

Research in Idaho's Wilderness

by Michael Frome

IT 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 cull 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-

ceived a report from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game on the status of this preeminent wild feline. It shows that while the River of No Return country is still the cougar stronghold, the big cats are found throughout the state, and many hunters are eager to pay a \$2,500 outfitter fee plus the cost of license tag and transportation to track it.

Hornocker has been a strong defender of undisturbed wilderness habitat. In 1968 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service named him leader of the Idaho Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at the University of Idaho. (He resigned last year to establish his own privately funded Wildlife Research Institute at the university). He became the prime mover in establishment of the Wilderness Research Center and purchase of the Taylor Ranch for field study. As he wrote in his proposal, "Almost 3 million acres of national forest lands in Idaho are dedicated as wilderness. In no other place in the United States, other than Alaska, does there exist such a large and continuous block of land relatively undisturbed by humans. These

wilderness lands provide a set of standards against which resource scientists can measure success or failure of man in the manipulation of his environment."

Significant studies are under way at the Taylor Ranch. For instance, Gary Koehler, a doctoral student working under Hornocker, is in his fifth year of research on bobcat ecology. Using live capture and radio collars, he has studied the effect of predation by coyotes and cougars as well as bobcats on assorted prey species. Frank Leonhardy of the University of Idaho Laboratory of Anthropology has directed a long-term study of ancient peoples living in the Idaho mountains, pursuing their "survival strategies" through a combination of archaeology, ethnobotany and wildlife research. Then there is Holly Akenson's project on bighorn sheep behavior and winter interaction of bighorns with deer and elk. I can't imagine a better place for it. While at the ranch in winter, hiking to the Middle Fork of the Salmon I saw nearly a hundred bighorns within close range. Nor can I imagine a

better person for the project than Holly, highly motivated, energetic and sensitive to the wild environment.

There are serious threats to the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. The largest trailless area in this 2.35-million-acre expanse is only 73,000 acres, and none of the wilderness is more than five miles from a trail or a dozen from a motor road. There are more than 2,000 mining claims and a "special mining management zone" of 40,000 acres apparently designated to ensure development of a cobalt deposit. More than 70 inholdings include developed resorts, corporate retreats and private homes. No fewer than 24 airstrips are scattered over the wilderness. "Aircraft use and related activities, including air traffic, landing strip maintenance and noise, all tend to degrade the wilderness setting and experience," warns a Forest Service report. "The existence of landing strips and aircraft activity are used to rationalize other uses and activities that further impact the wilderness resource and experience."

See FROME, page 44



Drawn for DEFENDERS by Tony Auth

The Loon Bag.



Beautifully embroidered clutch for those who expect quality. Loon design contains five thousand embroidered stitches including black, white and red threads. Durable zippered clutch measures 5 x 7 inches. Is available in blue or rust cordura or natural canvas. A fine gift with many uses. Yours for only \$8.00 each. We pay for shipping.

send check or money order to:

MAPLELEAF CREATIONS
Post Office Box 114
Penacook, New Hampshire 03303
Created and made in New England.

Please specify bag color and make sure your mailing address is correct.

Part of proceeds will benefit organizations helping to protect Loon environments.



SHARE THE EARTH!

WILDLIFE T-SHIRTS

Support wildlife by wearing environmental t-shirts. (10% of profits go to environmental groups.)

Many designs. \$9.45 ea. Heavy weight, 100% cotton t-shirts in S, M, L, XL in tan, blue, lilac & yellow.

FREE CATALOG!

P.O. BOX 2308 DEPT. DA6
JIM MORRIS BOULDER, CO 80306
(303) 444-6430

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED! © 85 Jim Morris

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 eagle, 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. □

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION. (1) Title of publication: DEFENDERS. (A) Publication No. 151-400 (2) Date of filing 11/19/85. (3) Frequency of issue: bimonthly. (A) No. of issues published annually: six. (B) Annual subscription price: \$10. (4) Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 1244 Nineteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. (5) Complete mailing address of the headquarters or general business offices of the publishers: same. (6) Publishers: Defenders of Wildlife, 1244 Nineteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Editor: James G. Deane, same address. Managing Editor: none. (7) Owner: Defenders of Wildlife, 1244 Nineteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. (8) Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: none. (9) The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal Income Tax purposes have not changed during preceding 12 months. (10) Extent and nature of circulation: Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: (A) total no. copies (Net Press Run): 73,660. (B) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales: 20. (2) Mail subscription: 67,012. (C) Total paid circulation: 67,032. (D) Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means, samples, complimentary, and other free copies: 3,231. (E) Total distribution: 70,263. (F) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 3,397. (2) Return from news agents: none. (G) Total (should equal Net Press Run shown in A): 73,660. Actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (A) Total no. copies (Net Press Run): 73,250. (B) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales: 20 (2) Mail subscription: 68,458. (C) Total paid circulation: 68,478. (D) Free distribution by mail, carrier or other means, samples, complimentary and other free copies: 2,309. (E) Total distribution: 70,787. (F) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, left over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing: 2,463. (2) Returned from news agents: none. (G) Total (should equal Net Press Run shown in A): 73,250. (11) I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

James G. Deane, Editor.