

Putin Helps Free Amur Tigers Back Into Wild

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The  **Moscow Times**

President Vladimir Putin helped release rare, orphaned Amur tigers into the wild on Thursday, the latest of several events apparently meant to portray him as an outdoorsman with a strong interest in wildlife conservation.

Russian television footage showed Putin, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, tugging on a rope to help open a gate and let the tigers — two males and a female — lope off into the wooded taiga of the remote Amur region in eastern Siberia.

The males were found as cubs in 2012, presumably orphaned when poachers killed their mothers, according to the International Fund for Animal Welfare, which helped organize what it called the largest release of rehabilitated Amur tigers ever.

It said there are some 360 tigers in the wilds of Russia, down from more than 400 at the turn of the century, and that poaching, logging, wildfires and shrinkage in the population of the hoofed animals they prey upon post their main threats.

Putin, 61, has sought to project the image of a healthy, active man during his 14 years as president or prime minister.

He has shot a tiger with a tranquilizer gun, hit a gray whale with a crossbow bolt to collect skin samples, and donned a baggy white jumpsuit to fly a motorized deltaplane surrounded by cranes to help introduce them into the wild.

Critics dismiss such activities as public relations exercises and Putin has acknowledged some of the stunts have been carefully staged, but has said they were worthwhile because they drew attention to conservation projects.

The Kremlin said the tigers released on Tuesday — dubbed Borya, Kuzia and Ilona — were now old enough to fend for themselves but would be monitored for a year, using collars with satellite tracking devices.

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