

The environment ministry wants to find her. There's a crack team looking for her. They want to shift her to another home. But she doesn't want to be found. A story of a long and determined tracking of an elusive tigress in Ranthambore

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TASHI TOBGYAL

# WHERE ARE YOU, T-37?



A tiger roars at the Ranthambore National Park in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan. Forest and park officials are on the hunt for two wandering cats

**D**elhi has ordered 18 of the country's best to find her—all of two-and-a-half years old and a fugitive—and bring her home or take her to a new one.

But she has a will of her own. She has given them a slip for the eighth time. This time, she leaves behind a teaser, a half-eaten wild pig. She is T 37, a tigress from the Ranthambore National Park (RNP) and this—a clearing in Sarola, Kota district, with a mash of pig insides staining the sandy soil and the whiff of danger around—is the closest they have come to her. "She seems to have found a new home here. She has gone past villages, agricultural fields and some rocky terrain," says R.S. Shekhawat, the Sawai Madhopur deputy conservator of forests, who heads the team that has been tracking the tigress, and making precious little progress, for three months now.

In January, after a nasty turf war with a stronger tigress on the periphery of the national park, T37 began a slow trek to the south. On the way, she killed an unwitting cow in Itawa, angered villagers and is now some 120 km away, with three teams of forest officials hot on her trail.

But why T37? Why is the Ministry of Environment and Forests of the mighty Government of India looking for this elusive cat from Ranthambore? The answer lies in the depleting tiger population at the Sariska tiger sanctuary, Ranthambore, on the other hand, has too many: it's home to 40 tigers but has space for only 32. The plan is to tranquillise and airlift her to her new home in Sariska, as has been done with three tigers since July 2008, a trade-off meant to benefit both habitats.

The men who have been on her chase for months are sympathetic. T 37, they admit, is cramped for space in Ranthambore, as are all the big cats living there. Fights over space break out often and in the last year, the state forest department reports that at least nine tigers have moved in and out of the park.

But, hang on. In a national park spilling over with big cats, why are dedicated teams bent on moving only T37 to Sariska? Why won't the other tigers make the cut? The answer is as arbitrary, as sarkari, as inscrutable as the alphanumeric system that is used to name the beautiful wild animal.

In October last year, the Ministry of Environment and Forests decided to halt the big shift to Sariska after media reports that the tigers belonging to the same genetic pool were being mated—damaging, it was alleged, the future generation of cats. After death of two cubs, the straying of many more from Ranthambore and the mauling of a villager, the ministry grudgingly gave the Rajasthan forest department the go-ahead to shift two tigers. But with a rider. Only the two tigers that had strayed away from the park—T37 and T47, both in January—were to be shifted. The others mulling around, easily spotted and within reach, were not to be disturbed till the inbreeding debate was settled. T47 had headed west and was recently spotted near Ranthambore, but still out of reach. So came the order: find T37, alive and tranquillised.

That Kafkaesque fiat brings Banwari (43), Ram Deva (51) and Deoram (53) to Sarola on this morning, after three months of tracking T37 on foot, armed with nothing but hefty sticks. They are part of the 18-member entourage tracking the tigress. Word of the fresh kill has spread like jungle fire and senior foresters and top forest officials are on their way in air-conditioned SUVs—desperately seeking T37.

The last time they had to airlift a wild cat was in February 2009, when a tigress was shifted to Sariska. Then, the conditions were different. The foresters knew the lay of the land and exactly when and where the tiger would turn up. This time around, the terrain is foreign not only to the tiger, but the foresters as well. While the former relies on her instinct to survive, and can, provided there is no human intervention, the forest department is on tenterhooks. Orders from the ministry cannot get higher.

Just a few hundred feet from Sarola village, which has a population of around 350, are ravines made of dense shrubs and trees. They have all but dried up in the fierce summer heat. There are wild pigs, cows, spotted deer and goats for T37 to savour. It is a 10-minute drive through a dusty plain, with just a shade of a cart track and some tyre treads that lead into a narrow aisle lined with thorns. More than half a kilometre from here are the wild, thorny lands beyond Sarola, where the big cat awaits. The rest of the path will have to be travelled on foot. Not too many in the team of trackers are game.

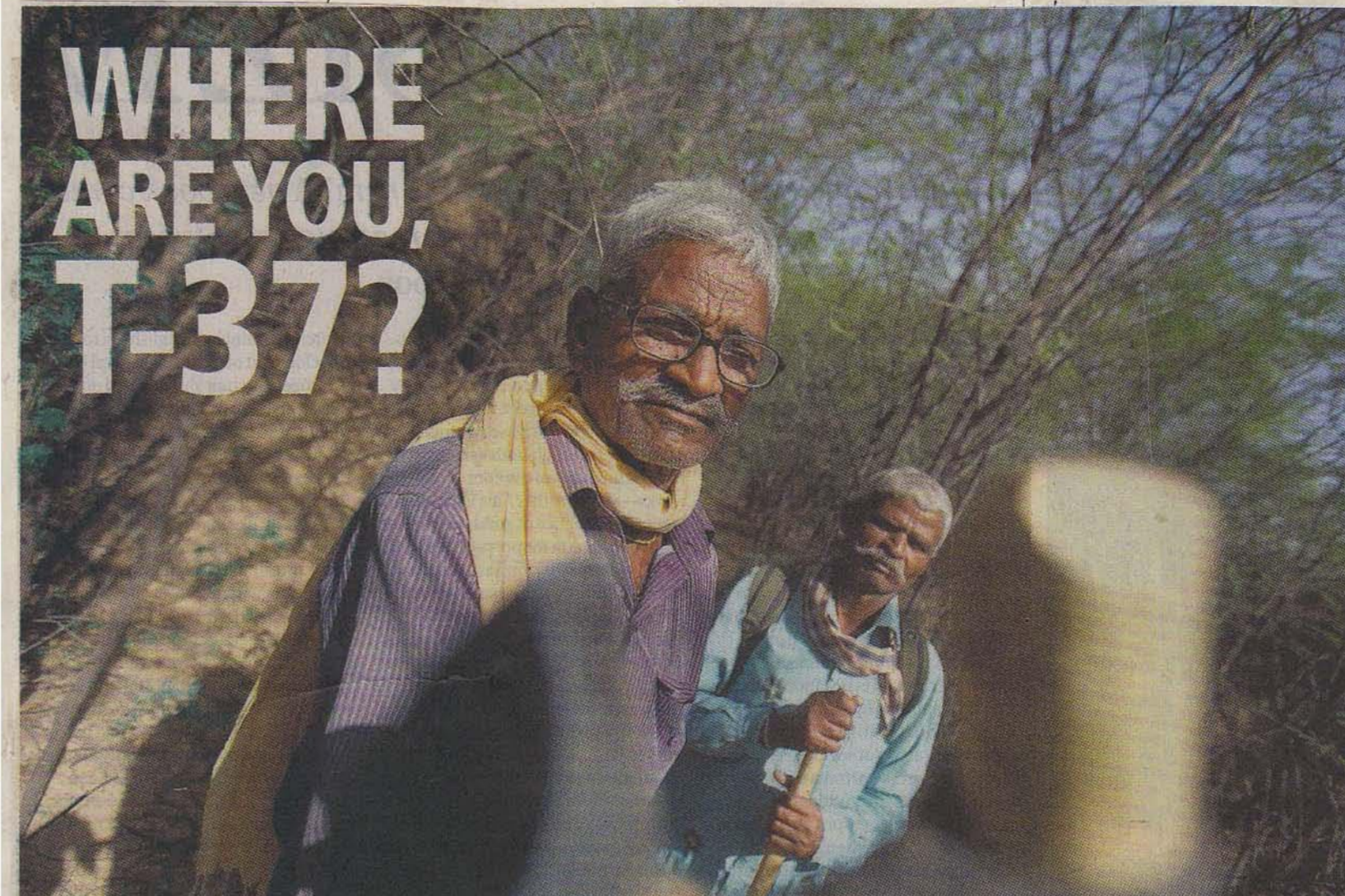
Ram Deva sounds a warning note as foresters mill around the wild pig carcass. "She killed the pig some 200 meters away and then dragged her to this ravine and was probably eating when we found her tracks. She heard our voices and disappeared. But I am sure that she is within half a kilometre of the kill," he cautions.

"She is waiting, watching, wary, she has heard our sounds. There is a small stream, north from here. She must be there. This is what they usually do after lunch," he says.

He should know—he has been on such trails such for 30 years now.

The three trackers are armed with two five-foot long sticks, except Deoram, who has a small axe attached to his. Before we get any ideas, he tells us. "There is a lot of foliage here. We have to cut through it. The tigress will never even feel this blade."

The trio's day starts with a recce. "We do all our tracking on foot. Every morning, by about 6 am, we scour the area for pugmarks, circling each one we find. Then we check the area again in the evening and the new marks give us a sense of the direction in which the tigress is moving," says Banwari.



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After weeks of unsuccessful attempts to baiting her into the open, they have decided to get outside help. In the form of Brijendra Singh. The forest department has been requesting the ministry for more experts to aid their search and recover operation, but the big names in tiger conservation seem to be "busy at the moment".

Brijendra Singh, a member of the National Board of Wildlife and honorary warden of the Corbett Tiger Reserve, is known to make the national animal respond when he mimics a roar.

He is here now, part of the team that is trying to get T37 back. His job: to mimic the sound of a male tiger. "If we can spot her now, I believe I can bring her out into the open so that we can tranquillise her," he says confidently.

There is a hint of promise in the air. Rajasthan Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) R.N. Mehrotra says, "She might come out, taking Mr Singh's call for that of a male tiger." After a pause, he seems to reconsider. "But it is a bit difficult. She's full now, and is resting and wary of human presence."

The roar of the male tiger is never heard. Instead, the team sticks to stan-

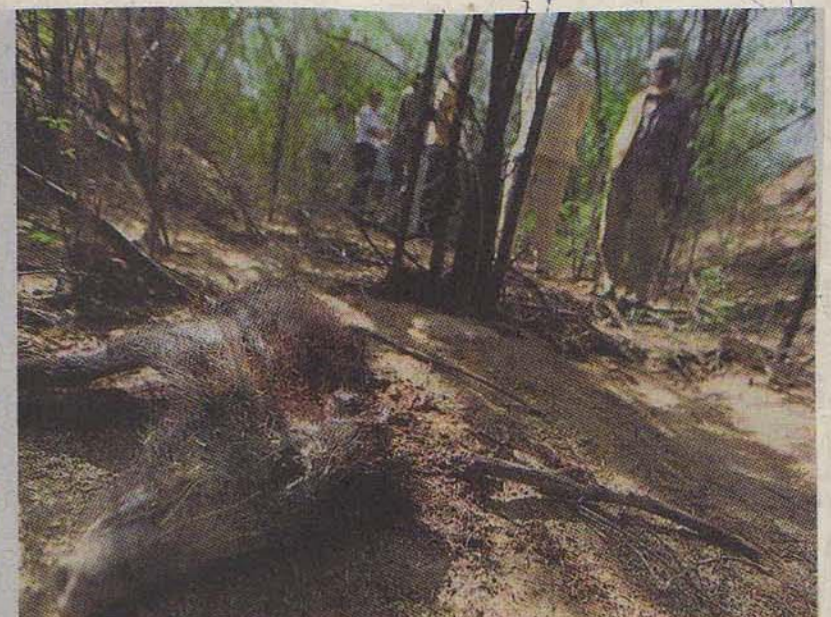
**THE FORESTERS LOOK AT THE MAP, EXCHANGE GLANCES AND MAKE UP THEIR MIND. THEY HAVE TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS, HUMBLY APPRISING THEM OF THE TIGRESS WHO DOES NOT WANT TO RETURN WITH THEM**



dard operating procedures. A camera trap—a camera with a heat sensor—used by foresters and wildlife photographers is set up. "It is set up around the kill and the instrument picks up heat signatures. If and when the tigress returns, the camera will automatically take a picture," says deputy conserva-

tor Shekhawat. The trap set, officials decide to give the tigress breathing space and retreat to chalk out a plan. The entourage of more than 12 vehicles, all SUVs, waits on the other side of Sarola, under the shade of towering eucalyptus trees. Picnic boxes are brought out, with chilled

water, cold drinks and breakfast. It has been a long morning. Senior foresters Singh, Mehrotra and Shekhawat busy themselves with a topographic map of the Kalisindh river area to plan the next course of action. "She spends most of her time on the western back of the river since there are



(Clockwise from above): Silhouette of a young tiger at the park; pugmarks of the tigress; trackers Deoram and Ram Deva, armed only with sticks; a wild pig that fell prey to T37

more ravines and water streams. Here she also depends on her main prey base, spotted deer, nilgai and wild boars," Mehrotra says. "What about cattle and domestic animals?" asks Singh, who is yet to acquaint himself with the area.

"In more than two months outside Ranthambore National Park, she has killed just nine domestic animals, including a cow, two donkeys and some sheep." "Any resistance from the villagers?" "For now, we have issued an advisory to them. They are wary and stay away from the ravines."

"This tigress seems to have reached some sort of comfort zone here. It might well be impossible to actually bring her out and sedate her," says Singh. Kota range officer Arun Sharma admits that T37 is not easily baited.

A foxy tigress she is. "She has not taken the bait so far. She comes close, rests and then leaves immediately. And if she senses human presence, she leaves her kill behind, never to visit it again," he says.

His sentence hangs in the silence—part frustration, part confession that this wild tiger chase is going nowhere.

The silence is broken by the small, crackling sounds of the forest. The sun is beginning to scorch their backs. The foresters look at the map, exchange glances and make up their mind. They have to write a letter to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, humbly apprising them of the tigress who does not want to return with them.

And in the clearing, two days later, the camera blinks once—to catch a glimpse of T37's rump. ♦