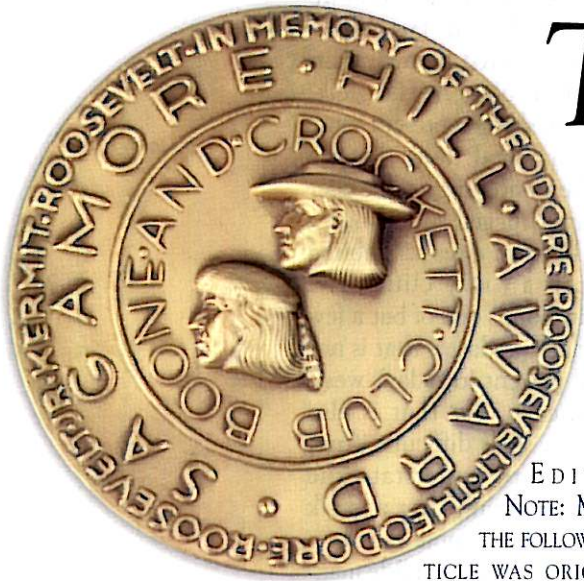


Gene Alford...

The Consummate Outdoorsman



EDITOR'S
NOTE: MUCH OF
THE FOLLOWING AR-
TICLE WAS ORIGINALLY
WRITTEN BY HAROLD NESBITT IN 1989
WHEN HE WAS EDITOR OF THE *BOONE &
CROCKETT ASSOCIATE'S NEWSLETTER*.
SINCE THE STORY OF THE ALFORD COU-
GAR IS SO UNIQUE, *FAIR CHASE* EDITOR,
GEORGE A. BETTAS HAS UPDATED, ED-
ITED, AND ADDED TO NESBITT'S
ORIGINAL WORK IN THIS ARTICLE.

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For only the 14th time, the Boone and Crockett Club awarded its highest award, the Sagamore Hill Award, to a trophy representing the highest attainment of sportsmanship and Fair Chase at the 20th North American Big Game Awards on June 10, 1989. The award was presented to Gene Alford of Kamiah, Idaho, for his cougar scoring 16-3/16 points that is second only to the World's Record in the category. Alford's story embodies the best of the sporting tradition that the Boone and Crockett Club has always encouraged and recognized with its records keeping for native big game of North America.

I met Gene Alford for the first time on June 8, 1989, at the 20th North American Big Game Awards in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I found him to be a tremendously interesting and knowledgeable person and engaged in a number of discussions with him about everything from

cougar hunting to packing into the back country with horses and mules. As a result of our meeting in Albuquerque I became well enough acquainted with Gene that he invited me to bring my horses and mules and join him for two different 100 mile pack trips into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. I made the first trip with Gene in August 1989 and the second trip two years later with Gene and my two daughters. These trips afforded me the opportunity to engage in many wonderful conversations with Gene in addition to the chance to hone my own packing and back country skills.

There are generally two schools of thought when it comes to horse/mule packing. You either pack with a sawbuck pack saddle and hang your gear on the pack saddle securing it with a mantle and a diamond hitch or you use a decker saddle and mantle up your loads and secure them to the pack saddle with a basket hitch or a similar hitch. Although I use decker saddles, most of my packing skills were learned from Joe Back's book, *Horses, Hitches, and Rocky Trails*. My packing technique involves using panniers which hang on the bows of the decker. My personal gear goes into two equally balanced duffel bags that fit nicely on top of the panniers. The top packs and the panniers are secured to the horse with a lash cinch and neatly tied diamond hitch. Gene's packing technique involves placing equal amounts of gear in manties, carefully folding the mantle around the load and using a

carefully tied rope to hold the load together. Each mantied load is then put on the decker with a basket hitch. Without going into a lot of detail, Gene was quite amused with me and my "sheepherder packing technique." I too, was amused with Gene's careful, methodical, step by step manner of placing his gear in manties, tying them neatly together, and attaching them to the decker with nary a wasted movement. Each day we would put the stock out to feed at daylight, cook our breakfast, pack our gear, load the stock and ride to a new destination. Upon our arrival we would put the stock out to graze, set up the wall tent, build a fire in the wood stove and cook supper. After supper we had a great time just talking. I spent most of my time simply listening to Gene's accounts of many different hunts and back country experiences. The first trip was a special learning experience for me. Gene's outdoor skills were apparent at every turn in the trail. From atop his Tennessee walker mule he would note interesting tidbits of information, every so often as we made our way through the wilderness. He was especially cognizant of wildlife movement in the area but also pointed out interesting historical and geographical features. His dogs, Kelly and Scratch, accompanied us on the first trip. Gene had an interesting way of "hitching" them together with a short tether. Since the dogs were allowed to run at will along with the pack string a fresh cougar or bobcat track could present a problem if

Golden Lion



Photo by Tom Tietz

Gene Alford...

Scratch chose to pursue the cat. Kelly served as an "emergency" brake for Scratch. On one occasion we did cut a fresh cougar track on the trail. Gene noticed it in the dust from his mule. He called to Kelly and she simply sat down when Scratch hit the track. After a bit, both Scratch and Kelly were loping along in unison with the pack string.

When we arrived at our evening campsites Gene would tie Scratch at the back of the wall tent and Kelly was allowed to spend her time as she wished until the next morning when we were ready to hit the trail again.

The second summer was even more special for me as my two daughters, Ashley and Elizabeth, accompanied us on the pack trip. Although Gene is a bachelor with no children, he was an immediate hit with the girls. He patiently answered their questions and showed them how to do many "little" things with their horses. The down side of the trip was that Scratch had died the previous winter and was not with us. Gene had a new "mostly blue tick" pup along that was learning to be an all around cougar dog. He assigned the chores of feeding and caring for his new pup on the trip to Elizabeth. The grin on her face was evidence that she enjoyed the assignment. My children and I had a unique opportunity to share time together with Gene Alford on these trips. We learned a great deal from Gene but most of all, I came to appreciate the wealth of Gene's outdoor skills and his innate ability to work with animals. He has a special talent when it comes to horses, mules, dogs and the wilderness. He is simply the consummate outdoorsman in the truest sense of the word.

Gene Alford moved to Idaho in 1959 to work for an outfitter, guiding hunters in the Selway River area. He had always loved hounds and cougars, and had spent many years hunting cougars with his strike dogs in California. The cougar hunting skills he had perfected in California served him well when he moved to

Idaho's Selway Country. Before long Gene discovered that he had found a pretty close approximation to "cougar paradise." Idaho is great cougar country, with plentiful food (deer, elk, and other game) and great cover provided by mountainous areas with limited access for motorized vehicles. Gene soon found a great way to spend a month each winter, hunting cougar with his dogs. Gene's annual cougar hunt evolved into a regular feature of his yearly calendar.

Each February, he would hire a local pilot to fly him, with his dogs and gear, into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. There, he would set up camp and let each day's agenda be determined by the cougar sign he and his dogs found on his daily hunting routes. Gene chose the month of February because, in his experience, he had learned that during February there were concentrations of big game animals, especially whitetail deer, along the Selway River which attracted good numbers of cougar. The weather along the river during February was generally better than the earlier months and facilitated more days of hunting.

You should understand that Gene Alford was no spring chicken when he took his record book cougar. He was 66 years-old at the time and is 74 today. A lot of folks at that age are concerned about a trip to the library on a snowy day, let alone being put out on their own in a wilderness area, with only two dogs for companionship, for a month. But, at the time of his hunt Gene was more than up to the task. He was (and still is) in excellent physical condition, with a wiry build and the slight squint of the Westerner who has spent a great many days afield under the blazing sun. And he's been chasing big cougar in this fashion for nearly 30 years.

Interestingly, Gene feels that the weather conditions are the most serious health hazards to be faced on his winter outings. With the ever-present snow and ice, a fall resulting in broken limbs and severe impairment of function could be fatal.

So, Gene exercises caution and good sense, including using ice crampons on his boots to avoid slipping on icy surfaces.

Gene has brought some big cougar to bay in his years of hunting in this fashion. In 1961, he killed two big toms that were entered in the Boone and Crockett Club's records program with the same score, 15-12/16 points, both equal to the score of the then World's Record. The scores of both were found to be slightly smaller by the Awards Judges Panel, but both were given the same final score, 15-11/16 points, and entered into the 1964 records book as tied (with two others at the same score) for number 3 for the category. A lesser hunter might well have hung-up the ice cleats and gun after this accomplishment, but not Gene Alford. He continued his yearly hunts, treeing a great many cougar and simply photographing or looking at most of them before letting them go; he was after a really big one.

Part of Gene's resolve to continue after a big one was disappointment in his two cougars ending up as only number three for the category after the initial entry score indicated they would tie the long-standing record (which incidentally was Theodore Roosevelt's cougar taken in 1901 near Meeker, Colorado).

At that same competition (as the Awards were called in those days), a cougar entered by Ed Burton and taken in 1954 scoring 15-12/16 points, tied the World's Record. In those days, communications were not as good as today. Gene did not attend the competition, and he had to rely on information relayed to him with the return of his skulls. Apparently that information failed to properly settle questions in Gene's mind as to how his two skulls dropped in score and in potential rank, giving him additional incentive to find another, bigger tom.

Interestingly, Burton's cougar may have been even larger had not a sloppy field-dressing job with an ax removed an estimated 2/16 inch from the skull length.

Similarly, one of Gene's cougars was missing a portion of the back of its skull as well. At the time Gene hunted with a .38 pistol and accidentally shot one of these record cats at the base of the skull, destroying part of the skull resulting in a significant

loss of skull material and a lesser skull length. Today Gene hunts with a scoped .357 pistol and does not have to worry about an errant bullet hitting a cougar in the wrong place.

Of course, both then and now, only the material present and unaltered on a trophy can be officially measured. So, Burton's trophy simply tied the World's Record instead of setting a new standard. Gene's damaged cougar skull was similarly scored and his trophy likewise scored lower than it would have if all of the skull material had been present. In any event the harvesting of these exceptional cougars certainly did indicate that there were some big toms out there.

Gene found what may well be his ultimate cougar on February 26, 1988. His hound, Scratch, which Gene described as a "mostly blue-tick" hound, struck the tom's trail at 8 a.m. that morning. Gene's hunting technique is different from what most cougar hunters are used to in areas where cougar are hunted during the winter when snow is present. Gene describes the dogs and the technique used by most hunters as "turn in" hounds/hunting. What he means is that the hunters locate a cougar track by driving a vehicle or snowmobile along back country roads until they locate a cougar track. When they find a track they assess the "freshness" of the track and attempt to determine the size of the cat by the size of the track. When a suitably fresh and sizeable track is found the hunters "turn in" their dogs on the track, making sure that the dogs follow the track in the direction in which the cat is traveling.

Gene hunts with a "strike dog" and believes this method of hunting is more challenging and demanding since the hunter is on foot and the dog is allowed to range ahead of the hunter as the hunter courses through the country. Gene perfected this method of hunting cougar while he was in California where there was seldom any tracking snow and cougar were hunted on dry ground. Gene will also tell you that hunting cougar in snow is much easier than hunting on bare ground, requiring more highly trained dogs with excellent

noses. The other interesting aspect of Gene's hunting technique on this hunt is that his second dog was not a hound. His second dog was Kelly, Gene's constant companion.

Kelly is a Kelpie, a stock dog much more often found on a ranch than on cougar hunts. When Scratch struck a cougar track, Kelly was right on his heels during the chase with all the enthusiasm for chasing the cat that she would have for chasing a rank old range bull out of the brush on a hot summer day.

Gene's hunting involves hiking through deer winter ranges at elevations ranging from 2,000 feet to more than 7,000 feet. When the dog "strikes" a cougar track the dog pursues the track, and sometimes follows the track in the wrong direction because the dog is not under the immediate control of the hunter who can see what direction the cat is traveling. On other occasions the strike dog will pick up a cougar track on ice or frozen ground where no tracks are visible. In either case the strike dog pursues the cat and the hunter follows until the cat is treed, the scent lost or until the hunter can get the dog turned around if it is backtracking.

Gene knows the crossing points of the cougar in the area he hunts and noted that the old toms travel in circles, making the circuit in about two weeks. The cats do this so as to not push the game from the area.

In the case of Gene's record cougar he, Scratch, and Kelly picked up the track in a saddle at about 3,500 feet in elevation. Scratch began cold trailing the track with Kelly in pursuit as well. After an hour of cold trailing and a considerable amount of gain in elevation Gene found one of the cougar's tracks in a patch of soft snow under a fir tree. The dogs were headed in the right direction but they were still cold trailing! Three hours after the trail had been cut, Gene found himself on top of a 6,000 foot ridge with the dogs following the cat's trail down the other side. Just a short distance down the back side of the mountain the dogs jumped the cougar. Fortunately for a tired Gene and his dogs, the cougar only went about halfway down the mountain before in Gene's

words, "stepping up the first tree it came to." A very tired Gene rested before taking some pictures and then using his .357 pistol to shoot the huge tom. It was when he started to skin the cat that he realized just how big-bodied this cougar was. It was so heavy that Gene couldn't lift the hindquarters to aid his skinning. It was obviously heavier than the normal 200 pounds of a really big tom cougar.



GENE ALFORD RECEIVING THE SAGAMORE HILL AWARD FROM DR. RED DUKE AT THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S 20TH AWARDS BANQUET ON JUNE 10, 1989.

It was estimated by Gene and others that the big tom must have weighed about 225 pounds, a real monster cat. Gene recalls quite vividly just how heavy the skin and skull were; they weighed 42 pounds when he got back to his camp, a real load under the weather conditions and after the day's long and tiring chase.

After the required 60-day drying period, Gene had the skull measured officially for entry into the Boone and Crockett Club's 20th Awards Program. Just as in 1961, the entry score tied the current World's Record score. Would this be history repeating itself? Yes it would, but with a much more pleasant ending.

The score for entry was 16-4/16 points, placing it in an apparent tie with the World's Record taken by Douglas E. Schuk in 1979. The 20th Awards Final Judges Panel scored Gene Alford's trophy as 16-3/16 points, not a tie for the World's Record but clearly the new all-time number 2 for the category. And in view of the great number of years of hunting by Alford with a lofty goal of trophy quality, the personal sacri-

Gene Alford...

fice to hunt with just his dogs each year, and the details of an excellent, Fair Chase hunt and kill, this trophy was a top contender for the coveted Sagamore Hill Award. This time Gene would not have any questions about the process and the recognition for his trophy. However he will tell you that a question still lingers in his mind, he boiled the skull to clean it and may have boiled it longer than he needed to, thereby causing the skull to shrink more than it would have if beetles or a maceration chamber had been used to clean it.

There was some stiff competition for the Sagamore Hill Award. The 20th NABG Awards recognized six new World's Records (barren ground caribou, Central Canada barren ground caribou, Sitka blacktail deer, Coues' non-typical whitetail deer, muskox, and the new category of non-typical American elk) and a number of other fine, high-ranking trophies, most with fine hunting stories. Still, there was something about Gene's story and his obvious love af-

Stipulations for the award state that it cannot be given more than a single time in an Awards Program, and it can only be awarded for a trophy that embodies both trophy quality and the essence of Fair Chase hunting. It is not necessarily given in every Awards, with its absence indicating the Judges Panel's conclusion that no trophy truly worthy of this highest award had been presented to them. The Sagamore Hill Medal may also be presented for exceptional service by an individual to the Club and its goals. Prior to the 20th NABG Awards, the Sagamore Hill Medal had been presented 13 times for trophies and four times for individuals for service to the Club.

After long and detailed discussions of all suitable candidates for the Sagamore Hill Medal, the Judges Panel voted to recommend Gene Alford's cougar trophy for the award. The Panel's recommendation was presented to the Executive Committee of the Boone and Crockett Club who could either accept the recommendation and prepare the medal, or reject the recommendation and thus end the matter. The Executive Committee heartily agreed with the Judges Panel and directed that the award be prepared for Alford's fine trophy.

It has always been tradition for the Sagamore Hill Award to be a surprise ending to the Awards Banquet. The awards other than a possible Sagamore Hill Award are made known on the day of the banquet at 'Press Day' when the working press is convened with the trophy owners in the trophy display so that stories and photos can be obtained firsthand. It has also been

tradition for the recipient to be present to receive the Sagamore Hill Medal, if at all possible. But Gene Alford lives in a small town and doesn't care a lot for big-city lights and dinners.

Help would have to be recruited to get him there. Eldon "Buck" Buckner of Baker, Oregon, was a member of the Judges Panel

who was acquainted with Gene. Walter White, Chairman of the Club's Records Committee, asked Buck to try to get Gene to the Awards Banquet without telling him of the Sagamore Hill Award. Buck did his job in fine fashion. Buck and Gene speak the same language; both are lean, taciturn Westerners who love the outdoors and hunting. With help from Buck's wife, Hope, Buck had Gene present for the activities and enjoying each minute, with only a little question in Gene's mind as to why it was essential that he be present.

Of course, as June 10th wore on, Gene got to wondering if maybe there was a chance that his cougar would receive the Sagamore Hill Award. He heard the other trophy owners and writers talking about the possibilities, and his trophy was mentioned in the group. He really didn't want to think about it for fear it might not come true. In fact, at the banquet, with a program in front of him listing all the awards to be made, including the Sagamore Hill Award, Gene refused to look at the pages. By the time the regular awards had ended and Gene was called to receive the Sagamore Hill Medal, you could tell by the wide grin on his face and moist eyes that it was a dream come true for Gene.

As Gene remarked to Buck on the return flight home, "I never thought 27 years ago when I started trailing cougar that the trail would lead to here." Gene Alford's long odyssey on the trail of a big tom cougar embodies a great deal of the mystique of all hunters, and trophy hunters in particular. It also has the happy ending of the highest award of the Boone and Crockett Club, one of those all-too-rare moments in this life when the guy in the white hat wins big.

Let's all toast Gene and the best of trophy hunting. And, let's wish him good tracking snow and good trails next February when he'll likely be back in the Bitterroot with his hounds. After the 20th North American Big Game Awards Program was completed, Gene donated his record cougar skull to the Boone & Crockett Club's National Collection of Heads and Horns. It can be viewed at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. ▲▲▲



GENE ALFORD WITH HIS DOGS, SCRATCH AND KELLY IN THE SELWAY-BITTERROOT WILDERNESS.

fair with big cougar and wilderness hunting with dogs that tugged at the Judges Panel member's hearts.

The Sagamore Hill Medal is the highest award of the Boone and Crockett Club. It is named after the favorite home of the Club's founder, Theodore Roosevelt, and it is given in memory of him and his two sons, Theodore Jr. and Kermit.