



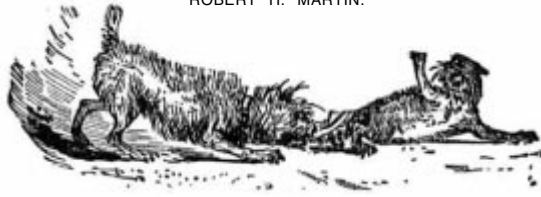
Painted for *OUTING* by Jas. L. Weston.

See "Wildcat Hunting in Virginia." (p. 483.)

"THE WILDCAT OF THE MOUNTAINS CAN MAKE AN UGLY FIGHT." (p. 483.)

# WILDCAT HUNTING IN WEST VIRGINIA.

ROBERT H. MARTIN.



THE wildcat has been treated by some writers on Natural History as cowardly and rather insignificant, a conclusion based, probably, upon a brain or structural analysis, rather than upon actual acquaintance with the animal in its wilderness haunts; and I have seen various estimates put upon the fighting qualities of the wildcat by hunters, but none of them do justice to that species with which I have met most frequently in the mountain districts of West Virginia.

It is true that the cat will generally retire before the hunter, and that it preys chiefly upon birds, rabbits, young pigs, lambs and other small animals; yet these facts do not warrant the charge of cowardice, no more than we can with propriety call the grizzly a coward because he will generally run away from the hunter unless surprised or cornered. The wildcat of the mountains will stand his ground under similar conditions, and can make an ugly fight.

The Hon. Theodore Roosevelt makes but brief mention of this animal in his "Wilderness Hunter," speaking particularly of one species, the Northern or Canada lynx. These, he says, can be killed easily with dogs, as they tree quite readily; but adds, "They often maul an unexperienced pack quite badly, inflicting severe scratches and bites on any hound which has just resolution enough to come to close quarters, but not enough to rush in furiously; but a big fighting dog will readily kill one."

Mr. J. C. Natrass classifies the lynx family common to the United States as follows: The Canada lynx, catamount, American wildcat and red cat. Speaking particularly of the Canada lynx, he says: "It is not 'expected that any dog will be required to kill the beast alone. \* \* \* If dogs have to do the killing it will need a good pack, well trained."

Of the wildcat common to the Western and Southern States, Mr. Arrow-smith ("Sangamon") says: "The wildcat is a savage fighter. An old Tom can stand off a whole pack of common dogs, and indeed it takes a very resolute dog to seize and kill one."

By own experience has been that there are very few dogs equal to the task of killing one of these beasts. I have seen several "resolute" dogs so badly clawed and bitten by one wildcat that they were rendered practically useless as hunters, and they did not succeed in killing the cat either. I have also seen a whole pack beaten off on two, if not three, occasions by one of these "varmints" when the cat was at the disadvantage of having one foot fast in a steel trap. Rolling on his back, the terrible claws of his hind feet were more than dog patience could endure. This seems to be his favorite mode of fighting, as it gives him free use of all his feet.

Some years ago I had engaged to do the—

"Pleasing task,  
To rear the tender thought,  
To teach the young idea how to shoot."

for the rising generation on the head waters of Leatherbark, a tributary of the South Fork of Hughes River, in West Virginia, a backwoods country lying some twenty or thirty miles back from the railroad, and at that time thinly settled, with great stretches of forest which were the home of the wildcat and fox, and where also a few deer were still to be found. At that time the wildcats had become very troublesome, as they had a particular fondness for the lambs and pigs which ran at large, nor did they hesitate, if they could get one no other way, to steal a pig from a sty beneath the very eaves of the house.

They were occasionally hunted with foxhounds, but with little success. They

had become so cunning that it was hard to get a shot at one. They treed readily enough when hard pressed by the dogs, but it was next to impossible to keep one up a tree. Let the hunter approach and they would invariably jump, making sometimes the most wonderful leaps; and the character of the country was such that they were usually able to escape to their dens in the rocks, having apparently learned the value of such cover as a safe retreat from the hunter's rifle. So it required the greatest degree of skill and care to get a shot at one; and if overtaken by the dogs alone, the only result was that for about every wildcat killed a half dozen dogs were "chawed up," so that it had come to be that when a party of 'coon-hunters or fox-hunters found that their dogs had jumped "one of them pesky varmints," they were generally called off, and the trap remained the only sure way of taking them. They have no fear of a trap and will walk right into one. In this respect they are very different from a fox.

Finding that the people of that community knew nothing about trapping, I sent for a supply of No. 2 steel fox-traps, and waited impatiently for a snowy Saturday to go still-hunting in a great forest that stretched away for miles south toward the Little Kanawha, where a drove of deer had taken up winter quarters, and where I had been told were any number of wildcat dens. At last it came, and I shouldered the long-barreled muzzle-loading rifle of my old friend, Farmer Y—, with whom I boarded, and tramped away to the woods.

It was a grand day in the forest, robed as it was in a mantle of spotless white, while—

"Every pine and fir and hemlock  
Wore ermine too dear for an Earl,  
And the poorest twig on the elm-tree  
Was ridged inch-deep with pearl."

But a thaw was coming. A south wind was blowing softly, and among the jewel-bedecked branches there was the tinkling of silvery ice-bells; the tongue-like leaves of the spruce and the frozen needles of the pine were moaning a dirge, and ever and anon could be heard the ringing tones of an anvil chorus as the trees were 'being unlocked from a frosty embrace. It was the music of the wind and frost played by the hand of Nature.

Aside from the health and life-giving vigor of the pure air and the exercise, I must confess that still-hunting on this particular day was rewarded with nothing better than "hunter's luck," exceedingly tired limbs and an overpowering sense of an inward emptiness; for, after tramping five miles or more through unbroken snow, stealing around coves and crossing ravines innumerable, without seeing a living thing larger than a gray-coated little sap-sucker, I turned my steps homeward. On reaching the creek bottom, however, I struck a solitary trail which, while it somewhat resembled both, was that of neither a dog nor a fox, being entirely too large for the latter. As it appeared to have been freshly made and led my way, I followed, keeping a sharp lookout ahead. It ended at last at the mouth of a den under a ledge of rocks. Closing the opening with stones, I hastened home for a trap, but my old friend laughed when I told him what I was going to do, and said: "Oh, you're not smart enough for that varmint; he's a wil'cat, an' he's not comin' out o' there till he's starved out; then he'll dig out summers else,"

"All right," I replied; "we will give him something to do, anyhow."

Returning I placed the trap, covered with a few leaves, in the mouth of the den, fastened the chain to the top of a hickory sapling which I had bent over, and walled up the front with stones so that in case the wildcat got into the trap he could neither escape within the den nor get outside.

Next morning the farmer's son and I started to visit the trap, taking three dogs with us. On approaching the den everything on the outside seemed to be just as I had left it, and young Y—, sharing the skepticism of his father, reminded me, "I tole you you hadn't caught nothin'." But as the dogs reached the mouth of the den there came a low, savage growl from behind the stone wall.

The dogs went wild on the instant and we could scarcely restrain them until we were ready. Cutting away the hickory sapling, young Y— held the end of the pole while I removed the stone wall, and there, with one forepaw in the trap, sat one of the largest wildcats that I have ever seen. Y— pulled, and as the cat came out the dogs jumped on him, and the fur and hair flew for a short

time. But, rolling himself on his back, it seemed no trick for him to give the dogs such a clawing that they soon fell back and stood barking. One old hound, a little more persistent than the others, went in for a second round, but the others, thinking, no doubt, that it was not their affair, left him to make the best of it, and consequently he was pretty badly used up; indeed, at one time I thought I would have to go to his assistance.

The cat now seemed anxious to turn his attention to us, but the trap had a good hold, and as the dogs would not undertake another "scrap" with him, I knocked him over. He was a splendid specimen and beautifully marked, being much lighter in color than the dark brindle-gray of the common wildcat, and was said to be a catamount by old hunters who saw him.

On our way home we passed over a glade covered with scrub oak and hazel, and saw the tracks of several wildcats. The dogs jumped one as soon as they entered the thicket, treeing him just over the hill, but the instant we came in view he made a most astounding leap—jumping fully forty feet—from a

large leaning tree, and reached his den before the dogs could overtake him,

The hillside was a wilderness of rock ledges, boulders, fallen trees and dense masses of underbrush, and proved to be a veritable home of wildcats. We found about a dozen dens in a radius of perhaps fifty feet. We had reason to believe, afterwards, that no less than four cats had been run to cover at that time, and for several subsequent mornings we started others. Indeed, the question of trapping cats there seemed to resolve itself into a matter of endurance, but I had to abandon the ground because of the great distance and difficulty.

I learned by experience that if a cat seeks his den undisturbed he will generally come out within twenty-four hours, but if run to cover he is likely to remain there for eight or ten days, until compelled by hunger to come out and seek food.

Aside from the pelts which I secured during that winter, I gained in another and unexpected way, for I made a reputation as being "a powerful good hunter," which, in the estimation of those good people, helped to make me "a powerful good teacher" as well.



## 'NEATH SUNNY SKIES.

### KONDEAU.

**N**EATH sunny skies, in soft blue air,  
With scent of roses everywhere,  
The little old gnarled olive trees  
Climb all the hill-side terraces,  
And gowns' of silver-gray they wear.

Below, in green, the lemons flare,  
And feathery palms rise stately there,  
Scarce stirred by lightly passing breeze  
'Neath sunny skies.

And Time's old face is ever fair,  
No wintry frost, no branches bare;  
For Summer bides, and seeks to please  
By every art, and calls to ease,  
And bids us cast away all care  
'Neath sunny skies.

CLIFFORD NEWTON.