

# Outdoors

## While hunting a jaguar in Mexico ...

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — This is the first of a two-part column. Part II will appear next week.

In January of 1964 I received exciting news. One of my scouts in Mexico had evidence of a jaguar drinking regularly at a certain jungle waterhole. In those days my Jeep Wagoneer pretty much stayed fueled and loaded for Mexico.

I tossed in a couple of guns and cameras and some clothes and rolled south.

My Mexican gun permits and hunting license were kept in force year-'round, and I carried on my person at all times a letter from Governor Balboa of the State of Tamaulipas which identified me as a "friend of Mexico" and directed all officials to assist me in every way possible. The letter dripped with official seals and ribbons, and got respectful attention on the few occasions when I had to display it.

There were no delays at the border, the general's office in Nuevo Laredo, or the army's 40-kilometer highway check-point. After a long, hard night's drive, much of it on primitive jungle tracks, I arrived at dawn at a camp on the Soto La Marina River, about 150 miles south of the border, where I had often hunted and fished.

After a few hours' sleep and a plate of cabrito I got the story. The jaguar, like all cats, drinks after feeding and had left his tracks in the mud along a charca, or waterhole, near a village downriver named Vista Hermosa.

I could use the camp as a base and one of the camp's outboard skiffs to travel back and forth. My friend (and guide and professional tigre hunter), Jesus, would meet me at Vista Hermosa.

I met Jesus there and we walked two miles into the jungle to the charca. There, Jesus had lashed a chair into a tree from which I could see both banks of the waterhole for a hundred yards in both directions. One of the things I could see was a set of fresh jaguar tracks in the mud.

I would occupy this chair for the 12 hours of darkness for the next ten nights, without using a light, smoking, eating, answering the call of nature, or shifting about in the creaky aluminum chair any more than could be helped.

Silence was imperative; it was the dark of the moon, and



Photo by John Wootters

Wootters' companion and guide on this and other jaguar hunts was a Mexican named Jesus, a professional jaguar hunter often called upon by local ranchers to eliminate a "tigre" turned cattle-killer. Here he carries a load of chachalacas and pigeons collected at the waterhole by Wootters to give to local villagers in gratitude for their courtesy and hospitality during his hunt.

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John Wootters

hunting would be entirely by ear, waiting for the sound of the big cat's tongue lapping at the water. For those who haven't heard it, that's as loud as a man clapping his hands.

I had a powerful shooting light mounted on my scope tube, with the switch taped to the rifle stock under my left thumb. The light was adjusted so that bullets from the rifle struck exactly dead-center in the light's beam at 50 yards. I also wore a headlight on my hat. Both lights were connected to fresh batteries. The .308 was stoked with handloaded ammunition featuring 200-grain Nosler bullets.

I was ready.

Sitting over a Mexican waterhole for 10 straight nights, essentially blind and almost motionless, may sound like terminal boredom, but it turned out to be no such thing. Actually, it was one of the most fascinating and exciting hunts I ever enjoyed.

Any sound I made might destroy my chances, but other denizens of the jungle were under no such constraint, and it seemed that every other animal dropped by for a drink

every night. There was enough traffic at the charca, in fact, to keep me wired for hours on end. Every fresh arrival could have been the jaguar ... until it started to drink.

All four-footed critters belong to one of two groups: those that drink by lapping the water and those that suck it up. Most carnivores lap, and I learned to recognize the signature sounds of dogs, foxes, bobcats, jaguarundis, coyotes, ocelots, and at least one other small feline – possibly a rare margay cat or maybe just a feral house cat; I could never manage to see the varmint.

Hoofed animals suck the water, and I was soon able to identify horses, mules and burros, cattle, goats and deer.

But there was one thirsty visitor that totally baffled me. It made a sibilant "tsp-tsp-tsp" that drove me nuts; for the life of me I couldn't associate it with any local animal, wild or domestic. Finally, on the 10th night, I could stand the suspense no longer and risked the whole trip to use a light briefly.

The mystery creature was an armadillo, and I may now be the only hunter in the world who knows what a drinking armadillo sounds like. Who says sitting all night in a tree over a Mexican waterhole isn't educational?

It isn't boring, either. Something is always going on out there in the brush, producing all kinds of rustles, whispers, tiny squeals, flurries, crackles, grunts, growls and thumps. Knowing that my seat in the tree was easily



These fresh tracks of a large male jaguar were photographed (and cast in plaster-of-paris) on the margin of the waterhole in the Mexican jungle over which the author sat from dark to dawn for ten consecutive nights.

within a jaguar's springing range from the ground also tended to keep me awake.

As dawn broke and the jungle's day-shift began to stir, the chachalacas' raucous dawn chorus emphatically signaled the end of the night's hunt. Hordes of doves of two or three species, red-billed pigeons, chachalacas, tinamus, turkeys, and other game birds flocked to the waterhole. Jesus, who had lain by a fire in the jungle all night, listening for a shot, would come and collect me for the hike back to Vista Hermosa and my boat trip back upriver for breakfast and a day's sleep.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer."**