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Travel

The Lure of the Lion

In Utah, Hunting Cats With a Camera

By Chris Bolgiano
Special to The Washington Post

I aimed the cross hairs precisely between the mountain lion's golden eyes. She was gazing directly at me from 40 feet up in a ponderosa pine, draped along a stout branch, her expression grave but sleepy. She snarled once at the dogs yapping below, then put her head on her paws and blinked her eyes as if she could hardly keep them open. Perfectly framed by the black edge of my sights, she filled the picture, and I pressed a button. My trophy, achieved by the same sweat and dust of traditional lion-hunting methods, would be a photograph.

Camera hunts that employ the expertise and equipment of hunting guides are a small but growing segment of a movement that many wildlife managers call "watchable wildlife." Although camera safaris have been popular for years in Africa, the concept has been slower to catch on in the United States. Theoretically, anyone capable of taking gun hunters out in the field can take camera hunters, but Karen LeCount, a professional hunting guide in southwestern Utah, makes a specialty of it. Going on a lion hunt with her in Utah's canyon country entangles you in a cat's cradle of old and new ideas about the West.

Mountain lions—also called cougars, pumas and panthers—are native to the American West, and enough still exist there that they are not officially listed as endangered or

See LIONS, E7, Col. 4

Lions

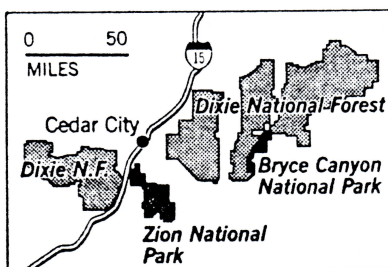
LIONS, From E1

threatened. The big cats once ranged throughout the East as well, but no longer; endangered Florida panthers are among the last known remnants of the Eastern population. In most Western states, however, hunting remains a legitimate activity—but it is highly controversial. The recent ban on lion hunting in California may presage the future.

Lions reach an average weight of 120 pounds, living mainly on deer and smaller animals. They possess almost unbelievable strength and agility, yet are extremely shy and solitary. Because they live such secret lives, lion lore has tended to fill in the unknown with a false measure of ferocity. The elusiveness of the lion is a more accurate part of the legend, and most people who live in lion country never see them. The only reliable way to spot one—and it's not guaranteed—is by following trained dogs.

Lion guides often go out in pairs—working the dogs and mules and taking care of the client are demanding. Karen LeCount works with the lean and laconic Charley Leeder. Like Karen, he is in his mid-forties, but his hands look as if they've worked through three lifetimes. His machismo is moderated by a wry, self-deprecating sense of humor, and by the fact that he offered Karen—who wears petite earrings on a hunt and touches up her fingernail polish afterward—a job as a lion guide 10 years ago.

Most hunters chase lions in snow, with snowmobiles or horses, when prints are as plain as marks on a page. Karen and Charley, however, continue a Southwestern tradition of dry ground tracking, which requires more accomplished hounds but offers more enjoyable weather.



BY DAVE COOK—THE WASHINGTON POST

In any weather, lion hunting is no frivolous undertaking. We spent five hard days on muleback searching for a fresh trail in Dixie National Forest and nearby federal and state lands. By sunrise each morning, we had eaten breakfast, saddled the mules and loaded them and the hounds, joined up with Charley and driven a short distance to one of the many trailheads along the massive stretching bulk of the Pine Valley Mountains.

I rode a mule named Cedar—old, slow and eminently respectable. He picked his own path, and much of the time I was able to ignore him and watch the passing, compelling landscape. Mules do occasionally trip, but recover unperturbed. "They're like four-wheel-drives compared to horses," Karen assured me.

Frequently we veered off the dirt roads and trails and took off cross-country to places that Charley and Karen knew were popular lion hangouts. The Pine Valley Mountains are palisaded with cliffs and gashed with ravines. Across the green quilted valley is the skyline of Zion National Park, its mono-

liths and spires the architecture of a meaning beyond human ken. It was mid-April, and along the trails were clumps of red Indian paintbrush, mats of pink phlox and bunches of yellow bitterbrush. Deer sometimes popped out of thickets as if on pogo sticks.

We made our way up-slope through a dense green chaparral of manzanita bushes and mountain mahogany, past stands of Gambel oak still silvery gray from winter, to groves of stout ponderosa pines. Chaps, gloves and hats protected us against eye-gouging, skin-slashing branches.

Lion hunting is no picnic, literally. We ate as we rode: sandwiches, granola bars and fruit that we'd packed into our saddlebags.

Occasionally Karen and I would wait on a ridge, stunned into silence by the vast view, while Charley and the dogs descended into a canyon to scout. If they found anything interesting, Charley would radio for us to join him. If they didn't pick up a fresh scent by early afternoon, however, we'd turn back. As the sun strengthens it bakes away the fragile scent in the tracks, and even if the dogs eventually hit a trail, dusk would likely abort the chase. By late afternoon, we'd be back at Karen's rustic house in New Harmony in time to shower, rest or read before dinner.

On the fifth afternoon of our quest, we had yet to spot a cougar. It was getting late, but Charley scrambled down one last canyon with the dogs. Lion hounds are trained by running pups with old, experienced dogs, and that day Karen had brought Happy, her youngest, as well as Dottie, old and half-blind.

It wasn't long before the dogs began to howl, and in 20 minutes they treed a lion that had been sleeping beneath a ledge. It took Karen and me an hour to reach them, maneuvering through a forest of burned mountain mahogany,

See LIONS, E8, Col. 1

LIONS, From E7

and pushing through manzanita bushes with arms like octopuses.

Soon the scrub was too thick even for the mules, and we dismounted to climb the last hundred yards on foot. I struggled up a knuckle of mountain toward the biggest ponderosa pine around. When I emerged at its base, the dogs were baying and Charley was stretched out against a rock, grinning.

I stood below the lion, gaping, at first too breathless even to fumble with my camera. The lion was a full-grown female, perhaps 100 pounds. For 15 minutes I watched her with binoculars and admired her perfect pelage, marred only by a tiny notch in her left ear. She was the color of oak leaves bleached by winter. The dogs below her never stopped yelping, but she gazed at them, at us, and past us with a sort of absent-minded composure. In fact, she dozed, closing her eyes to slits, resting her head on huge paws.

Then she slid down the branches, there was a flash of white belly, and she was gone. The dogs were on leashes by then, and the hunt was over.

We rode home, into the slanting sun.

Karen's pup Happy had treed his first lion, and Dottie, faithful but spent, had treed her last. On the long, dusty trek out, Dottie faltered, and Karen carried her out on muleback.

Camera hunts are obviously less disastrous for the lion than gun hunts, but they are not completely benign. Scientists have shown that cats treed for research purposes (usually to be fitted with radio collars) quickly resume their lives after interruption. But there is a slight danger that the cat (or the dogs or mules, for that matter) will be hurt during the chase. The worst possibility is that the dogs will track down kittens too young to climb trees and attack them.

I'd thought about these things for a year before yielding to an old, deep need to see this powerful animal for myself. As I flew home, I savored the memory of my encounter with the mountain lion, and hoped she had utterly forgotten me.

Chris Bolgiano, a freelance writer in Virginia, has studied mountain lions for several years, but never saw one in the wild until she hunted one with a camera.


WAYS & MEANS

Camera hunts are still new to some traditional hunting guides, but their popularity is growing. For a list of licensed guides and outfitters in the western United States, contact Henry Barron, President, North American Outfitters Association, P.O. Box 1339, Townsend, Mont. 59644, 406-266-5625.

When choosing a guide, request a contract that includes written description of services offered, price, liability insurance and a list of recent clients.

My guide, Karen LeCount of Cougar Country Outfitters (P.O. Box 550, New Harmony, Utah 84757, 801-586-3823), charges \$3,000 for a camera lion hunt of up to 10 days. Charley Leeder, owner of Leeder Hunting (P.O. Box 551, New Harmony, Utah 84757, 801-586-9124), offers a similar hunt. The price includes lodging, all meals, laundry facilities and the use of mules and dogs—but no guarantee that a lion will be treed.

—Chris Bolgiano



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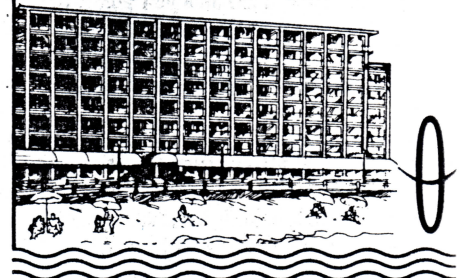
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