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# SPECTATOR ARCHERY







*Chasing mountain lions in the dead of winter is always an up-and-down proposition.*

**BY  
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**I**t was the peak of the elk rut, 1805. Yes, Friday, September 13, 1805. An unlucky day. The Lewis and Clark Expedition crossed the Bitterroot divide into what is now Idaho and never heard a bugle, never saw an elk. Behind them rolled vast herds of bison, elk, pronghorns, deer, the Missouri River and the way home. Before them lay the Pacific Northwest wilderness and hardship.

For the next seven days the men battled the mountains. “. . . crossed three high mountains, rendered almost impassable from the steepness of the ascent and the quantity of fallen timber . . . steep and stony, broken by fallen timber, thickly over grown by pine, spruce, fir . . . food now exhausted, we killed a colt.”

“. . . it began to snow and continued all day . . . pines so thickly strewn that the snow fell from them . . . continually wet to the skin . . . We camped in . . . low ground . . . scarcely large enough to lie level.”

# KILLER UP A TREE





*The author's Mossberg Patriot Bantam Youth Model rests atop the remains of a whitetail fawn killed by the cougar only a few hours before the dogs treed the big cat.*





*Left: Ranch manager Jeremi Syron (right) and guide Corey Swanson listen intently as one of the strike dogs hits fresh cat scent. Above: Jeremi prepares to release the other dogs, then the hunters follow in hopes the big cat will be treed. Below: The author struggles up a steep slope.*

“Wolf,” Jeremi said, toeing the broad dog track in the snow. “Looks like an outlier, maybe a scout for that pack we saw farther back.”

“Looking for those elk, most likely,” Corey added as he gazed out across the widening canyon we’d been paralleling half the morning. Snowmelt was beginning to drip from dark granite outcroppings facing the sun. This is why the elk and moose tracks were up here. They’d found a microclimate where the right combination of a steep, south-facing slope, wind-blocking terrain, and an old burn had created open grazing. Wherever the elk gathered, wolves followed. But we were more interested in mountain lions.

This wild menagerie, absent in 1805, was the result of modern man’s meddling. Forest fires in 1910 and beyond had cleared out much of the old-growth conifers, opening the hills to young grasses, shrubs and deciduous brush. Hunters gathered elk from Yellowstone and released them into the mountains. Whitetails and mule deer flourished down in the foothills and farm country, expanding their range up and up past 8,000 feet. Mountain goats were released into more rugged terrain. Moose moved down from the north. Cougars padded north from the Salmon River wilderness and black bears flourished on the sudden banquet of berries and carcasses. The starvation camps of Lewis and Clark became a cornucopia of game, which is the biggest part of the reason the Flying B Ranch is there.

North Idaho’s Flying B Ranch has a long history of hunting game and fish of all types, but especially mountain lions.

These were young, strong, tough, hardened woodsmen who had already crossed half a continent, largely living off the fat of the land. But here, the only fat seemed to be timber. Trunks, limbs and boughs. They found no salmon in the streams, no elk in the mountains, no deer in the narrow valleys.

“We then melted some snow, and supped on a little portable soup, a few canisters of which, with about 20 pounds weight of bear’s oil, are our only remaining means of subsistence . . . our guns scarcely of any service, for there is no living creature in these mountains except . . . small pheasants (grouse) a small species of squirrel (pine) and a blue bird of the vulture kind (Steller’s Jay.)”

“The men are growing weak and losing their flesh very fast.”

The Expedition eventually escaped the forested wilderness, breaking out onto the Weippe Prairie where the Nez Perce fed them dried salmon, a “small piece” of buffalo, berries and too much *quamash*, the starchy root of the beautiful, blue camas flower, which led to significant gastrointestinal distress.

Two hundred twelve years later I hunted in the shadow of Lewis and Clark, also on the 13th day, but February, not September. Despite this being the heart of winter in deep snow country, things would be different for me. Headquartering in one of the same camps Lewis and Clark had used, I would eat heartily, soak in a hot tub, dry my boots and clothing nightly, and find more than jays and squirrels. Lots more.

**Unlike Roosevelt, I did not begrudge this cat his role in life. Lord of stealth, certainly, but no more a craven murderer of deer than I. He hunted, he killed, he ate. His right to prowl and stalk these ancient mountains goes back millions of years. Mine, perhaps half that.**





The lodge has hosted dozens of successful hunters over some 30 years of outfitting.

"It's just perfect lion country," head guide and ranch manager Jeremi Syron told me. "You can see that. A good mix of forest, brush and steep canyons for escape cover. Proximity to croplands to feed a lot of deer, moose and elk."

"And a low-elevation river valley to concentrate them in winter," Corey Swanson added. Corey is the Flying B's big game manager and a 10-year veteran guide in this wild country. "Deer, elk, moose . . . they all have to come down. And the lions are right behind them. It's like their all-you-can eat buffet."

I'd seen evidence of that several years earlier during a deer hunt on the ridge where Lewis and Clark had ridden on their way back from winter camp on the Pacific Coast in 1806. We were glassing the big canyon, Lawyer Creek a burbling rush far below, when a pumpkin-headed old tom chased three whitetails from the brush. As he sauntered across the hillside, several more deer rose from their beds and fled. After that cat disappeared, we turned our attention to our side of the canyon just in time to see a second cougar leap from a thicket and swat a hen pheasant from the air.

The Flying B guides its clients to about six lions each year, averaging 4.5 days of hunting for each one treed. A treed cat, however, isn't always a big cat. It's the density of lions that makes hunting so good.

Such was the case in February 2017. We came across five whitetail kills as we followed the baying hounds up and down and across the same steep, heavily vegetated terrain Lewis and Clark had fought.

"This one's not too fresh, but maybe fresh enough," Jeremi said on our second day. He was dangling the partial remains of a whitetail fawn half buried under a massive old Douglas fir.

"Looks like a big tom by the track. He could still be sleeping it off up there. Let's take up his track and see if the dogs get hot."

Walking along an overfed cougar's track shouldn't be much of a chore, but the crusted snow broke in places, held in others. When it broke over three feet of fluff, it wallowed out and became a major investment in time and energy. But the spoor kept leading upward. We kept sweating after it.

The sun was gliding toward its evening rest when Seven, Jeremi's black-and-white

Walker, lit up.

"It's not super-hot, but good enough that I think I'll let him go," Jeremi said over the baying. His arm jerked behind the lunging hound. "Try to keep up."

And just that quickly I started chasing my first lion hound. Well, more like tracking. I tried running when the barking crescendoed, but a 20-yard dash uphill in deep snow doesn't last long. Pretty soon I was stopping after 10 yards. I heard Jeremi call my name a few times, urging me on. And then the mountain was quiet. Seven was silent. Jeremi was gone. I was tracking the trackers who were tracking the cougar.

Corey, who'd been canvassing another slope with Bess, another Walker, and Hank, a bluetick, caught up with me, passed me and disappeared.

"Try to keep up!" was the last I heard as he plunged into a deep canyon.

I couldn't. I wanted to and even thought I might be able to when I cleared a ridge and heard one of the hounds barking treed just there on the far slope. It didn't look that far away; probably close enough to reach with the little Mossberg 243 Winchester I carried. But I couldn't see dog, cat or guides. To reach them I'd have to drop down as far as I'd already climbed up, then climb again. At least 700 feet. But there was hound music to accompany me.

And then there wasn't. I'd been leaping, plunging down a nearly perpendicular slope when I nearly slammed into Jeremi coming up.

"Sounds as if the cat bailed and they went around the corner," he said. "Think you can make it?"

"No. I mean, yeah, probably. But not

quickly. And when I get there, I'll be wasted. Knees are starting to bite."

"And it could be dark, too," my solicitous guide added diplomatically. "Maybe too dark for a shot. And then we'd have to drop out in the dark and come back in the morning."

I got the distinct impression the man was giving me an opening, an easy out. Discretion being the better part of valor, I took it. Jeremi is smart that way. It's one thing for a mountain-tough guide to push the envelope, quite another for a gray-bearded desk jockey with delusions of mountain man grandeur to try to keep up with him.

"It'll almost be dark by the time we get down anyway," he said, "and this way you can recuperate for tomorrow."



*Closing in on the cat, the hunters and dogs had to contend with deep snow, massive windfalls and thick tangles of brush.*



The challenge when cougar hunting with hounds is similar to crossing the wilderness with Lewis and Clark. It's a combination of faith, hope, effort, balance and pigheaded endurance. You're wet, cold, tired, discouraged and a little bit hungry—but determined. You know you can do this. You just can't do it fast. You can't afford to be reckless. The mountain



won't allow it. Twist an ankle, torque a knee, jab a broken limb through your leg, or merely wear yourself out and your hunt could be over.

Unlike Lewis and Clark's team, Jeremi, Cory and I could retire at the end of each day to libations at the lodge, a hot fire, thick steaks, ibuprofen, a hot tub (yes!) and hot showers. Just what's needed to revive an out-of-shape hunter past his prime. And you get to do this because your guides are doing the hard work.

While I limped off the mountain, Jeremi hiked back for the truck. Corey ran down the dogs and pulled them off the treed lion. Yes, treed with a licensed hunter a quarter-mile away, a thousand feet down and too tired to get there. Embarrassing. Frustrating. But there it

is. Perhaps one should chase cougars in his 30s instead of his 60s.

A second day of climbing, wallowing, chasing. More ibuprofen. More hot tub.

The dogs got on a smoking trail the third day. Following them, we climbed over a freshly buried fawn, massive lion prints in the snow leading away from it. This cat would be an old male—big, full, fat and slow. But we couldn't tell that when we followed him. He went up. He went down. He side-hilled through knee-deep snow, across waist-deep snow, hugging brushy slopes on the verge of becoming cliffs. He led us past bounding deer tracks, steaming moose droppings, churned elk trails. Down through a cloistered grove of ancient cedars, across a creek murmuring between mattresses of snow. Under windfall trunks and tangled thorns, through hanging green gardens of ferns, up a flank of firs. Through it all, the dogs urged us forward, barking, baying. Treed.

And there was little Bess, incongruously fragile and small in the grand glade of giant pines and firs, marching up the snowy mountain flanks. Seven, just as small, heads up, baying, baying, baying.

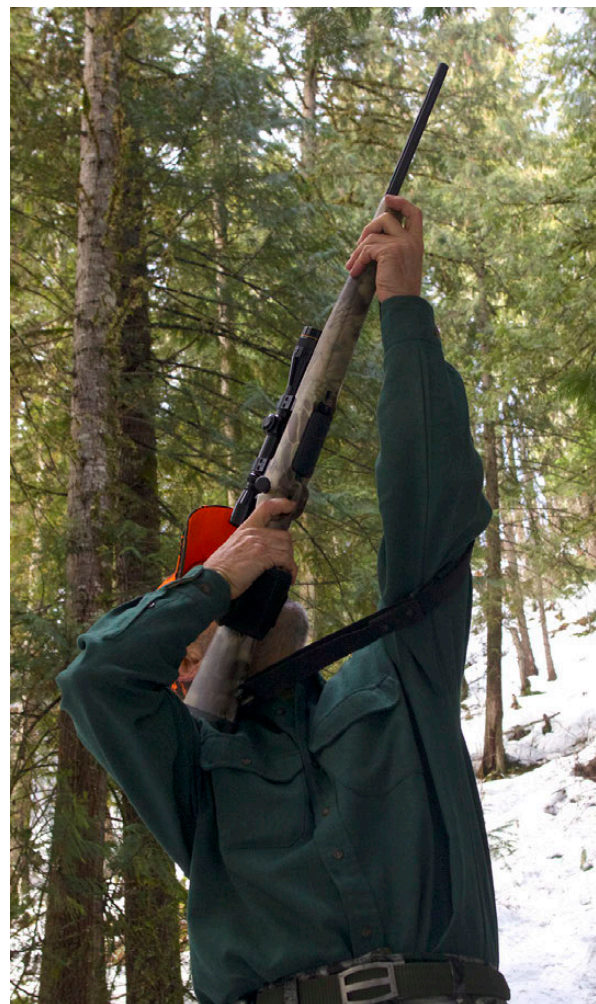
That a lion, Roosevelt's "... destroyer of the deer, the lord of stealthy murder, facing his doom with a heart both craven and cruel," would let himself be harried up a tree by a couple of insolent dogs one-quarter his bulk shall ever remain one of the mysteries of the woods. But there he was. Big. Aloof. Staring down at us. He glowed a soft, warm orange against the white-and-green world in which we then lived.

Unlike Roosevelt, I did not begrudge this cat his role in life. Lord of stealth, certainly, but no more a craven murderer of deer than I. He hunted, he killed, he ate. His right to prowl and stalk these ancient mountains goes back millions of years. Mine, perhaps half that.

It mattered not how and when we'd come to our places. Both of us were

products of the natural world, actors within Her ancient cycle of renewal. Hunter and hunted and hunted and hunter, each in our turn, each acting our roles. He, with his 170 pounds of muscle and sinew, fangs and claws. I, with my steel and copper, aluminum and glass. From rimrock and treetops, season after season, he'd pounced on helpless fawns and elk cows, biting to suffocate them, twisting their necks to break them. I'd sent small stones whistling through the woods to break spines and hearts. Carnivores, we hunted, we killed, we ate.

And here we'd converged. He with superior strength, I with superior numbers, the cooperation of the pack, and the tools of my heritage. With a small pop a chemical reaction converted a solid into a gas. Confined, that gas expanded rapidly, creating enough pressure to push a tiny, pointed, 90-grain stone from the barrel of my tool. Directed with the precision of optical engineering, that little lead-and-copper stone leaped 3,000 feet-per-second to strike the lion. Heart-shot, the beast turned a cartwheel in the air, hit the snow with a *whump* and slid to a stop in the quiet woods along the Lewis and Clark Trail. ■







## IF YOU WANT TO GO

In retrospect, I should not have waited until age 64 to pursue my first cougar. A healthy older person in good shape can hunt, succeed and have a wonderful time doing so. He or she just can't go as fast and far as the guides. Flying B guides know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. They pace themselves and take good care of you. A drink in front of the fireplace followed by dinner and the hot tub will not only revive you, but also fully brace you for the next day.

The central Idaho wilderness was the location for Maurice Hornocker's seminal cougar research in the 1960s. The state has managed a growing lion population ever since declaring the big cats game animals in 1972. From the snowy mountain forests in the north to the sagebrush canyons in the south, Idaho's cougars continue to thrive despite a harvest of 400 to 500 annually. Non-residents can buy tags over the counter.

To book this adventure, contact Flying B Ranch at [flyingbranch.com](http://flyingbranch.com) or 800-472-1945.

## GEAR TESTS

A north Idaho lion hunt is not where you want to drag a 10-pound, 24-inch barrel, marbled walnut rifle. I toyed with taking a 357 Magnum revolver, but wanted the precision of a parallax adjustable Leupold Vari-X 3-9 scope. A short, light, inexpensive youth model Mossberg Bantam Patriot bolt-action rifle in 243 Winchester with 20-inch barrel proved a

good choice. With its butt secured in a Stratus Systems belt-holder and the forend snapped into my ALPS pack sternum strap, I was hands-free for climbing. Despite regular contact with limbs, rocks, snow and water, neither the rifle nor the scope went awry.

A single 90-grain Scirocco through the heart handled the cat nicely, and that bonded bullet, with its pure copper jacket, is tough enough to break through a few limbs and stay in one piece.

Sitka fleece pants and jacket solved the sweat and wet snow issues. LOWA Tibet GTX boots with knee-high gaiters proved the right footwear. They kept my feet dry and navigated the mix of muddy slopes, icy trails and deep snow. Yes, we did some post-holing, but snowshoes would never have worked in the brushy cover.

Jeremi and Corey kept track of their dogs with Garmin Astro satellite GPS collars, a great way to NOT lose your best buddy in dangerous, rugged terrain.

## MEAT YOUR COUGAR

It might have been an old high school taunt for the opposing team, but it's valid for lion hunters: "What do we eat? Cougar meat?" I'd long heard that mountain lion was lean, sweet and delicious, but also, like pork and black bear, carried trichinosis. According to the CDC, that's true, but all you have to do is bring the meat to 160 degrees F. to neutralize the *Trichinella* parasite. Check out [parasites/trichinellosis/hunters.html](http://parasites/trichinellosis/hunters.html) for details.

Ryan Nelson, long-time chef at the Flying B, said one of the best-liked meals he serves at the ranch is cougar loin. All the workers there like it and Carol, the lodge manager, claims it's her favorite. With ringing endorsements like that, I had to try some. They weren't kidding. This truly is the other, *other* white meat. What remains is in my freezer now, but it won't last long.



Corey (left) and Jeremi gather up their hounds after the hunt. Above: Out on a limb, the 170-pound cougar stares down at the hunters. Opposite: The hunters and dogs move in on the cat before Spomer takes a bead and drops it with one shot through the heart.



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