

Some Enviros Carry Guns

Even now, wildlife needs hunters. By Frank Miniter

Savvy journalists know that when faced with a complex topic their audiences might not have time to delve into, they should seek out a sage so characteristic of their role they're almost a stereotype, because such an individual will personify the story, give the tale life, and thereby make the knotty topic palatable.

Such was the problem I had when trying to write an article on predator management. So I called the Fish & Wildlife Service's PR department at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., and asked if I could go into the field with their most renowned cougar specialist. "Too dangerous. We don't allow the press to tag along! Besides, we're tired of hit pieces," was their answer.

Savvy journalists also don't give in easily. So, after weeks of climbing the chain of command and explaining I was a journalist who understands the need for professional hunters, a PR person relented: "Okay, you win, the guy you want to meet is Mike

Bodenchuk, the head of Utah's division of Wildlife Services. We'll set it up."

Weeks later I landed in Salt Lake City, got a look at Bodenchuk and smiled. Bodenchuk's a tall man with a graying mustache, an earned cowboy squint, and the round-rimmed hat to top off his strapping part. He shook my hand with an iron grip, chuckled, boasted that he'd show me what they do all right, and guffawed that when the trip was over I'd be able to communicate why we need federal hunters even in this century.

Then he announced we were going to Utah's Book Cliffs to hunt down a particularly troublesome tom. We'd be riding mules in an area that only pales in roughness before the Grand Canyon as we tried to catch up to a cougar that was eating a reintroduced herd of bighorn sheep into extinction.

Bodenchuk looked me up and down,

squinted, and challenged, "I hope you can ride!"

TALES OF A WILDLIFE REFEREE

Hours later, as we zoomed south to the Book Cliffs, I started to dig tales of bravado out of Bodenchuk. He'd chased one stock-killing female mountain lion on foot up a cliff where he cornered it on a ledge under ancient Indian pictographs. He'd crawled into a mineshaft after another livestock-eating mountain lion and killed that cat in total darkness by shooting at the sound of its deep snarl. In fact, his



BODENCHUK PHOTOS COURTESY USDA

job was such a tough avocation that later, while we were sitting in the cab of another pickup hauling mules to the Book Cliffs with Cory Vetere, a lion specialist with Wildlife Services, Bodenchuk and Vetere passed the time counting up the divorces the state division's 26 hunters have had. After a lot of counting fingers they decided the divorce rate for Wildlife Service's hunters was about 50 percent.

Despite the sacrifices, critics have labeled the division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture "cowboy welfare." They argue that it benefits only a few western ranchers. But then they get in commercial airliners like the rest of us and don't even consider that Wildlife Services personnel are killing waterfowl on the runways with subsonic loads so the geese won't fly into a jet engine and take their plane down. The threat is serious. According to Wildlife Services, wildlife collisions with aircraft cost U.S. civil aviation more than \$500 million annually; nearly 6,000 wildlife collisions with civil aircraft were reported in 2003 alone.

Next Bodenchuk told me about the worst stock killer he'd ever encountered. His ensuing tale was so daring, I later looked into the story. After a lot of interviews here's what I

found: On July 27, 1992, Billie Worthen left her sheep wagon to check on the 876 sheep she was watching over. She was within a few hundred yards of the sheep when her horse began to spook. She soon discovered what was making her horse edgy—the smell of blood. Hours later Wildlife Services' predator specialists had to place rocks on the carcasses as they counted the bodies to be sure they didn't count the same animal twice. It was the worst single stock-killing incident in Utah state history—102 sheep dead.

Bending down to look at a track of the culprit, Kelly Joe Wright, a predator specialist with Wildlife Services, saw that the animal responsible for the carnage was a mountain lion.

Bodenchuk and Wright killed several cougars in that area that year. And likely got the cat responsible. But a hit-and-run tom began to perplex them. This cougar was different. He'd learned how to lose the hounds. The tom's territory was basically all the Old Woman Plateau. Roughly 40 square miles, the plateau is jammed between Interstate 70 on its western edge and a rim on its eastern edge, a 1,000-foot plummet that zigzags north like a lightning bolt.

John Wintch, a rancher who resides in Manti, Utah, held the grazing permit for the Old Woman Plateau, as his father and grandfather had before him. The next spring, on April 10, 1993, a herder found one of Wintch's sheep killed by a cougar. Hours later, Bodenchuk knelt over the track and knew the big tom had drawn blood again. He loosed his hounds—Gomer, a bluetick, and Brutus, a redbone. When the dogs started bawling, the tom beelined for the precipice at Saleratus Creek. Stepping off his gray mare to see where the cat lost the hounds, Bodenchuk couldn't make out where he'd jumped to; the tom had just launched into space.

Wright and Bodenchuk took five lions off the Old Woman Plateau in 1993, but they never treed the big tom. Wintch lost a fifth of his sheep to predation that year. The following four years were dark and bloody for his sheep and cattle. Despite Wright and Bodenchuk's efforts, Wintch lost an average of 600 sheep a year from his herd of 3,000 on the plateau, and the big tom continued to kill.

After years of loss, Wintch had to make the toughest decision of his life. He wouldn't put sheep back up on the plateau. He says it was "like trying to hold onto a handful of sand—no matter how hard you try, it just slips through your fingers." When he was a boy there were 29 herds of sheep in Saleratus



Mike Bodenchuk pulls his mule up Utah's Book Cliffs to hunt a particularly troublesome cougar that was eating a reintroduced herd of bighorn sheep. The cat was tough to find. INSET: Cougar, aka mountain lion. OPPOSITE: Bodenchuk with one of his hounds.



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REINTRODUCED WILDLIFE NEEDS HUNTERS

As his tale ended we pulled into Green River, Utah, our jump-off point into the Book Cliffs. Bodenchuk explained: "If we don't get this cougar, that herd of bighorns is doomed. This is just another example of why wildlife needs hunting. Let me give you a

Canyon; now there are none.

Bodenchuk used regular hunting permits to chase that old tom for the next few years. After a marathon chase, he caught the cat at the lip of Saleratus Canyon in 1999, the very place where the big male cougar would always lose the dogs. In the red dust of a dying Utah evening Bodenchuk and the 150-pound mountain lion looked at each other for a long, lurid moment before the tom jumped and Bodenchuk killed him with his revolver.

broader example. There are a few areas in this state that are off-limits to hunting. One is located on the west side of Salt Lake. Most of the problem cougars I deal with come from there. In other units hunters kill a select number of cats each year. Biologists set the annual quotas, so that we can balance their populations with human concerns and with the needs of the ecosystems they inhabit. This keeps the mountain lions afraid of us and it minimizes human-lion conflicts."

Bodenchuk, Vetere, and I unloaded our mules, rode down a canyon and stopped—the trail dead-ended, or so I thought.

"Where did the trail go?" I asked stupidly.

"Hell, boy, it goes straight up from here. Hold on!" And I did for the next four hair-raising days. We found the tom's track and territorial scratches and even his kills—bighorns with their necks broken—but we never caught up to him. After four days on the back of a mule named Cherie, jumping ledges, and having the pride scared out of me as I rode along 300-foot precipices, Bodenchuk and I headed back to Salt Lake.

When we came into an area with cell phone service, Bodenchuk checked his messages, gasped, and pushed the accelerator down. "I'll have to drop you off early at the airport. There's an aggressive mountain lion in Salt Lake. Another mountain lion has come out of that un hunted population."

Bodenchuk left me at the curb and raced off to protect an urban homeowner from the wild predators living all around. Weeks later Vetere caught up to the big tom that was destroying the small herd of bighorn sheep in the Book Cliffs. "They're gonna make it," he boasted. ■

Frank Minter is the author of "The Politically Incorrect Guide to Hunting," a book that gives the facts behind why even vegetarians owe hunters, the truth about the Second Amendment, and who America's real conservationists are. It retails for \$19.95 and is available at Amazon.com and wherever books are sold.

Endangered Species Need Hunters Too

Though environmental groups won't admit it, Wildlife Services' predator-management specialists protect endangered species by preserving ecosystems in places such as Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and San Clemente Island, Calif. Nonnative, invasive predators can be devastating to island ecosystems where a lack of natural enemies and competition for resources allow these species to wipe out native wildlife. For example, in 2001, Alaska's Aleutian Canada goose was officially removed from the list of federally threatened species, due in part to Wildlife Services' efforts to prevent predation by the arctic fox.

More than Cougar Control

Wildlife Services' specialists control bird populations at airports to avert situations like these:

- In September 1995, the U.S. Air Force lost 24 airmen and \$190 million as a result of aircraft colliding with Canada geese.

- In 2000, the engine of a B-747 was destroyed in a fiery explosion after ingesting a western gull during takeoff from Los Angeles International Airport. Parts of the engine fell onto a public beach and the pilot was forced to dump 83 tons of jet fuel over the ocean before safely landing the aircraft, which was carrying 449 passengers.

- In September 2004, an MD-80 carrying 107 passengers ingested a double-crested cormorant into an engine after departing Chicago O'Hare. The engine caught fire and parts fell into a Chicago neighborhood. The pilot was able to land the plane on one engine.