

My First Cougar hunt

Manon, 18, Germany

One of my biggest interests are dogs and how they are included in hunting. So I was very excited when I found out that I had been given the opportunity to go hunting with hounds. Before I came to the ranch I had no experience with hunting, especially not with hounds. So this would be a completely new experience.

Since I arrived at the ranch, I have taken the responsibility to care for the dogs and spent more time with them. Because if this, my curiosity about their job as hunting hounds grew bigger and bigger, and I chose to inform myself more about this type of hunting by reading the procedure for the cougar hunt. I also built two doghouses and a dog-box for the Truck, to ensure that everything is ready for when cougar season opened.

I am sure that a lot of people ask why we hunt cougars. The reason is that the mountain lion population in British Columbia is very high. You can see the problem that results from this when you look at their hunt habits: on average one cougar kills one deer, one bighorn sheep or mountain goat a week-so 52 per year. This has a very big impact of the deer, bighorn sheep and mountain goat population. So the hunt is important, as it ensures that a balance is kept between the animals, and it makes sure that the different species can survive.

On November 15th, the season for the cougar hunt opened and guests came to enjoy the hunt. And for me it created an opportunity to participate on an amazing adventure.

First we had to find a track, which had to be as fresh as possible. At the beginning the weather conditions were very bad - we had no snow. There was snow higher up in the mountains, but this snow was old, so we couldn't tell how old the track was. When we found paw prints we let the hounds out of the dog box, but we had no luck: the track was too old so the young dogs couldn't follow it.

During one of our drives our guide, Cameron, explained to us the difference between a cat and a dog track: a cat track (cougar, bobcat, lynx) is much rounder than a dog track. On cat tracks you can't see the claws and a cat track has three balls on the bottom of the track while a dog track has only two. It is very important to know the difference; else it can be very dangerous for the dogs when you let them run after a wolf.



The next morning, we woke up and saw fresh snow outside. So we were happy and full of motivation. We found a cougar track that looked fresh so we let the dogs run. But unfortunately we had no success. The dogs could smell the cougar and followed the track down the hill till the bottom of the creek, but there we lost the track on the river.

But we didn't lose our motivation and we kept searching until finally we found a very fresh cat track near the ranch. It was early in the morning and still a little bit dark outside, so we



had to use our headlamps. We put the GPS collars on two of the dogs and showed them the track and fortunately they started to follow it. Because of the young age of the hounds they lost the track a few times, so we had to find it again. One of us went to the right side while the other one went on the left side. This meant that we could check the area in the form of a circle. At the beginning I was a little bit nervous because it was the

first time that I looked for the tracks by myself and I wasn't sure if I was able to find the right track. When the dogs lost the track they ran everywhere in front of us. This meant that there were dog tracks everywhere, which didn't make it any easier for us. So I had to use and think about my knowledge about the differences between dog and cat tracks and finally I found the cougar footprint in between the dog tracks. After a certain time, I became more confident in what I was doing and was able to see the right way much faster. Most of the time we would run the hounds on the leash so that we could correct them faster when they lost the way. After some hours of walking we let the dogs run by themselves and the bark gets louder. We started to look harder in the trees and finally we saw a cougar, high up in a tree, watching us. It was the first time for me to see a cougar in real-life, and I was very fascinated!

After Cameron shot the cat, we let the dogs chew on her. This is very important because it is their reward for their hard work. Then we took some pictures and carried the cougar back to the truck. Back at the ranch I learned how to skin and cut the cougar.

This adventure helped me to believe more in myself. I also learned that hunting is so much more than just shooting. You have to work hard to find a track and you have to learn not to



give up when something doesn't work the first time. But I think this is the best moment of the hunt, because then you are connected with the wildlife and with nature.