Cougars - Whoâ€™s afraid of the big bad cat?

by Scott_Staats

There seems to be a lot of talk lately about cougars. From what Iâ€™ve heard and read, there must be at least a half million of the critters hiding behind every tree ready to pounce on Fifi, Fido or even your small child.

Just about everybody I talk with has a different view on cougars. Somebody even asked me the other day where I stand on cougars, I replied â€œAs far back as possible since they can reach around with a front paw and swipe you off.â€•

Iâ€™ve spent a good part of my life in the woods and have seen a total of two mountain lions. The last one was seen along a canyon road at night, but the first was a close encounter that Iâ€™ll never forget.

That memorable day occurred August 30, 1991 while bow hunting for elk and deer in the Idaho mountains. I headed out that hot afternoon toward a ground stand I built on a ridge. About a mile from my rig, I took a breather and gave a few calls on the elk bugle. After getting no response, I continued sneaking quietly up the game trail.

Suddenly, about 100 yards farther, I stopped in my tracks after detecting the putrid smell of something dead. After quickly determining that it wasnâ€™t my lunch, I looked to my right and found myself staring into the penetrating eyes of a mountain lion, no more than 20 feet away (I paced it off later).

At that moment, I felt small, vulnerable and no longer at the top of the food chain, like a Texas oilman at a Sierra Club meeting. The only other time I recall similar feelings occurred in the backcountry tundra of Denali National Park in Alaska when I looked up to see a large grizzly bear approaching a few hundred yards off.

I recalled hearing of only a few cougar attacks in the west and I hoped this meeting wouldnâ€™t end up being

part of those statistics.

In hindsight, which, by the way, I was trying hard not to show the lion, I suppose it heard me bugling and hid on the side of the trail hoping for a tasty elk dinner. As these felines often target sick or weak animals, it put a major dent in the estimation of my bugling prowess, not to mention my physical appearance. But that was the least of my worries at the moment. The cat seemed just as surprised as I was at our encounter. We just kept staring at each other, as if daring the other to make the first move. The scene could be described as â€œHidden Cougar, Frightened Hunter.â€•

I donâ€™t remember doing it at the time, but I became aware of an arrow nocked on the bow. Not that I planned on shooting at the lion, but at least it gave me a little comfort or perhaps false security. Besides, he could have been on me in one or two pounces if he so desired. He looked like a pretty good-sized lion, but then again even a small cougar looks big from 20 feet away.

The entire encounter lasted a little over a minute, but it seemed like an eternity. The cougar flinched three or four times as if preparing for the pounce. I envisioned the leap, the attack, the high-pitched screams (from both of us) and the long, bloodied crawl back to my rig, if I even made it back. Perhaps the only thing left for the search and rescue team to discover a few days later would be a pile of mountain lion scat with traces of camouflage and a Snickers wrapper. I think every hair on my body was on end, which may have helped me out since I hear youâ€™re suppose to make yourself look bigger if you run into a lion.

I decided to make the first move and slowly continued up the trail, never turning my back on the beast. He seemed content for the time being to stay put, probably still in a state of confusion about the sickly elk in humanoid form. Our staring contest ended when I rounded a corner.

After reaching my stand, it occurred to me that the cougar was only a few hundred yards away. The thought of sitting there until dark and walking by the same spot didnâ€™t appeal to me. By then the cat may have changed its mind about being picky with dinner selections.

I decided to hunt slowly in a wide arc back toward my rig. The rest of the day I could feel eyes burning into the back of my neck (although it could have been the hot afternoon sun). I donâ€™t know if the cat stalked me after that but I felt its presence. In a thick stand of timber on the side of a mountain I came across a steaming pile of bear scat (which finally answered â€œyesâ€• to that age-old question). Jeez, what was next, I wondered â€“ Bigfoot? It seemed like every wild animal was out and about that day, except of course elk and deer.

A year later and only a few ridges away from that earlier cougar encounter, my wife and I were camping during hunting season when we heard some kind of animal circling close to our tent in the middle of the night. It made a strange continual â€œrrrittt-rrritttâ€• sound and I guessed it to be a skunk, raccoon or some similar small critter. I stuck my head out of the tent flap into the darkness and yelled, â€œGo on! Git outta here!â€• We could hear the noise fade as the animal climbed up the opposite sagebrush hill. Somewhere in the distance a coyote howled. (Coyotes are always howling off in the distance).

We didn't give it much more thought until a few months later while watching a nature show on PBS. A study area had been set up in the mountains of Idaho that contained a female mountain lion and her two cubs. A male cougar jumped the high fence one night, killing one of the cubs. The mother searched or grieved for the dead cub, all the while making a â€œrrrittt-rrritttâ€• sound. At that instant, my wife and I looked at each other and the hair on our necks stood on end. When I stuck my head out of the tent that night, Iâ€™m lucky the mountain lion didnâ€™t take a swat at me.

Iâ€™ve had a few more close encounters with cats while elk hunting in Oregonâ€™s mountains. Once, while trudging through about two feet of snow, I came across a very fresh drag mark that looked as if a hunter dragged off a deer. The temperature hovered in the teens and the spots of blood hadnâ€™t yet frozen. I thought I would follow this would-be poacher and catch him in the act. Shoot a deer during elk season, will you?

After seeing where the animal was dragged over big logs, I began having second thoughts. What if this villain turned out to be the size of an Oakland Raiders lineman, then what would I do? I had visions of surprising him by yelling, â€œFreeze, game warden, put down your rifle.â€• I held my .270 a little tighter and continued on, considering this pre-emptive move.

After a few more minutes of trailing, I looked ahead about 20 feet and froze. Parts of the deer could be seen

sticking out from freshly built pile of branches and pine needles.

Two words immediately came to mind â€“ â€œCougar kill.â€• Then six more â€“ â€œGet the hell out of here.â€•

I looked up into the surrounding tall ponderosa pines, prepared to see a cougar staring down. I never saw him, although I felt he was watching me from somewhere close by.

Another time, I followed a fresh set of elk tracks but could never quite catch up. Iâ€™d even see the elk get up a couple of hundred yards ahead of me and take off through the snow. We played this cat and mouse game for about an hour. Then while walking up a wooded draw, and only about five minutes behind the elk, I noticed its tracks suddenly veer 90-degrees to the left.

Curious, I thought.

Then I looked up ahead and noticed a fresh set of cougar tracks coming down the draw. I could see where the cat made 10- or 15-foot leaps and took off after the elk. I thought to myself, â€œThis could be interesting.â€• So I started off after both sets of tracks. After a few minutes, the trees began closing in and the snow got deeper. I began feeling more like the hunted than the hunter as I plodded into the dense, white thicket and decided instead to head back to camp, wishing them both the best of luck.

Iâ€™m sure that Iâ€™ve been watched by many cougars while out in the woods. And Iâ€™m sure they could have had me for dinner anytime they chose. But I havenâ€™t been attacked yet and I figure the chance of injury by a cougar in the woods is less than, say, trying to negotiate traffic circles in Bend.

The reason predators exist is to make a species stronger. We all need to experience that primordial feeling of knowing thereâ€™s something out there that could eat us. Maybe if we had more cougars and grizzlies around, weâ€™d all be sleeker, stronger, smarter and weigh under 250 pounds.

Perhaps we should even consider transplanting these carnivores into our neighborhoods and homes. At least weâ€™d spend more time running and hiding than sitting on the couch with a beer and a bag of potato chips. Now, if youâ€™ll excuse me, my favorite show is on tonight and I need a beer.

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