

BATTLE IN THE TIMBER

By IVAN L. IRWIN
B&C ASSOCIATE



On December 4th, my brother, Clayton, and I were returning home from our first hunt of the 1994 mountain lion season in Montana. When we arrived in the town of Choteau, Montana, along the Rocky Mountain Front, I asked him if he wanted to go up and check out the Teton drainage, in the Sawtooth Range, before we called it a day. This area is known for its steep, vertical slopes and rocky cliffs. When you chase a lion there you earn it. As we were making our way up the drainage I spotted a large track. After checking out the track and measuring the stride, that averaged 45 inches, I told Clayton, "This is a large cat!"

It was around 2:30 in the afternoon when we decided to turn two of my dogs loose on that cat. My lead dog was Cautious, a four year-old Black and Tan/Walker cross and the other dog was Pepper, my two-and-a-half year-old Plott/Redbone cross. The dogs took to the track well. We followed them for about two hours listening and hoping we would hear them bark treed soon because it was getting dark. We followed the track a while longer and noticed the cat was following a ridge that led to steep, rocky cliffs. I told Clayton to follow the ridge up and try to catch and leash up the dogs. I would stay on the track in case the dogs lost the cat in the rocky cliffs and came back on their own tracks. Clayton found Cautious and yelled he was heading back down the ridge to the truck. By then it was dark and I was in the cliffs. I knew it wasn't worth the risk of trying to find Pepper up there, so I headed for the ridge Clayton was taking to the truck. I met him at the bottom and told him I heard Pepper in the cliffs but would wait until morning to find her.

That night when I got home I called Mike Hofland. He's the person who gave me Cautious and started me out lion hunting. I told him what had happened that day. Early the next morning we headed back up the drainage where I had left Pepper. Mike brought his two best dogs, Skeeter, his seven year-

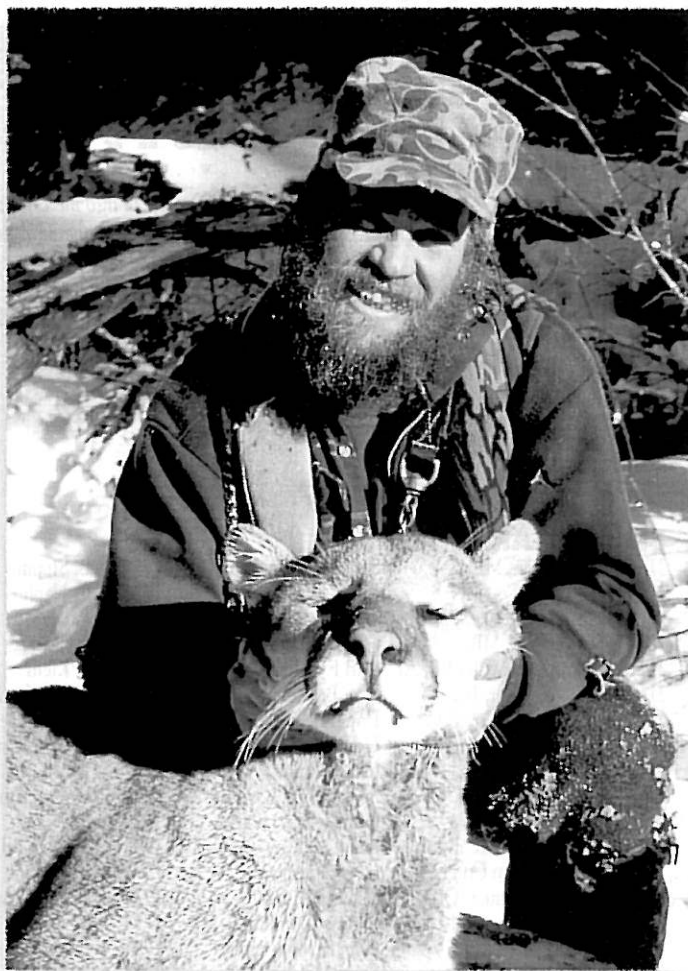
old male Walker hound and Nicky his six year-old registered Black and Tan bitch, Cautious' parents.

On the way up to find Pepper, we cut two small lion tracks. Rounding the next corner we cut a big track with one bloody mitt. We checked the stride and I told Mike this must be the same cat.

We waited until daylight with no sign of Pepper then turned out the dogs, and in no time - trail chop! Finding Pepper was going to have to wait. Mike and I followed the tracks which were leading back in toward steep terrain and heavy timber. By noon we had climbed over the first mountain. At that time we could hear the dogs barking treed two mountain ridges away. As we made our way up the first mountain ridge, we could no longer hear the dogs barking treed, but we stayed on the tracks. A little while later we heard the dogs barking trail again. The cat had jumped the tree and was heading for another drainage. A tense thirty minutes passed. We could hear the dogs had treed the lion again. When we came walking in on the tree the big, nervous tom cat jumped again. Down the mountainside the dogs roared after the cat within a few feet of its tail. About a half mile farther the dogs treed the cat again. This time we weren't taking any chances because we could tell this cat did not like staying in trees. The large brushy pine tree left little visibility for a shot.

Moving around the tree we finally found a small opening which allowed me a shot with my .44 magnum. The shot knocked the big cat out of the tree and it ran down the hill with the dogs right after him. Once again, we heard them treed.

I ran to the tree knowing the dogs could easily catch the cat on the ground but the cat managed to climb a few feet up another tree. When I got there, Cautious looked like he had been injured by the cat. Without hesitation, I shot the big tom again, killing it instantly. When I looked at Cautious I knew he was injured badly, and we didn't



have much time. I could see where the lion had left teeth marks on his head and nose.

Cautious would not follow us or walk so I carried him down the mountain. Cautious died in my arms before we made it to the truck.

This was a hunt and a chase of a lifetime. The cat scored 15-1/16 points. It weighed 165 pounds with an empty stomach and measured 7' 6" long. If I could, I'd give this lion its life back for my Cautious. After a long full day, Mike and I still went and found Pepper that evening.

I have hunted mountain lion in Montana for five years now. I have to tell you it was a story book climax to all the trees and chases I have experienced, some thirty plus, and all it took to get there and back. I hope I have many more but most importantly I hope the hunters who have the heart, desire and opportunity to hunt lions with hounds will be able to do so in the future.

IVAN L. IRWIN WITH HIS COUGAR TAKEN IN TETON COUNTY MONTANA. THE TOM SCORES 15-1/16 POINTS