

# Fear keeps tigress Machli out of sight

## Rivals Intrude On Ex-Queen's Territory In Ranthambore

Anindo Dey | TNN



Of late, Machli is not using main paths and roads of her territory

## Park's pride found hiding in crevice

Amit Bhattacharya & Rachna Singh | TNN

**New Delhi/Jaipur:** The world's oldest wild tigress has cheated death yet again. Twenty-six days after it went missing, prompting several searches in the forest, Ranthambore's famed tigress was spotted on Tuesday by forest officials.

"Due to extreme cold, it had hibernated into a crevice which has sufficient water and prey base," said a wildlife official.

According to wildlife officials, she was spotted on trap cameras at Poli ka Nullah in the Kachida valley on Tuesday. Sources told TOI that after getting a message, Ranthambore's assistant conservator of forest led a search team and found the 17-year-old tigress.

"The tigress is weaker than before, but very much alive," the official said. "It even came out and followed our jeep for some distance."

Photographer Sandip Singh, who has been following the tigress's life for years, too got a confirmation about Machli being found from officials on the spot.

It was feared that Ranthambore's tiger queen had died of old age or had been poached after she went missing on January 9 from zone 5

of the park. Although her pugmarks had been found, the tigress could not be spotted despite major searches by forest official.

Machli, who is also perhaps the most photographed striped cat in the world, played a major role in the resurrection of Ranthambore national park after it was hit by falling tiger numbers as well as waning tourist interest in the early 2000s. Two of her cubs were also relocated to Sariska, after the tigers population there was decimated due to poaching and other reasons.

"In 2004, there were just 15 tigers left in Ranthambore. Today, that figure is close to 50. Around 60% of the present tiger population is Machli's progeny," said Balendu Singh, honorary warden of Sawai Madhopur district.

The tigress, who mothered nine cubs in all, had been a major draw with tourists because it was so often sighted.

Though the tigress has finally been spotted, wildlife biologists say it is reaching its fade-out time. "Our analysis of Machli's sightings in the past few months shows that the number of day when she becomes traceless is increasing. This perhaps shows that she's getting weaker," said Dharmendra Khandal of NGO Tiger Watch.

**Jaipur:** Once the queen of all she surveyed at Ranthambore National Park, the fear of other tigers now stalks the ageing Machli, who was spotted by forest officials on Tuesday — 26 days after she went missing.

The celebrated 17-year-old tigress (T16) is said to have not only taken to lesser and hidden paths of the reserve, but also become irregular in accepting the bait given to supplement her diet, according to a report prepared by the park's field director, Rahul Bhatnagar.

Bhatnagar's report is based on data collected daily over the past year by the Kundera range of the reserve that monitors the tigress.

"Direct sighting reduced in the last few months from 10-12 to 3-4 in recent times," says the report. "It is also difficult to find indirect evidence of Machli in recent times as she has restricted her movement because of fear of other tigers. She is not using the main paths and roads of her territory in recent times. Her sighting by tourists has decreased manifold, while a sighting around Lakrda Choki was almost certain up to the last season." Her 'no trace' days are al-

so rising.

After her daughter (T17) pushed her out of her original territory near the lakes, said to be the prime habitat of the park, Machli has faced stiff competition from other big cats despite restricting herself to Baba ki Gufa, Bhoot Khora, Lakrda and Adi Dugger areas of the park.

The challenges from other tigers continued after Machli changed her territory. It even failed to take food supplements given by the forest department after she lost her canines. "The frequency of Machli's bait consumption fell from four to 1-2 per month because of pressure from other tigers," says the report. "If she took bait, other tigers fought with the old lady. Possibly she was trying to avoid such conflicts. Earlier, she was taking her bait near Baba ki Gufa or Lakrda Choki because there was no threat from other tigers. In recent months, the forest department became cau-

tious about giving her bait and gave bait in various areas."

The report cites the presence of four other tigers — T19, T28, and two sub-adult cubs of T19 (T64 and T65) — in Machli's area last October and of a fight with T19 on October 21, 2010 that left her with an injury on the foreleg.

"But the frequency of movement of T19 and her sub-adult cubs increased in Machli's area," says the report. "Earlier, because of hunger she would roar near the guard posts till they gave her a bait, else she would not leave. But her roaring for food has decreased in recent times, particularly after the monsoon. She was so used to the sound of the particular vehicle used to give her the bait and the driver's voice that she would immediately come out. But now she has reduced coming out even when the guard, Jugraj, repeatedly calls her. Possibly, because of fear of other tigers."