HOUNDED & SLANDERED

by Vivien Felker

Maligned by animal rights groups and misunderstood by many fellow hunters, hound handlers seek to keep tradition alive.

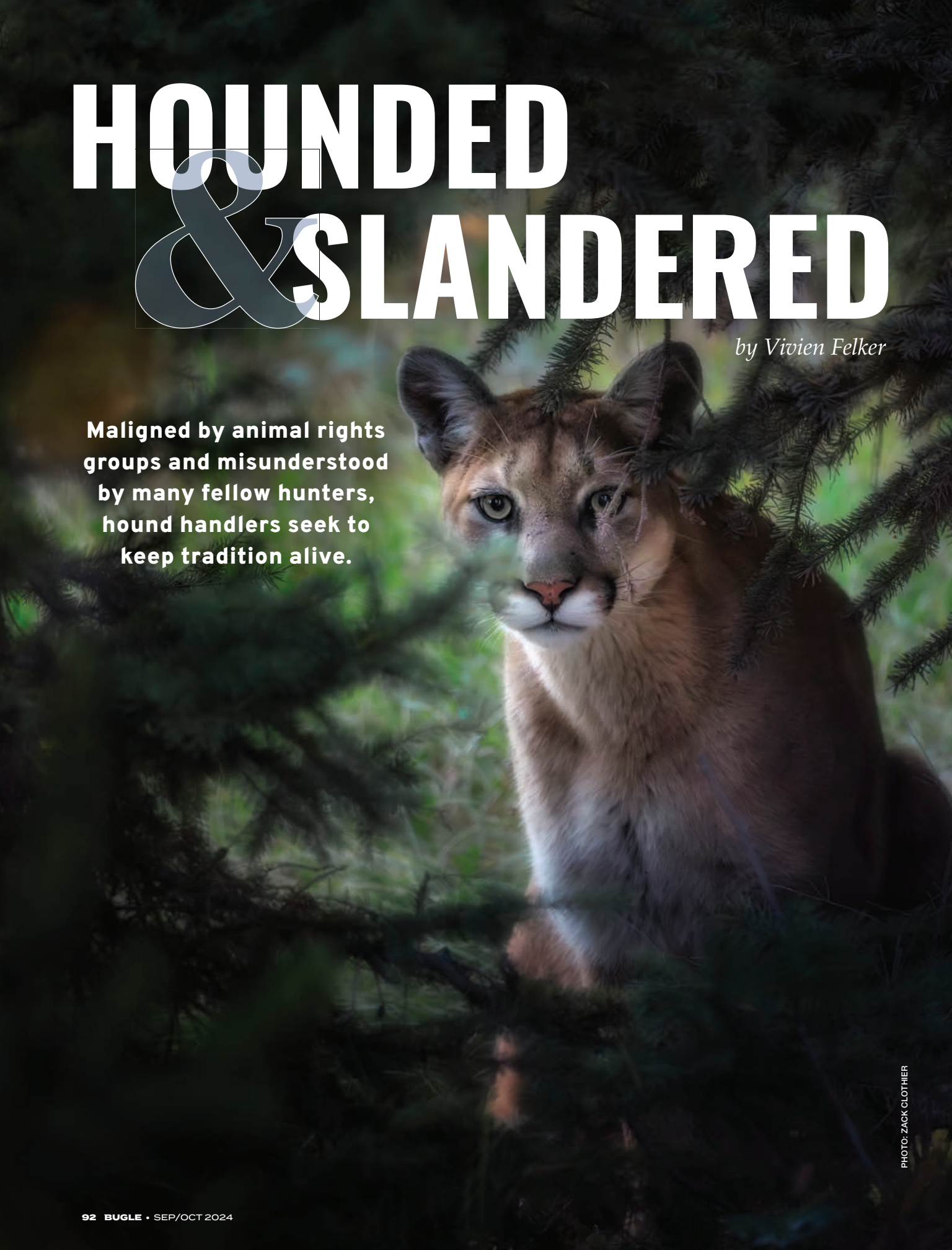

PHOTO: ZACK CLOTHIER

"There's something about standing under a tree and making eye contact with one of the most prolific predators in North America," I told my boyfriend Danner as we sat in the truck after a mountain lion hunt.

The day's events had worn us out. We'd gotten up early in the morning to look for tracks crossing the freshly powdered mountain roads in western Montana. Just 10 minutes in, he braked the truck to an abrupt stop while in the middle of giving me a crash course on how to identify a cat track. Perfect timing.

"You're looking for...*that*!" he blurted, stunned that just minutes into my first-ever lion hunt we had already cut a track, which typically takes days if not weeks.

With help from Danner's friend Aaron Kelly, who hunts lions with hounds in our area, we were soon on the trail of the big cat, following the baying of excited hounds. Aaron had checked for any sign of wolves in the area (which are known to kill hounds) and ensured his dogs' GPS collars were fitted and working before guiding them onto the track. Two of Aaron's dogs, Turbo and Willow, had led Danner to a treed lion the year prior, which he shot with his grandpa's old .30-30. This year, Willow and three others immediately took off, noses glued to the scent.

Turbo took a moment to follow, but soon took up the track as well. Just a young pup the previous winter, Danner and Aaron had taken turns carrying him up the mountain so he could experience a hunt.

We soon took to the trail as well, moving through a shallow skiff of snow thanks to the unusually mild spring. Around an hour later, Aaron's handheld device that tracked the location of the dogs indicated their barks per minute had jumped up, a sign they'd caught up to the mountain lion. We quickened our pace to cut the distance to the dogs and the cat, clambering up snow-covered rocks as we worked hard gaining elevation.

I was awestruck by the scene we finally came upon and surprised by the strength of my reaction. The dogs had treed the cat high in a ponderosa pine growing on a steep, rocky face, and when we hiked around to the uphill side, the lion was perched nearly at eye level. I sat down on the hill and took some pictures on my phone. Willow came over to lick my face, happily wagging her tail, pleased with herself. Beyond the lion, the sun poured down from blue skies onto the gorgeous western Montana valley far below. The cat was a young male Aaron estimated to weigh roughly 100 pounds. Danner decided to hold his tag for a mature lion, and maybe he'd find this cat again in future years.

Aaron called off the dogs swiftly with a simple command, and we headed back down the hill, leaving the feline untouched in the tree.

I felt deeply humbled in the presence of an animal so physically powerful and sculpted by the demands of killing a deer, elk or moose every six to 12 days. I'd stood mere feet from a famously elusive species most people will never see at any distance. That cat still crosses my

mind often as I circle back to my initial assessment that there's just something special about being up close and personal with a treed mountain lion. I still feel at a loss for words trying to explain the feeling. What I do know now more than I ever did before as a Midwestern-born whitetail hunter is why some of us live to experience that very moment, even as others struggle to understand, or ridicule them for it.

Though humans have trained dogs to help them hunt for thousands of years, animal-rights groups have focused on ending hound hunting for mountain lions and bobcats for decades with varying degrees of success, painting cat hunters as bloodthirsty killers who are inhumane and barbaric. But lion hunters who use dogs (the most common and effective method of take) also get criticized by some other hunters who think it provides an unfair advantage when hunting.

In my personal experience, however, it's both an ethical and fair chase form of hunting, and one that creates an uncommon bond that serves to boost the conservation of the species. No subsection of hunters, much less the general public, are more in tune or more committed to the welfare of the species.

A Campaign against Colorado Cougar Hunters

The latest battleground over mountain lion hunting is brewing in Colorado in the form of Ballot Initiative 91. If roughly two-thirds of the 188,000 signatures it has gathered survive state certification, this November, the citizens of Colorado will vote whether to ban all hunting of cougars, bobcats and lynx (even though lynx are federally protected and not hunted in the state), whether dogs are used or not.

As with the vote in 2020 to release wolves in Colorado, the groups have failed to get traction with state wildlife managers and have instead turned to "ballot box biology" to decide how wildlife will be managed rather than through the best available science.

And the same hard-worn tropes are once again being rolled out to pigeonhole lion hunters as trophy-obsessed troglodytes who never eat their quarry.

To better understand what motivates hound handlers who spend so much time and money to get close to mountain lions they rarely kill, I interviewed both Aaron and another hound-hunting enthusiast, Adeline Richardson, as well as a hound handler in Colorado who would be impacted by a cat hunting ban.

These hunters love and care deeply about mountain lions, as well as the dogs that lion hunters are sometimes accused of abusing. I also found that, like hunters of other species, hound handlers are perhaps the staunchest supporters of maintaining the existence of mountain lions on the landscape, wanting them to be hunted only at sustainable levels through ethical and fair chase means.

A quick search on the website of Cats Aren't Trophies, the animal-rights group spearheading the ballot proposal in Colorado, reveals stereotypes steeped in emotion and misinformation.

"Hounding is thrill-killing for trophies and personal profit," the group claims. In the face of such rhetoric, Adeline provides perspective.

Like many kids, her dad introduced her to hunting at a young age. By 12 she'd already gained a love for chasing lions by tagging along with her dad and his hounds. Now 25, she has stared up at hundreds of treed mountain lions, but in all those years, she has only ever killed two, and says she may never kill another.

"It's not about killing cats for me at all. I've found a lot more joy in training puppies and watching them learn, as well as watching how much the dogs love to chase and pursue game."

Adeline is quick to point out that with every mountain lion that she or anyone whom she's hunted with has killed, they've packed out its meat and savored every steak—a far cry from the verbiage used in Colorado Initiative 91 that lion hunting is "practiced primarily for the display of an animal's head, fur, or other body parts, rather than for utilization of the meat."

PHOTO: ROD SINCLAIR

That reflects the popular notion that houndsmen are merely running dogs to "slap a head on the wall," Adeline says. "Mountain lion meat is actually extremely good. It's one of the best wild game meats I've ever had."

Cats Aren't Trophies argues that consuming a mountain lion is "an attempt to say the end justifies the means, and to cover up the truth." They claim the meat isn't an integral part of the hunt as mountain lion hunters contend, because "eating lions is just not part of our American culture today. We don't find mountain lions in our grocery store, and because we only have a few thousand mountain lions in existence, it would never be a good way to feed a family."

That either ignores or intentionally misrepresents the fact that the meat of any wild animal will never be found at an American grocery store—deer, elk or otherwise—because its sale was banned more than a century ago to eliminate market hunting. Any deer or elk you find in a market's meat section or on a restaurant's menu died on a game farm, not at the hands of a hunter.

Furthermore, wanton waste laws in Colorado require all edible mountain lion meat be consumed and many hunters across the West prize the lean and clean meat as excellent table fare, making the wording on the website deceiving at best.

"If you're going to harvest an animal that you are putting in a tree with your dogs, you're going to utilize the meat, because killing it weighs heavily on you," says Adeline.

Naomi Hersh, a hound handler in Colorado, says the mountain lion meals she makes are a hit in her household. "Mountain lion gumbo is the best."

The naysayers also pay no heed to the fact that mountain lion populations have rebounded on a massive scale ever since managed hunting began for the species more than half a century ago. In fact, they're doing better as a species than any other large wild cat on earth, showing up in new places every year and maintaining their health and vigor in areas they've been hunted for decades. If there is any challenge cougars face, it stems from human development, not hunting.

According to the Mountain Lion Foundation, a group endorsing the Colorado hunting ban, wildlife managers estimate that 20,000 to 40,000 mountain lions now roam North America.

It's no small irony that since California banned all hunting of cougars in 1972, it's had very little idea of how many cats lived in the state for more than 50 years. Earlier this year, researchers released the first comprehensive estimate of mountain lions in California—between 3,200 and 4,500—thousands fewer than previously thought and similar to how many roam Colorado and Montana where hunting mountain lions is legal.

The count was conducted by state and university scientists who used GPS collar data as well as genetic information from scat samples to model population densities across the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Mojave Desert and southern California's patchwork of designated wilderness areas. Yet virtually every collar placed on any mountain lion was thanks to hound handlers who treed the cat. And anytime a lion attacks people or pets, a hound handler is brought in to find it. They may have to travel from out of state because so few people are trained, much less their dogs, due to the hunting ban.

"Hound hunting presents unique challenges that give you such a deep love for the cat, and I want my son to develop that character."

- Naomi Hersh

Aaron says "trophy hunting" is a phrase with a negative connotation that has been weaponized to advance the interests of groups that attack lion hunting traditions, without accurately reflecting the values of mountain lion hunters and what motivates them afield. Adeline agrees and says that everyone has their own idea of a "trophy," with her ideal being to get "a good picture of a cat in a tree." She adds that keeping parts of an animal isn't for a show of violence, but rather to symbolize the experience of the hunt, which she says may be hard for some people to appreciate if they've never experienced it. "It's about respect for the animal, and saying, 'this animal gave its life for me' and remembering it while you're sitting there eating it for dinner."

Another narrative that hound hunters are constantly pushing back against, Adeline says, is that their form of hunting is lazy, and that they abuse their dogs who do all the work for them. Cats Aren't Trophies perpetuates this belief, stating on its website, "Dogs are fitted with GPS radio collars and trained to chase a mountain lion until the cat is trapped high in a tree. At that time, the hunter, waiting in a vehicle or off-site for the outfitter's call, walks up to shoot the mountain lion..."

Aaron and Adeline say this does not accurately capture the essence of a mountain lion hunt at all, and that naysayers don't see the work that goes on behind the scenes to train and feed dogs 24/7, as well as the physical fitness required to hike after them. It's all part of the mystique, she says, just as it is for bird hunting or any other activity that requires dog and

trainer to work in a deeply dedicated harmony. "I'd invite anyone [to come] out with us to experience it themselves. It makes people kind of start to understand that we love these dogs like they're family, and we do it for the dogs."

"It's pretty often a catch-and-release type hunt," adds Aaron. Adeline agrees, saying people might be astounded at the level of hard work and long hikes that often lead to simply leaving a mountain lion unscathed in a tree.

The common practice of using GPS collars to monitor the location of dogs running a track is also presented as an unfair advantage by groups such as the Mountain Lion Foundation. But according to hound handlers, it's merely a safety measure to ensure their dogs' well-being.

Naomi says her family treats their mixed-bag of hound dogs they affectionately refer to as their "pack of misfits" like family, and use GPS collars to be able to locate their dogs at all times.

"The valleys of Colorado can oftentimes make it sound like the dogs are barking in a completely different direction from where they truly are. Or, if they simply go over a hill the noise can disappear completely," Naomi says. Their goal is always to have their dogs back safe at home at the end of each hunt, where they can often be found lounging around on the couch or snuggled up next to her and her husband's baby.

Like Adeline, Naomi learned how to run hounds from her dad when she was young and has seen firsthand how valuable houndsmen are to conserving the species by assisting mountain lion biologists to collect data. In Montana, a five-year study that began in 2010 looked at how lions impact calf elk survival in Montana's Bitterroot Valley. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Kelly Proffitt found mountain lions were the primary killer of elk calves in the area, where only 23% survived their first year.

The second phase of Proffitt's study began in 2012, examining if increasing mountain lion harvest quotas would increase calf survival. As a control population, she monitored mountain lion populations and elk mortality in the upper Clark Fork region near the mountain town of Philipsburg. To acquire a baseline knowledge of how many mountain lions inhabited the respective areas, Proffitt called in local hound handlers to help collect biopsy samples. The team would find and run a track, then once a lion was treed, dart it with a biopsy gun to collect a small piece of tissue used to identify individuals by their DNA. In the May-June 2021 issue of *Bugle,* FWP regional wildlife manager Mike Thompson (now retired) said the houndsmen contracted for the project were instrumental in its execution. "They have trained hounds, the equipment and the skills no one else possesses," he said.

After estimating mountain lion populations, FWP increased the hunt quota in the Bitterroot, but left it unchanged in the Clark Fork. A year after increasing the quota, researchers conducted their final counts of lions and elk. They found that increasing mountain lion harvest positively affected elk populations, bumping up Bitterroot calf survival from 23 to 42% in 2013.

Colorado-based hound handler Naomi Hersh poses with Hiram, a member of the group of dogs Hersh's family lovingly calls their "pack of misfits."

This was good news for Bitterroot elk and deer hunters, but not everyone agreed with the increased quotas. Namely, Bitterroot houndsmen. They felt the increased quota would be detrimental both to the quality of the hunting and to lions in general, and railed against seasons they believed attracted hordes of hunters to travel to the valley to chase lions on a special permit. When the state was deciding on harvest goals for the 2015 season, Bitterroot houndsmen recommended lowering the quota and counting incidental kills in that tally.

State wildlife officials also value input from hound handlers about what they have seen in the field, and hound handlers are required by law in Montana to have all kills inspected to collect health and age data from each lion, which helps biologists better understand this elusive predator.

Naomi wants the public's understanding of hound handlers to improve so their traditions can be preserved.

"I can't imagine my son not growing up raising dogs like I did. Hound hunting presents unique challenges that give you such a deep love for the cat, and I want my son to develop that character," she says.

PHOTO: COURTESY NAOMI HERSH