

Lion Hunter's from Halfway Around the World

I called my friend Tommy from Sweden last year and asked him if he wanted to go Mountain Lion hunting in the United States and to my surprise he said give me 3 weeks and I will be ready. Problem was that I wasn't ready at all. Tommy Andersson is 73 years old and lives on the Arctic circle in North of Sweden in a place called Jokkmokk. My name is Henrik Haugsgjerd I live in Norway and am 59 years old.

We have been friends for about 35 years and met through Field trail competitions for Birddogs like German shorthair pointers and English Pointers. We hunt Moose and Caprecallie with dogs every fall up at his place. Caprecallie are birds similar to turkeys. Tommy and I have hunted all over the world together and we have been in South Africa together and are going again in 1 week and that's 13 days after returning from New Mexico.

Why we ended up with Matt Gilstrap as an outfitter was that I found his name on the Internet with one of the outfitters with good prices on a hunt. (Low price means we can do it again)

I called Matt last year in March to get some info how all this works and how to go about it, when, where, ect. He explained to me the way he hunts mountain lions from horseback with hounds and that's exactly what I was looking for. Being able to watch the dogs work is more important than the kill. I think you have to be a hound handler to understand this as Tommy and I hunt hares and such. We kept in contact on the Email once in a while and were ready to set off from Scandinavia 20th of March this year.

All excited for the trip and the hunt and also to meet the cowboy lion hunter from New Mexico.

We had all the time in the world to get excited about going to New Mexico as we ordered the trip one year in advance. One of the big issues was that Tommy has never been on a horse and being 73 maybe it was a bit late to start and as for myself its been 14 years since I was on a horse in Canada hunting. What the hell what was the problem, horses have a 4 wheel walk and saddles like rest chairs. I forgot to tell Tommy that we where hunting at elevation from 6500 til 9000 feet. I live 65 feet over sea level and Tommy 900. (I saw myself gasping for air already.)

Matt picked us up in El Paso, Texas and I was surprised how fit this 40 year old cowboy was. (and there was Tommy 73 and a fat Norwegian with a belly going on 220 lbs) Going down the road the conversation was going easy and the jokes came out.

We drove a couple of hours and came to a town called Truth or Consequences (what a name eh)

Well we had to do some shopping here so we got our hunting license my new video camera (gift for my wife) and some VINO.....

We arrived at the ranch in the middle of nowhere after 4.5 hrs driving, we must have seen at least 500 elk and lots of deer and then there it was..... the place in New Mexico where we were going to be MEN again and go Lion hunting.

Deanna met us when we stopped and I was surprised because I thought Matt lived by himself and there was this gorgeous woman in late 30. Still cant figure out what a good looking woman like her was doing out in the wilderness with this cowboy.

We used the rest of that day to look at the hounds and the horses and liked what we saw.(to see the dogs work was a priority for us)

Then we met Lori who was going to cook for us and did we have some great meals.

Sunday morning we took the truck just to have a look around and in the afternoon just a small horseback riding trip of 2 hrs(we could hardly walk after that and that was the beginning.)

Monday was the first day of real hunting and we started around 7.30 in the morning and temp was around 15 degrees. So it seemed a bit right when Tommy wondered why they didn't have solar panel in the saddle to warm it up there was plenty room for batteries, but we managed and it warmed up soon enough. We started hunting right from the ranch house as we did every morning for the next twelve days. Originally we only booked for seven days and were planning on touring New Mexico for the rest of our trip. But after hunting in this spectacular wilderness Tommy and I asked Matt if we could just stay here and hunt until our flight back to Sweden. So we extended our hunt for five more days. We went down the east fork of the Gila river into a very nice canyon that I don't remember the name of. With us we had six dogs, Kelly, Sven, Turtle, Skitso, Lady Bug and Bobo a blue heeler cross dog that never left Matt's side except to catch rock squirrels.

Riding down the valley over the stream it was a beautiful morning with Matt shouting "Get off that" to the dogs when they had a sniff of a racoon track or similar. In fact we should hear that a lot for the next days. After an hours ride we went into a creek in the valley and there was some scent that really made the dogs open and bawl. I knew whatever these dogs could smell was different than the racoon tracks they wanted to hunt earlier just from the tone of their voices. Later Matt explained that he lets his young dogs hunt racoons because they are easy to catch and readily available. The terrain is very rocky and much of it covered by pine needles making it very difficult to see any type of tracks. No more had the dogs all started bawling and carrying on Matt turned around in the saddle and said, "It's a lion and a hot one too". Within seconds the dogs were over the top of the mountain and out of hearing range. Matt got off his horse and showed us where the lion had left his mark in some pine needles under a big tree. He said as fast as them dogs are moving that this lion was not to far away. Only question was were the dogs going the same way that the lion went. Matt also explained that the dogs will work a cat track either direction unlike a bear track in which they almost never work backwards. When I asked Matt what they were doing he simply said "Huntin Cats.

Please remember that this is the first morning of what turned into a twelve day hunt, Tommy and I learned a lot the following days about the dogs and how they work and that was an experience for us as it was the opposite way of using hounds compared to what we did. Matt wanted his dogs near him so they didn't run off into the mountains hauling after tracks he didn't approve of. So he had to check out the tracks to see what they where and what direction they went because it was cold tracks and difficult to follow so they could easily have gone the wrong way. We use our hounds on fresh tracks on Hare and Deer and they find out after just going a few yards the wrong way that we better go the other way and 98% of the time they do.

We followed the sound of the hounds up one mountain and down into the next canyon and everytime we got to the top of one the dogs were already into the next. We took horses up and down canyons and rock slides that previous to this hunt I thought were impossible for man not alone a horse to travel. Finally we caught up to all but two of the dogs that were trying to work out the scent trail of this crafty old tom cat. From across the river you could hear dogs trailing and bawling, Matt told Deanna, Tommy and me to stay with the horses as he was going figure out what was going on. Seems the hounds were going around and around this huge rockpile that no way could the horses attempt. So the three of us just sat and listened to trailing dogs

which to me was like hearing Mozart in a symphony of wilderness. A much needed brake for Tommy and I. After about an hour Matt came back with part of the dogs and told us that the lion had killed an elk and had spent a lot of time going around marking his territory. Two of the dogs, Turtle and Skitso had continued down river and the old leader Kelly had turned and was going back the direction we had come from. Matt said he had found a track and that Turtle and Skitso were running the track backwards and that Kelly had figured it out on her own and was heading the right way. He told us to stay right there and he was going to catch the two hounds going backwards and then come get us. We had to hold on to the dogs he brought with him and this was no easy chore because they could hear Kelly leaving and they wanted to go real bad.

Matt rode off at full speed to catch Turtle and Skitso. About 45 minutes later he returned and I asked if we had to go back the same way we came. Matt said we could stay in the river drainage and get back to where we started. Thank God we didn't have to climb in and out of those canyons again. About a mile or so from where we first found the lion track this morning you could hear Kelly trailing coming in our direction. Matt said the lion must have crossed the river somewhere along here and about that time Turtle started bawling his head off and the rest of the dogs joined right in. And here came Kelly right past us at full speed and once again there they went straight up a rock pile that must have went a mile and I knew there was no way we were going to be able to follow. You could hear them dogs getting further and further away until they were gone. Matt left us with the horses on the river and climbed straight up the side of the mountain to see which way the hounds were going. Every once in a while you could faintly here the sound of a dog echo off the canyon walls. Matt came back down to where we were and said we have to ride around this canyon a couple miles to get to where the dogs are. Where we climbed those horses you would have to see to believe. Almost at the top Bobo the blue heeler just took off barking like crazy. I asked what he was chasing and Matt said Bobo can hear the hounds treeing. Sure enough when we hit the top you could barely hear dogs barking, a sound much different than when they are trailing.

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Was that music or what. We had to ride around the mountain side to get to the hounds. Tommy and me managed to ride like the men from "Snowy River" up and down ready to see what was up there. In front of us a Lion in the tree what a sight..... This was what it all was about a big Tom in a tree with the hounds barking and screaming up the tree. The cat looked down on us saying if you want me come up and get me. Tommy and I tossed a coin for the lion and I won the draw so now I will have this perfect cat in my hunting room back in Norway.

That was just the first day of twelve for us to hunt and ride horses and to see these amazing lion dogs work in one of the most scenic areas we have ever hunted. Although we never treed another big to the last day we trailed a big cat for 12 hours straight, until it was well into the dark.

This was one of the best hunts I have ever been on and for sure I can say that I will be back riding like John Wayne in the Valleys of Geronimo