Thome George

UP A TREE

Amazing how some experiences never leave you. Nearly 20 years ago, in Okanogan County Washington, I was on the verge of becoming a professional furniture builder. My signature style of using twigs to make a mosaic on table tops, is a process requiring materials of straight whip like Birch sticks which grow in clumps off larger trees.

I was in the field, near Frosty Creek, harvesting these materials with only a small backpack, pruning clippers, and a bundle of cut twigs. Clipping away in one of these clumps of birch a sudden race of electricity ran up and down by spine like a scream.

Standing up and turning around slowly, I looked into the extremely thick brush behind me, and not 15 feet away I saw a set of piercing eyes staring straight from within a black face.

The cougar then revealed himself by very slowly emerging from the brush. At this time all my naïve thinking and stories I've heard came to mind and I screamed "NO!" as loud as I could with no avail as the cougar continued to slowly walk towards me. I held open my shirt as to appear larger in the attempt to ward off his approach but to no avail.

As the cat neared "leaping distance", my mind raced for a solution. I grasped a branch above me and pulled myself up into the birch, which thankfully held my weight.

Undeterred the cat sat directly underneath my spot in the tree and did not take his eyes off me. The cougar refused to leave and I became more and more uncomfortable with my tenuous perch in the tree. A solution to this dilemma was obviously needed.

Buried in my pack was some webbing I use to bundle sticks. Climbing a bit further up, I wrapped myself in the webbing to create a sling – which afforded me some measure of comfort some 20 feet above the ground. For the next hour and a half we remained in this standoff. No effort on my part could move that big cat from its position at the base of that birch.

Unable to climb that particular birch, cat began then to look back and forth from me to an adjacent larger tree, and I knew he was contemplating climbing that tree to jump over to where I was located. I was running out of options as I imagined us facing each other from such precarious positions. I decided to act with the only tools I had available.

On my belt I had a very small carving knife, which I tied to the end of a birch stick to make a rough spear. A tenuous defense at best as I thought, "What good is this going to do?"

Minutes slipped away and I had time to observe the cougar, which had amazing sleek fur and was quite well fed (I estimated him to be a young male around 130 lbs.). There had been tales around the county of cougar sightings; a neighbor of mine had lost more than 60 rabbits and all his chickens. Obviously this guy had been feasting for days.

Another excruciating hour passed when some cows happened by and caught his eye. He then looked back at me and walked into the thick brush in the direction of the cattle. I did not move and stayed in my position for another half hour I knew I would have to eventually move but had no desire to lower myself into the thick brush which covered the ground, unable to see what was underneath.

With my make-shift spear in hand, I then climbed further up where I could scramble from birch tree to birch tree, bending the branches with my weight into the next tree all the way to where I could see a nearby road. I walked that road all the way home to my wife and son who immediately asked me "Where have you been?" I had quite the story to say the least.

The next day I had to drive a shipment of furniture to Montana where I had a lot of time to play the scene over and over again and wonder what could have been. I've since come to the realization that all my experiences, training, and everything I had been taught up to that point all came into play that day with the cougar. I've told this story a 100 times and have learned to never discount the sign of a jolt of electricity up your spine.

Whenever I'm harvesting materials these days, I always carry bear spray, a revolver, a large walking staff, and I never leave home without my dog. And I always keep an eye open for the closest birch tree, just in case.

CODY HIGH STYLE

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