

My Idaho Mountain Lion Hunt

I just returned from an exciting and successful hunt for mountain lion in mid-western Idaho. It had its beginnings 2 years ago having been a high bidder at the annual NH Safari Club banquet auction. I ended up buying a hound hunt for NH bear with Andy Savage, formerly of Moultonborough. On that hunt we treed over a dozen bear in a week, but having already taken several nice bear in my hunting career, I let them all go.

Last year Andy bought an outfitting business in Riggins, Idaho called "Heaven's Gate Outfitting" (www.hgoid.com). His hunts include bear, elk, goat, mule deer, whitetail deer, and mountain lion. We had hit it off while hunting together in NH so he called me to get out there and get a cat. I thought it over and sealed the deal via an e-mail on my Blackberry while I was in a tree stand in northern Saskatchewan Thanksgiving week.

For those of you that like to criticize things you don't know about, a hound hunt is a very sporting and fun way to take game. It is just as hard or harder than other types of hunting and not always fruitful. It is enjoyable to take part in the strategy used in the hunt and following the barking hounds. The hounds live to hunt, just like me.

Mountain lion range from northern Yukon to the southern Andes. There are plenty of cats out there being managed and kept in balance by the Fish & Game departments. A while back California outlawed cat hunting. There have been 12 confirmed attacks on humans since 1986. There were only 3 attacks from 1890-1985. Mountain lions find Californians tasty especially after being protected. Ungrateful varmints!

We set up the hunt for mid January, but I got a call from Andy the day before the scheduled flight saying I should hold off 1 week as the rain and warm weather had just melted most of the snow. Last minute changes to departures due to weather are typical on mountain lion hunts, so to have a good hunt the hunter must be willing to be flexible.

I arrived at the airport in Boise 1 week later, got into my rental car and drove 3 hours north to Riggins. The only hiccup during the drive was being stopped for speeding. I told the officer I was on my way to a cat hunt. He said I must be going up to Riggins so he only gave a warning because he didn't want to spoil my hunt. Andy later told me they never give warnings here, just tickets. Thanks!

Upon arrival I was greeted by Andy and his family at their spacious new house half way up a mountain. Outstanding views! Our crew was going to vary each day but included Andy and his wife Karen, and guides Wes, Nick, and Andrew. His hunting territory covers nearly 1200 square miles of intense terrain.

The next morning we went to town to get my hunting license and a profound, life changing event occurred. For the first time my hair color was entered on a license as gray, not brown. Now I'm an old man at age 52.

Our hunting method would be to drive snowmobiles dozens of miles each day in hopes of seeing fresh cat tracks in the game yarding areas. If we found a track we would let the hounds loose -Plots and Walkers. Every day we would see mule deer, whitetail deer, and elk in the steep wooded and open grassland areas. The snowmobile rides and the views were worth the price of admission.

We had fairly good conditions the first day but then the rain and warm weather came, melting the snow that had fallen 2 days earlier. We would get on a track in the deep snow high in the wooded north slopes but the track would head into the bare south slopes and be lost.

We encountered many wolf tracks out in the bush. As a documented fact, they have decimated the game in the surrounding states and parts of Idaho. The new hunting season for them was stopped by the anti's recently and it is not known if or when it will eventually start up again. According to rumor, many people in the area use the three "s" rule - Shoot, Shovel, and Shut up.

On the fourth day, as we were not finding any tracks from mature cats while on the snowmobiles, we decided to bushwack into some steep draws in hopes of cutting a track. The snow was well over 3' deep up at 6000' and we "post holed" as we walked. Snowshoes were not practical in the steep brushy terrain. Lower down we came upon the old track of a huge cat following a female but they just meandered everywhere and due to being old, no scent was on them.

We returned the next day back to the now 4 day old tracks since as they say, "It's the only show in town". We eventually found the big cats day old tracks and let the hounds loose. If we had taken a right turn on a trail that previous day we would have been on super hot tracks then. The tracks took us up and down the mountains and finally onto the barren lower south slopes through a big herd of elk. With no snow and tracks a day old, it didn't look good.

Finally, after circling the snowless area the dogs hit scent. Then an hour later they started the type of barking that meant the cat was treed. I couldn't believe it! The only problem was the hounds were at the bottom of the valley in some nasty cliffs.

We walked down through the cliffs but came to an area that was not passable so we had to climb back up and make another attempt. After three tries over 1.5 hours we finally made it to the river at the bottom. Not for sissies. This was very frustrating as we knew the cat wouldn't stay treed forever and we could hear the dogs barking all the time. "So close but yet so far".

We had to cross the river 3 times and I almost got swept downstream. I was using my T/C muzzle loader and was worried that it would get wet while I crossed the raging

river and cause a miss fire. Also, I only had 1 extra bullet left due to having to take a few practice shots that morning. The gun had gone through some rough treatment on the snowmobiles and steep hills during the week.

We finally arrived to find a large cat high up in a Douglas fir. I eventually found a good spot to take a clear shot, then the guides tied up the dogs to avoid a may lay. At the shot the cat jumped and fortunately ran downhill away from me and expired in 3 leaps. I had considered shooting from the downhill side and would have been met by the claws and teeth of the cat.

It was finally over! I was emotionally and physically drained. Andy later commented that it looked like I was going to cry. I came very close and did my best to compose myself. Don't want to ruin my image.

The record book beast measured 9' 2" from nose to tail. He was the talk of the town the rest of the week as we did errands and met Andy's friends. Yes, we celebrated at several of the local bars!

I owe part of my success to the hunter that earlier in the month had elected to stay at the truck while the guides were doing all of the work tracking cats. This same cat had been treed but the hunter was not able to reach the cat before it bailed out of the tree. I had insisted on the first day that I be in every aspect of the hunt and not sit around until something was treed.

I was in shape for the hunt since I spend 7 days a week in the woods of New Hampshire, either working as a land surveyor, hunting, or puttering on my woodlots. I was humbled when Andy twice asked me to be a guide for the coming fall. Boy, that sure helps the ego! I declined as I prefer to be on the shooting part of the deal.

We finished off the week hunting bobcats, birds, and sheds. We were successful on the latter two but when it came to the bobcats it was the same as usual with hunting. You see one type of game when you are after the other. I also had the opportunity to fish for steelheads in the nearby Salmon River but I was having too much fun hunting. Maybe next time.

As a Boone & Crockett measurer, Andy also put me to work in the evenings that week measuring trophy animals taken in the area. The number one mountain lion in the United States was taken nearby by Gene Alford in 1988. Gene also took two cats back in the 60's that tie for 8th place. According to my guides, the number two archery elk in the world was taken in the same steep valley my cat came from. Great genetics here!

As in all of my hunts, I took the meat back home with me. Kathy and I liked the taste, similar in look and taste to pork. My son Patrick wouldn't try it. His loss.

I have hunted the world and this experience ranks at the top. The guides did their utmost best under bad hunting conditions and we "Got er done!" Great cooking also. I only lost one pound after walking all of those difficult miles. I'll be back, having already

booked a bear hunt and will be after other animals there in the coming years. Patrick's inheritance is getting smaller. You only live once.

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