



## Tiger Escape

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### Abstract

The article presents an incidence of tiger escape in Hyderabad Zoo of Andhra Pradesh state in India as experienced by the author. The story narrates how it was difficult and a risky operation to capture the escaped tiger alive without a 'tranquillizer gun' in those days (1977). The story tells how with the wise leadership of the author a team of dedicated people was successful in capturing the escaped tiger alive without any loss of human life. The whole operation required highly coordinated team effort along with trust in knowledge of animal behavior, daring staff, and above all, strict discipline in carrying out the whole operation. The experience provides a unique example of method and approach of wildlife conservation and management.

### Keywords

Tiger escape, Tippu, operation capture alive

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Recently it was widely reported and publicized in many newspapers with photograph of a tiger escaping from its cage in Guwahati Zoo of Assam state in India. The news prompted me to write my personal experience of a 'tiger escape' in Hyderabad Zoo of Andhra Pradesh state. We were handicapped those days, because we did not have a 'tranquillizer gun'. Moreover, it requires trust in knowledge of animal behavior, daring staff, and above all, strict discipline in carrying out the operation forgetting about meals.

It was a very cool pleasant morning in Hyderabad on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1977. Zoo was closed being the weekly off when overall cleaning is done in a leisurely stride. I relaxed in the *verandah* (corridor) enjoying the charm of morning sun, which was very comforting at 8.00 am, reading the newspaper. I did not have to go early for morning rounds of the zoo. As I looked at the greenery of the fodder to give relief to my straining eyes I saw a person rushing on a bicycle as if chased by a tiger. I wondered why all the haste? So, took my attention back to the newspaper.

At that time watchman came panting up the steps in an agitated state, scared and worried, bursting out the news of 'tiger escape'. Being unaware I asked him, where? He pointed towards 'observation cages' near veterinary hospital and stores. He went on to say that it was moving freely in the zoo. I advised him to rush back from outside by the main road, get the main gates closed, and ask the workers to assemble in groups, preferably outside the gates, or inside the keeper

area at animal enclosures wherever they were, and lock themselves as a precaution. I quickly loaded the 0.303 gun, asked my son and the maid to keep themselves locked inside, dashed off in the jeep to check the gates, and rushed to the hospital and stores section by 8.15 am to monitor the situation. Accompanied by the Supervisor of Lion Safari Park (LSP) I went rapidly through the zoo, warning everyone to take precautions as the tiger at the 'observation cages' escaped, and could surface anywhere. We picked up Head Animal Keeper (HAK) and went to the tiger enclosure at the 'observation cages' by 8.30 am. We found the outer door of tiger enclosure open, and the concerned keeper safely locked himself inside the cage. We queried the keeper about the mode of escape made by 'Tippu' (name of the tiger), and the direction in to which it moved away.

I was not bothered at that moment to investigate into the issues of negligence for the escape. Fortunately, 'Tippu' did not move towards the main zoo area but towards the undeveloped ten-acre wilderness patch behind the crocodile enclosures and the 'observation cages'. I saw a few pug-marks which indicated that it had entered into the wilderness where a few feral deer resided. Just then we saw the deer charging out of the wilderness, and disappearing in the open area around canteen, children's park and the fodder field. I concluded that 'Tippu' was in the wilderness zone, enjoying the new found jungle environment for the first time in its life having been a zoo-born.

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We quickly went over to the stores by 8.45 am, and sent back the jeep to pick up the staff available at different points, to be brought to the stores. I instructed all those gathered to pick up empty tin cans or any other noise making devices from the stores, and move in a group towards the open area bordering the 'wilderness area' behind the canteen and Natural History Museum. Soon, 40 persons gathered in the open lawn around the periphery of the ten-acre wilderness. I briefed them that we need to be perfectly disciplined and coordinated. No one should act individually however clever or brilliant idea they get at the time of operation 'capture alive'. I explained that this disciplined approach was necessary in order to catch the tiger alive in contrast to putting it to death, which was happened to both the panthers a couple of years ago at the zoo, soon after they escaped without taking any risk. I explained that we need to cordon off the area forming a human chain and move forward in spurts, enclosing the area. I assured them from my knowledge of animal behavior that the tiger will not attack or break through.

I explained to the staff that as per the animal psychology and instinct it would move to a place of safety if feels threatened. In this case it would run back to its cage, the place most familiar and secure to it. Therefore, our slow advancement would force the tiger to move back along the path it had taken for the escape. So, the men were asked to move only 10-15 steps forward each time I blew a whistle. We were organized and ready for the operation by 10.00 am. A few were sent up on to the boundary wall to peek at the dense vegetation from its height. The tiger was neither visible from anywhere nor showing any sign of movement by it. It seemed that it just slumped down into the vegetation in fear of danger. We were soon joined by volunteers to make up the crowd to around seventy.

I told everyone that the operation was to be completed before 5.00 pm otherwise we would have to get the tiger shot since we cannot allow it to prowl freely at night within the zoo. However, there were different opinions. LSP Supervisor, the senior most and also with *shikar* (hunting) experience, did not want to take a risk, and desired to get it shot immediately on sighting. The junior HAK desired to try to catch it alive as I desired. However, my wish prevailed and the majority of staff was ready for the try. It was all an excitement to the staff taking a risk. However, I once again reminded them to maintain a strict discipline, and to act only on my whistle.

I summoned for the elephant used in children's park, and two vehicles of the LSP. Two supervisors manned each of the two vehicles. At first they moved along the peripheral wall, and then moved into the wilderness to locate the tiger. The *mahout* (elephant rider) was asked to push in where the vehicles could not go because of the dense undergrowth. It was around 11.30 am the tiger was sighted by the *mahout*, when the elephant refused to move forward making shrill noises of reluctance. Seeing the elephant trumpeting, and hearing loud noises all

around, the tiger retreated from its sheltered place, where it was well camouflaged, to seek another place. Now with the confirmation, we—the vehicles, elephant and men pressed forward towards the tiger, making maximum noise to drive it out of the wilderness from 12.00 noon onwards. We advanced as planned with the blowing of my whistle at every 5-10 minutes interval, so as not to rush through, lest the tiger would get traumatized and go berserk. At that time, there was a summon from my residence, since I rushed off to the field without having a breakfast.

We once again physically sighted the tiger around 1.30 pm when it got up reluctantly, and made a short move towards the crocodile house. It was very encouraging to the persons on foot. They got very excited at its act of retreating. They made a quick rush towards it violating the rules of disciplined approach they followed up to that time. The tiger got perturbed, and rushed towards them snarling, which made them run back helter-skelter, totally disarrayed. At that moment I was worried to think whether I made a mistake of not heeding the LSP supervisor's matured advice. What would happen if the tiger get frenzied and attack any of them? This situation brought a setback to the entire organized operation for just a moment's haste. I felt disappointed.

The tiger had broken through the cordon, and reached the boundary wall. It did not try to scale the wall for by then the wall was crowded with people shouting and screaming, beating their noise creating contraptions. In our excitement and eagerness to accomplish the task by 5.00 pm we did not think about lunch, and never felt hungry or tired. We were in no mood to break the tempo of the beat and excitement so went pressing on.

The tiger had again settled down, and we once again reorganized ourselves, and restarted the operation anew. I chided the staff not to hurry, and to move forward only at my whistle with no more than 10-15 steps per whistle. The tiger moved again more frequently with the elephant and vehicles behind it. It was also apparently tired, not having its morning milk and eggs. So, it was taking rest frequently at short distances. We too did not hurry. We moved in spurts as decided realizing the earlier folly.

It was around 4.15 pm when the tiger reached the crocodile enclosure, and settled down beside it. We too paused for a while. I cautioned the staff to relax wherever they were, and to get consolidated for a final vigorous thrust forward, when ordered. Meanwhile, I positioned my jeep in front of its likely way out from the wilderness through which it had entered after escaping from the cage at morning. This position was about 20 meters from the wilderness in the open space in the midst of the 'observation cages' area, from where 'Tippu' escaped in the morning.

The situation reached at its height at around 4.40 pm. It would be difficult to see the tiger with early winter dusk after 5.00 pm. I thought I should take the ultimate decision before the minutes



ticked away. I cannot allow the tiger to roam freely after dusk. It would become pell-mell creating a commotion among birds and animals in cages, and open enclosures. A strange fear of expecting it to jump over the not too high boundary wall, and of the complaints and wrath of the people fully boggled my mind. I further imagined what will happen if someone is mauled or killed. What will be my plight then?

Just as the crowding thoughts flashed through my mind, the sentinel on the tree having clear visibility, indicated that the tiger had got up. He started alerting us about its movement towards the likely exit from wilderness, the point through which it had entered at morning. By the time surrounding was rapidly becoming dark. It was 5.10 pm. I blew the whistle for the final thrust. There was a great noise created by the staff and the additional crowd who joined the staff on the compound wall. I kept the door of Tippu's enclosure wide open for it to enter, if it so desired. I had with me Arjun, the reckless daring animal keeper, seasoned Babiah, the tiger keeper from tiger moat area, and two other daring keepers with tins to make noise. The sentinel alerted us that the tiger was about to come out in the open. I became alert with the gun un-cocked to fire, if need be. As the beat began with the loudest noise possible, the vehicles blasting their horns, the tiger came out of the wilderness. It got very scared of the open area, and charged towards the jeep. I opened fire into the air. Two beaters with me created the maximum noise, while Arjun and Babiah screamed very loudly, and the jeep horn blared. All these noises momentarily stopped the tiger's dash towards the jeep. It suddenly turned right,

charged and galloped into its familiar cage, with its own scent emanating invitingly, giving it all the comfort it sought from morning, ever since it escaped out for an adventure.

Arjun was equally quick. He sprang out of the jeep, and charged behind the tiger with loud terrifying screams. I followed Arjun to give a cover up lest it retaliates. He bolted the door. The mission was completed at 5.20 pm. People came out from the wilderness with scratches and bruises from the lantana, like a conquering army in great jubilation, with dances and songs never experienced by the staff before. The air was filled with highly glorified, excited, and triumphant shouts of joy and sounds of victory, with everyone's personal yarn to tell about his contribution. I heard them congratulating each other. I ordered for tea and snacks to celebrate our success in catching 'Tippu alive'—an event never happened before in the zoos without a tranquillizer gun.

At last, every one of the operation team realized, *There is no place like home* even for tigers. LSP Supervisor embraced me and started shedding tears of joy. It was a great tribute to our successful coordinated determined efforts.

In retrospect, if in the melee a person was mauled and died, how would they have reacted at me keeping the two earlier episodes in mind? Or if I had got it killed at the earliest sighting as advised, how would they have reacted at my haste? However, all ended well. 'Tippu' lived on. He became the proud father of many litters through many fertile females, including the ferocious wild Nandini. He tamed her.