

STORIES FROM THE 31ST BIG GAME AWARDS

KELLY R. ZECHA
COUGAR
Second Award (tie)
15-8/16 B&C Points

This all happened because my wife Rehna gave me an envelope for Christmas with a note that explained that I could spend the specified amount on a dream hunt. This was the only time in my life this has ever happened. After a big hug and kiss, I told her that I would pin down a hunt for something I have kept putting off. I did not know at the time it would be for a mountain lion, nor did I have any idea it truly would end up being a dream hunt.

Kelly's cougar took second award (tie) after Judges Panel verification in April and was displayed in the exhibit until the 31st Big Game Awards that took place in July 2022.



In a chance conversation with Dave Liesin at the local gun store, I mentioned that I wanted to do a mountain hunt while I was still physically able. He told me about this outfitter he met through a relative. I went home that afternoon, contacted Cleve Dwire with Bull Creek Outfitters, and three days later I had booked the Nevada hunt for early 2019.

Living in Kansas all my life, I knew from experience that a mountain lion hunt was not a walk in the park. I dressed as I was planning to dress on the mountain, packed everything, including my Weatherby pistol, that I would carry in my backpack, and walked every evening on a piece of property with blow sand as topsoil. I knew that would give me the best workout I could get without going to town every day to a gym. Honestly, since it was winter at the time I am sure it helped, but once I got to a higher altitude, it sure didn't feel like it.

After flying into Las Vegas and renting a 4x4 pickup, I headed north toward Elko, Nevada. I had no idea I was about to get caught in a blizzard well after dark. The storm forced me to turn around and drive 30 miles back to Pioche, Nevada, using the rumble strips in the middle of the highway as my only guide. While driving, one of my boys called to see how the trip was going. I had him locate a motel and contact them to get me a room for the night.

The next morning, the highways were clear, so I headed out toward Elko again. Once there, I met Cleve and Becky Dwire and discussed a game plan. The next morning they picked me up and off we went. We ended up driving several roads looking for tracks in the snow while on our way to spots where Cleve could unload the snowmobile and run up a few passes. This process went on for a few days, which was a

good thing because it gave me time to develop a friendship with them. While Cleve was out on the snow machine, Becky would tend to the dogs, making sure they all had something to eat and drink. She would let them run to get some exercise. They would be ready if we ended up cutting a track.

Several days in, a fresh track was found. At that point, the hounds were put on the track and the singing started. That's most likely something only a houndsman and a hunter could appreciate! It was hard to believe a bunch of hounds could sound so good screaming at the top of their lungs! Eventually, the cat was treed, but it was a big female, so the dogs were rounded up. That pretty much ate up all the daylight for that day, so we headed back to Elko.

We had nice light snow that night, so the next morning was great for finding fresh tracks. That next day also brought help from Cleve's brother Monty. Again, as we drove around through mountain passes we were constantly looking for fresh tracks. It wasn't until around noon that day that we had another opportunity, but it was a promising one. Again the dogs were all released out of their pickup box. Once we got everything ready, we were off.

I have wanted to do this for probably 30 years but always put it off to hunt something else. In my mind, I struggled to understand the excitement of the chase and the feeling of having a mountain lion glare at you while you were crazy enough to stand below him. I did what I could to prepare myself for this moment, but all of my plans of exactly what I was going to do when the cat came into view were clearly left back at the truck.

Once the cat was treed and we finally reached the tree, it was great to catch my breath and take in the

moment. I am used to chasing deer, so this was an odd time for me. I am not accustomed to having time to take pictures without the constant fear of the prey taking off and leaving the country. The fear was still there for me, but the guides sure seemed relaxed and did a great job of trying to settle me down to a more relaxed state of being.

This cat went up a huge pine tree that was very full, so even finding him through the cover of the pine needles was a challenge. It took a fair amount of time to find a large enough opening that offered a clean shot on the cat, which unfortunately was going to have to be a straight-on shot. He was resting up against the tree trunk where the bullet needed to be. One simply

could not even see him from the other side. Had the dogs not been screaming to tell us where he was, I assure you that a person could have easily walked right by the tree and never seen him.

After getting the dogs tied up and everyone safe, it was time to do what I set out to do—or so I thought. Because my 7mm-08 Weatherby pistol I was using had a long eye relief scope on it, it was really tough to locate the cat in a window that small.

It was at this time Monty said, "Let me throw some rocks or sticks up toward him to see if I can get him to move a little." To my pleasant surprise, he was able to get him into a position for a much cleaner shot. It was still not ideal, but it was as clean a shot

Once Kelly got to the tom and tried to pick him up he realized just how big the cat was.



as we were going to get. Once I felt secure in my shot placement, I squeezed the trigger, and down came the cat.

As soon as he was down, he took off on us. He did not get far as the dogs were released again. The cougar was in no shape to run. As he hit the ground and jumped up heading out, I took off running thinking I was going to chase him as best I could. It was at that time Cleve hollered at me to stop and wait for the dogs. You might say I was a little excited!

The lion had run 50-60 yards, and the dogs were on him again. This time the tom was on the ground. Monty asked me not to fire a finishing shot until he got the dogs pulled away. As we stepped in to get the dogs, the cat charged and jumped at us. Monty and I were standing next to each other and did what we could, which was to get out of the way before the cat was on us. In doing so, Monty slipped on the snow and fell to the ground. Fortunately, one front shoulder was out of commission on the cat.

This cat landed within inches, not feet, when he

jumped at us. This all happened quite fast. The dogs were on the cat as soon as he took off, which I believe is what ended up saving our skins. As Monty got up, I noticed blood running down his neck so I told him that the cat had evidently got him with at least one claw. He said he didn't think so. As I looked at it closely, we determined he had hit a tree branch when he was falling.

Once we regained our bearings, we were able to get the dogs. I leaned in and put a finishing shot on the cat. Only when I could actually put my hands on him did I realize how big the tom was. I had no clue what he would score—or really cared. I just knew that he was a massive, very nice, old tom. Even in my ignorance about a good tom, I just couldn't get over how large his head was.

At that point, Cleve and Monty moved the cat to a spot where we could get some pictures. I tried to pick the tom up for pictures, but I quickly found out that was not going to happen. Once the three of us got him picked up and I was able to wrap my

arms around him I could see exactly why I wasn't going to be able to do it on my own. After pictures, we took him down to the snow machine, loaded him up, and went back to the pickup.

From there we went to the ranger station to let them record the kill and get my license information. While there, we weighed him. He tipped the scales at 162 pounds. Monty is the one who asked me if I was going to have him scored. He suspected it was easily going to make the record book. Honestly, had he not asked, I probably would have never had the skull measured.

I knew the tom was big, but I don't know enough about them to have any idea what my guides had put me on. Besides that, when I go out hunting I go to get away and to wrap myself in another world that allows me a short time to unwind and not care about what the rest of the world is doing at that time. Never do I go out expecting a monster like we found that day. Don't get me wrong, the hope is always there, but it is not something

that defines if I have a great time or not.

What I didn't mention was that this ended up being a lion that the Nevada Division of Wildlife was tracking and doing a study on. This particular cat was wearing three pieces of jewelry. Two were ear tags, and the third was a tracking collar. While at the ranger station they removed the collar and sent us on our way after we had a very nice conversation with the warden who was there that day. My hat's off to the fella, as he made an enjoyable hunt enjoyable all the way to the end.

Once I returned home, I made a couple of calls looking for information. What I found out is that this cat was a mature 5-6 year old that had been collared for 13 months. It traveled two mountain ranges from the Utah/Nevada state line to the west slopes of the Delmar Mountains. During the time he was collared, he ranged approximately 450 square miles. They provided me with pictures of three kill sights where they had collected evidence of his diet being 65 percent deer, 29 percent wild horse, and three percent coyote. I did ask the biologist about whether or not I should have harvested that particular cat because it wore a collar. He told me point blank, "The tom was a wild animal, and they have to control the population or many other issues would start showing up." He did say, however, that the one negative was that they'd now have to dart another one and track it. But by doing that, it would offer them new information to use in their research. ■

Kelly received his plaque and medal for second award on stage at the 31st Big Game Awards Banquet in Springfield, Missouri, in July. LEFT TO RIGHT: Past VP of Big Game Records Buck Buckner, Kelly R. Zecha, and Records Chairman Mike Opitz.

