

TOP FISHING SECRETS

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Battling Cougars in the Dead of Night

Rather than risk taking time to unlock and open the car I decided to jump on top of it instead! At the very least, the idea of making a stand seemed better than becoming a chew-toy without a fight!

Timothy Kuserets

It's an easy thing to say "To die what you love doing the most is the best way to go" but to actually have your conviction tested by literally having the choice to live or die is another thing entirely. Under dire circumstances you'll find out just what kind of person you are and how far you're willing to go to stand by what you believe; I did and I'll never forget it.

If I fish a river that has many fishermen during the regular season, I'll fish it during the off seasons just so I can be out in nature and essentially alone in the woods it was the desire to commune with nature that started an unbelievable sequence of events.

It was early July of 1998. The Cowlitz River was running relatively low, the summer runs of fish were thin, and the parking area of the famed "Blue Creek" was void of anyone. I was completely alone at 2 o'clock in the morning, though I wasn't supposed to be.

"Dude, what are you beating on my door for? Do you know what time it is?"

"Scott, you said you wanted to go fishing with me, are you telling me you forgot?"

"Man, me and the ole lady had a fight and we just made up about an hour ago. I don't think I can go. You don't mind do you?"

"Why should I mind? I traveled 25 miles out of my way to pick you up. I bought all the gear you're going to need for the day, not to mention forgetting some gear of my own. I was in such a hurry to get here that I can't even remember what it was I forgot! Why should I mind?"

As I was pulling out of his drive way I was incredulous. I had taken extraordinary steps to ensure his comfort and his not going was the thanks I received for my efforts. There was still two hours of driving for me and come what may I was going fishing even if Scott couldn't get himself out of bed. I never did believe his story about the fight and I thought about it all the way to the river.

So, there I was sitting in the parked car fuming over how the day was going versus how it was supposed to. As I stepped out of the car and went to the trunk to get my gear ready when there was a howl in the dark. I knew immediately there was only one animal that could make that sound, but it sounded close...I mean really close. I jerked violently to the right to hear footsteps racing towards me; there was more howling as it did! I bolted for the car door and jumped in! Just as the door closed that roaring something dashed underneath the car with a violent thump! The howls were replaced by the sound of hissing and snapping, the kind of noise you hear from that of a cornered cat, but the volume of it made it sound as though it were in the car with me. My heart was pounding and I didn't know what to do. Any form of weapon I could have used to scare off the big cat was in the trunk, and my backseats didn't fold forward like the newer models; but that wasn't the worst of it. As the rumble of the growls seeped through the floorboards there was another howl off in the near stand of trees that led to the forest. I could hear the footfalls of the paws of another mountain lion heading right for the car and the other cat. It dove beneath the car and immediately a fight broke out that buffeted the car too and fro in such a

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way as to make me feel I was in the middle of an earthquake without the threat of turning me upside down, but still...it was very violent. As I sit there feeling ridiculous and embarrassed at the predicament I thought about honking the horn but wondered if in doing so both would scatter in different directions. As fanatical as it sounds, though my fishing trip seemed to be over, I still thought about what it would take to travel down that lonely trail that was about a mile long. I wanted to fish. The thought of contending with the battling cougars in the dead of night scattering in two separate directions was enough for me to wait it out. What seemed like an eternity was probably only two minutes when the first one scrambled out and away in the direction of the river with the second in hot pursuit. As they tore off into the trees, gravel from beneath their sliding paws pelted the side of the car and windows. It sounded as though the car was being shot at; but things seemed to be going right at that point. If the cats had to go anywhere they had headed off in the direction I was hoping for, or rather, any direction that didn't head in the direction of the trail I had to traverse.

I sat there for the longest time thinking about what had happened and realized a couple of things. In my desire to ensure Scott would have the best possible time I hadn't told anyone else where I was going. Not one person would miss me anytime soon and that scared the hell out of me. I could die in the woods and every person I knew would be left scratching their heads as to where I was. I had previous experiences with mountain lions in the past, but none from the outset of the fishing trip. Here I had a choice of leaving the area unharmed or I could chance it. In the past, when confronted by elk, bears, wolves, and mountain lions I felt that each situation had been from fates telling me to wise up and stop fishing, but this was something else entirely. The whole thing felt like a game show with Bob Barker of Truth-or-Consequences.

"Behind curtain number one is a doom too terrible for you to imagine, but the rewards from the spiritual perspectives will last with you a lifetime if you survive! Behind curtain number two is a trip home and you get to live with WHAT IF for the rest of your life! To win you must travel through the woods looking over your shoulder the entire time you're in there! Which curtain do you choose?"

Holding my breath and listening I could hear nothing but the beating of my racing heart. Without even realizing it my hand was on the door. The choice had been made. I was going. Pulling up on the handle the door latch opened. I held it there in place and listened. I didn't hear anything. I opened the door just wide enough for me to get one leg out, and I listened. Still ready to dive back in the car I opened the door the rest of the way and stuck my head out above the roof and listened. Nothing, I couldn't hear a thing. With my key ready for the trunk I went to the back of the car making sure that the door remain ajar for the just in case. Every motion I made after opening the trunk felt painfully slow. I rooted around my tackle and could not find my flashlight, not even the backup; but for the moment I wasn't worried about it, rather, I thought it best to use the dim light from the trunk so I wouldn't attract further attention.

If I had been sweating before it was the first time I saw it drip in the trunk, which had just enough light for me to see it hit the duffle bag I carried all my smaller gear in. I didn't have a flashlight! It must have been one of the things I had forgotten when packing for Scott, who was feeling less of a friend and more like someone I wanted to live long enough to kill. At that moment of realization I heard the roar of the rampant cats in the woods. Getting back into the car from where I was became a blur. I was in the driver seat so fast I was embarrassed from the fantastic accomplishment. I turned the ignition over, turned on the headlights, and honked the horn and waited. The car ran like that for about twenty minutes before I turned it off. I wasn't sure but the sound of the cats seemed be leaving the rivers edge and deeper into the woods...in the direction I had to go to get to the river.

In the direction I had to go to get to the river rang in my ears like a revelation. Another decision had been made without me thinking about it. Getting out of the car for the last time I accepted the fact that if I was meant to die out in the middle of nowhere then maybe, when the fall season opened up, someone would see the car and at least call the authorities; but I wasn't completely stupid; I turned the car back on and left the door ajar as I went back to the trunk, which was still open. I geared up using the trunk light. I made sure to tie all the knots for my

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terminal gear, and to some extra leaders attaching some swivels to them so all I would have to do is snap lines together, at least that was the theory. It was hard to take my mind off the flashlight. Everything I needed for the trip was there including my fillet knife, but at the moment I was fretting over not being able to see anything without that light. In the dead of night it was something critical, especially with mountain lions roaming about. "Damn it! It's always the most important thing! The one time I ever wanted it badly enough to consider using it and it's not here, and under most circumstances the idea of using any kind of light near a river or trail only served the purpose of scaring fish! You're dead Scott! I swear I'm going to wring your neck!"

Of course I knew I never would actually wring his neck, but the prospect of it at that exact moment gave me some measure of comfort. It gave me something else to focus on.

I leaned my rods up against the car and sat in the front seat contemplating. I was fully aware that things could go from bad to worse if I went down that trail in the dark. It was hours away from sunup and the optimal fishing conditions would come and go with the rising of the sun. Nothing was going right so I decided that nothing would, and with that philosophy I got out of the car and headed into the woods.

Every sound sent tingles all over my body. I hadn't gone a quarter mile when I stopped. I couldn't hear anything at all. My heavy breathing was masking all the other sounds which scared me all the more...I had to think of something. So, standing there on the trail I remembered some of the necessary tactics to avoid confrontation with bears. Noise was the one thing hikers actually needed to make to spook bears, so it stood to reason that it could work with mountain lions. It was the exact opposite of what I had been attempting the length of the trail. So I started to talk to myself loudly, all the while purposefully shaking bushes as I went along the trail with the moonlight barely showing me the way.

"Can you hear me? You don't want to get anywhere near me! I'll cut your heart out! Run you suckers, I'll catch you and do to you the most natural thing I can think of...I'll kill you first!"

Sounds crazy right? I was still a little freaked out but the prospects of getting to the river were looking really good to me, and I started thinking about steelhead instead of dying. Ordinarily the walk takes about half an hour, but this trip took me over an hour, and not because it was dark. When I first saw the river I knew there wasn't very far to go when I saw off in the distance lights...moving flashlights.

It was extremely weird to me since I hadn't seen another vehicle in the parking area, but it wasn't something strange enough to put me off from approaching. I was sure that it was just a couple of other anglers. The idea of having company to fish with was a huge relief. I got within about seventy-yards when I called out.

"Hello! How's the fishing?"

"If you ain't a fucking bobber-jig dude you better keep right on walking!"

All my fears about the big cats disappeared. Out in the middle of nowhere two asses, not mules, become more of a problem than the cats might ever have been.

"Hey, I don't want any problems! If you guys don't want me fishing with you than that's fine; I drift and I'll be heading downstream."

"That's right mother fucker...just keep right on moving!"

Quietly, I slowly walked on by and never said a word to either one of them. I found a nice hold about another 50 yards downstream where I decided to hold off on fishing until daybreak.

As far downriver as I was the other fishermen made sure I could still hear them. I waited for the sun to come up and made sure not to respond to any of the lamentations about drift fishermen constantly crowding bobber-jig fishermen. Which I thought was rather funny since it was the middle of the summer and the likelihood of anyone else showing up was non-existent and the fact that they were taking the time to ensure I could hear them suggested they wanted me still further downriver.

Slowly the early morning rays peeked through the woods and onto the river in an area of which I intended to fish, a slot and seam near the shoreline.

I could see movement on the surface near the bank slightly upstream. While standing at the water's edge I cast

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upstream at a 90 degree angle much further than I probably had to but I wanted the presentation to look natural. The moment the terminal gear hit the water I began to reel in the slack created by the drift. It traveled downstream about 20 yards when I felt the hit. It was an incredibly hard hit, and given the direction of the drift, it was the only kind of hit I anticipated. The summer-run steelhead was all over the place jumping out of the river of heights five feet or more several times. As it came in I tailed it and put it directly back in the river satisfied that something had finally gone right.

“What the hell did you do that for? I’ll bet that’s the last goddamn fish you get all day!”

It was my happy neighbors the bobber-jig fishermen. They had been watching me fight the chromer the entire time.

Disregarding them I decided to go further downstream and see if I couldn’t put some distance between us, at the very least, so I couldn’t hear them complain anymore. I didn’t want the worst experience in the woods to be from some fishing confrontation that had no merit.

After meandering along the bank for a while I eventually I came to an eddy that was swirling on the far side of the river; though staring eyes could still be felt by my compatriots. The section of the river wasn’t terribly wide, but the main current was fast and deep. It looked like a good place to fish.

I must have been preoccupied by all that had happened because for some reason I just stared at the eddy. It felt as if I were trying to will something into happening. The water seemed to hypnotize me as I delved into thought when the back of a huge steelhead porpoised right in the seam of the very eddy I had been staring at. The anticipation of hooking into that lunger was enough to almost make me fall into the river as I hurried to cast out. As the terminal gear hit the seam of the eddy about 10 yards further upstream the current carried it slowly. It looked as though the pencil lead I was using was too heavy. Rather than recast I decided to let it drift as far as possible before reeling in, but as it went through the drift the slower it moved until finally it stopped altogether. I thought about the rotten luck of having to trim the lead and recast; it was time consuming and every second counted. I reeled in only to feel the resistance of what only could be a snag. The situation felt as though nothing I could do was going to stop my day from being complicated no matter what I did. I wrapped the mainline around my left hand and gave a huge tug on the rod when at the exact same moment the monster jumped out of the river! It was that steelhead I had seen with its back out of the eddy! It was bullet chrome hen, and couldn’t have been smaller than 18-pounds! For a summer fish it was a trophy! It was then that I realized just how close I had come to fishing some whitewater! If that whale of a fish decided to bolt towards it there was nothing my 8-pound mainline and I were going to be able to do about it! When it bolted upstream I couldn’t believe the good luck! It went all the way up to the next pool where it put on a show of acrobatics all fishermen long to see. The perfect chrome scales glistened as it jumped each time. It was so bright it had the reflection of a mirror in the sun.

“Well goddamn...look at you!”

They had seen me fighting the stealie and had come down to watch...I supposed.

“Ain’t you special? We’ve been here since yesterday and haven’t had so much as a nibble and here you come prancing in here and got yourself a fish in no time at all! Did you figure out how to snag em?”

“What do you guys want? You didn’t want me fishing anywhere near you so downriver I went and now here I am. If you don’t like to be around other fishermen very much you wouldn’t know it by the way you keep talking at me.”

All of this was going on while the beautiful fish was flailing about. It was a test of all the fishing skill I had garnered over the years.

“We just want to know how the hell you got those two fish so fast. We know what were doing and still they ain’t biting. Whatcha using?”

“I’m just drifting a corkie (Lil’ Corky) and yarn with some scent, that’s it.”

It was at that moment the fish was coming in for me to tail it.

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“That ain’t no damn salmon ya know? It’s not a very big fish. It might be 10-pounds.”

“Who are you guys kidding? I’ve been fishing for a long time and whatever the fish is it most certainly is not 10-pounds.”

“You think it’s smaller than that?”

As I was tailing it I got a good look at it. I had stepped into the river up to my knees and could tell by the peduncle (Tail-wrist) that it was huge.

“Look, if you guys really want to know what I was using I don’t mind telling you, but if you’re just down here to harass me I’ve got nothing left to say.”

“We just wanted to see how big your fish was anyway. Don’t really care what you were using.”

They turned around and left. This time when they went back to where they had been fishing they packed up all their gear and left. I don’t know exactly where they were going but the thought of them heading in the direction of my car left me wondering if they would do something to it. The whole thing with those guys put a damper on my fish, which was gorgeous. It was a beautiful fish that was twice the size of the first one. I strung it up and sat down on some rocks. It had been quite a day. The fight of the fish must have lasted about 10 minutes but most of the last portions of the battle between me and it eluded my thought of recollection; it was frustrating. I laid my rod against an overhanging tree and looked across the river where I saw a mule deer and her doe. They were on the other side of the river, but from their motions I could see they intended to cross the raging river. It was the doe that made me think the idea of crossing was insane. The mule paced back and forth for a short time before jumping in with the doe in tow. Immediately the deer were swept sideways downriver, but they were making progress. Perpendicular to the far side bank they crossed the river downstream about a hundred yards and made it to the bank not more than 50 yards from me. I laid back and just watched them. Watching them cross that section of the Cowlitz inspired me. The plunge into the river seemed to be the same kind of plunge I had taken when I decided to walk down the trail in the dead of the night while wild cats were about. Everything seemed to be in harmony and balance. I had been intensely musing when I realized that both deer were coming towards me. Slowly, I moved to my vest, which I had laid out beside me, and took out my camera. I snapped off a couple of photographs to commemorate the moment. To my astonishment both the mule and doe got within 15-feet of me and just stared. The curious nature of both of them was enough to make me think about all that had transpired in a spiritual sense. Right then and there the doe lay down and the mother stood watch. They were completely unafraid of me. The compliment was awesome and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. The language we had spoken was of a universal tone that only we could understand at that particular moment, so I thought. After about 20 minutes both mother and off-spring moved back the other way and melted into the surrounding woods. The day felt complete. I was wrong.

I decided that I should wait for some time before heading out. I wanted to give the deer a far enough head start that I wouldn’t scare them as I went back along the trail. It was still pretty early in the morning, but the day and night had felt very long yet whole which left me nothing left to do but to breakdown my gear and head out feeling utterly satisfied how everything had turned out. After gilling the huge fish, I left it on the stringer and tied it to a thick short branch, which I used a holding tool for packing the fish out; it took the bite off my hands the line was sure to cause. Slowly I made my way to the trail.

Everything was calm and quite. Birds were chirping, the river was babbling less and less the further into the trail I moved. The sun was out and just getting higher than the trees when a small finch landed on my right shoulder. It was no surprise that a bird would land on anyone but I was still walking when it did. The undulations of my shoulders should have been enough to keep it from landing, but there it was singing to me; even with the light flapping of the steelhead’s tail against my backside. I continued to walk and felt a sense of pride I’ve rarely felt. The homage that little fellow was giving me was something I wished I could communicate back. I did the best I could by not disturbing it and continued on. The finch left my shoulder after only a minute, or thereabouts, but the sense of well-being was huge. I couldn’t imagine what else could be better than that.

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Nature had communed with me and I had done my best to return the favor.

Just breaking through a stand of trees I heard a rustling behind me. Bushes were getting knocked down by something or someone running. The grass in the field of which I was standing was about shoulder high, but I could see back in the trees a deer running faster than I had ever seen a deer run. As it approached the trail, I had been in, it started to hop, like skipping, or something like that, and as it did it turned its head in my direction. It saw me. Without rhyme or reason it ran towards me when I saw further back in the trees a mountain lion racing down the hill from the same direction the deer had just been. I didn't know what to do so I froze in place. The mule ran right for me. It looked like the same female I had seen earlier. At first I thought she was going to run me over but it ran right by me, I mean it was so close I could feel the wind from it as it raced on by. The eyes of the animal were huge. It was in a panic and so was I. It was as it was passing by that I realized the crime that had just been perpetrated against me. That damn animal ran as close as it did to cover its scent with mine. It had literally scraped a mountain lion onto me. I turned to the direction of the trees and heard the panting of the huge cat as it traveled down the hill, growling its discontent. The second it hit the trail it made the same 90 degree turn the deer had. I know the rules of the woods. You're never supposed to run from a charging animal but you know I did! I dropped everything and ran like hell! I don't know what the world record for track is in speed running, but considering I was wearing waders, and a vest while in boots I'd say I was doing something close to the speed of sound. The grass I was running through seemed to part before me! Ordinarily, I would have looked at the ground to watch out for roots, logs, and underbrush to avoid tripping, but if I encountered any during my escape I must have flown over them! The fluid motions of my legs scurrying around the brush and grass as I made it to the last stand of trees just before the parking lot felt like a roller coaster of planned steps, though nothing could have been further from the truth! In point of fact I was in a panic anticipating the pounce of that cat at any moment! It didn't happen. Off in the short distance I could see the car through the trees and thought for a moment that the ironies of the day would see me dead at the door of my car one key turn from salvation. Rather than risk taking time to open the car I decided to jump on top of it instead. At least the idea of making a stand on the car seemed better than becoming a chew-toy without a fight. With a single leap I was on the roof of the car twisting around to wait for the imminent attack. There was nothing. Not wanting to believe that it was too good to be true I didn't move. Seconds felt like hours and minutes felt like days and week but still nothing came from the woods. It was only after several minutes had passed by that I could finally hear the panicked huffing and puffing I was making as I tried to breathe. An hour went by before I got off the car and opened the trunk. It was then I realized why the cougar had not come after me. All my gear was still in the woods. Anything I'd been carrying had been dropped to run for my life. My hat, rod, and fish were still in there. The Fish! The fish I had risked everything for was on the ground. Of course it didn't take a genius to figure out that the reason I wasn't cat chow was because that gorgeous steelhead was. The day was a complete washout after all. That deer! That damn beautiful deer snookered me! Though I think of the brilliance behind the crime against me the natural need for survival was something to respect and not hate. It was only doing what came natural and in turn I did the same thing. In the end, that summer steelhead saved both me and the deer. All things came to bear and I respected everything that happened. Even those nasty fishermen had a role in the outcome of the day. If they hadn't wanted me to go further downstream I might not have ever caught either one of the fish and who knows, maybe I really would have been on the cougar menu without the fish. Though there was an intense desire to go back in the woods to get my rod and hat I didn't. I did a lot of things that day that could have been construed as crazy, but I wasn't insane.

The trip home was short by comparison to the trip there, at least, that's how it felt. The next time I saw Scott he asked me if I got any fish and all I ever told him was no. What else could I say? The events that took place that day were fantastic and hard to believe and I was there. His ironic response of being glad he hadn't gone is something I think about from time to time. He too played a role in the outcome of that day. If he had gone with me things could have been different; who's to say what that would be.

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It's an interesting dilemma having your life in your own hands and taking the risks that might end it. I always wondered if I could face dire situations and follow my convictions to the end, even if there were other options. Philosophically, every choice I made that day was on the basis of the way I feel and think and I was tested. I often wonder if I actually passed the test, and in response to anyone that might ask me the same thing I can only say that I'm alive. Though my ideals had been weathered and strained I'm still here to tell the tale.