

**Mountain Lion**  
**February 18, 2012 New Mexico**

**Amos 3:8 “*The lion hath roared, who will not fear?*”**

Although I have purchased a lot of mountain lion tags during the past decade and a half I've lived in NM, it's typically been more of a precautionary measure to have a tag in my pocket while hunting deer or other game “just in case”, than real belief of shooting one.

This lackadaisical approach shifted shortly after I met my friend Mike. I still chuckle when I recall the circumstances. I had just finished mountain biking on the Albuquerque foothills trails one fine fall day many years ago when I noticed a couple of guys emerge from the desert scrub with hound dogs in tow. Immediately I surmised they had been looking for bears, so I casually rolled over to chat.

Immediately I could see the look in their eyes, suggestive of something like “just what we need: a spandex-garbed anti-hunter coming to tell us to leave the cuddly bears alone”. I slyly inquired “what are you up to, looking for bears?” to which they sheepishly replied “well, yeah”. Feeling a little guilty for making them squirm, I enthusiastically responded “Cool! I'm a bowhunter and have looked for bears for years, but so far haven't managed to catch up with one”. Immediately their faces relaxed and we hit it off and swapped some hunting tales. We promised to keep in touch and hunt together sometime.

Fast forward many years and as Mike began to specialize in training his dogs to trail cats, I occasionally tagged along in hopes of cutting lion tracks in the snow as we cruised back roads. It seemed that whenever Mike called to check if I was free to look for lions I either had to pass or could only break free for a day or less with other commitments scheduled. With half a dozen trips under my belt over the years, all I had to show for it was beautiful scenery, bleary eyes and the occasional deer or elk sighting. Seemingly within a day or two following each outing I'd receive a text from Mike containing tantalizing photos of lion tracks or treed cats that I had missed out on.

Earlier this winter I broke free for another try. In typical fashion I had already committed to attending a Christmas play as a family, so that trip began late Friday night after loading up the dogs. Mirroring other trips, that venture ended with little more than a lack of sleep. We did see some pronghorns, and unexpectedly crossed bear tracks in the snow long after he should have been hibernating.



Beautiful pronghorns in the snow



Dogs were raring to go - we only lacked a track to cut them loose

My next opportunity came in February when timing finally came together. I had no commitments and was free Friday evening through Sunday morning if need be, and we were blessed with fresh snow Thursday night and Friday!

I met Mike at his house and we headed out with gusto. We drove all night and crossed the tracks of plenty of elk, deer, coyote and the occasional bobcat, but didn't cut any lion tracks. Snow conditions were perfect and we were the first vehicle on the back roads. Sometime early morning we dropped elevation to where the precipitation had been rain and the roads became a muddy mess. We continued to look for tracks, but the lights kept getting gummed with mud and conditions were less than favorable. I suggested we cut our losses in that area and roll farther south where we were confident the storm had dumped snow.

We arrived at our destination still a few of hours before dawn and were greeted with 3" of fluffy powder covering the ground: absolutely perfect conditions for tracks. Again we crossed deer, elk and coyote tracks galore. We explored a side road with no luck, then returned to the main road only to encounter a fresh set of vehicle tracks. Drat! We hoped to be the first ones on the road. To add insult to injury only a hundred yards farther we encountered the truck dumping dogs onto a fresh lion track. Double-drat! We were crestfallen to have missed out by only minutes after driving all night long.

With no other options, we simply crept past him and continued. We were pleasantly surprised to come across another set of older lion tracks about a half mile beyond! Immediately we loosed two dogs and continued, only to discover an extremely fresh set of big lion tracks just half a short way beyond! We dumped two more hounds and tracked their movements by means of their GPS collars.



Large Tom tracks in snow

Before long it became apparent that the dogs' paths were veering toward one another and when they met they continued as a group on the fresher (larger) set of tracks. They lined out toward exceptionally rugged badlands country. We repositioned the truck and were joined by Mike's friend Tye, another local houndsman. One of Mike's younger pups-in-training turned back to us, which left 3-hounds on the track. Mike grabbed a length of rope from his truck and tucked it over his shoulder. Knowing that the area we were headed toward held cliffs hundreds of feet tall I questioned the usefulness of a pitiful 25-foot length of rope, but Mike thought it might come in handy: little did we know. We shouldered our packs and supplies and dove off the mesa toward the dogs and dropped out of snow very shortly: the dogs would have to trail this lion on dry ground.

Mike has painstakingly trained his dogs to work the dry ground, which is much more difficult than in snow, because tracks are not apparent for the trainer to assist the dogs, and the dry ground holds less scent than wet snow. Given our conditions here in New Mexico, where snows can be few and far between, it is advantageous to have dogs that are effective even when weather conditions are less than optimal, and there are very few dogs proficient enough.

At one point we found ourselves on the lip of a 400-500' vertical cliff face and spent an hour watching the dogs work the scent below us. They would backtrack, retry, retrace their steps, circle around and backtrack again, bawling their frustration. Suddenly they made a beeline down the canyon - they had solved the riddle!

Mike excitedly pumped his fist and declared "They figured it out, they're gonna get this lion, we gotta get down there - let's go!"





Somehow we had to figure out a way to get down to where the dogs had sorted out the track and followed the trail even farther away

The route down was not easy. Anybody who thinks lion hunting with dogs consists of strolling up to a tree and shooting fish in a barrel is sorely mistaken. I'm quite comfortable on steep terrain and in good shape, but it took all I had to keep up to Mike as we scrambled downward, while picking our way around cliffs. It took us a couple of hours to make our way to the bottom of the drainage and by then the dogs had moved another mile and a half.



Rough path down to the canyon floor - not your average stroll in the park





Cactus, yuccas and thorny brush offered about the only handholds in some places

At one point we thought we were stuck, but Mike's rope allowed us to negotiate down a vertical section to the canyon floor. Once we reached the area where the dogs had troubles with the trail, it was apparent why: the canyon floor was a jumble of boulders the size of trucks and larger, mixed with brush and a maze of braided waterways likely cut by none other than Noah's flood back in the old days.

I was astounded that the dogs could make any progress under those conditions. I envisioned the lion leaping from boulder to boulder with ease, which would leave little scent behind and create large gaps in the trail for the dogs to sort out. The performance of the dogs was incredible, and we weren't even close to the end of the trail yet. At some point Mike's GPS began to indicate that the dogs had bayed the lion: their collars were tipping up, so they were likely looking upward into a tree. This information shifted Mike into higher gear and our pace really picked up. Granted I was carrying a little more provisions than Mike, and my bow kept getting hung up in the brush, but I was beginning to wonder if he was part hound dog himself because no matter how hard I pushed it, all I could do was keep him in sight, never gain ground.





Photos simply can't do it justice, but without Mike's rope we would have reached the end of the line at this point and been forced to backtrack for miles and reroute





Even the “easy” walking was tough, but it was all part of the fun!



We had come a long way since leaving the truck at 7AM! Ultimately my GPS indicated over 5-miles and 3,000-foot elevation drop to where the cat was bayed

Finally Mike's GPS indicated that the dogs were only 600-yards ahead of us just out of sight around the next bend. We carefully eased forward eager for a glimpse our quarry, but we were momentarily confused as we looked at the GPS directional arrow. It indicated 200-yards toward a cliff that was only about 150-yards away, which made no sense...until we looked up.



There, high above us, the dogs had the lion bayed near the top of an almost vertical rock face roughly 300-feet high! It was beyond imagination how the dogs had gotten up there, let alone kept their footing on the steep face as they heckled the lion.



A photo can't capture the full extent of the cliff – this is only the top quarter



Initial view of lion from below – the steepness is apparent by the lion's tail hanging down





The dogs and lion occasionally changed positions as they feinted and jabbed



This Tom wasn't very happy and let the dogs know it

I had brought only my bow, expectating a 20-yard shot. This cat was something like 150-yards away and well beyond even extended archery range. I couldn't visualize any way to kill this cat without a rifle. It was obviously a very dangerous situation for the dogs, their footing was precarious and it was a looong way down.

Mike was equally surprised that his dogs had bayed the lion in such a precarious place, and beamed like a proud papa to see the challenge his dogs were capable of.

I expressed my concerns of being unable to shoot my bow, and given our remote location, any attempt to obtain a rifle would take nearly a full day. Mike responded that we had to do something and if "the dogs got up there, so can we". I'm not afraid of heights, but the magnitude of the cliff height was dizzying and even with binoculars I could not see any route to get within bow range of the cat without being outfitted with

climbing gear. "We gotta try" Mike said, as he took off up the steep earthen slope bordering the rocky cliff face.

I hastily dumped my pack and unnecessary gear and gave my camera and tripod to Tye, who quickly volunteered to stay below to keep tabs on things (heck, I wanted to stay below too, but I was the shooter!). I slung my bow over my back and scrambled to keep up with Mike as he ascended the steep rocky slope.

When we reached the approximate elevation of the dogs and lion we could make out the path they had taken onto the cliff: a roughly 1-foot wide bench on the rock face with a 200-foot drop below! They were beyond our line of sight, but this risky route appeared even worse where it began to curve away beyond our sight. I told Mike that not only was I not going out there, but I would not allow him to attempt it either. There was simply no room for error and an extremely high margin of risk.

Mike was chomping at the bit to do something, so I suggested we might continue upward and peer down on the lion from the top of the cliff. We continued up the soil slope, which was almost too steep for vegetation to take hold, and arrived at the top of the rocks.

The problem now was that the top of the cliff wasn't flat like a mesa, but simply the termination of an extremely steep earthen slope. Imagine gingerly traversing across the steepest house roof pitch you can imagine and then scooting down to the eaves to peer over, knowing that the drop beyond was 300-plus feet, and you'll get a feel for the situation. We had limited yucca, brush, and grassy vegetation to provide meager slip resistance, but there was no lip at the edge of the rocks: over time natural soil erosion had brought the edge of the soil cover right to the rocky edge.

Again, a photo doesn't do it justice, but once one considers the perspective of Tye's photo, taken from far below us on the opposite side of the canyon, the pitch begins to make more sense. If the slope above the cliff was gentle or flat, from Tye's perspective no soil would be visible. Tye was looking almost straight up...and the soil slope is apparent. Visualize it for yourself sometime next time you pass a steeply pitched roof.





Watch out for that first step...it's a doozie

Mike crept to the edge and excitedly motioned that the lion was just below! "It's HUGE", he exclaimed. He motioned me to come down; however, he had the benefit of both hands and both feet to cling to what little vegetation and footholds were present. I told him there was no way I would stand on the edge with both hands holding my bow without first tying the rope around my waist and looping it around the strongest thing within range: a sturdy yuca root ball. "So are you glad I brought the rope now?" Mike teased with a smile. Boy was I ever!

I gently eased to the edge and peered over. The height was dizzying and my stomach roiled, despite not having any real fear of heights. The view was something to make any normal brain scream "stay back!"

As I leaned over farther and farther I was finally able to see the lion straight down from my vantage. I'd never seen a cougar before, but he certainly looked big.

I managed to kick out a little foothold against a lone yucca clinging to the top of the cliff for my left foot to help position myself for a shot. The slope above the stone cliff was so steep that although my left leg was fully straight as I stood at the lip, my right leg was bent ninety degrees and my knee rested directly on the ground. I took a few deep breaths, tried to ignore the drop below me and focused only on the lion. I drew my bow and leaned out to line up my sight pins. I estimated the lion to be about 30-yards away, but since it was straight down and gravity only affects projectiles in the horizontal component of distance, I was confident that I should aim with my 20-yard pin.

The problem was I couldn't lean out far enough to ensure that my arrow would clear the rock at my toe. I repositioned and tried drawing my bow four or five times, but no matter what I did, there was no way to shoot downward at that steep of an angle unless I physically leaned beyond the edge and relied solely on the rope. I finally found one position that might have barely provided arrow clearance, but my lower bow limb and cam were resting on the ground at full draw – which would recoil and wildly affect accuracy if I shot. I can't say my life flashed before my eyes, but I my family was running through my mind and I recognized that no trophy was worth dying for. My position was precarious and I was unwilling to risk certain death by trusting only a rope and a yucca to make a shot. I leaned back onto the slope and consulted with Mike, informing him there simply wasn't any way I could make the shot.

Mike suggested I use his backup pistol, so I lodged my bow in some branches to keep it from sliding away. He implored me to get as many bullets into the lion's vitals as I could, because a wounded lion posed a real danger to his valuable hounds, and even more so on the ridiculously steep face they had bayed him on.

I eased myself back to the edge and again peered at to the lion lying below. Mike urged me to be careful shooting near the dogs, although that was already on my mind.

As if guided from the Lord himself, suddenly all three dogs moved away from the lion and out of my view: they would be in no danger from any shot.

I took a deep breath, calmly settled the open sights between the lion's shoulder blades and gently squeezed the trigger. BOOM...the bullet smacked a lip of rock about 3-feet below me, and the lion didn't even flinch. Even with the pistol I hadn't been out far enough for the bullet path to clear the rocks, despite the sights being on the lion. That meant I needed to lean even *farther*!

The semi-automatic pistol had jammed, so I turned back to Mike and explained what happened, and that I needed more slack on the rope – bot not too much! I implored him to tighten his hold on the rope as I'd be pushing my balance, perhaps beyond my tipping point. Once again I gathered my wits, stood up and forced myself to bend over over the lip. I mentally envisioned how far I'd need to be for the bullet's path to clear, lined up again and squeezed off shots. I think the first may have missed slightly, but the second hit the cat well and he hunched up, spun in the air and tore off with the dogs hot on his heels too quickly for me to squeeze off a third. They disappeared below my overhanging perch and I couldn't see anything.

Tye yelled from below us "He's goin' up!", and with no idea of what was happening, I waited at ready in case the lion suddenly appeared in my face, although I couldn't imagine anything being able to scale the rock.



All we could hear was hounds baying and rocks sliding - in a word, *chaos*. Then we heard a rumbling like an avalanche followed by brief silence, and then a BOOM that echoed off the canyon walls like thunder.

"What happened?!" we hollered to Tye, to which he enthusiastically shouted "He's dead, the lion's dead, he fell to the bottom!"

"What about the dogs?" we anxiously inquired.

"They're OK, dogs are OK!" Tye sang back.

Mike was fired up and eager to get down to see the cat. Not that I wasn't also excited, but I was still extremely worried, as we were by no means out of harm's way. I offered up a quick prayer of thanks with Mike and asked for our safety getting back down, before we gingerly worked our way uphill to obtain a little safety factor from the dropoff before sidehilling to our descent route.

By the time we reached the bottom Tye was already at the cat. He was initially unsure whether to approach it without a weapon, but said with a wry grin that in the end he'd decided that if the lion could survive a fall like that it deserved to chew on him a little.

I envisioned something like a splattered watermelon awaiting us at the bottom, but surprisingly one couldn't even tell the lion had fallen hundreds of feet. The video clips Tye captured are amazing; hopefully I'll be able to share them with all of you readers at some point. The video clip of the cat succumbing to the bullet, losing blood pressure, and in turn losing his grip on the cliff and taking the loooong fall to the bottom is an incredible. And drives home the point how perilous our position was.

There is a misconception that killing a bear or lion with the use of dogs is akin to shooting fish in a barrel, and I admit I had nagging feelings of this in my mind prior to this hunt. While it's true that using dogs made the hunt different than a typical spot and stalk or call, or ambush hunt, the reality is that making the shot is pretty much the easiest part of any hunt. Getting oneself into the position for the shot is the hard part, and positioning ourselves for the shot on this hunt proved to be as physically demanding and dangerous as any other hunt I've ever been on. Much like well-trained bird dogs, I gained incredible respect for the talent of Mike's lion hounds. Watching them work their noses on the trail almost directly below us and later witnessing their tenacity to cling to the cliff face while harrying the lion proved their crucial role in the team effort in taking this lion. If you have preconceived notions about hunting big game with dogs I invite you to give it a try with an open mind and I suspect your view will change.

We had no way to weigh the beast, but I tried lifting him and could barely get it off the ground. We estimated it to be 180-pounds or more. I later measured the hide at 7'-9" from nose to tip of tail. It was the largest lion that Mike and Tye had ever seen. After seeing the size and evident power of this predator I'll no longer refer to them as cougars, but as mountain *lions*, for they truly rank among the king of beasts. I now have no doubt as to the claim that mature toms are able to kill even the largest of bull elk with ease.



What a beast!



The hounds were the real heroes of the day





I could only lift the lion this high, using all the strength I could muster

After photos we skinned the cat (is there more than one way?! LOL) and deboned the meat. I'd read accounts from the mountain men of old, that lion ranks at the top of North American table fare and looked forward to trying it. I later dropped off 63-pounds of meat at the butcher. Coupled with my tripod, camera, food, emergency gear and other "stuff", my backpack was over 75-pounds and we were miles from the truck.

Mike offered to carry the hide and Tye volunteered to take my bow. After replaying our route down to this point, Tye reckoned that it would be nearly impossible to retrace our steps and that we would be better off continuing downward another 3-ish miles to civilization. We stumbled around and over huge boulders and rugged ground. My quads were already complaining from the downhill earlier in the day, and the heavy load was a recipe for severe soreness. When all was said and done I would barely be able to walk for the next week.

We stopped for only one brief rest on our quest for the nearest road. Tye mentioned that he was tuckered. I chided him "and you even slept last night", since Mike and I had driven all night looking for tracks, "I'm wiped out too". Mike, a houndsman to the core despite eyes drooping from lack of sleep, quipped "Heck, we're gonna take these same dogs and go do it again tomorrow." As if to drive home her point that well-deserved rest

was in order, one of Mike's dogs, already reclining directly on the rocks, stretched up her head, yawned, flopped her head down on the hard ground and conked out. We couldn't help but laugh hysterically at her timing.



Tired pup

We pushed on for about 3-hours, and eventually reached a road to catch our ride. My GPS recorded over 8-miles of hiking, which didn't account for the zig-zagging and weaving to route around dropoffs, cliffs and boulders. It also didn't reflect our 5,000 feet of elevation drop.

I steadfastly believe that that the circumstances/adventure/memories associated with any hunt become a significant element of status of any trophy. Many times we return home empty handed, yet the events of those outings oftentimes can be the most memorable. I seriously considered the prospect that my recent Arizona elk nail-biting yarn might never be topped - that trip had resulted in not only personal memories of grand proportions, but a whopper bull too. Yet here I was only a few months later, blessed with not only the opportunity to push my physical and mental limits, but another perhaps more beautiful trophy. I am truly humbled: the Lord is good.

As a footnote, our daughter was eager to be the first in the family to sample lion meat, and for simplicity we made a mild lion stew for our initial meal. Robin has a delicate palate and is a very picky eater, yet she gave it a hearty "4-Thumbs up" (including big her toes) approval. We've since prepared lionloaf (meatloaf), burgers, and steak. Lion meat has become our favorite, which is strong testimony considering we have been blessed with a wide variety of game fare in the freezer, including: elk, deer, oryx, feral hog, Dall sheep, Barbary sheep, mountain goat, feral goat and wild turkey over the years. I'm certainly looking forward to another lion attempt, as this delicious meat supply is already running low!





Robin providing her hearty “4 Thumbs Up” to lion backstrap steak!