



An Amur tiger with her cub
— Courtesy of World Wildlife Fund

The big cats at risk of exhausting their nine lives



The Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park in the northeastern provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang has become a sanctuary for Amur tigers. — IC

Lu Feiran

In China's northeast, one of nature's most magnificent and critically endangered mammals roams the dense mountainous forests of a wildlife sanctuary.

Hunchun County in Jilin Province hosts the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park. It was established to protect the rare Amur tiger and Amur leopard.

The 60-or-so tigers in the 15,000-square-kilometer park are safeguarded by 3,000-plus rangers. Among them is 33-year-old Liu Guoqing, a Hunchun native. Last month, he and his colleagues won the championship in a ranger competition organized by the World Wildlife Fund.

"Ranger work can be tiresome after a while, and the competition was a boost for all of us," Liu said. "The prize included a trip to the Shanghai Disney Resort, and I have to admit that was very attractive."

From the competition, now in its sixth year, we can get

an idea of the daily work of rangers. A field test simulated an actual environment where rangers had to display skills such as setting up infrared cameras in the right place to track animals' movements, surviving the harsh mountain environment, and spotting and removing traps set by poachers.

Furthermore, a writing test demonstrated the knowledge and skills required of a qualified ranger: identifying animal traces such as feces and fur fragments, using navigation tools and understanding relevant animal protection laws.

"The competition is actually more difficult than usual range work because it is time-limited, and also because it's held in summer," Liu said.

In winter, it's much easier to find traces of the tigers in the snow, and sunshine penetrating leafless trees provides better sight.

One of the field tests involved finding simulated hunting tools as quickly as possible.

The tools were disguised in camouflage. Liu's team failed to find them all.

"It was a lesson to us, so we collected the props as future teaching tools," he said.

The Amur tiger, also known as the Siberian tiger, is the biggest cat in the world. Its name comes from the river that marks the northeastern border of China and Russia.

There are approximately 500 to 600 Amur tigers left in the wild. They are distributed in eastern Siberia, China's Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces and possibly in the northern region of North Korea.

The Amur tiger is one of four tiger subspecies in China and the only one that holds out hope for restoring numbers of the wild population.

Of the other three subspecies, the Indo-Chinese and Bengal tigers are rarely found in China, and the South China tiger now exists only in zoos.

The fate of the Amur tiger has been adversely affected by human activity. Early in