

FROM THE EDITOR

Walking Up Lions



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So what does it take to walk up a lion? Basic knowledge about cougar habits and behavior, fresh snow, good tracking conditions, time, and a lot of effort are key ingredients. A little bit of luck is also very helpful. Before you begin it helps to understand cougar behavior. Knowing where to look for tracks is a good starting point.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL years the use of dogs for hunting cougar has been restricted through ballot initiatives in a number of states throughout the West. When this occurred in Washington most hunters interested in bagging a cougar gave up on the idea because, without dogs, they felt their chances of bagging a lion were slim to none.

Without the use of dogs the lion harvest declined significantly and contributed to a corresponding increase in lion populations in the state. With the “dog ban” in place and the increase in the lion popula-

tion, a few hardy Washington State hunters have discovered a new winter challenge . . . stalking cougars on foot. Hunters who have taken the time to follow lion tracks in the snow throughout the West have been walking up lions off and on for years. Because of the difficulty of catching a lion in this manner, most hunters who really wanted to harvest a lion employed the services of someone who had hounds trained for the purpose. Often the lions harvested without the use of dogs were written off as “luck.” I recall an article Debra Bradbury wrote in her *International Black Powder Hunting* magazine several years ago, which was also mentioned in

our Winter 97 issue of *Fair Chase*. Debra walked up and shot a nice lion in Wyoming by following its tracks in a fresh snow. Although she was proud of her accomplishment, she lamented that it would have been even better if she had taken the lion with her black powder rifle rather than her .270!

My first intentional encounter with a cougar was about ten years ago when I drew a limited entry cou-

gar tag for southeastern Washington. My friend Jim Ellinger and I tracked lions for several days looking for just the right track to run with his hounds. The three days we spent looking over tracks in the snow were really interesting. Jim knew just where to look for tracks and over the three days we cut something like 18 tracks. Most were too small to chase and others were too old or had “washed out” in the sunshine before we found them. The intriguing aspect of the hunt was the finding and sorting out of the tracks. Early one morning we found the fresh tracks of a good-sized cougar and decided to turn in the hounds.

The hounds coursed along the river, followed the lion across a large cottonwood that had fallen across the water, and soon appeared on the rocky hillside above the river. Standing there in the sun were six full curl bighorn rams, alert but not alarmed, as the dogs cut across the hillside less than 50 yards below them. Once the dogs reached the bottom of the canyon their voices became more energized and soon they had treed the lion. As I marveled at the lion in the tree I wondered how a hunter might simulate this hunt and take a cat without the dogs.

I did not have to wait long after I took my cougar for friends of mine in Washington to begin perfecting the art of hunting cougar without dogs. The recent ban on the use of hounds for cougar hunting in our state has added enthusiasm to their pursuit of this hunting technique. About a month ago I visited a friend, Jeff Thorpe, and scored a very nice non-typical mule deer buck his brother took last fall. I arrived at his home just after he and his brother returned “empty handed” from an early morning lion chase. Jeff is relatively new at this endeavor but his hunting partner, Alan Charlton, has been doing it successfully for several years. They had cut a track that morning but had to abandon it when it began to rain and the “tracking snow” turned to slush. We talked a bit about cougar hunting, but once I

began scoring the deer our talk turned to big mule deer.

A couple weeks after I returned home I received an e-mail note from Jeff. Attached was a digital photo of a nice lion he and his brother had taken—proof that patience and perseverance pays off.

So what does it take to walk up a lion? Basic knowledge about cougar habits and behavior, fresh snow, good tracking conditions, time, and a lot of effort are key ingredients. A little bit of luck is also very helpful. Before you begin it helps to understand cougar behavior. Knowing where to look for tracks is a good starting point. In any given area there are low spots on ridges and other such places where lions regularly cross while hunting. When big game animals are concentrated in the winter you can count on the lions to be not far away. Simply driving backcountry roads immediately after a fresh snow is the simplest way to find tracks but you will have more competition on such roads than you will away from them. A snowmobile and snowshoes will increase your range and facilitate penetration into roadless areas.

Once you find a track be prepared for a full day of hiking and climbing. The fresher the track the better your chances are of catching up with the lion. If the lion makes a kill your chances of seeing the lion are even better. When pressed, lions become extremely stealthy and elusive. Jeff and two friends were in hot pursuit of a lion a few days ago and never saw the lion even though they were within 100 yards of the cat several times. The lion kept looping back on them in the thick timber, much as a whitetail buck will do during a drive. Tactics employed for deer and elk will work for cougars but there are no sure bets. The cats can disappear in very light cover. A tactic that Jeff has used effectively involves keeping one hunter on the track and having the other hunter(s) loop ahead. The looping hunter has a good chance of catching the cat sneaking out of cover ahead of the

COUGARS FROM WASHINGTON

tracking hunter. This tactic paid off a week ago when Jeff jumped a very large tom off a kill. About a mile into the chase, Jeff's partner Mike White took the cat as it emerged from a thicket while Jeff was in pursuit.

Some cats will tree when pressed, but just because the cat is in the tree is not a guarantee that you will be able to see it. While pursuing a cat several weeks ago Jeff and his brother found where the tracks ended at a large Douglas fir tree. It took the better part of an hour for them to spot the cat in the tree. Once they did, Jeff's brother Wally bagged a nice lion (see inset).

Jeff and his brother have tracked down three lions using the walk up technique this winter. The odds are definitely in favor of the cougar, however. One lion in eight or ten chases is considered very good odds for the hunter. Following a cougar track in a foot or more of snow requires a great deal of stamina and determination. If you are not in great physical shape when you first begin stalking cougars on foot, you will be in shape by the time you either bag one, give up, or run out of snow. If you have not tried this method of hunting cougar, pay attention to the cougar populations in states like Washington and Oregon. With a little planning, a lot of effort, and a little bit of luck you may find this to be one of the greatest fair chase hunts you have ever endured! ▲▲▲



THE THORPE BROTHERS WITH WALLY'S 2001 TOM.



MIKE WHITE'S 2001 TOM



DALE WILSON'S WALK-UP TOM

THORPE BROTHERS FIRST WALK UP BY WALLY AND JEFF THORPE

This was to be a mutual effort to bag the first mountain lion in the Thorpe family.

On Sunday morning, my brother Jeff drove me up into the hills to look for lion tracks. After a fair amount of riding, with no luck, we decided that we would split up and hike in different directions to cover more off-road ground. Jeff was about to stop the truck and send ol' Wally on his way, when we cut a fresh set of tracks. We strapped on our snowshoes and started to follow the big, meandering kitty.

I was unanimously elected to keep my nose on the tracks and follow them to the end of the earth if need be. My older and slightly more intelligent brother took the high road, attempting to cut the advancing cougar off, thus forcing him to choose between us. Luckily he didn't choose either of us . . . yet. I followed the tracks back and forth across the creek, and through thick, bristly bushes. The tracks led me around a large Douglas fir tree. The tracks only went halfway around, but it took me a couple of laps to realize that the cat was probably lurking just overhead. Suddenly, feeling like lunch, I slowly backed away from the base of the tree. I gave Jeff a yell and he worked his way over to the area. We made several wide sweeping circles around the fir, looking for any sign of the cat or of tracks leading away.

Convinced that he had to be in that tree, we looked for another 20 minutes before I finally saw the lion staring down at me, seemingly unbothered. Perhaps he was just not hungry. Anyway, Jeff and I discussed the situation at length and decided to give brother Bob "back us up with a big gun" Thorpe a call on the cellular "can't get out of the canyon" phone. After a few failed attempts to reach Bob, we decided that we didn't need any back-up, and found our shooting spot.

The cat was around 30 feet up, and we could only get out about 15 feet from the base of the tree for a shot, so needless to say we had to bend over backwards to launch an arrow. Oh yeah, did I mention that Jeff and I only had our bows? Jeff said that since I found the tree, I should go ahead and shoot first. I decided not to argue.

We both drew our bows. I shot, then Jeff released an instant after me. I drilled the cat mid-chest, the arrow exiting behind his left shoulder. Jeff's arrow missed as the cat moved out of sight into some thick stuff. I stayed in the same spot while Jeff went around the tree to try and find an opening for another shot. When I could see the cat again I let another arrow fly, hitting him in the center of his chest, pinning the broadhead into his spine. He fell unobstructed to the ground. He was a young tom weighing about 100 pounds, and 6'6" nose to tail—a fine, first effort for the Thorpe brothers.

CAT HUNTING IS FOR THE BIRDS BY DALE WILSON

I am probably pretty lucky to have seen three cats this year. Most of the time, I walk all day without ever seeing a cat track, or follow a cat track all day without ever finding a cat. I had decided to hunt cats this year in an area I had been thinking about for quite awhile—one that held plenty of wintering deer and elk. I began scouting the area during the week, on foot or on snowshoes, glassing the draws and hillsides. Sometimes nervous deer would point me in a likely direction; sometimes it was the circling of magpies or eagles overhead. More often than not, the predator in question turned out to be a coyote rather than a cat.

On my way home from a long winter day of hiking and glassing, I spotted eagles and crows circling in the trees on a hill above me, but it was late and I was just too darned tired to investigate. Two days later, with fresh snow on the ground, I returned to the same spot. The eagles and crows were still hanging around on top of the hill. I soon discovered an elk kill nearby, but all that remained was the hide and big cat tracks that were several days old. After about an hour or so of walking downhill along the treeline, I found the cat's bed—a bunch of needles piled up in a dry spot under a pine tree. A little further on, I noticed a big dirt-encrusted cat track in the snow which led me into a shallow gully. As I followed the tracks into the bottom of the gully, I spied the cat moving through the bushes about 100 yards in front of me. I had to wait until the cat quartered a little so I could take a shot. Although the bullet hit him in the lungs and rolled him over, he jumped to his feet and ran 100 yards before dropping dead in the creek bottom. He weighed about 155 lbs, and was 6'11" from head to tail. I was one happy (and lucky) cat hunter.