

Putin Tiger Picture Challenged

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Putin locking a GPS collar on a tranquilized far eastern tiger in 2008. **Alexei Druzhinin**

A tiger can't change its stripes — which is leading some people to wonder whether President-elect Vladimir Putin needs to change his story about which one he shot.

In one of the macho photo moments that Putin often indulges in, he was shown on an expedition in the Far East in 2008 with preservationists tracking wild Amur tigers. According to the video footage, Putin shot one of the rare beasts with a tranquilizer gun so scientists could put a GPS collar on the tiger.

Putin's website later showed photos of what it claimed to be the same tiger, back in the wild.

But environmentalist Dmitry Molodtsov, who runs a website about the big cats, posted an [investigation](#) this month indicating that the tiger shot by Putin isn't the same one shown later on Putin's video.

That leads him to suggest that the tiger Putin shot wasn't a wild specimen at all but a comparatively docile animal from a zoo.

Putin is known for stage-managed media appearances in an array of manly pursuits — petting a polar bear, riding a horse bare-chested and hanging out with leather-clad bikers. The images have endeared him to many people and provoked scorn among others — in particular last year's video footage of him finding ancient Greek artifacts while scuba diving, which his spokesman Dmitry Peskov later admitted had been planted on the seabed.

Peskov could not be immediately reached for comment about the tiger encounter. But Natalya Remennikova, project coordinator at the government-funded Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution in Moscow, which is in charge of the Amur tiger preservation program, dismissed Molodtsov's claim as untrue.

"Somebody made it up, or they thought that they saw something suspicious," she said, adding that the report could be aimed to smear Putin, the current prime minister.

Photos on Putin's [website](#) do show tigers with different coat patterns during the encounter with Putin and afterward in the wild.

Vladimir Krever of the Russian branch of the World Wildlife Fund agreed.

"What I have seen online are two different animals," said Krever, WWF's biodiversity coordinator. But he said he cannot vouch for the authenticity of the photograph and suggested that the camera might have captured another tiger.

Molodtsov insisted that there can be no doubt about the authenticity of the photographs he was comparing because they were posted on Putin's website.

He alleged that the tigress Putin shot with a tranquilizer had been taken from a zoo and had never lived in the wild. He said photographs of a tiger in the Khabarovsk Zoo made him "99 percent certain it was the tiger pictured with Putin."

Molodtsov said he felt obligated to publish his investigation.

"I thought this to be my civil duty to report this," he said. "I want to live in a country where a politician will know that he can improve his declining ratings only with real deeds."

Putin has long been a strong advocate of tiger conservation efforts. Fewer than 400 Ussuri tigers — also known as Siberian, Amur or Manchurian tigers — are believed to survive in the wild, most of them in Russia and some in China. They are the largest tiger species, weighing up to 275 kilograms.

An abandoned tiger cub discovered by hunters in the Primorye region in February has been taken to a rehabilitation center, conservation officials said Friday.

Wildlife inspectors told RIA-Novosti that the five- or six-month-old female, which was found in a state of exhaustion by hunters on February 25, is recovering well. She is expected to be released back into the wild when she is a year old.