

# SLOWEST MEMBER OF THE PACK.

By JOHN HAVILAND

The silence of a new snow settled over the Bitterroot Mountains along the border of Montana and Idaho. The accumulation of winter snows had pushed the deer and elk into the lower hills of the Bitterroots to be tracked by mountain lions after their prey. My friend's two Walker hounds roamed ahead up the trail, checking for tracks.

The male Walker hound, Pilgrim, veered to the right side of the trail and buried his nose in a mountain lion track, inhaling the scent into his nostrils and exhaling a resonant howl. Pilgrim's sister, Belle, joined in the cry.

"Grab the dogs," yelled Corey.

I made a leap for Belle and snapped a leash on her collar. Corey jumped for Pilgrim, but came up with an arm full of snow. Pilgrim ran up the trail with his nose skimming the lion's trail in the snow. The dog disappeared around the corner in the trail, howling in time with the switching of its tail.

"The track Pilgrim's on is the wrong lion," Corey said.

The evening before Corey had snowshoed down the trail from checking his trap line to find large lion tracks over his snowshoe prints. But that was a couple miles farther up the creek bottom. The cat Pilgrim was following had moved through during the night.

The strain Belle put on her leash from missing out on the action pulled me up the trail. More lions, this time a female and her two kittens had crossed the trail at the next bend. Belle went wild with indecision. I pulled her in the direction Pilgrim and first lion had run. After a short distance the first lion and Pilgrim had turned up toward a face of cliffs.

"Belle might as well have some fun too," I thought, so I unsnapped her leash. She ran up the mountain and across a ledge in the cliffs. Corey and I plodded along behind. We followed Belle's yowls fading over the top of the mountain. The winter morning felt hot. I shed layers of wool until I was down to my shirt.

The yowling of both dogs carried back on the far side of the mountain. The pace of the cry had increased.

"They're barking treed," Corey said. "You can tell because Belle hits right at 90 barks a minute when she's got a lion up the tree." The dogs turned from the tree for a moment to note we had finally arrived. A lion sat looking down from high in the branches of a Douglas fir. When the lion spotted us it slithered down and around the trunk of the tree like a snake. It jumped from the tree between the dogs and ran before the dogs could move, slaloming down through the trees, swinging its tail one way, then the other for balance.

The dogs scrambled right after the cat. In a minute they had the cat back in another tree. Once again Corey and I brought up the rear.

This time the cat lay content in the branches 15 feet above the ground. It ignored the dogs' racket and their futile attempts to climb the tree trunk. I tried to look into the dark of the lion's eyes. But it stared aloof across the mountains.

"Looks like it might go 115 pounds," Corey said. "Might be a female."

We circled the tree to see if we could determine the lion's sex, but branches blocked the view. Corey decided he would climb up for a closer

inspection. I decided to stay with the hounds. Corey climbed up until the tip of the lion's drooping tail touched his hat. The lion gave Corey a casual glance, then peed on his hat. "Definitely female," Corey said.

I unloaded my gun to watch the lion. Although the lion appeared aloof, its front leg muscles flexed to raise the tendons running to its claws. Its whiskers twitched nervously. The winter white of its jaw blended into a brown body the same color as the dry grass of fall.

Every so often the dogs looked our way. Their impatient stares said they had done their part to put the lion in the tree. Now the time had come for us to do our duty and get the lion out of the tree. The hounds whined when we snapped the leashes on their collars to drag them away. I am sure they wile away the hours in their kennel plotting how to get a lion out of a tree. With that solved they could rid the pack of its slowest members.

Hiking back down the trail we stopped along a creek running beneath the December ice. The creek still ran strong from water stored in the ground beneath the forests and in the Bitterroot Mountains themselves along the Idaho/Montana border. Pilgrim and Belle sat, pleading sad eyes to bum a good portion of our sandwiches.

The sun had set over the Bitterroots by the time we reached the trailhead. We loaded the dogs into their box in the back of the pickup. The weather report on the radio forecast snow for the next morning.

"Pick you up in the morning at six," I told Corey.

COREY FOLLOWS HIS HOUND DOGS, PILGRIM AND BELLE, AS THEY SEARCH FOR MOUNTAIN LION TRACKS IN THE NEW FALLEN SNOW OF THE BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS.



Corey and I are relatively new to lion hunting. A couple years earlier Corey had traded his labor in crafting two custom rifle stocks to long-time lion hunter Larry Bennett for Pilgrim and Belle. Bennett had trained the dogs well. They are so gentle small children play in the yard with them. They never give a deer or elk track a second look. But when the subject turns to cats, it's a different story.

The first winter the dogs jumped a mature male lion off a calf elk it had just killed. After a short chase, the lion was treed and Corey finished what the dogs had started. The lion's hide now covers a good portion of Corey's wall.

The second winter Corey and I hiked several different mountain ranges looking for fresh lion tracks to turn out the dogs. We chased several cats, but never fired a shot.

A string of mild winters had dramatically increased the whitetail deer

we had driven up the road to find a big lion had crossed the road at the same place. However, the tracks were always a couple days old.

This morning the tracks were there again, covered with only a few flakes of snow. I parked the pickup to wait for daylight. The hounds thrust their noses through the holes in their box for the lion's scent.

"Could be a lion morning," Corey said.

Daylight finally filtered through a slit between the mountain tops to the east and the clouds to brightened the forest. I checked to make sure the magazine of my Winchester was full of 30-30 cartridges. We each snapped a leash on a dog as they jumped from their box.

The lion had hunted back and forth across the canyon during the night. Tracks led every which way. We walked the tracks trying to unravel the direction the lion had gone. The dogs strained at their leashes, their howling echoing through the canyon.

Corey pointed up the steep south slope and yelled, "Near as I can figure the cat went up there."

We unleashed the dogs. They scrambled up the wall through the snow. After several attempts I started crawling, grabbing

roots and tree trunks to help pull me up. The dogs started milling around in confusion high on the hill. As I was still climbing up they ran down. I turned to follow, only to meet them coming back.

We all met back in the creek bottom where we had started. With the dogs on their leashes again, we walked the tracks. After a few false starts we found the lion had actually gone into the thicket of the north slope.

The dogs knew now the trail led straight to the lion. Belle and I seemed to take opposite sides around every tree. She dived under blown down logs while I climbed over them. We were always yanking the other to a stop.

The lion lined out in a straight path when the forest opened up.

"Let'em run," Corey said. I held Belle back by her collar for enough slack to unsnap her leash. Their howls turned to a continual wailing as they ran.

I trudged along. Corey looked back at me with a sneer similar to the ones the dogs had given us in the past at our dragging pace. "Nobody beats me to the tree," he said. He disappeared into the trees to run with his dogs.

After awhile the tracks showed where the dogs had jumped the lion from its bed. The tempo of the dogs' wailing picked up toward the top of the mountain, and I knew the dogs had done their part.

At the head of a draw Corey and the two dogs stood at the base of a giant cedar. I wouldn't have been surprised to see Corey lean against the cedar with his arms and bark up into the branches like the two dogs. All of them glared at me impatiently.

High in the limbs of the cedar the lion stared down. The branches and fog hanging in the air partially concealed the lion. The lion snarled from deep in its throat. It swiped the air, daring anyone to come closer.

"Big male," Corey said.

The resistance of muscle played under the tan of the lion's coat. Even with the large mass of the lion's body, its head and feet seemed too big.

I walked around the cedar for the clearest shot. An opening showed a section of chest. Compound confusion broke loose when I shot. The lion came out of the tree full of life and claws. The dogs jumped on the lion when it hit the ground, taking away a chance for another shot.

The lion and dogs ran down the draw, snapping and clawing. I was right on their heels. The cat came to bay against the base of a tree. Pilgrim flew through the air and clamped on to the lion's face. Belle bit the lion's tail and held on. The lion wiped Pilgrim off and pinned him to the ground with its foreleg. I ran up, but held my fire for fear of hitting the dog. The lion forced a decision when it raised up and growled right in my face. The breath out of the black of the lion's throat was clean, hissing out of the mouth of white canines. This time the shot was good.

Pilgrim and Belle looked at the lion as a prize where everyone in the pack had done their job.

Corey ran up from behind. "I never knew you could move so fast," he said.



THE AUTHOR, JOHN, AND HIS TROPHY MOUNTAIN LION TAKEN IN THE BITTERROOT MOUNTAINS OF MONTANA. THE LION SCORES 15-1/16 POINTS.

population and range in Montana. Mountain lions also expanded their numbers and range to accommodate the prey. The lion was classified as a game animal in 1971 in Montana. During the 1971-72 hunting season 51 lions were taken by hunters. The number grew to 236 lions during the 1991-92 season. With the increased interest in lion hunting, the hunting season in the more accessible areas sometimes closes in only a couple weeks because Montana has a quota on the number of lions that can be taken from each hunting district.

Snow fell out of the dark sky as Corey and I drove toward the mountains.

"Maybe we should go around the long way to check if that lion with the big feet has come back yet," Corey said.

Several times in the past weeks