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Photo by Maurice Hornocker

A Siberian tiger crosses the snow at the Sikhote-Alin Biosphere Reserve in the Russian Far East.

Lending hope for big cats

Maurice Hornocker has spent decades among feline carnivores

By TONY EVANS
Express Staff Writer

When a mountain lion killed and ate two baby alpacas at a ranch north of Hailey last month, it served as a reminder that the Wood River Valley is home to big cats—those up to 200 pounds in weight and capable of bringing down an elk.

Ranch owner John Chapman's decision not to have the cat hunted down and killed was a sign of how perceptions have changed in the United States on the *Puma concolor*, also known as the cougar or puma. Mountain lions were once shot on sight any time of the year as varmints. Until the late 1950s, a hunter could earn a \$50 bounty for killing one. Today, they are a designated big-game species in Idaho, which confers regulatory status on hunts.

Though seldom seen, the elusive mountain lion has slowly been reclaiming its historical ranges in recent decades, thanks in large part to the work of wildlife biologist Maurice Hornocker, who lives on Broadford Road in Bellevue.

"There is so much more wildlife now than when I was a kid," Hornocker says. "There are mountain lions turning up even in Iowa, where I grew up. They were almost killed out by the early 1970s. We have given them some breathing room and a chance to reproduce. But there have been no multi-million-dollar programs for them. They have done it on their own."

During the 1960s, Hornocker helped to pioneer the use of radio-telemetry collars in the study of large carnivores in North America. He later expanded his conservation efforts to the Russian Far East where the Hornocker Wildlife Institute for 20 years provided support to save the endangered Siberian tiger, *Panthera tigris altaica*, the largest of the big cats. The Hornocker Institute recently merged with the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Hornocker has written and photographed for National Geographic magazine and many other publications. He also collaborated with author Peter Matthiessen on a book, "Tigers in the



Express photo by David N. Seelig

Wildlife biologist and big cat specialist Maurice Hornocker takes a break in his Bellevue office. For a slide show of Hornocker and his work, go to www.mtexpress.com.

Snow," published in 2000.

This year, with conservationist Sharon Negri, Hornocker published "Cougar Ecology and Conservation," an encyclopedia of current mountain lion studies in North America and South America. In the book he promotes the idea of bringing domestication practices to the problem of dangerous human-predator relations.

"Every cat has a different personality," he says. "We could infiltrate aggressive big cat populations with males from more placid populations."

The book is said to be a capstone in Hornocker's career, which began after he read a story about a forest ranger in The Saturday Evening Post in the 1950s.

"That was the first time I became aware of the profession of wildlife biologist," he says.

He used \$10 worth of dimes at a pay telephone to call the dean of the University of Montana to inquire about this new field of study and was promptly invited into the forestry and wildlife management program.

Hornocker studied under the wing of renowned field biologist

John Craighead, who, along with his brother Frank, helped to save the grizzly bear from extinction in Yellowstone National Park.

Hornocker decided to complete his doctoral studies by expanding knowledge about mountain lions in Montana. His first study involved paying \$50 to anyone who could tree a mountain lion for collaring.

"Of the 14 cats treed for the bounty, 10 were killed by winter's end," Hornocker says.

He decided to move his collaring operation to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in central Idaho.

"It is still the biggest hunk of pristine roadless area in the lower 48 states," he says.

While studying wild and captive mountain lions in Idaho, Hornocker established the Taylor Ranch Field Station, now used by the University of Idaho to train up-and-coming field biologists.

During his 40-year career, Hornocker and his colleagues conducted pioneering research in North America on mountain lions, lynx, bobcats and ocelots, on leopards in Africa and Asia,

See HORNOCKER, next page.

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HORNOCKER

Biologist takes his cause abroad

Continued from previous page

jaguars in Central America and South America, and tigers in Siberia.

Once scarce in this area, mountain lions have recovered so successfully that one turned up in Hornocker's yard a few years ago, where it faced off with his cat.

"They definitely seemed to recognize one another," he said.

Hornocker estimates that there are two territorial males and perhaps four breeding female mountain lions in the Wood River Valley, along with transient males that pass through each year in search of their own territory.

There are estimated to be about 50,000 mountain lions in North America and South America. In Idaho, there are perhaps 2,000 to 4,000, says Idaho Fish and Game spokesman Ed Mitchell.

"They are extremely hard to count," Mitchell admits. "I have lived here all my life, and spent much of it in the woods, and have never seen one."

Recently, mountain lions have competed for range with the gray wolf, reintroduced to Idaho in 1995. Last winter, a mountain lion was killed by a pack of wolves near Sun Valley.

Hornocker spoke out years ago against wolf reintroduction, saying it would be unsuccessful.

"I was dead wrong," he says. "I am amazed today at how they can cross the Chamberlain Basin in 10 feet of snow."

He says the presence of wolves is changing the distribution of prey animals and mountain lions. The lions, he says, now stick more closely to rocky terrain to avoid conflict.

Aware that mountain lion attacks on people have increased in recent years, Hornocker says hikers and bikers should be "cautious, but not afraid."

"Don't jog in their territory

at dusk or dawn. If you see one, don't run. Pick up a club. Make yourself as big as you can to appear formidable."

Though big cats are making a comeback in the United States, Hornocker says, big carnivores are not doing so well worldwide.

He has worked since 1990 at Sikhote-Alin Biosphere Reserve in the Russian Far East, a Yosemite National Park-size nature preserve near the Sea of Japan. He and his associates have been helping Russian scientists trap and study the endangered Siberian tiger, which can grow to 650 pounds.

Hornocker estimates there are only 400 Siberian tigers left in the wild. He says poaching of tigers and their prey species has increased 100-fold since the fall of communism.

"It was better under communism for the tiger," he says. "Everyone knew their place and the borders were closed. International interests have been cutting forest and building roads willy-nilly."

Hornocker says that any efforts at wildlife conservation have to include promoting a viable local economy. He says forest cutting in Siberia was traditionally under local control because the native people, like the tiger, also lived on elk and deer.

"There was no domestic livestock there. The native people revered the tiger. They knew that healthy tiger populations meant healthy forests."

In Idaho, where recreation is an increasingly important part of the local economy, he suggests taking full advantage of the return of predators. In towns such as Gardner, Mont., north of Yellowstone, wolf viewing has become a multi-million-dollar industry.

Hornocker plans to return to Sikhote-Alin in March to resume his work with Siberian tigers.

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