

Researcher Captures 'Big Cat' 116 Times During Study

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO, Moscow — Like man, he stalks his prey by sight, sound and smell. He is America's most sought-after trophy, the cougar.

But despite the cougar's qualifications and high intelligence, Dr. Maurice G. Hornocker captured him 16 times for a study he conducted on the big cat.

During three consecutive winters from 1964-66, Dr. Hornocker, newly-appointed leader of the Idaho Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, University of Idaho, conducted a study on the cougar population and its effect on prey, primarily deer and elk. The study was done as a cooperative project of the University of British Columbia, University of Idaho and the Idaho Fish and Game Department. In addition, grants were made through the American Museum of Natural History, Boone and Crockett Club and the New York Zoological Society.

Working in the rugged Idaho Primitive Area near Big Creek, Hornocker captured 39 cats, some as many as 14 times for a total of 116 different captures. In tracking the big cats, Hornocker walked more than 3,700 miles and in mountains ranging from 3,500 to 7,000 feet.

To capture the cougars, Hornocker used three hound dogs to track and tree them, and a tranquilizer gun to quiet them. The tranquilizer gun, developed by Hornocker, resembles a shotgun and is fired by a 50 caliber charge. The final step is to mark the drugged lion by tattooing or with a collar for future reference when recaptured or killed.

"We had a couple of close calls trying to get the drugged cat out of rotten trees or trees hanging over bluffs, but one incident was particularly close. It happened when I first began the study. In the beginning, I used an immobilizing drug instead of the tranquilizer to quiet the animals. I shot this 155-pound cat in a pine tree and started up the tree to get him down. When I was about 75 feet up the tree and just a

or fishing, but their fears are unfounded. Cougars are generally shy animals, and don't want anything to do with man; and, with the abundant natural food supply, there is no threat. In fact, the neighbor's dog poses more of a real threat than the cougar," Hornocker stated.

"The importance of this study is to show the cougar's vital role in maintaining nature's proper balance. Until such time as the surplus deer and elk can be removed by hunters, bringing these populations into balance with their winter food supply, then cougar predation will remain beneficial," Hornocker concluded.



CAPTURE — A drugged 50-pound cougar is carried up an incline by Dr. Maurice Hornocker in the rugged Idaho Primitive Area. Following capture, Hornocker marked the cats by either tattooing or with a collar for identification when recaptured or killed.