

Predatory Instinct

In 1994 my hunting buddy, son and I were working a mesquite grove about 60 miles west of Phoenix. Some very big bucks had been taken from this area in past years. We split up and approached the area from three different directions. Right away, I could tell something was not right. There were absolutely no fresh signs and not even the occasional cow was around.

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Then I heard a strange sound, like nothing I had ever heard in all my years of hunting. I walked cautiously a little further, my eyes straining in the diminishing light of the fall sunset. Finally I spotted the source of the low growl. Fifty feet in

front of me was the head of a mountain lion peering over a small knoll. Time seemed to slow down and I distinctly recall the emotions I felt.

My initial reaction was one of absolute, pure excitement, identical to what I've felt when I've seen big horned sheep or bald eagles in the wild. The very next thought, Did I get a mountain lion permit again this year? Previously I had gotten a permit; this year not. Damn!

Next my thoughts turned to the situation at hand. Why is this predator growling at me? I knew that this was a truly rare occasion, and I also recognized that I could be in danger. Were there cubs around? Was there a food stash? Was this lion sick and therefore unpredictable? Looking down at my bolt action .30-06, I knew that if the lion charged, I'd have only one shot. At that point I unsnapped my pistol holster and waited for its next move. After what seemed like an eternity, the lion got up and slowly walked off, disappearing into the underbrush.

I've discussed this incident with a number of old time Arizona hunters. Their response was uniform: unless you have trained dogs tracking and treeing it, you will never see one in the wild. They stalk YOU, not the other way around. Maybe once or twice in a lifetime you will see one in the distance.

Being armed made all the difference in the world in my attitude. If under identi-

cal circumstances I had been unarmed and come across a growling mountain lion, I probably would have slowly backed away facing the lion. That's what I've been trained to do. I would have been scared out of my wits, a little like when I've come across a buzzing rattler. A terrific test for the cardio-vascular system!

Those with no gun and training might wind up dead. Several individuals in the West have fallen prey because they turned and ran. Just as in an encounter with two legged predators, having a gun and the right attitude can make all the difference in the world.—**RM, Paradise Valley, AZ**