

# Research in Idaho's Wilderness

by Michael Frome

**I**T WAS Indian summer, with touches of golden aspen on the slopes. The pilot, Jack Magee, adept at flying wildlife biologists in their field research, banked the little plane now and then to show me an occasional moose browsing in some high glacial lake. Idaho, I thought, can hardly compete with other states for crowds or commerce, but with the grandeur of the Salmon River Mountains, who needs Beverly Hills and Broadway?

At the moment we were flying to the Taylor Ranch, a research station of the University of Idaho deep in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Other universities may be better endowed for classroom learning, but Idaho is singularly blessed with a field study center surrounded by wild nature.

This was my second visit. We were met at the airstrip by Jim Akenson and his wife, Holly, managers of the ranch for three years. Jack brought them newspapers and fresh plums from his yard. They in turn loaded him down with apples from their trees. That kind of sharing doesn't happen much in cities; environmental simplicity, or perhaps the influence of wilderness, evokes the better qualities of humankind.

Jim and Holly are committed to wilderness research and to living in harmony with the world around them. He has a master's degree in geography. Holly is working on hers in wildlife—a study of bighorn sheep behavior. They come out now and then but are glad to get back to simple living and organizing the field laboratory and herbarium, helping researchers and passing hikers and hunters and exploring the country.

The Taylor Ranch is administered as part of the Wilderness Research Center, an unusual unit for a university like Idaho's. Forestry schools at most land-grant universities are deeply

entrenched in the production of natural resources as commodities and in the manipulation, rather than protection, of nature. But wildness is part of the character and culture of Idaho. The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, which completely envelops the Taylor Ranch, covers more than 2.35 million acres. It is the largest unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System outside Alaska. The Selway-Bitterroot, Gospel Hump, Hells Canyon and Sawtooth bring Idaho wilderness to almost 4 million acres. There also are more than 8 million acres of de facto wilderness, choice roadless country in the national forests, as well as some administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

It's the treasure of wild country that gives Idaho its special quality. Yet it strikes me that we hardly yet know the real benefits that protection of such country yields to humankind. This is what gives the Taylor Ranch such high potential. The ranch, or more properly field research station, occupies 65 acres of a former homestead 50 miles east of the resort community of McCall. It lies along Big Creek, the major tributary of the Middle Fork of the Salmon.

The ranch is a part of frontier history. On my first visit I came across a fascinating set of documents. They included minutes of a 1930 Boise meeting of a governor's committee on the then proposed Idaho Primitive Area. Governor H. Clarence Baldrige at that meeting recalled how he and other committee members three years earlier had stayed at the Uncle Dave Lewis Ranch, later to become the Jess Taylor Ranch. The governor said Uncle Dave hadn't left his ranch for five years. Uncle Dave, or "Cougar Dave," reportedly had come into the country in 1879. He lived alone with his hounds. He is said to have killed 600 cougars. The

governor called it the wildest country he had ever seen and urged that it be "perpetuated, as nearly in its natural state as possible for future generations." The idea was well received, with the abundance of wildlife a key factor. Early in 1931 the U.S. Forest Service established the Idaho Primitive Area covering more than a million acres. Considerably expanded, it later was renamed the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

In 1934 the aging Uncle Dave sold his ranch, complete with four log cabins, hayfield, air strip and corral, to Jess Taylor, who developed an outfitting operation catering principally to sportsmen. It might have gone on forever in this manner had it not been for the arrival in the mid-60s of a young hunter, Maurice G. Hornocker. He explained that he was after cougars, but not for their hides. As a graduate student in wildlife biology at the University of Montana, he had studied under John Craighead and had done field work in Yellowstone with the Craighead grizzly research team. Now he wanted to rent part of the ranch to study mountain lions.

From 1964 to 1969 Hornocker and an assistant, Wilbur Wiles, a local man-of-the-mountains, captured, tranquilized, weighed, marked and released cougars. They traveled on foot and on snowshoes, working traplines between the ranch and campsites in the field. Hornocker produced a definitive study on predation. He reported that cougars, solitary travelers in wild country, almost always kill young and very old prey. They kill elk suffering nutritional deficiency, often in advance of inevitable winter die-offs, and they keep the herds alert and moving.

In 1972 the Idaho legislature reclassified the cougar from a predator to a game species. Recently I re-



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won by lobbying by Defenders-led environmentalists. The program will build on efforts started last year. These include studies of **northern fur seal** and **sea lion** entanglement, beach cleanup programs, an analysis of debris threats to **monk seals**, and putting observers aboard fishing vessels that use gillnets and other fishing equipment that can harm marine life. Nets often are cast overboard, entangling sea birds and marine mammals. Every year an estimated 50,000 seals and countless **albatrosses, gulls, murrets, petrels** and **puffins** die in nets. . . . Defenders President **Allen E. Smith** in October was presented with the Environmentalist of the Year Award of the **Springfield, Massachusetts, Naturalists' Club**. The club, a leading all-volunteer environmental organization in New England, presents the award annually in recognition of an individual "who has contributed significantly to the health, beauty, and permanence of our environment." . . . **Sara Vickerman**, Defenders regional program director, now is doubling as **Pacific Northwest** regional representative. Her new address and phone are 0434 S.W. Iowa Street, Portland, Oregon 97201, (503) 293-1433. . . . Three captive-raised endangered **California condors** may be released into the wild in April. The Interior Department will monitor how they fare before deciding whether to buy them their own 14,000-acre refuge. Only six of the huge scavengers remain in the wild; 21 are in captivity.

—Beth Gyorgy

## FROME

Continued from page 21

Yet little is being done to meet such threats. The Forest Service is not an efficient administrator of this great wilderness in its trust. Management is divided among six separate national forests in two different regions, both headquartered far from the scene. Policy decisions are made by foresters trained in timbering and roadbuilding rather than wilderness sensitivity, and the public at large is not consulted very much. As one of the world's foremost wildlife reservoirs, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness deserves a better deal. Its mammals include significant populations of deer, elk, mountain sheep, mountain goats and bears and

other predators; its birds, golden and bald eagles, great horned and boreal owls, mergansers and water ouzels; its fish, prized salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout.

The Taylor Ranch, as I see it, is a great credit to the University of Idaho—a do-it-yourself field station providing shelter and a warm spirit for serious researchers. The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness is a credit to both Idaho and the nation. The challenge is to come to grips with the threats in order to fulfill the potential of them both as part of our commitment to safeguard our wild heritage. □

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