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A Cougar Hunt in a Research Laboratory

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Night was rapidly settling down over the north Idaho hills, the cold gray sky increasing the gloom. "Cougar Jones", "Cap" Laird, Murphy and "Government Bill" were satisfied to finish the day, wet from the shoulders down and a trifle disappointed after trailing the two day old cougar track all day in four feet of snow through the Experiment Station forest, a mountainous timber area used exclusively for research in forest management.

Suddenly, Jack, the powerful bloodhound, turned his nose to the descending, chill night air breaking the stillness of that winter evening with a long whine which fell on characteristic cadence. The hunters and the smaller dogs, Mike and Alec, became instantly alert. The big cat and her two
kittens had finally been tracked to its recent kill but the wary feline scented hunters and dogs and made a stealthy get-away.

The three-leashed dogs were nevertheless held in control for dusk and imminent darkness permitted nothing but a hurried examination of the cause for Jack’s alarm. In heavy woolens but with high spirits the men returned to camp planning the while a big hunt for the morrow.

When cold gray dawn stole over the north Idaho mountains and the snow covered forest, hunters and dogs hurried to regain the kill observed in semi-darkness on the previous day. Their way led up Benton Creek logging road through beautiful young timber mostly of white pine whose tender green foliage bore a new but light layer of snow. As the light increased the first clean snow on the canopy and on the low cedar understory presented a scene of unusual beauty.

About a mile from the station, the road was abandoned and the men pushed their way through a bench land mixture of young white pine, Douglas fir and cedar, toward the foot of the south exposure of the drainage. There they found numerous deer tracks singly and in well beaten trails—the lower end of an extensive yard.

In the general white pine type of the North Idaho region there are so-called subtypes conditioned upon site factors of generally lower altitudes. Many of the south slope stands contain relatively open yellow pine or Douglas fir or a mixture of the two. The browse under such open stands consists mainly of Goatbrush Mountain balm, Ocean spray, etc., the first named being much preferred by deer.

The slain deer was a fat four-point white tail buck. It had been “jumped” by the cougar about 200 feet up the slope. In the ensuing life struggle deer and cat had rolled down the hill leaving a trail of blood amid broken brush and branches until the deer lodged against a veteran Douglas fir. The jugular vein had been ripped open and the back showed lacerations of the powerful claws. The kill had been made recently, during the last thirty-six hours, and the only parts devoured were the cerebellum, the back of the neck and the left ham. Such a sight was sufficient to arouse a natural desire to avenge each and every attack of a powerful and relentless marauder upon an almost helpless but noble game animal.

Without misgivings as to the final outcome, the overnight trail of the three beasts was picked up with the full appreciation of the tramp ahead to a distant yard and kill.
The dogs, always leashed, showed as much restless desire to push ahead as the men. Those who have followed a wounded deer probably had the occasion to marvel at its ability to lead the pursuer through some of the worst going in the locality. But the deer is outclassed hopelessly as compared to a fleeing mountain lion. Not only was the going heavy but the clever concealment, doubling, separation and re-doubling of the tracks demanded continued training vigilance and much repeated walking and a concomitant and irritating slowing up of progress. The ridge between the Benton Creek and Canyon Creek drainages was passed through a comparatively dense stand of young yellow pine, larch, Douglas fir, white pine and occasional red cedars, a transitional subtype of the two very distinct north and south slope vegetative complexes. The north slope furnished an even more difficult continuation of the labors of trailing. In addition to a foot or two of deep snow the young stand of white pine, larch, cedar, hemlock and white fir was so dense that at times it was necessary to crawl on hand and knees to get through. “Jack pots” of snow breakage and old wind falls of the huge trees had been used by the tens in clever attempts to shake off the pursuer. Frequently, men and dogs disappeared under the snow and literally had to dig themselves out only to receive and not too warmly, a deluge of the white burden sliding off the cedar understory. In less than an hour’s time there was very little dry clothing left on the men and with it vanished much of the restraining desire to use proper language. Even Bill, a son of a—minister, forgot himself now and then. Decidedly, the forest was losing much of its charm, but then there was compensation in the anticipation which possessed men and dogs.

Three hours of continued exertion along the north slope brought the men to the V shaped bottom of Canyon Creek. Ordinarily the expenditure of such amounts of energy constitutes more than a day’s labor but though men and dogs felt a bit tired all signs of it vanished now. Ahead of them on the opposite slope were the immense rock bluffs, and as far as the eye could see the three cougar tracks wound upward that slope to its most inaccessible portion. Above the bluffs there was visible a mature yellow pine stand—another deer yard—where undoubtedly the early morning’s kill would be found.

Men and dogs pushed ahead with renewed vigor. The tracks had to be abandoned temporarily because the bluffs proved insurmountable. It was only with great difficulty that the dogs were kept quiet. The hunters soon divided in-
to two parties, the one scaling the bluffs below and the other above the tracks. Once on top the men joined from opposite directions thus relocating the trail, but were it not for Jack's keen nose, it would have been passed unnoticed on the crusted snow. The joy of it had proven too much for him, for the mountains were reverberating his sonorous, deep voice. One or more of such outbreaks and it meant several more hours of trailing.

The tracks led the hunters out of the yellow pines into the transitional type on a rather broad and flat ridge and back into the yellow pine, thus zigzagging and roughly paralleling the downhill course of the creek some 600 feet lower in elevation. The hotter the trail became the more difficult it was to keep the dogs under control. Jack persisted in a subdued whining. In the hasty pursuit it was not noticed immediately that the kittens had retraced their previous tracks. But two hours earlier there had been a light snow flurry and now the men saw clean, fresh footprints. The pursuit came to a sudden halt. Laird and Bill holding Jack found—only 50 feet back—where the two young cougars had branched off in a most leisurely manner. There the two waited for Jones and Murphy who had taken Mike and Alec and followed the trail to its logical conclusion. In less than ten minutes these men returned reporting a kill of a young doe still warm and near the edge of the bluffs they had picked up the big cat's tracks leading away in the opposite direction of those of her kittens.

Very cautiously Bill and Jack led the way following the twin tracks. Four hundred feet on the trail took a rather sharp left hand turn. It led directly into a snow bent cover. Jack was tugging heavily on the lead. Bill handed him over to Murphy and peered under the cover. About fifty feet ahead, two bare spots in the scant snow, and still warm, were the mute evidence that two cougar kittens had just been disturbed most impolitely in their siesta.

In a second the hound and the mongrels were unleashed, there was one whirlwind rush into the snow bent cover and canine pandemonium broke loose. How the hills echoed and re-echoed with Jack's deep and powerful voice and Mike's and Alec's high pitched yelps. In another minute the dogs barked "treed." Without further indecision and directed by sound the men ran in a straight line down a small shallow draw, draining over the bluffs, to the spot where supposedly both kittens had found temporary safety up a tree.

The dogs were in a frantic uproar at their inability to climb the 16-inch cedar to which one of the cougars was
clinging about 25 feet from the ground just above the first
dead limb, but they were commanded to be quiet and were
tied to sapling trees. How helpless the little fellow up there
appeared as he watched now and then the strange proceed-
ings below apparently with a care free and certainly with a
most innocent expression. The dogs reciprocated with dis-
trustful snarls.

"Kill the little fellow? - Why, no!"

At least one of the kittens should be caught alive. Jones
prepared the ropes and adjusting the telephone belt and
climbers, when there was a loud snap of a dead cedar limb
which broke under the kitten's weight. Another furious up-
roar of the dogs broke loose as they attempted vainly to
reach the cedar. But a cat is a cat. The little fellow regain-
ed his hold on the cedar after dropping five feet and shot up
the tree to the very tip about 80 feet above the ground. But
where was his twin?

"Cap" Laird and Bill took Mike and Alec and with a little
difficulty located the second kitten's tracks which led directly
through the open yellow pine to the rock bluffs below. Here
the mongrels were turned loose. They fairly tobogganed
down the precipitous slope; the men following as best as
they could. Bill's breeches struck a hidden gooseneck in
the snow chute, but that did not retard his speed, it just
reduced the frictional surface from cloth to skin. Distress-
ful shouts of "ho" mingled with the yelping of the mongrels
down the canyon. But when Bill later on removed the peck
of snow from under his belt, he vehemently denied having
ever sent out distress signals.

"Just listen to Mike and Alec, Cap, they are barking
'treed' ".

"Yes," was Cap's answer, "but a pond at the lower end
of this chute would have helped us to negotiate the infernal
mess in the creek bottom and - would have made a perfect
cooling system for overheated bearings . . . By Jove, Bill,
do you hear those dogs? They are running again. What
do you suppose is happening down there?"

"Let's go and see," was Bill's only reply as he picked his
way through the creek bottom.

Once more the men fought their way through the snow-
ettangled young growth on the north slope. They had not
gone very far, however, when they noticed the cougar had
stopped in its flight to fight off the dogs instead of taking to
a tree. Judging from the tracks the dogs had been wise
enough to circle the enraged cat with a considerable margin
of safety. A short distance farther was another such
circle but here came Mike and Alec with wagging tails and outstretched tongues. All coaxing to return was of no avail and they would only bluff obedience to Cap Laird's commands for they were determined to join Jack. Evidently they figured Cap and Bill could finish the issue in the canyon as their instinct sensed livelier sport over the bluffs. The two men knew that under the circumstances speed was the best expediency, so in spite of a sudden and almost overwhelming exhaustion they shortly found where the young cat had been treed in a small bent over larch scarcely more than ten feet above the ground. They had not arrived a minute too early for it was getting ready to leave. With a complete sense of satisfaction and a well earned rest Cap Laird, dropped into the snow almost directly under the cougar kitten and pointing to it said very dramatically:

"Bill, to you as a forester and a lover of nature, I wish to introduce a rare fruit, the winter raspberry. I hope you will accept the honor of picking the first ripe fruit on this white-blossom-covered raspberry bush. Please do not drop it on my head for I am finding solace here."

It was simply a matter of a few minutes and a 9 mm. bullet out of a well aimed Luger pistol - piercing the jugular vein, and the four-point buck was avenged.

"Fine work, Bill," shouted Cap Laird, "We will disembowel this furred butterball; he enjoyed his last epicurean indulgence this morning. But be sure not to waste any of the suet, it furnishes the uction par excellence for leather boots and bad colds."

Bill had just measured off 5 feet and 10 inches from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail when both men jumped to their feet as if shot up by coil springs. A hideous mixture of growls, snarls, and choked barking emanating from the bluffs above rent the quiet atmosphere. Dragging the carcass the men hurried, as best they could, to the creek, and there - rapidly progressing down the craggy incline was a sight to behold.

On the downhill side of the cedar in which the first cougar kitten had found temporary refuge there stood a second cedar with its crown leaning heavily into the other tree. With belt, climbers and a rope noose in readiness Jones went up cautiously on the downhill tree, while Murphy was uncoiling the quarter inch rope and at the same time trying to appease Jack's anger. The young cougar was watching Jones' approach, with blazing eyes. Arrived on a level with it Jones slowed down his motions still more, spread and fastened the noose on the split prongs of a forked stick and at-
tempted to slip it over the cat's head. The kitten was resting heavily on a green limb and as the noose approached its head it gradually leaned farther and farther away from the trees in the effort to dodge the noose for a leap to the ground was unthinkable as long as there was a growling and snarling bloodhound below and to leap into another crown would have meant to leap into a man's lap. With green eyes, now betraying indecision, this lion heart glanced hither and thither for help. The brittle limb broke. The escape from the noose was unexpected. By all odds a face to face encounter with the devil below was to be prevented. But with traditional faithfulness cedar limb after cedar limb broke. His princely majesty landed in front of a hound infuriated to the highest pitch because it was being held by a wire-wound leash tied to a sapling.

Amid spitting and hissing and terrific growls the frightened cat did not land, no, it bounced away with incredible speed. Jones dropped out of his tree almost as fast as the cat had come down. Jack's vise-like jaws attempted to sever the leash. The grinding of teeth and metal was plainly audible amid his anger-choked growls. Murphy jumped to his help and unsnapped the leash. With a hair raising howl Jack disappeared. Jones had gathered everything into the pack sack. The men ran toward the rock cliffs. They were just in time to see a knot of fur disappear over them.

Mike and Alec had taken the return over the rocky slope quite leisurely, but when they heard Jack they sped up the trail. On top they collided with the mountain lion. Did the fight start immediately? No one can tell. But the delay gave Jack a scrapping chance. Over the brink rolled cat and dogs in a melee, very nearly following the course Cap and Bill had taken previously. They were moving down at a fast pace, but not fast enough for Jones to gain on them, with Murphy and the pack sack as close seconds. The snow was flying in all directions as if thrown by a speed plow. The combatants nearly landed at Cap's and Bill's very feet. But everything moved so fast now that the telling is only a slow motion rendering.

Mike's head was pinned into the snow by the cougar's muscular and disproportionately large front paws. Alec's head nearly disappeared in the cat's throat, where he had gotten a hold of its tongue, lacerating it badly. Jack had a hold of the small of the back and undoubtedly would have had it crushed in the next moment. Jones prevented it. With a cat-like leap and an animal instinct probably seldom equalled by civilized man, he tore off Jack and straddled the
cougar. Like a flash his hands had pinned the cat’s front legs to its neck and the thighs were fixed between his knees. The beast was caught by a human trap in a vise-like grip.

Leisurely, “Cougar” Jones sat back, holding in his lap a terribly infuriated kitten. Incessant growls accompanied by frantic efforts to free itself and daggers flashed from yellowish-green, narrowed eyes were the cougar’s replies to Cougar Jones’ comforting remarks.

“Well, well, Kitty, what are you so mad about? Don’t you appreciate a warm lap? It isn’t quite so soft as mother’s, but didn’t I save your life? You could have just bet all the venison steaks mother left in the pantry for you, your life wasn’t worth a nickle when Jack got that hold on you.”

“Say, pussy,” Cap Laird broke in, “you are surely a saucy little rascal. Hold still so we can slip these home made mittens over your patty’s. You are to have a nice, long hoss back ride home and it would be a shame if you would freeze them and lose your nice finger nails. I declare, you act hungry. I suppose a piece of human flesh would taste good to you just now, but listen, if you behave yourself we will bring mother down for you tomorrow and some nice, juicy slices of that venison you and your brother had this morning.”

The cat was soon gagged and bound securely and stowed away in the pack sack which Murphy swung over his shoulders. The kitten measured a little over six feet and in bondage weighed 65 pounds. Both of them still showed faintly on their fur the darker spots of adolescence.

“It is time we are starting on our six-mile hike home,” said Bill, “the sky is clear and the cold blasts from Baldie are fast changing us into armored knights of the chase. Tomorrow we will go after the old cat. We should have little trouble finding her; she surely will be waiting for her babes to come home. I want to tell you one thing, though, cougar hunting and fighting forest fires are in a class by themselves. But great Scott, what sport! I think both games require ‘he men’ in every respect—I am not patting anybody on the back, you understand, but the idea is this: nature is thereby better able to maintain the proper balance in the forest for the benefit of mankind, now and in posterity.”