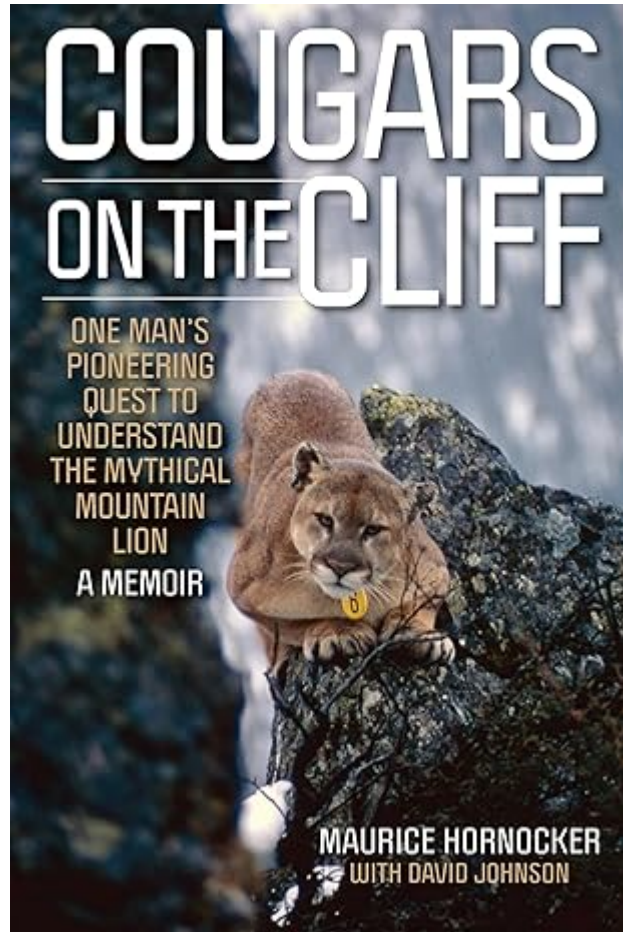


# Cougars on the Cliff: One Man's Pioneer Quest to Understand the Mythical Mountain Lion—a Memoir

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## BOOK REVIEW

Maurice Hornocker (with David Johnson). 2023. Lyons Press, Essex, CT, USA. 295 pages (hardcover). \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-4930-7329-0

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*My memories are remnants of what field research was, but may never be again. Simplicity and intuition have been relegated if not lost. Feet on the ground have been replaced by the latest technology. Yes, remote sensing and all the gadgets and gizmos of the digital era have made the study of secretive species less challenging and the collection of quantitative data much easier. But the technology tends to focus solely on the specific target species, not the environmental forces that can and do alter behavior. The researcher's immersion into the target animal's environment, I maintain, leads to a better understanding of the animal and its world. Gut feelings garnered while trudging through an apex*

*predator's home range, the direct observations of details within the ecosystem, the confirming or debunking of theories by scouring the earth—these can't be replaced by technical inventions. Nor can technology match the thrill of finally locking eyes with the animal you seek to better understand. Such encounters are organic, aboriginal, primal, and even downright life changing.*  
—Maurice Hornocker, *Cougars on the Cliff*

The words above, which don't appear until midway through *Cougars on the Cliff*, could have served as an opening admonition or a succinct introduction to this timely and interesting book that describes what has become known as the Idaho Cougar Project (Project) and ran from 1964 to 1973. In writing this memoir, Maurice Hornocker has provided the reader with an intriguing and detailed account of his early effort to understand the basics of mountain lion ecology. In comments that appeared on the dust jacket, Michael Tewes emphasized the challenges that Hornocker faced, noting that, "It takes a rare collection of virtues—courage, confidence, and essentially grit—to hike into a vast, daunting wilderness of snow-covered mountains to chase, catch and release mountain lions on foot. Maurice Hornocker was the first, and he did it in an era of little technology and a lot of peril."

This book consists of a preface that is followed by four parts and an epilogue. Each of the four sections is dedicated to a specific field season of Dr. Hornocker's research, with the final part addressing the last year of the investigation and some additional and important events that transpired thereafter. In addition to the preface, there are 37 chapters and a very thoughtful epilogue. Each of the parts is comprised of several chapters and, as noted appreciatively by the author (p. xv), composing this memoir allowed him to shed the constraints with which technical writing has become so burdened. This book is, indeed, a compilation of memories describing the achievements, acquisition of knowledge, failures, family life, frustrations, personalities, politics, public meetings, satisfaction, science, and success associated with the Project. Success is best represented by the fact that mountain lions have benefited from science-directed management, as embodied in the author's statement (p. xiii) that, "... the cougar, *an extraordinarily adaptable animal* [emphasis added], has responded by repopulating much of its historic home range—notably without ever being officially declared threatened or endangered."

Each of the chapters could have appeared individually as a short article in a sporting magazine, a magazine of broad public interest, or an outlet dedicated solely to wildlife conservation. By writing this memoir, however, the author has saved readers the trouble of searching widely for those articles, and has presented them in a logical order. The text is illustrated nicely with vintage photographs—either by the author or members of his team—and that he describes as having been made with a heavy, 35-mm Nikon-F camera that, "... a person could use ... to pound nails" (p. 184).

Throughout the book, Hornocker quotes extensively from field notes retrieved from his personal archives; by my count, 56 of those were attributed to personnel that worked with him on the Project. Most of them were penned by Wilbur Wiles, Maurice's primary collaborator and houndsman, friend, and what I would describe as having been an outstanding colleague. Hornocker and Wiles learned a great deal from each other, but together they learned a great deal about mountain lions and shared that newfound information with the scientific community. Hornocker also quotes from his personal notes a total of 116 times (again by my count, so I might be off by one or more), and he relied heavily on details recorded on site and throughout the Project; I suspect it took many hundreds of hours to review, organize, and then compile them into this easy-to-read and valuable account of the frustrations and achievements that are described throughout the text.

In 1964, when Maurice Hornocker was launching his ambitious and historic effort to investigate mountain

lion ecology in some of the most rugged and remote terrain in North America, I was suffering through Miss LeVan's 10<sup>th</sup> Grade English class at San Pedro High School. Six years later, when his initial results were published (Hornocker 1970), I was in the first year of graduate school at California State University Long Beach and wondering just where life would take me. Three years later, when the second treatise (Seidensticker et al. 1973) on the Project was published, I had completed an M.A. degree, but still wondered where I was headed. Had *Cougars on the Cliff* been available at that time, it likely would have had some influence on my immediate plans; I am not disappointed with the way things turned out, but I also am glad this book has become available.

All in all, *Cougars on the Cliff* is a worthy read, and I strongly recommend it from historical and scientific perspectives. I fear, however, that the proportion of newly minted wildlife biologists that currently experience the trials, tribulations, and satisfaction described in the book is small. The research conducted by Hornocker and his team was accomplished by wearing out boots, by making observations and interpreting them in the context of life history events, capturing and recapturing individual animals (and for the most part without the advantage of radio telemetry), plotting those locations on paper maps, and then transforming those data and observations into conclusions based on what was experienced in the field. Moreover, the team members were vulnerable to numerous dangerous conditions while carrying out the research.

These days, I see more and more evidence that some individuals would rather take advantage of the comfort of their office, and simply view information transmitted directly from the field to a video display, than expend time and energy in a field setting. I sense also that an increasingly common strategy is to utilize incredibly sophisticated software to build any number of models that potentially explain what was occurring or what had occurred, perhaps hundreds of kilometers from the comfort of the office. Hornocker shared a similar concern in the epilogue, wherein he wrote, "I hope this tale I've told ... will inspire young scientists to ... lace up their boots, enter the world's remaining wild places, and experience the thrill of in-person discovery."

I've not had the privilege of meeting Dr. Hornocker, but I couldn't agree more with that statement. I am optimistic that his book will rekindle the fire and enthusiasm that many of us experienced during our careers, and I hope the amount of physical effort that went into the original research, as well as the writing of this memoir, will be an inspiration to many. If readers respond accordingly, it is my belief that wildlife, wildlife science, and wildlife conservation will, in the long run, be better served.

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