

# MORE THAN A LION HUNT

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Clint checking to be  
sure the author was  
still on his horse.



I had always realized full well that any animal I took had sacrificed its life to give me the chance to have hunted. But this was no ordinary animal . . .

It should come as no surprise that taking up a new skill in middle age is a darn sight harder than starting as a youngster. How often have each of us tried a new activity as a grown-up, performed poorly and quit, or at least no longer took it too seriously. In my case, big game hunting was one of those mid-life pursuits. I shot a firearm for the first time at 27 years of age. For the next 20 years, I only gun-hunted ducks and upland birds. It was a dozen years ago that I began rifle hunting.

Twenty-five years ago, when I first moved to Wisconsin, I tried hunting with a bow. Those of you who bowhunt may recall that this was during the advent of the compound bow, and we all switched from our wooden recurves to bows with wheels. I hunted my compound for four years, even taking once a small buck, but somehow to me this was not archery. Then all the fancy additions came along: illuminated multi-pin sights, releases, and cams . . . you name it. It was just no longer fun. The woods had always been a place to get away, to escape from the world. Yet here I was, taking with me this machine, this super efficient arrow-shooting apparatus. Taking the compound bow into the primeval forest meant I was taking civilization along. I wasn't troubled by others using a compound, it just had no appeal to me. Figuring that the day of the wooden bow was gone, I retired from bowhunting in 1982.

So it came to pass that while wandering through a sporting goods store, a book on instinctive archery in the bargain bin caught my eye. I purchased it, brought it home, and neglected it for a year. When I finally opened the book, I was fascinated to find that the age of the wooden bow was not dead. Local inquiries found that there were quite competent traditional archers in my area. There were traditional clubs, traditional tournaments, a whole slew of bowyers and arrowsmiths, and even traditional magazines. There was a whole traditional culture out there beckoning me. Like the argonauts of Greek mythology, however, I was to pay for following the siren's call. I was taking up a new sport at age 55, and both frustration and humility would be making many house calls.

I probably did all the wrong things starting out, but emotion overcame logic. The novice traditionalist would be best off with a recurve. Its greater

speed would offer both greater killing power and a flatter trajectory. But I soon became enamored with the longbow, and gravitated toward wood arrows to boot. Complicating this undertaking was a non-dominant eye injury which effected depth perception and eventually forced me to give up my surgical practice. This, of course, gave me more time for archery practice and hunting. Despite near daily training, progress was slow and that first year, 1997, I limited my hunting to styrofoam game. Archery was proving to be a major conservation effort.

The following year, there was some improvement. Since I was not getting younger, trying some hunting became a justifiable decision. I was being challenged, and had always abhorred failure. Therefore I arranged eight hunting trips over the next two years for deer, elk, stag, and bear; all with limited success due to problems finding game or my own inexperience.

In Saskatchewan, I twice thought that I had arrowed a nice cinnamon black bear, but both times, the arrows had only creased the back. I learned that a spring bear may easily have six inches of hair above his back, but when he is lying down, the hair underneath is compressed flat, so his true body is low in relation to the outline of his fur.

So now we are in February of 2000, with the hope that maybe a light will start appearing at the end of this long tunnel. I found myself with Clint Mecham of Tropic, Utah on a mountain lion hunt the good old-fashioned way – on horseback. Clint had been recommended by my good friend and accomplished rifle-hunter, Dale Prochnow. Dale several years earlier had treed one or two lions daily, and had taken a big tom. In my naive way, I figured that if we treed enough lions, eventually one would be low enough to give me a reasonably short shot. To prepare, I shot at a target attached to a pulley system on the top eave of my house.

Clint proved more than I expected. He was tremendously patient, something a longbow hunter like me needed. He made me feel right at home with his family, with whom I dined. He was well read and anxious

to teach, which meshed with my frequently over-inquisitive personality. He was also a retired saddle-bronc and bull-riding rodeo star. There was never a lull in conversation.

For the past 15 years, Clint had been contracted by the state of Utah to assist with lion studies. His principle job was to locate and tree a lion with his dogs, dart it with a sedative, and climb the tree before the cat could fall out. The lion would be roped and lowered to the ground. Clint could then age, tattoo, weigh, and measure the sleeping cat before putting on a tracking collar.

Along with graduate student assistants, Clint next performed both airplane and ground follow-up of all the collared lions. These studies produced a wealth of hitherto only guessed-at data, including how far males and females range, that lions have a deer-kill rate of 48 per year per cat (although a female with offspring will usually kill every four days), that a female keeps her young with her up to 18 months, the average litter size, and much more. Clint probably knew as much as any man about mountain lions.

There were blue skies on day one of the hunt. We piled two horses, two hunters and six dogs into a pick-up, and headed toward the mountains. Clint did manage to find and slowly follow an old track for two hours, when the dogs, which had been intermittently barking as we trailed after them, all let out a whoop and took off up the north slope of a ridge. We followed. Through the snow-covered, downed timber we climbed, weaving between thick aspens through openings which were wider than a horse's body but not as wide as my knees. When the go-

ing got difficult, my horse Navajo would lunge forward in a series of unexpected up-hill gallops.

Sure enough, the dogs had treed a cat, but not the one we were following. As I climbed to the up-hill side, the cat could not have been more than eight yards from me. Seemed like a reasonable shot. But after taking photographs, I couldn't find my guide. It turns out that Clint had been making wide loops around the area. He believed that the number of tracks he found in his circling suggested that this female lion had year-old kittens, and he didn't think we should take her. This didn't trouble me. Ending a hunt on the first day is almost like not earning the trophy, and I still did want to do some more riding in the mountains. After all, Dale had seen at least one cat daily. What Clint didn't tell me until later was that Dale had seen cats more frequently than any other hunter, and that when doing his study the week before on an adjacent mountain, Clint hadn't found a single cat.

Just then, the cat bailed out, snapping off dead limbs as she descended, and hit the ground running, with the dogs howling in the down-

The author caught in a local snowstorm.



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The pup Slim taking it all in after the hunt.

hill pursuit. Down we rode, and again she treed, this time somewhat higher. We left her, had a three-hour ride out to the truck, and arrived home after dark with at least one sore bottom.

The weather turned, and it snowed the next morning. The ideal is to have snow on the ground 12 to 48 hours old. Nevertheless, we loaded all the gear and took off. Because of the fresh snow, we just drove the forest service trails. Nothing.

On day three, it rained. Clint stuck his head into the bunkhouse at six to tell me that it would be fruitless to hunt, so he took me on a tour of the area. We visited an Anasazi ruin and museum. There are so many old Indian artifacts and petrified wood pieces around that these folks use it to border their landscaping. That afternoon we visited 93 year old Mac, perhaps the most respected of the old lion hunters in an area where lion hunting is a passion. The story is still told how, in his younger days, Mac had roped a bear.

The next morning it again snowed, stopping just before we started our ride. Seven hours in the saddle, but again no sign. The highlight of that ride was Navajo's log crossing technique. Usually, he stepped over a log one leg at a time. Occasionally he would step over a log with one foreleg, and then jump the other three over, and stop. The first time he stopped, I didn't. Fortunately, the snow was soft.

The next morning, the fifth day of the hunt, it again snowed, and because of the slippery roads, we just took the dogs and spent another day

driving the forest trails. No sign.

The sixth day was predicted to be fair. The forecasters were wrong. No sooner had we saddled up when a significant local mountain snowstorm erupted. After a beautiful four-hour ride through snow-covered pines and spruce, assiduously avoiding the snow on the branches from falling down our necks, we called it quits. Any cat tracks would have been an hour or two old, but there were none.

The next day was to be my last, but my most recent two years of failed hunts had fully prepared me for this disappointment, and I was going to accept it gracefully. Clint offered to get his dad Stan and brother McLane, both experienced lion guides in their own right, to help on the morrow. Sounded great to me. The snow was stopping, and if it didn't snow any more, we would have good tracking conditions.

Despite the absence of game, the trip was proving to be enjoyable. Clint was outstanding company. The scenery was great. Having to drive twice a day through Bryce Canyon from Clint's home to the mountain we hunted was a treat in itself. The almost iridescent red cliffs would change their hue, depending on the availability and angle of the sun. We discussed many aspects of the environment, from the esoteric to the mundane, such as why we were seeing so many robins on the snowy ridge tops where worms would seem an unavailable food source.

What I appreciated the most were the dogs. We took anywhere from five to nine with us daily. Having competed in both pointer and retriever field trials, I was in my element just sitting on a horse and watching the dogs work. They would at times stick their noses deeply into old elk tracks covered with a few inches of new powder hoping to get a whiff of a cat's paw. A number of times they started on bobcat prints, some very fresh, and had to be called off. At one point, we roused a large six-by-six bull elk with two junior companions, but the dogs simply watched them walk off from 50 yards away.

We always had with us dogs of different specialties. Some were

good at cutting a track, another's talent was following a trail, while a third may have been great in the final chase. I had never hunted with hounds, but it wasn't long before I appreciated the quality of the dogs and the amount of training effort Clint must have put in.

Our final day dawned overcast. The plan was for Clint and I to ride together and Stan and McLane to go in their truck, and we would road hunt in two separate areas. We would then meet at Deer Creek Canyon, which we did. Neither group reported finding tracks. Stan and McLane then rode west up Deer Creek with their dogs. To the north of Deer Creek is Mountain Springs Canyon, and Clint and I headed up and along the ridge that forms the north wall of that draw. The wind was gusty, and the low cloud cover obliterated at times the ravine to our left.

After two hours, we had a radio report from McLane that they were on the trail of at least three cougars, so we started towards them. The baying of their dogs was readily heard on the two-way radio. (Later that evening, we learned that they had eventually treed the same female that we had on the first day, and that she indeed did have a pair of year-old kittens. Clint's decision that first day had been correct.)

About halfway down the ridge, we both thought we heard a dog's distant bark. McLane's dogs were still far over the next ridge. We soon discovered that Hank, a three year-old that Clint felt had great potential, was missing, yet we had seen no lion tracks. We rode over to a bluff and yelled and whistled, but no Hank. At this point, I thought that Hank's disappearance would cost us valuable time.

The ridge side was a series of ups and downs. We rode a little further, paralleling the ridgetop, and then identified dog tracks in the snow on the next rise. Suddenly, in the distance, Hank bayed. Hearing this, the other dogs unleashed their vocal cords and charged over the rise to give him a hand. So did we. Reaching the top, we could see the dogs howling as they darted back and forth. Suddenly there was Hank, in high gear, no more than six feet be-

hind the tail of a fleeing mountain lion. The cougar jumped into a single, short Ponderosa pine adjacent to a low cliff. I became excited thinking that I could climb the rocks and have a short horizontal shot.

We could not understand how Hank had winded that cat from so far. From the place we lost him until we saw cat tracks was a good 400 yards. A gust of wind must have carried a whiff of the scent. A nose is not something you can teach a dog.

We rode up, tied the horses to some small brush, tethered the dogs, and began photographing. The cat turned out to be a female, and females are much more prone to bail out of a tree than males. And out she came, and downhill she went, with the now released dogs in hot pursuit, followed soon by us. Across the creek and up the north facing slope we headed.

The dogs treed her in another Ponderosa on the steep, forested, snowy hillside. She was resting on a limb about 45 feet up. Foregoing any thoughts about more pictures, the bow was removed from the scabbard, assembled, and strung, and the dogs tied up. With all the crisscrossing boughs and twigs, it was difficult to find a clear shot. Threading an arrow through branches is not the same as sending a bullet.

The spot we selected to shoot from was uphill and knocked 10 feet off the vertical distance to the cat. Because of all the downed timber and the heavy slippery snow, I had to kneel for stability. Clint understood that although this was a longer shot than I had hoped, it was likely to be my only shot. As a consideration to the cat, if I only wounded her, there was Clint's pistol as a back-up.

Now we had to wait until the lion came out onto a branch almost facing us, and even here there was still one limb crossing her upper chest. She stood above me, surveying her getaway route, and was obviously preparing to bail once again. I tried to recall everything I was supposed to remember, like point my bow arm, and reach a solid anchor. Actually, I'm not sure I remembered anything, but I must have done something right, because the released arrow headed right for the

lower sternum and buried itself in the midline.

She bailed again, and we sent just one dog, Gator, after her. Gator would keep his distance from an injured cat on the ground. She treed again. It was now just a matter of time. As she visibly weakened and finally could not maintain her balance in the tree, she fell slowly down the trunk. Slim, a young male pup that we hadn't tethered, got too close, and the cat feigned a charge, sending the dog scurrying back behind us. The lion growled softly if we approached too closely. But her minutes were numbered. As we watched from 15 yards away, she rolled onto her side, lay down her head and peacefully went into her final sleep. When we now looked up, the sky was crystal clear – we had never even seen the clouds dissipate. The lion was moved out of the woods and into the open for pictures. The sun was bright and all of nature's winter colors were suddenly brilliant.

If it appears that this was an emotional, almost religious, moment for me . . . it was. I had always realized full well that any animal I took had sacrificed its life to give me the chance to have hunted. But this was no ordinary animal. As we watched her eyes glaze over, the scene reminded me strongly of Aldo Leopold's story that the mountain was saddened when he shot and watched die her last wolf. My

own religion teaches me that yearly we individually are written into the book of life for the coming year. My strong feelings about nature suggest to me that this should be true of animals also.

We later weighed her at 116 pounds, the largest female Clint had weighed, and he aged her at over seven years. In her lifetime, she

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would have been responsible for the demise of hundreds of deer, and many an elk also. And now she had fallen to my hands using the most primitive of weapons. There was no sense of victory, but rather a sadness.

I thanked Clint, but we never congratulated each other. I knew during the whole ride back to the truck that I had finally and fairly taken a respectable game animal with a wooden bow and a cedar arrow. If my goal on this hunt was to know that I had been justly challenged and finally proven myself worthy, it didn't seem so important now. I came away with much more. I had smiled for the camera, but beyond that, there was no sense of elation or excitement, but rather one of introspection and a deep awareness of my oneness with nature. May I never forget the last few moments of that animal's life. ▲▲▲

**The smile for the camera concealed significant deeper feelings of the author.**

