

## Big cat attacks against humans spike in winter in UP's conflict-ridden Terai region: report

WTI veterinarians and rescue team tend to an adult tigress rescued from being lynched in the North Kheri Forest Division of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve in Uttar Pradesh's Terai region on April 13. Photo courtesy: Wildlife Trust of India

Attacks by tigers and leopards on humans and livestock in Uttar Pradesh's Terai region marked a seasonal and geographical variation, according to a report jointly undertaken by the Wildlife Trust of India and the Uttar Pradesh Forest department. The report, *Living with the Wild—Mitigating Conflict between Humans and Big Cat Species in Uttar Pradesh*, was released last Tuesday by UP deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya.

According to the report, most attacks occurred during the day time, suggesting "that the larger proportion of tiger attacks on humans were accidental encounters."

In fact, since 2009, only 4-5 cases of confirmed man-eating tigers have been recorded in this landscape, the WTI noted. A total of 136 humans have been attacked by tigers or leopards in 94 fringe villages of Dudhwa and Pilibhit forests in 151 reported conflict cases from 2000 to 2013.

### Seasonal variation

Tiger attacks were found to be higher in winter (42.5%) with the highest peak in February (19.2%), "which probably corresponds to a high influx of people collecting fuelwood in forest areas," followed by summers (39.7%).

However, when it came to attacking livestock, the highest number of incidents involving leopards and tigers were reported during monsoons: 45-50%. Though full data is not available, official records from 2003 to 2012 reveal 474 livestock deaths across the Dudhwa-Pilibhit Tiger Reserve landscape, with tigers accounting for 58.6% of these deaths.

The high number of attacks on livestock during monsoons "is in contrast to the seasonal patterns of attacks on humans by the two big cat species, and demands more detailed study to determine the underlying causality," the WTI, a leading nature conservation organisation which works with the State wildlife department, noted.

"One hypothesis is that livestock are more difficult to guard when grazing in the forests during the monsoons and are therefore more susceptible to being attacked by tigers and leopards. As a large part of this landscape is flood prone during the monsoons, heavy rains may also lead to some cattle getting lost or stranded in forest areas, thus falling prey to tigers and leopards," the report said.

### Latest attack

The latest incident in the human-big cat conflict in Uttar Pradesh's Terai region occurred last week, when a team of forest officials, police and wildlife conservationists rescued a young adult tigress from getting lynched by an aggressive mob in the North Kheri Forest Division of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, along the Indo-Nepal border in Uttar Pradesh.

The tigress had attacked and killed a local villager, Kamta Prasad (50), while he had gone into the crop fields adjoining Sahatepurva village to relieve himself in the early hours. Officials spotted the tigress sitting in the fields surrounded by a large mob of people. The animal was saved from the mob and eventually captured with the help of a large number of nets and without sedation.

“The tigress had killed and partially consumed the victim following what was likely an accidental encounter. We suspect she has been in this area, which is devoid of good forested habitat, for a few months,” said Prem Chandra Pandey, Head of WTI’s Terai Tiger Project.

WTI veterinarian Reetika Maheshwari, who examined the captured tigress, found possible signs of a head injury, perhaps inflicted when the surrounding mob broke loose and began pummeling it with sticks on its capture. The animal was moved to Lucknow zoo for further inspection.

#### Man-animal conflict

As per the WTI, around 180 cases of conflicts between humans and big cats (tigers, leopards) leading to human deaths and injuries have been recorded between 2000 to 2018 in and around the Dudhwa-Pilibhit Tiger landscape. Of these, 98 pertained to tigers.

“Two peaks are observed in this data; one between from 2009 and 2012, and the other between 2016 -2018,” Mayukh Chatterjee, head of the WTI Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation division, told *The Hindu*. “However, the peaks do not appear to correspond directly to any specific environment covariate, and appear as rather stochastic bursts.”

Since 2009, the WTI project team has rescued eight tigers from 36 human-tiger conflict situations, with four tigers successfully released back into the wild.

According to the report, tiger attacks occurred largely inside forests or on their fringes (54.79%), while (31.5%) occurred in crop fields, primarily sugarcane. Only a small proportion of attacks (13.7%) were recorded to have occurred within houses or near homes.

“Only a small percentage of tiger attacks occurred at greater distances away from the forest edge. Tigers, as per our data, also did not selectively attack men/women or adults/children, and most attacks occurred during the day (90.6%), which suggests, most attacks by tigers are due to accidental encounters between humans and tigers,” said Mr. Chatterjee.

While he said that it “may be a little far fetched to state that such conflicts are really on the rise,” it would “be more apt to say that the animosity and adverse reactions to these incidents is on the rise in recent times.”

#### Varying trends

Contrastingly, leopard attacks were mainly concentrated within or near village boundaries (92.1%), with 47.6% of attacks occurring inside houses or near homesteads, 15.87% occurring within village peripheries and 28.6% taking place in agricultural fields.

The report also provides data of the varying trends in attacks by tigers and leopards. Attacks by tigers were higher when people visited forests to collect firewood and other non-timber products (38.6%). A high percentage of tiger attacks (32.9%) also occurred when people were working in their farms, and about 23.3% of the attacks happened when people were doing odd jobs, sitting, moving, defecating or urinating in the village periphery or fringe forests.

In contrast, the highest proportion (77.8%) of leopard attacks occurred when victims (mostly children) were sleeping, sitting or standing idle, doing odd jobs or defecating/urinating. Only about 22.2% of the attacks occurred while victims were engaged in farm work.

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We know the blackbuck as either venerated or as victims of poaching. This is not always so

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