

BUCK HUNT TURNED CAT HUNT

IT was the 1996 mule deer season in Eastern Oregon. My father and I were hunting in the Minam Unit that is located in the Eagle Cap Wilderness of the Wallowa Mountains.

We had been hunting for five days and hadn't had much luck. We saw several smaller bucks, but nothing we wanted to shoot. After talking it over with Dad, I decided I would go deep in the canyon the next morning since he had found a spot there where a nice buck hung out the day before. I had never been that far down the canyon before so I decided to check it out.

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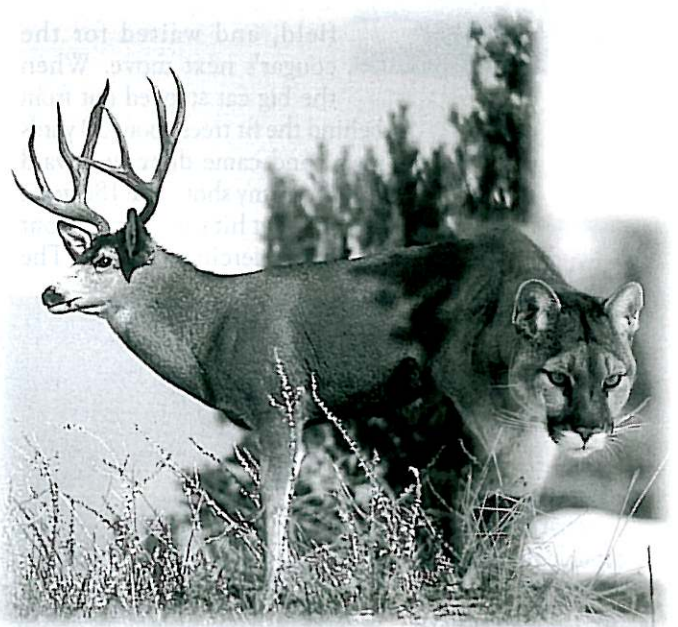
The next morning I left camp about an hour before dawn so I could be where I wanted to hunt before sunrise. At day-break, I found the area Dad discovered the previous day and started hunting. Moving very slowly and quietly, I made my way through the area. I found springs, trails, and possible feeding areas as I tried to learn some of the buck's possible habits while hunting for him.

Late that afternoon I decided to sit and watch for the buck from above a small open ridge that had plenty of feed and good willow brush cover. To reach my chosen vantage point above the ridge, I crossed just below a small surface spring that drained through a stand of red fir along the left side of the ridge, and climbed uphill. I sat with my back to a sizable fir tree.

Above and behind me was a small grassy clearing running left to right, with a good stand of timber behind it. To my right was a deep, spring-fed draw that ran down the right side of the ridge.

I sat for about two hours, watching the open ridge below but didn't see anything. When the sun started setting behind the mountain I decided that I would stay a little bit longer, then start walking out of the canyon.

Suddenly, to my right and above me, I heard a pine squir-



rel scolding. Then another scolded, closer this time. When one sounded its alarm right behind me, I turned to see what all the fuss was about. There it was! Not the buck I was looking for, but a full-grown cougar! With its nose to the ground, it slowly moved along a game trail that led to the small surface spring to my left.

I wasn't feeling too safe with a cougar 20 yards behind me, but didn't want to move for fear the cougar would see me and run off before I could get a good shot. So I sat very still, hoping the cougar might move around me enough to offer a clear shot. Soon the cat made its way down the trail to the spring and stopped. Then it

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moved a little farther downhill, almost to the spot where I had crossed to get my present position.

With that move, I lost sight of the cougar behind two big fir trees. Taking advantage of the situation, I turned slightly and raised my .30-06 Springfield, and waited for the cougar's next move. When

the big cat stepped out from behind the fir trees about 30 yards away, and came directly toward me, I took my shot. The 180 grain Speer bullet hit the cougar's front shoulder, piercing its heart. The

cat slammed to the ground, rolled down the hill about fifteen yards, and finally stopped against an old windfall. I walked down to admire the animal I had taken: a fine female that measured eight-feet two-inches long and later scored 15-7/16 points. The cat was checked by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists as required, and a tooth extracted for age determination. It turns out the cougar was 11 years-old. It's skull measurement is the largest of any female entered in the Boone and Crockett Club's records program since they began recording the sex of cougar entries. The fact that I was able to take such an elusive animal was probably the result of both

luck and growing numbers of cougars in Oregon.

In the late 1960s when my father started hunting in the Minam, seeing a cougar track was rare and seeing a cougar was even more rare. On the other hand, the deer population was very high. Then when I started hunting with Dad in the 1980s, seeing maybe one cougar a year would be normal. During this time deer numbers were lower, but still in good shape. Now, in the 1990s, seeing two or three cougars a year is not uncommon and their numbers seem to increase every year. But now the deer population is dropping even faster and it's becoming a big concern for my father and me.

In 1994, hunting in Oregon was dealt a devastating blow. A ballot initiative promoted by anti-hunting factions passed, making the use of dogs to hunt cougars illegal. A subsequent initiative on the 1996 Oregon ballot, which would have reserved wildlife regulations to professional O.D.F.W. biologists, failed by a narrow margin. With hound hunting the only effective way to control cougar populations, we feel their numbers will grow even faster than they have in the past. Since deer are the main choice of food for cougars, with recent Oregon studies showing the average interval between kills is less than one week, we fear the worse for the deer population.

Looking at the place where I shot the cat the next day with my dad, we saw that the cougar had followed Dad's tracks down to the spring, then smelling my fresher tracks, had turned and started following me. We feel that curiosity killed this cat. In the wilderness where we hunt, cougars probably don't see or smell much of man, and being a curious animal, often follow man's tracks. Although I'm not sure of this cat's reasons, I'm glad it followed our tracks to end my hunt with a great trophy to remember. ▲▲▲

MICHAEL BENNETT
WITH HIS FEMALE
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