

# Outdoors

## While hunting a jaguar ... Part II

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — This is the second of a two-part column.

Last week, we left the author perched in an ebano tree overlooking a waterhole in tropical Mexico on the first of 10 consecutive nights, listening to the night noises of the jungle and straining to hear a jaguar drinking.

The night was mild and still on my second vigil on the charca. Two leopard frogs were calling from the water's edge below my seat in the tree, so regularly that I came to recognize their individual voices. They were like friends keeping me company. I named them Ramon and Tomas, and listened for their calls, knowing that their sudden silence might be my first warning of the presence of a large animal ... maybe even the jaguar whose spotted hide I had come to collect.

My third night was cool and so clear that I fancied I was peering light-years into the past — as indeed I was — as I named the constellations I'd learned in childhood.

From so far south, the blazing figures of the zodiac were not exactly where I expected them to appear in January but were still in their proper order on the great glittering wheel of the Milky Way. I picked out "my" constellation — Orion, the great hunter with his club lifted to bash Taurus, the charging bull.

There's not much else to look at from a tree in the Mexican jungle, but the stars have always been friendly companions for me, no matter where on this planet I happened to be, from Korea to Africa to the Arctic.

Suddenly, my stargazing focused on an object streaking across the sky from horizon to horizon, its brightness dimming and increasing rhythmically. I'd never seen anything like it, and for a moment imagined that I was looking at an actual UFO. Then I realized that this was an artificial satellite, and that the variation in brightness resulted from the orbiting vehicle tumbling slowly, alternately catching and losing the sun.

It was the first and only satellite I ever saw in orbit, and it snatched me out of the wilderness physically surrounding me at that moment and reconnected me to the modern world and my own culture.

The next night in the tree produced even more excitement from the sky. The night was peaceful, and Ramon and Tomas were chatting monotonously away. Their point-counterpoint croaking was about to put me to sleep when I was absolutely electrified by a roaring, rushing sound that seemed to come from every direction at once.



Photo by John Wootters

The view from Wootters' tree overlooking the lonely jungle waterhole as a cow wades across at last light.

### Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

gle night, the noise was so sudden, so loud, and so totally unexpected that for a moment I almost panicked. Then I noticed a narrow, ruler-straight band of cloud racing toward me from the northwest, stretching from horizon to horizon. It was illuminated by a low half-moon, and seemed more than weird enough to trigger notions about apocalypse.

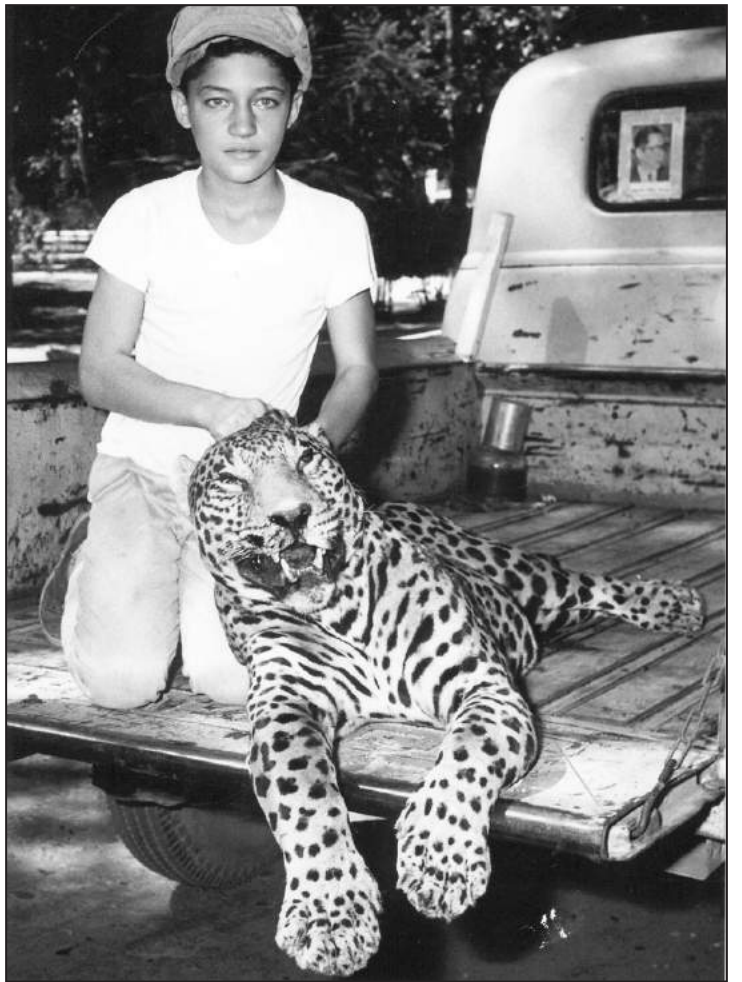
Then a ferocious blast of icy air struck my tree like a runaway locomotive, making even the biggest limbs writhe and thrash, and my chair to buck wildly. In minutes the temperature plummeted twenty degrees or more and I was suddenly shivering.

I bailed out. As soon as my boots hit the ground I saw that the cloud-band had moved on past, leaving the sky as clear and star-studded behind it as before the weather front had struck. The howling wind which had startled me passed away with the clouds. The gusts diminished to gentle northerly breezes, and the Tamaulipas jungle community seemed to be almost as it was before the arrival of the most dramatic and bewildering frontal passage of my whole life.

Now Jesus appeared out of the jungle to guide me to his fire, where we chatted until daybreak. Where there is a will to communicate, there is no such thing as a language barrier.

Jungle jaguar hunting boring? Not very; jaguar or no jaguar!

When I departed after the 10th night, there had been no jaguar, at least at my waterhole. But the men of Vista



Probably not the jaguar the author was hunting, this cat was killed in the same area a few months later. The identity of the boy is unknown.

Hermosa found the cat's tracks at dawn and put a pack of curs on them. They treed and killed the jaguar before the sun was well up.

For 10 days these people had very generously allowed me to have my chance at the cat, but when I failed they took action. I'd been urged to use the dogs, too, when I first arrived, but I don't hunt big game with hounds. I knew the odds and was satisfied with that decision.

The men of the village earned a reward for eliminating the threat to the rancher's livestock, probably about equal to a year's pay, plus the proceeds of the sale of the cat's pelt.

For poor people it was too important a matter to dither

over ethical abstractions like "fair chase." They needed that cat more than I did, but they gave me my chance anyway.

That's pretty typical of the rural people of Mexico. Away from the border and off the turista trails, these humble people are the kindest, most hospitable folks toward strangers that I've ever met, anywhere in the world.

They got the jaguar and the money ... but what I got out of those 10 memorable nights was far more valuable.

**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."**