. Box 860, Babar Mahal, Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>1</sup> govindapokhrel90@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup> pokhralchiran@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup> asisgrg1984@gmail.com, <sup>4</sup> bishnu.thakuri@gmail.com,  
<sup>5</sup> ambikapdkhatiwada@gmail.com, <sup>6</sup> merry.aj21@gmail.com, <sup>7</sup> birendragtm@gmail.com, <sup>8</sup> mithilesh.mahato12@gmail.com,  
<sup>9</sup> nareshsubedi@gmail.com, <sup>10</sup> mchetri@gmail.com (corresponding author)

The Tiger *Panthera tigris* occurs in 10 countries with a global population estimated at fewer than 4,000 mature individuals; it is listed as 'Endangered' in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Goodrich et al. 2022). In Nepal, it has been legally protected as a priority species under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1973 (Jnawali et al. 2011). Despite persistent threats due to poaching and habitat loss (Goodrich et al. 2022), populations have gradually increased in India and Nepal since 2010 (Jhala et al. 2019; DNPWC & DFSC 2022).

Nepal's Tiger population is distributed primarily in the lowlands of the Terai, straddling along the international border with India (Thapa & Kelly 2017). This region is included in the transboundary Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) covering 50,911 km<sup>2</sup> from Rajaji National Park in northwestern India to Parsa National Park and adjoining forests in southcentral Nepal (Thapa et al. 2017). The Nepal part of the TAL comprises about 24,710 km<sup>2</sup> and

encompasses five protected areas and seven wildlife corridors, all surrounded by a largely agricultural landscape (Bhatt et al. 2023; Figure 1). The Tiger was documented in 16 districts during the 2022 National Tiger Survey, which covered a sampling area of 18,928 km<sup>2</sup> in the TAL (DNPWC & DFSC 2022). The national population was estimated at 344–403 individuals, with the easternmost record in a forest in Rautahat District, located to the east of Parsa National Park (DNPWC & DFSC 2022). As the Tiger population continues to rise, available habitats inside protected areas are becoming increasingly limited, highlighting the urgent need for habitat expansion and improving management (DNPWC & DFSC 2022).

Beyond the TAL, a Tiger was killed in the early 2000s in a village at the southern edge of the Trijuga Forest in Saptari District (Shah et al. 2018). The Tiger was known to exist in this area in the early 1970s, but was not

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recorded during a survey in 1994 (Smith et al. 1998). This national forest covers about 442 km<sup>2</sup> at an elevation of 104–430 m and is surrounded by community-managed forests, croplands, and settlements (Pokharel et al. 2022). It predominantly harbours deciduous tree species and hosts at least 86 vertebrates including 37 mammals (Shah et al. 2018). The area receives an annual rainfall of 1,159–2,827 mm, and the average annual temperature is in the range of 23–25.5°C (Pokharel et al. 2022).

Further east in Nepal, a single adult Tiger was photographed in November 2020 at an elevation of 3,165 m during a camera trapping survey in Ilam District (Bista et al. 2021). Across the international border with India, the Tiger has also been recorded in Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary and Neora Valley National Park located in the northeastern hills of West Bengal (Qureshi et al. 2023).

**OBSERVATION**

On 3 March 2025, a female Tiger had entered a residential house in Fattepur Village in the north-east of the Trijuga Forest (Image 1). It was subsequently rescued by a team of wildlife and veterinary technicians from the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR), local forest

officials, and security personnel. It was then transferred to the headquarters of KWTR in Sunsari District (Image 2), where it was examined (Image 3). It measured 243 cm from nose to tail tip, weighed 126 kg and was in good physical condition. Dental profile examination revealed intact, creamy white canines. We estimated its age at less than five years. After six hours of observation under veterinary care, it was transported to Parsa National Park (Image 4) and released near Sitalpur Khola.

**DISCUSSION**

We manually compared the stripe pattern of the Tigress against profiles of identified individuals in the Chitwan-Parsa National Parks complex (DNPWC & DFSC 2022). We did not find any match, indicating that this individual has not been documented and identified in Nepal before. We could not assess whether it has been recorded in India as we did not have access to the Indian database of Tiger profiles.

Long-distance dispersal by female Tigers was considered rather unusual, with a maximum linear distance of 43.2 km documented in Chitwan National Park in the early 1990s (Smith 1993). However, in central India, a female Tiger moved 340 km, traversed

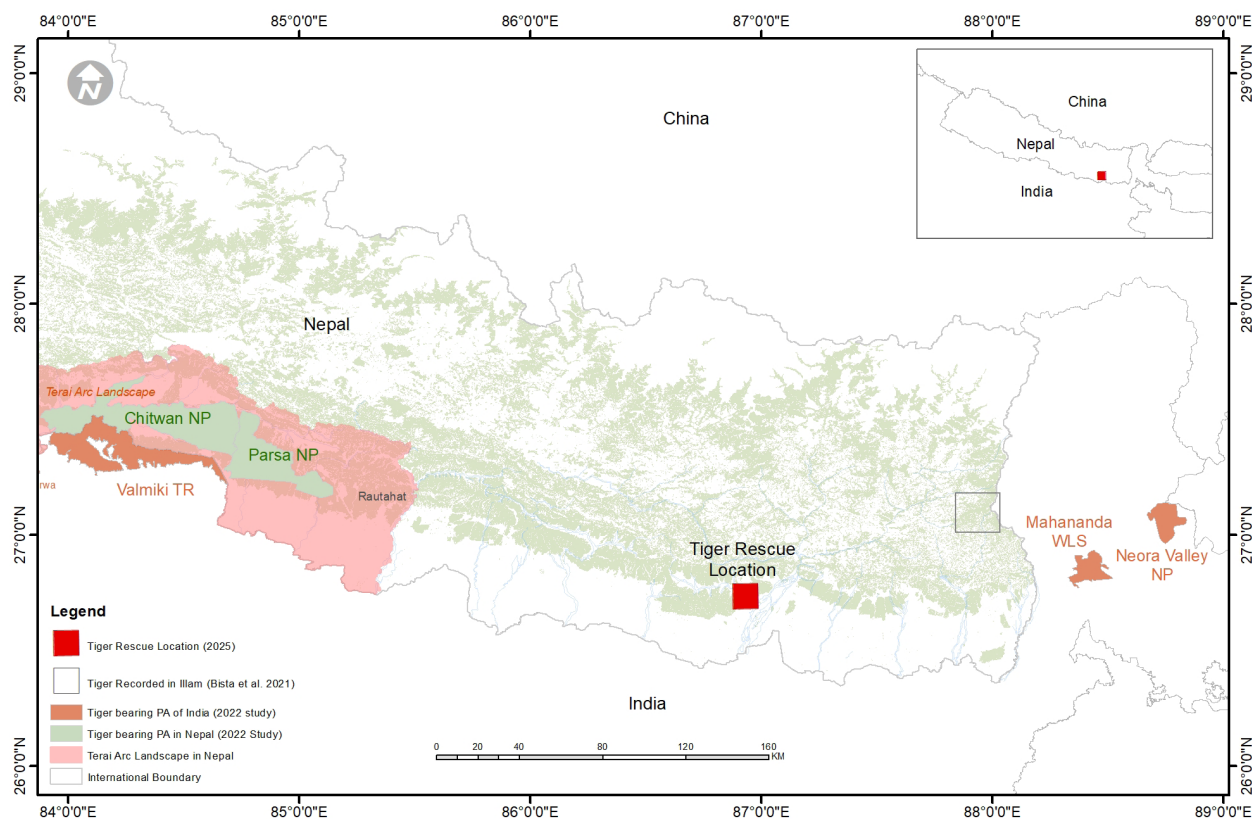


Figure 1. Protected areas with records of the Tiger in southern Nepal and northern India.



Image 1. The dental profile of the Tiger. © Birendra Gautam.



Image 2. The Tiger after sedation. © Birendra Gautam.



Image 3. A team of wildlife technicians and veterinarians inspects the health of the Tiger. © Birendra Gautam.

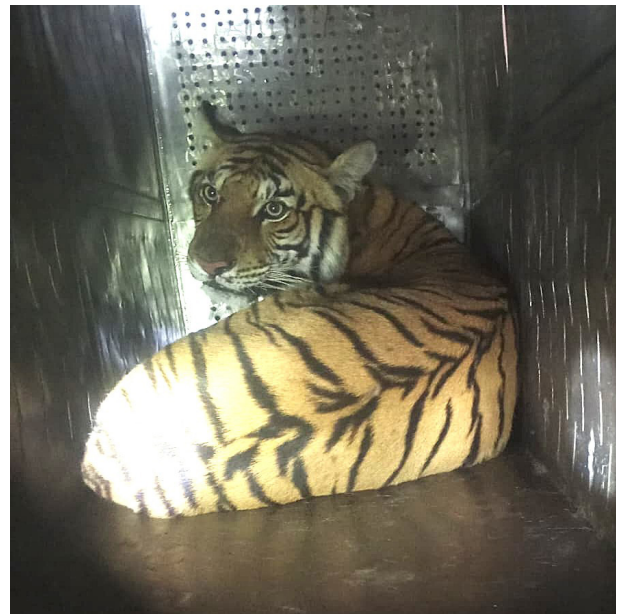


Image 4. The Tiger shortly before being released into Parsa National Park, Nepal. © Suresh Shahi.

19 stopover sites in 78 days and established her home range 99.1 km away from her natal area (Sarkar et al. 2021).

In light of this dispersal distance, two scenarios for the arrival of the Tigress in the Trijuga Forest area are plausible. It may have come from the eastern part of the TAL, traversing the hills in an easterly direction. The linear distance between the eastern edge of the TAL and the Trijuga Forest is about 120 km (Shah et al. 2018). The Tigress may also have crossed through the hills from Ilam District in a south-westerly direction. The linear distance from the locality record of the Tiger in this area is about 100 km.

Wherever the Tigress came from, its arrival in Saptari District underscores the need to extend surveys to remnant forests beyond the TAL in eastern Nepal. As documented in the Chitwan-Parsa National Parks

complex, tigers readily and rapidly resettle areas as prey availability, habitat quality and connectivity are improved (Lamichhane et al. 2018). Potential Tiger prey species in the Trijuga Forest include Chital *Axis axis*, Northern Red Muntjac *Muntiacus vaginalis*, and Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* (Shah et al. 2018). Wildlife corridors connecting the Trijuga Forest with Tiger-bearing areas in the TAL and in eastern Nepal will still need to be identified to establish safe migration routes and facilitate the expansion of Nepal's Tiger population (DNPWC 2023). However, human-dominated areas pose significant conservation challenges, including an increased risk of human-wildlife negative interactions (Karanth et al.

2012; Sharma & Neupane 2023). An evidence-based, community-centred approach combined with programs to raise conservation awareness is, therefore, essential to ensure the long-term survival of the Tiger also outside designated protected areas.

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