Face to Face With a Mountain Lion

My Outdoor Adventure

Pat Richards

1963

IT HAD BEEN A PRETTY GOOD DAY whether the trout were running well or not. I had enough in the willow creel for supper, it was a beautiful late May afternoon on a beautiful branch of the Colorado, and I was feeling pretty good about the fisherman's life in general as I headed down the streamside path toward camp, a couple of miles away.

Halfway there, skirting a high bank around a rocky pool, I saw an acquaintance still-fishing the pool below — the only other fisherman I'd seen since morning. I dropped down the slide to say howdy, and Joe (I never learned his last name) offered a cup of coffee from the little pot he always carried. We hunkered around his little fire in the late afternoon chill, sipping his terrible thick coffee, comparing catches, allowing that the fishing was fair, and debating the wisdom of his decision to comb the pool with a fat nightcrawler. The picture could have gone on anyone's calendar.

But the party ended abruptly. Over our low voices we heard the coughing grunt of a large animal. Though we'd both spent a lot of time in the mountains, neither of us was experienced enough to identify the sound immediately. We sat back and listened more care- full v. The sound repeated itself every couple of minutes, and was getting louder, as if the animal was approaching from downstream. With voices suddenly a lot lower, we argued over the probable source of the unfamiliar sound. After several minutes, during which the sound grew even louder, we agreed that it must be a bear, and that something must be wrong with him. We began to be a little concerned about our mysterious neighbor, who apparently was about to join our party.

Looking around me. I saw that, if our intruder was walking upstream near the water, we were stuck with a close personal call. The ledge w here Joe and I sat was four or five feet wide and a foot or two above the rushing water, and the shale rockfall behind us rose at its usual steep angle of repose for almost a hundred feet. A few feet upstream the ledge disappeared in a slide that had overrun it and gone into the pool. The ledge made a fine place to fish, but a poor reception spot for an injured - and perhaps unhappy - l>ear. We quickly decider! that this was no place to be, and started down the hundred feet of ledge that led to the end of the rockfall, where we could move into the forest behind us and avoid traffic with our visitor.

Joe reeled his line up to his rod tip while I kicked the fire into the stream and picked up our gear, and in seconds, we were moving quickly downstream. We may not have been frightened, but we were certainly concerned; the sound was louder than ever.

The occasional black bear that you encounter on the western slope of the Continental Divide is a fairly small, timid animal, and most have seen — and many have been shot at by — men. They're not regarded as dangerous, but there's no reason to borrow trouble by cornering yourself with one, especially if he shows signs of being hurt or angry. We weren't about to wait around and find out

As we hit the straightaway around our turn, we met our "visitor," and stopped cold in our tracks, it was a great, big, tawny mountain lion, and she was coming upstream on *our* ledge, maybe hunting for rockslide animals, or maybe for the handful of half-wild cattle that grazed the little valley. She was tall and lean and hungry-looking —

more so than usual for the big cats — and she was hunting for a litter of cubs to boot; her swayed belly almost touched the ledge as she stopped and stared at us, and she was as surprised as we were to have company. For what seemed like a long, long time, we looked each other squarely in the eye at a range of about twenty feet. I couldn't help admiring her feline grace with one part of my mind, while I mentally frisked myself for defense weapons with the other. The search was useless, of course. I was facing the big cat with two medium-sized cutthroat trout, a four-inch folding fish knife stowed in a tight jeans pocket, and an eight foot fiberglass fly rod with a number 12 salmon egg hook at the end of the leader. I might as well have been naked. (Joe admitted later that he was taking the same kind of inventors about the same time, and with no better results.)

With the lucidity of a man sitting in his living room (though probably only for a second or two) I remembered clearly that the mountain lion will usually go to almost an) Length to avoid man; that there were very tew instances of a "cougar" committing an unprovoked attack on an adult human. At the same time. I recalled stories of the blinding speed of a big eat intent on its prey, and unconsciously braced myself while I thought up the rockslide and across the pool toward distant safety.

Maybe the most disturbing of the many thoughts crowding my mind was the realization that this was no intruder in *my* path. We were the intruders - and here was the landlady. . . .

During that brief interval, the cat took one or two hesitating steps toward us down the ledge, then turned partly to one side, facing the rocks and apparently debating the chances of turning around in that two-foot space. I remember thinking that she had the longest tail I had ever seen on an animal. She was carrying it low, but curled over itself at the end, in the style that dog-fanciers call "gaily. The soft black tip swung around to my side as we stared at each other. Her eyes were the same translucent yellow as a cut topaz, and I remember thinking, at the same time, that she was the most impressive animal I had ever seen, and that if she decided to make a run for it in our direction, somebody was going to get hurt.

I suppose we stood there staring at each other for no more than a couple of seconds, that lion and Joe and me. Frozen as we were in our tracks, it seemed like quite a long time — probably for all three of us. Poorest seat in the arena was Joe's. He was too short to see over me, and the ledge was too narrow for him to see around me very well, and I could feel him moving behind me, trying to keep an eye on the cat. At the moment, being jostled was the last thing in the world I wanted, so I elbowed him back a half step without taking my eyes off the cougar. He grunted and stumbled, and I turned to make sure I hadn't nudged him into the stream.

Our movement broke the trance. I heard the cat's rush before I saw her move, and swung back around just in time to see her take two giant steps in our direction, then detour up the rockslide and over our heads. Scrabbling and scratching through the broken shale, she made the hundred diagonal feet in what seemed to be only a half-dozen great bounds, kicking several miniature avalanches of rock down onto the narrow

ledge anti around our feet. Almost before we could see what she was doing, the big cat had disappeared over the edge, leaving us wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

Several minutes later, after the first surge of relief and the first burst of chatter about our encounter. I reminded Joe that, after all. we hadn't had much to worry about I repeated the line about mountain lions never attacking a man unless wounded or cornered. He looked up. still with a relieved expression, and snorted. "Sure. But what happens if that lion and me get into the same square mile of rockslide and the lion *thinks* it's cornered?"

Then *I* was scared. I hadn't thought of *that.*

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