

THE GREAT

cat

OF NORTH AMERICA

Just the other day I read that a Colorado mountain lion killed one unfortunate youngster and badly mauled another. I haven't been keeping score, but it's no secret that such tragedies have become increasingly common in recent years. In fact, there's no measurement for the percentage of increase. During the first few hundred years of European occupation of North America there were virtually no authenticated cases of a cougar attacking a human. Rumors, yes. Legends, for sure. Campfire tales, by the dozen . . . but almost no hard evidence. During the last few years there have been a number of well-documented and highly publicized attacks, including several human fatalities. That's an important qualifier, for a cougar attack on a person almost always results in the death of the cougar. Sometimes even the offending one.

*The cougar is
America's most
misunderstood
big game
animal.*

*By Col. Craig Boddington USMCR
Professional Member - BYC Club
Senior Field Editor - Petersen's HUNTING*

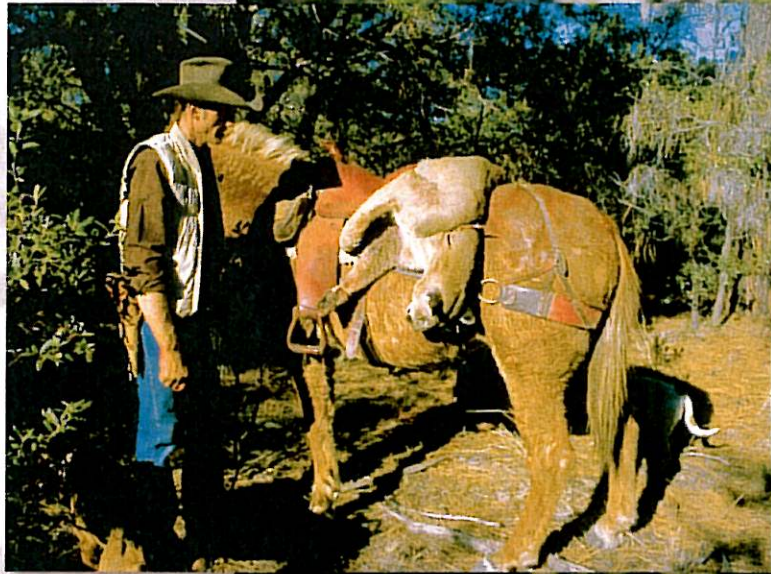
**ARIZONA OUTFITTER
WARNER GLENN WITH A
BIG CAT. DESPITE YEAR-
'ROUND OPEN SEASON,
ARIZONA'S MOUNTAIN
LIONS CONTINUE TO DO
JUST FINE.**

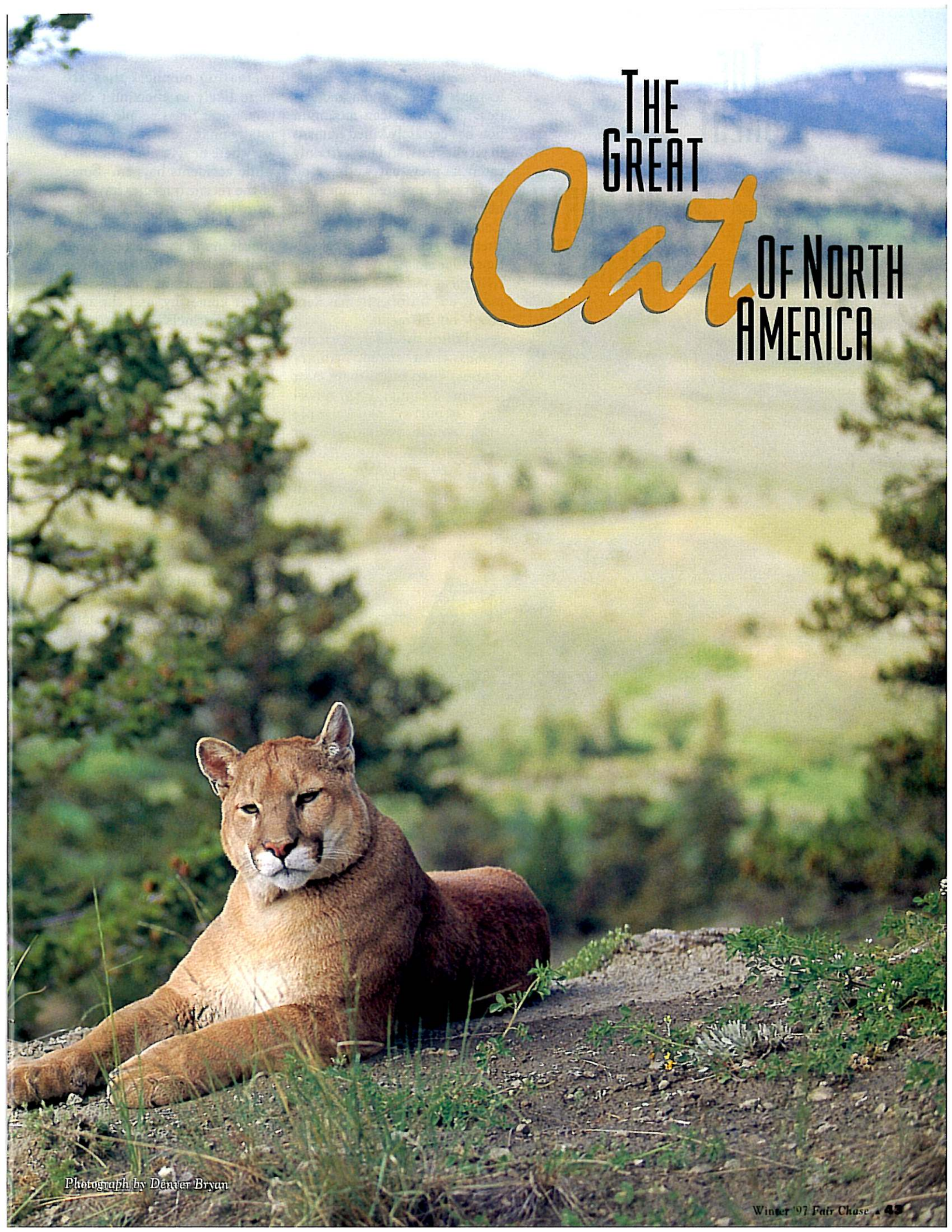
In great contradiction to this, I still see cougars as a common figure in animal rights and anti-hunting propaganda. This is because they are beautiful creatures and, if photographed in the proper light, appear anthropomorphically cute and cuddly. I don't have a problem with that, but I'm getting awfully tired of hearing them described as "endangered."

So what's the truth about the cougar? Is he some kind of a man-eating monster, or a teddy bear in feline clothing? Is he endangered? Of course he's none of these things. The cougar, or mountain lion, panther, painter, catamount, or whatever you choose to call him, is just what he is: A big, beautiful cat that is exceptionally shy and secretive, a bit of a loner, and also one of the most efficient predators in the world.

The mountain lion has absolutely no problem killing big deer twice his size, and is known to kill elk five times his size. These are his natural prey, and his normal diet is generally considered to approach a deer per week. However, like all cats he can be a bit on the lazy side. Especially when game is short he may develop a taste for veal, and he often shows a strong preference for mutton or horse foals. The ease with which he pulls down quadrupeds much larger than he is astonishing. However, no one can seriously suggest that the cougar is dangerous game. If he had the disposition of the leopard he would be, but he does not.

The leopard is nocturnal and shy, but he can be very aggressive. Although the leopard is a much smaller cat than the mountain lion, there are numer-



A photograph of a cougar resting on a rocky ledge in a mountainous landscape. The cougar is the central focus, lying down and looking towards the camera. The background consists of rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky, with some evergreen trees in the foreground.

THE
GREAT
Cat
OF NORTH
AMERICA

Photograph by Denver Bryan

THE GREAT *Cat* OF NORTH AMERICA

ous case histories of man-eating leopards in both India and Africa. The American mountain lion has certainly killed humans in recent years, and has certainly eaten its prey--but we have no history of repeated maneaters like the Rudraprayag leopard that Colonel Jim Corbett killed . . . after it had claimed dozens of victims. Our mountain lion has the equipment and the know-how to use it, but historically has kept people off the menu.

I think the difference today comes from three primary causes. First, and perhaps most importantly, urban sprawl is putting more people into inadvertent contact with mountain lions. As people move into the scenic suburbs in

increasing numbers they are more likely to encounter cougars. Most times people will be totally unaware that a cougar is anywhere near . . . but once in a while accidents happen. Some of the recent tragedies have appeared to be just that: accidents of mistaken identification. A cougar lies in wait along a game trail, perhaps a trail that has yielded dinner in the past. A jogger comes by, and the cat's natural instincts come into play before its brain becomes engaged. This doesn't make it any less tragic, but it falls short of being diabolical.

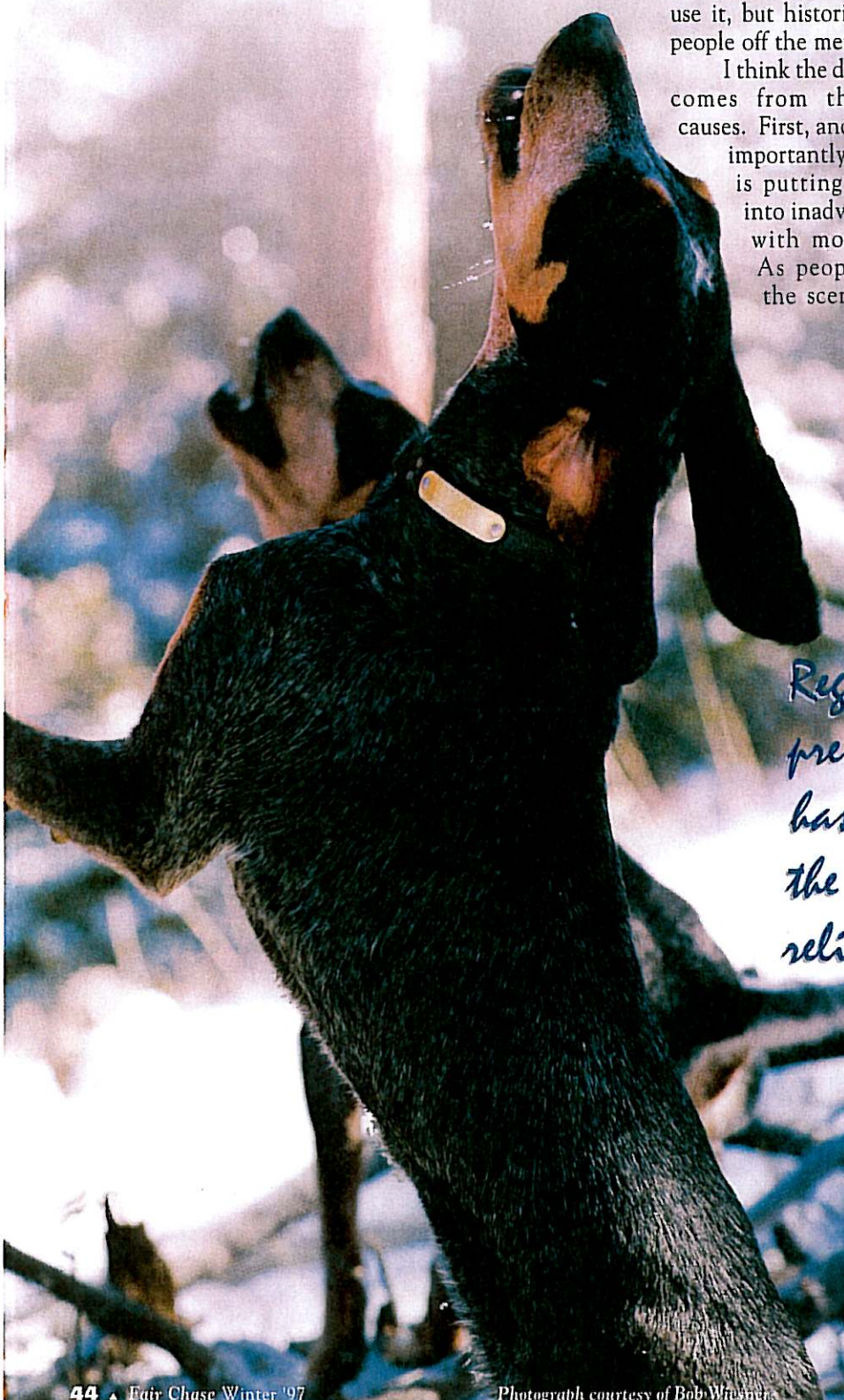
In some areas an underlying reason for increased attacks on humans--as well as livestock depredation--is an unnatural imbalance between predator and prey. Although there have been recent man-cougar incidents in Idaho, Montana, and most other western states, both Colorado and California seem to have hosted an unnatural share. But look at the situation. Both states have a lot of ideal cougar habitat, and both have always been home to healthy populations of the great cats. Colorado has

Regardless of the bad press hound hunting has received, this is the only reasonably reliable way to hunt a cougar.

sharply limited cougar hunting these days, and California has had no sport hunting for a quarter-century. Cougars are exceptionally difficult to count, but both states probably have an all-time-high population. Both states are

classic examples of urban sprawl, with people buying "ranchettes" and moving into hills and mountains in large numbers. The stage is thus set for unprecedented potential for man-cougar contact.

Now add in near-all-time lows in deer populations in both states. In Colorado the causes have been loss of habitat, espe-



cially winter range, coupled with tough winters; and a tremendous explosion in elk, which are indeed natural prey for cougars but not the preferred diet. In California the causes are drought, loss of habitat, and the cougars themselves. When the mountain lion was protected back in 1971 it was estimated that California might hold 2000 cougars. Today the estimates range from 5000 to 7000 and beyond, and many experts feel these are conservative figures.

Given the chance, a cougar might kill and eat a deer per week. Certainly forty a year is not an exaggerated figure. In a recent season, California deer tag returns indicated that the sportsmen's harvest was a mere 30,000 deer. Deer tag returns are not exactly mandatory, so the legal harvest is probably a bit higher . . . but not by much. In the same year, some 70,000 deer were reported killed on roads and highways. Depending on how conservative you want to be, California's cougars killed from 200,000 to 350,000 deer that year . . . if they could find them. The Golden State deer herd was never estimated at much more than 750,000, so it doesn't take a mathematician to figure out that the cougars' harvest is not sustainable.

The Central Coast, where I live, is a classic example. Just fifteen years ago it was a deer factory; it wasn't uncommon to see more than a hundred in a single field. Then came the drought. Then came the wine industry, with high fences and easy-to-obtain depredation permits to protect the invaluable grapes. Then came the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which has done wonders for birds but has taken a lot of row-crop acreage that the deer loved out of production. The cougars have always been there, and they still are . . . but deer are downright scarce. Cougar depredation is at an all-time high, and so are man-cougar en-

counters. Sad to say, the stage is set for more tragedies.

A third factor is the fact that there is little cougar hunting being done today, even in the prime western states and Canadian provinces. The most reviled group in our sporting fraternity is the houndsman, a great and unfortunate shift from our heritage. Hunting with hounds was the preferred hunting method of no less than Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, and it is virtually the only reliable way to hunt the elu-

completely unbothered, have lost their centuries-old respect for man. Certainly there are a lot more near-misses than ever before, with reports of people being stalked by cougars and finding them in their backyards relatively commonplace.

In years gone by an experienced hunter could spend a lifetime in cougar country and never see more than tracks and scat. These days, in much of the west, daylight sightings are no longer unusual. In light of all

IN HOUND HUNTING THERE IS DEFINITELY DANGER...BUT IT'S MOSTLY TO THE HOUNDS. WARNER GLENN IS DOING SOME QUICK SURGERY ON A COURAGEOUS DOG THAT GOT TOO CLOSE.



sive cougar. It was also a favorite hunting method of our founder, Theodore Roosevelt, who, while he was President, took a fine cougar that is still listed in the all-time *Records of North American Big Game*. Things are different today. Much of society, including many hunters, seem to have decided that hound hunting is unsporting. Hound hunting has been legislated out of existence in several states. Even where legal many houndsmen have given up under the pressure--and the grim economic reality of the impracticality of keeping a pack of hounds for ever-shortening seasons.

There isn't a lot of cougar hunting going on, and one could theorize that the cougars, now

this, continued propaganda about the "endangered" cougar is just plain ridiculous. Although he is still extremely uncommon in the eastern half of the country, he has basically recaptured most of his former range, and certainly exists in huntable numbers from the western Great Plains to the Pacific. The small Florida cougar is indeed seriously threatened, but as a species *Felis concolor* is quite secure. More secure, perhaps, than much of his prey and those who hunt him!

Mind you, none of this is to say that the cougar should be considered "dangerous game." Certainly he should not be. Many of the recent tragedies have involved children, young-

sters, and women--almost never a full-grown man. And never an armed hunter who was pursuing a cougar. Although we call him "mountain lion" and sometimes just "lion," our cougar is not a lion, nor a tiger, nor a leopard. He is an exceptionally efficient hunter and sometimes, like the

Rather, it's that they're generally solitary hunters who range widely over big country. You can't call in anything unless it hears you calling, and it takes a huge measure of luck to be in exactly the right place at the right time for a cat to hear you . . . and be in the mood to respond.

know any man who has actually done it . . . but I know one woman who has. Deb Bradbury of Glenrock, Wyoming, publisher of *Blackpowder Hunter* and one of the best rifle shots I know, got it in her mind that she wanted to take a cougar without using dogs. She lives in good cougar country that offers several months of snow, so she had that advantage. She is also an ardent coyote hunter, so she knows her country and, during the winter, is out and about a great deal.

Deb searched for fresh cougar tracks for three winters, and several times found tracks fresh enough to follow. A couple she jumped without seeing, some just plain outran her, and other times darkness ended the chase. Then, early one morning about two years ago, she found the fresh tracks of a good cat. She followed throughout the morning, sometimes losing the tracks where the wind had swept the hills clean, then casting ahead to find them again. The track wound endless through sagebrush hills and timbered pockets, and it seemed certain this was another wild goose chase.

In the afternoon she found a fresh kill . . . and fresher tracks. She pressed on, and after an hour or so she saw a tawny form on the far side of a clearing, just about to drift into a stand of evergreens. One shot from her .270, and she accomplished a hunting feat that I had considered to be just a legend.

Most of those of us who choose to hunt cougars do so with the aid of hounds! Regardless of the bad press hound hunting has received, this is the only reasonably reliable way to hunt a cougar. It is not a sure thing. Even in good country the big cats are thinly scattered and range widely, and it can take many days to find a track. Sometimes you don't find one! Once you find a track and turn loose the pack, it is still not a sure thing. Like most cats, cougars are short-winded and the average chase is not long.

cat he is, he will kill to excess in a flock of sheep or a winter yard of deer. But except in those flashing moments when he works for his dinner, he is not ferocious by nature. He is reticent and shy, and extremely difficult to see--especially on purpose. I know a very few dedicated predator callers who have called in mountain lions. More often than not this is a natural accident that results from countless hours of blowing a predator call in lion country. In other words, a mountain lion was called in while calling bobcats or coyotes. I also know some very dedicated predator callers who have spent countless hours trying to call in a mountain lion, without success. It isn't that they won't come to a call. They will.

I also know several people who have simply blundered into cougars while hunting something else and have wound up with a mountain lion rug for their trouble. It happens, but it's a lot like buying a lottery ticket. You have to have a lottery ticket to win, and you have to have a cougar license to play. The odds are much the same. I've actually bumped into cougars in the wild three times, which is quite a lot--but never with a license nor an open season. In good country there's nothing wrong with buying a tag, especially since there are more cougars than ever before. But don't count on it . . .

Over the years I have read and heard told that a good man on snowshoes could walk down a cougar in tracking snow. I don't



DEBRA BRADBURY,
PUBLISHER OF
BLACKPOWDER HUNTER,
WITH THE COUGAR SHE
TOOK WITHOUT THE USE
OF HOUNDS AFTER THREE
WINTERS OF TRACKING.

But sometimes the chase outdistances the hunter. Sometimes the hunters can't keep up. And sometimes the cat loses the dogs in the rugged country they call home. No two chases are alike, and you never know what might happen when you turn loose the dogs. However, cougar hunting with hounds is generally successful, more so than hound hunting for bears because of the cougar's short wind and a more natural tendency to take to a tree.

There are no other truly viable ways to take a cougar, so there are no exact parallels with bear hunting. However, as is the case with hunting black bears with dogs, hound hunting is also extremely selective. Very few people have seen enough cougars to know whether a cat that is accidentally encountered

or comes to a varmint call is mature or not ... and, given an opportunity, a tag, and an open season, fewer would stop to check. With hound hunting there is no reason for a mistake; you have seen the tracks, and you will see the treed cougar at close range. If he isn't what you want you can walk away.

Two other things about hound hunting are widely misunderstood. First, it's an extremely physical hunt. You simply have to keep within earshot of the hounds, and that can mean a mad scramble through extremely tough real estate or slogging through deep snow--with or without snowshoes, depending on whether you have them or not. The other thing about cougar hunting that those who haven't tried it don't understand is that

it's extremely exciting. Listening to the chase, scrambling from ridge to ridge, and then closing in on the cacaphony of hounds around the tree is a thrilling experience. What's different about cougar hunting from most other hunting experiences is that the chase is everything, and the shot is anticlimactic.

Most of the time it is an extremely simple thing to shoot a treed cougar. As in all hunting, the shot must be placed well, but in cougar hunting this is especially important lest the hounds be endangered by a wounded cat. However, the shot will not be difficult. No special equipment is required, nor is a great deal of power needed. Cougars are not particularly hardy, and the shot is close enough that precise placement

Cougars are highly efficient hunters and have the equipment to be dangerous. However, they do not have the disposition of other great cats and it takes unusual circumstances for them to be a menace to man.

should be assured. Some cougar hunters use guns as light as .22 magnums, and the old .25-20 and .32-20 are favorites among houndsmen.

THE GREAT Cat OF NORTH AMERICA

Traditional centerfires in the deer class are not needed, and are overly destructive--especially at the very short ranges common with hound hunting.

Many use handguns and archery tackle to add to the challenge. Such tackle is certainly effective enough, but this misses the point. It isn't the shot that matters; it's getting to the tree and being part of the chase. In this regard, the unfortunate part about cougar hunting is that the real enjoyment of the hunt belongs to the houndsman alone. He has raised and trained his dogs and knows the sound each one makes. He can stand on a rocky point and listen to a chase on the next mountain and know which dog is in the lead. He will





Photograph courtesy of Debra Bradbury

know when the trail is cold and when it gets hot, and he will know when the cougar is jumped, and he will know exactly and precisely when it trees. You or I who are not houndsmen will know none of these things, and our experience of a cougar hunt is much the poorer for the lack.

I am not a houndsman, and I much prefer hunting that I can fully participate in. I can appreciate an exciting chase, and I'm enough of a runner to enjoy the hard scramble in getting to the tree, but I am also a rifleman, and the kind of shooting required doesn't appeal to me. So nearly 20 years have passed since my last cougar hunt. In that I was exceptionally fortunate; I hunted with Arizona legends Warner Glenn and his father, the late Marvin Glenn. Gentlemen both, soft-spoken and men of few words, they nevertheless were anxious to share their mountains and explain the intricacies of the chase as it unfolded. I pity

the cougar hunter who is simply taken to tree and sent home with his cougar by a taciturn houndsman-- and I fear that is often the case.

With the Glenn's we combed the rugged Chiricahua and Dragoon Mountains for a few days looking for tracks. We explored Indian caves, treed the first coati mundi I'd ever seen, and followed a couple of tracks that proved too cold in the dry Arizona air. And then a neighbor called and reported that they'd found a fresh javelina kill. We trailed the riding mules and dogs to the spot, found a day-old kill, and shortly we were on a hell-for-leather chase through rugged rimrock

It's a traditional and time-honored sport still pursued by a dying breed of individualists... and they are hunters, just like all the rest of us that are not houndsmen.

country. The cat, a very big tom, treed in a huge Ponderosa pine. I still have the rug and the skull, boiled out for me by Margaret Glenn in her pressure cooker. They are prized trophies, but what I remember most is sharing the hunt with such fine people.

It was an enjoyable hunt, but for the reasons stated it is not one that I have an overwhelming desire to repeat. Which is a good thing. Although the cougar remains legal game in most western states, about a decade ago, after years of a moratorium on cougar hunting, California changed the cougar to a non-game animal, in effect a sacred cow. The game department cannot manage them and sportsmen cannot hunt them; all we can do is feed our dwindling deer herd to their increasing numbers. And a California resident, although a citizen of the United States in most contexts of the

Constitution, cannot lawfully bring a legally-taken sport-hunted cougar into the state of California. Since that's where I live, and since I lack the wherewithal to challenge such an outrageous law, chances are I will hunt no more cougars in my lifetime.

On the other hand, I am an absolute proponent of cougar hunting and hound hunting. Cougar hunting because, like all wildlife resources, the great cats need to be managed. Allowing Mother Nature to maintain her own balance is a wonderful idea in a perfect world, but the world hasn't been perfect since Man started leaving lots of footprints. In a natural state the great predators exhaust their prey and move on,

but in Man's world there isn't always anyplace left for them to go. So first they run out of prey, and then they starve--or, driven by hunger, they commit what we consider crimes and are executed for them.

It's a comforting thing to know that the wild places of the West are still cougar country, but I don't want them in the backyard with my kids . . . and I'd like to have some deer around as well. So I'm all for managing prey and predator species alike, making sure that there are deer to watch and occasionally hunt . . . and enough cougars so that I can see their tracks once in a while, and just maybe catch a glimpse of one every few years.

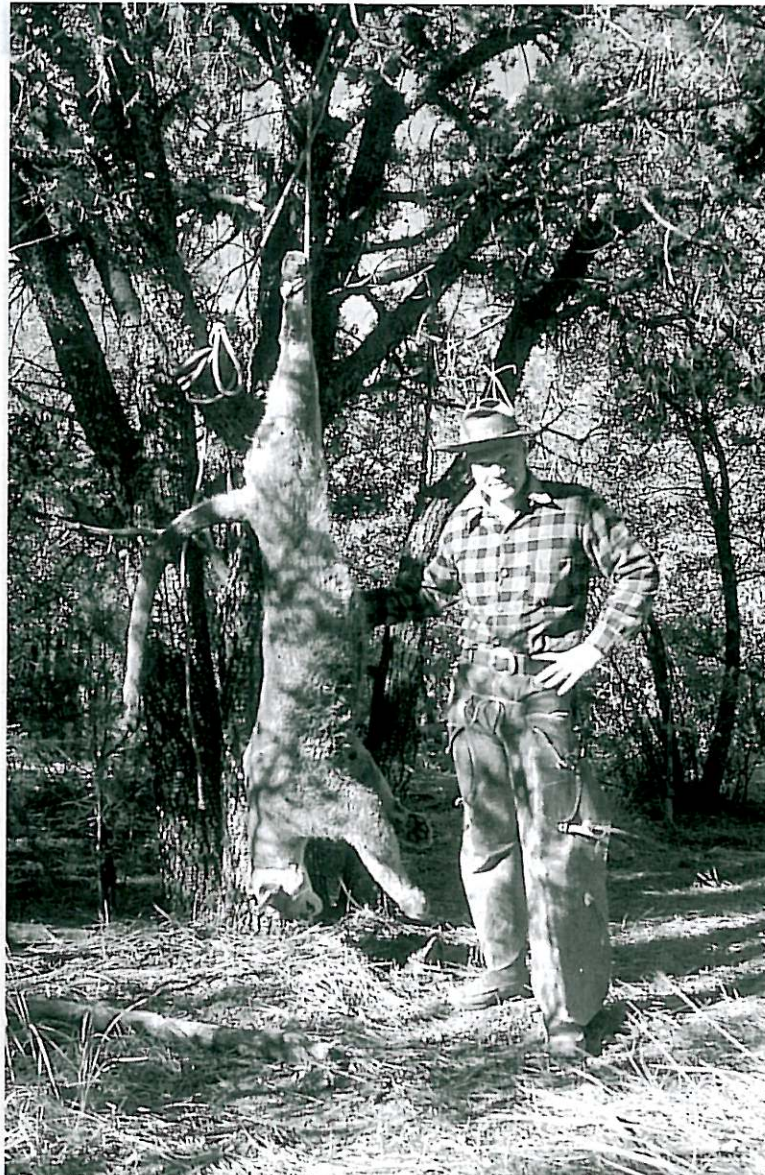
I'm all for hound hunting, too. Not because I'm a houndsman, but because, over the last two centuries, it remains the only reliable way to hunt cougars, and is an equally effective and selective way to hunt bears. And not just for that reason alone. It's a traditional and time-honored sport still pursued by a dying breed of individualists . . . and they are hunters, just like all the rest of us who are not houndsmen. In the states where hound hunting has been outlawed the vote would have been different had sportsmen stuck together. Instead many of us, perhaps well-intentioned but extremely short-sighted, turned on our own. We as hunters are not only individualists, but we're often narrow-minded elitists quick to scorn hunting methods we don't understand. It makes me tired to hear talk that hound hunting isn't "fair chase," or that baiting for bears isn't "fair chase." Good Lord, more than a dozen states allow baiting for deer, and as far as I know nobody thinks hunting quail over dogs is unsporting.

If you don't like it, don't do it--but keep in mind that local hunting techniques are usually developed from hunting conditions. Hunters learned centuries ago that gamebirds

were much easier to locate with the help of a canine nose. Similarly, that deer were drawn to apples and corn. Most of the states that allow baiting have heavy cover, where spot-and-stalk techniques are not only difficult, but unproductive. I suspect baiting remains legal in many areas not only because it's so traditional that few think twice about it, but also because it helps keep the harvest of the prolific white-tail at management goals. Bear are traditionally baited or run with hounds in areas where the cover is so thick that other methods just won't work. And with cougars it's the only game in town. Well, not exactly. Deb

Bradbury proved there are other means. Her three-year quest, an admirable exercise in determination and woodcraft, stands as one of the most singular hunting feats I'm aware of, and certainly redefines fair chase...but it is not an effective management tool. Hound hunting is. ▲▲▲

THE GREAT Cat OF NORTH AMERICA



THE AUTHOR WITH A VERY GOOD TOM COUGAR TAKEN IN SOUTHWESTERN ARIZONA. ALTHOUGH HE USED A HANDGUN, CHOICE OF EQUIPMENT DOESN'T ADD TO THE CHALLENGE IN COUGAR HUNTING. THE HUNT IS VERY MUCH THE CHASE, NOT THE KILL.