

# A Ghost in the Darkness

Dying is not an option, and death is not a game which will soon be over. Death is not anything, it's the absence of presence, nothing more. The endless time of never coming back, a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes not sound...

*Poem written by Tom Stoppard*



**T**HE EVENING of August 5, 2014, in the wilderness of North-western Alberta, was spectacular. It's not often you simultaneously have perfect weather in the mountains and the pleasure of being surrounded by great co-workers. Friends actually. As are most tragedies in our lives, they are unexpected and arrive in the blink of an eye. Often, these sudden events bring forward the inherent human spirit to survive and the selfless acts and heroic efforts of others to save a loved one. On August 2014, death came in the form of a cougar, but dying was not something on the mind of its intended victim.

The Alberta ESRD (Environment and Sustainable Resource Development) Fisheries team had assembled in a remote location in the Nose Mountain region, southwest of Grande Prairie, for an annual stream fish count and survey. Some streams were to be accessed by foot and OHV's with more remote areas via helicopter. When I received my invite to attend the weeklong event, I was thrilled. What better opportunity to see the remotest areas of my new district, get up in a chopper, camp with great people, and do a little fishing? The invite included a very lengthy safety briefing plan and as I read it, I distinctly remember thinking, "Wow, who puts together such an in-depth and detailed safety plan?" Someone had gone through a great deal of work to produce this plan and it almost seemed like overkill. Little did I know how important and lifesaving the plan would soon become.

August 5<sup>th</sup> was a day still early enough in the summer where the sun stays up well past 10:00 p.m. In it, the shadows lengthen while the temperatures drop and the animals start to wake for their evening forays. Following a day of 30 degree weather, the evening was a soothing time, a time to get a fire going and maybe roast a wiener or marshmallow while plans were being made and stories were being told. The wild lightning and thunderstorm that had rolled

through turned everything to mud, but the sky was now clearing and spirits were lifted.

The cougar feared not humans nor their noisy activities, having heard these sounds his entire life. Be it logging, oil and gas exploration or hunters and their ATV's, the wild cat had become conditioned to such commotion. Like most cougars, it knew humans are

breaks. Marcia was the last to go. She took the same path into the shadows to what she had called her "bathroom with a great view." Marcia had walked a long distance from the group while admiring the summer night and last light's beautiful scenery.

Returning from her walk, a mere 40 meters from camp, nearby movement triggered Marcia's attention. A very



normally oblivious to its presence as it patiently watched the group from just outside the camp's perimeter. As the last sliver of daylight faded into dusk, the cat's confidence grew. Darkness was his domain. The onset of pitch black also sparks the desire for most humans to complete their day's final tasks, such as collecting firewood, prepping the tent and of course, bathroom breaks.

There were eight people in camp that night, and a last minute shift change had precluded me from attending and being part of the team. Five men; Adrian, Chad, Myles, Mike and Marcel and three women, Marcia, Jenny and Kristy, were camped on the abandoned oil lease site. The camp was surrounded by a newly regenerating clear-cut loaded with old stumps and young new trees and grasses. One at a time, the women left the lease and entered the edge of the clear-cut area for their bathroom

large cougar emerged from the under-brush, only meters in front of her. The cougar's ominous green eyes locked to hers, its ears were laid back as it slinked forward, rapidly closing the gap. A person needn't any previous experience with a predator to understand this look and posture, it is instinctual from somewhere deep in our past. Marcia knew what was coming. Marcia yelled and raised a shovel, her only weapon. The cougar sprang forward and began its attack. Marcia had time for one quick swing connecting solidly with the side of the cougars head. The blow had no effect. The cougar was on her.

As the cougar lunged forward, Marcia tripped on some brush and the cat's jaws closed over her face. In typical cougar predatory behavior, the cat went for Marcia's head trying to crush the vertebrae just below the back of her skull. This was likely the cougar's first attempt



on human prey. Hence, as it tried to grasp her skull, it quickly found its jaws were not wide enough to accomplish the task as it had done countless times on deer and other ungulates, which have much narrower skulls.

Marcia was now in a fight for her life, but her attempts seemed so feeble against the tremendous strength of the cougar. The cougar released its jaws allowing Marcia to roll over onto her front side. This new position offered Marcia protection of her internal organs and neck. She recalled with horror, the sounds of the cougar's canine teeth grating against her skull over and over as it tried to get its grip to crush it.

Again, the cougar's jaws engulfed her head and with a solid grip, the cougar picked her up off the ground and violently shook her the way a dog shakes a squeeze toy. At that point, Marcia felt every ounce of her strength fade away. Fear and doubt began to creep into her thoughts. The cougar had readjusted its grip on her head, this time bounding towards heavier brush, carrying her completely off the ground.

It was now 10:20 p.m. and Chad was the first to hear the screams. He knew Marcia was in trouble. Only minutes before, she had passed by him behind

the trailer and into the bush. Chad began yelling as loud as possible, followed closely by Myles as they ran towards the commotion. As Chad ran towards the screams he imagined a bear attack, but as Chad and Myles neared the attack site they observed something straight out of a horror movie. Both men momentarily puzzled as they saw Marcia's boots lying motionless on the ground. In the blink of an eye, the boots disappeared into the heavy brush as if tied to a puppet string. Myles was the first one into the brush and saw the cat standing on top of Marcia, its jaws still engulfing her head. Myles, being at least 275 pounds of muscle, has been described by fellow staff as a "brick wall". When he landed a solid kick into the cougar's ribs, the cat took notice and released Marcia. Chad is also a big man, over six feet and 260 pounds. With two formidable men towering over the cat while yelling for all their voices were worth, the cat thought twice and retreated into the brush.

Myles braved the brush and immediately began assessing Marcia's condition, knowing the cougar was still only meters away, watching. Chad continued to yell at the top of his lungs at decibels sure to steal speech the next

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day. The rest of the group were now in full gear and began the execution of that "lengthy" safety plan I had looked over a few days earlier. Myles took the role of first responder, assessing Marcia's injuries. Marcia told Myles her skull was crushed. As Chad attempted to apply pressure to the enormous wound, he could feel the skull plates seemed to be "floating and in a fluid like state" so he immediately switched tactics to avoid damaging Marcia's brain.

With the inability to provide direct pressure to the skull for fear of further injury, Marcia became uneasy. It was

decided she would revert to holding her own head. This action not only helped to relax Marcia, it also gave her some control. As Myles continued with his care, Marcia remained conscious and was actually giving him directions! Chad stood guard over Myles and Marcia, putting himself between the still lurking cougar and its victim. Mike and Adrian soon arrived and set up a defensive perimeter. They began taking turns running gear from the camp to the attack site. Adrian had obtained a shotgun during one of the runs, and now stood guard over the first aiders as they worked. Adrian then handed off the shotgun to Mike as he returned to camp to help others with logistics and provide ETA's of the helicopter.

Marcel, Kristy and Jenny all worked the available communication devices including a satellite phone, cell phone, two-way radio. Kristy activated her "SPOT" units emergency button. Even with every technology possible being available, communications were slow, the passing thunderstorm weakened signals and the first connection to STARS came via the satellite phone. It was very weak.

During one of the supply runs from camp, Mike had returned by taking a short cut through some brush. There was the cougar, lying flat on the ground staring at him. The cougar had never left the attack site, but rather had repositioned itself advantageously in some cover. The cat watched the first aiders, waiting for an opportunity to reclaim its prey. At this point, Mike's two camp dogs entered onto the scene. They blocked a second attack and ran the cougar off into the darkness. Everybody grouped into either pairs or trios, pepper spray at the ready as they anxiously waited for news for a potential rescue.

Back at Grande Prairie, STARS was now aware of the incident and location. In the first of a series of unbelievable coincidences, Marcia's husband, a STARS pilot, had just landed the STARS helicopter in Grande Prairie. A violent electrical storm now settled in at the airport, the same one that had blown through Marcia's camp only

hours earlier. The helicopter could not be refueled until it passed. He had just completed his shift and his crew change when the call came in at 10:40 p.m., but he had no idea who the victim was and headed home for the night. Eventually, the storm passed and the helicopter was able to refuel and take off, arriving at 11:45 p.m., over an hour and one half after the initial attack. With massive

this time, a local hound's man had arrived and released his dogs on the cat's trail. As the original fisheries crew was departing, a GPS tracking collar on one of the hound's necks was indicating the cat had been treed. They left with some satisfaction.

As officers rapidly approached, they discovered the hounds had hit a bear track just past camp and turned onto it, baying up a bear. Meanwhile, the cougar made its get away into the remote region of Muddy Creek and as the sun rose, the temperature and winds quickly picked up, eliminating all scent and any chance of starting out on the cougar again. In fact, the chase had just begun, and nobody had any idea of just how long it was actually going to last or where it would take the officers.

The officers each took different tasks, setting traps, gathering DNA samples, and doing random patrols in the vicinity of the site. By the end of the day, the hounds were exhausted, as were the officers. The cat had vanished into the vast expanse of wilderness.

The next morning, a new hound's man and his fresh dogs had arrived from Sundre, Alberta, and a new chase began. Officer Howarth, Willie Rasmussen, and I began a sweeping foot patrol in the Muddy Creek drainage hoping to pick up fresh tracks as we covered ground. As the sun came up, it was already hot, and by late afternoon we had traveled 25 kilometers with the hounds. By this time, it was plus 30 degrees and dead calm. A few false starts by the hounds had got our hearts racing, but nothing panned out; it was just too dry for the ground to retain any scent.

The GPS showed our team, to hit the oil road on the mountain top, still had 3 km of solid uphill bush whacking before us. Everybody was so tired, it may have been 300km. As we pushed uphill through the overgrown cutline, and through hundreds of meters of stinging nettles, we began to realize the sheer size of the area. At km 28, we hit a tiny fresh water stream and took in some much needed fluid. Both the dogs and



blood loss and trauma, Marcia's will of steel and the dedication of first aid team had managed to keep her alive. The first medications and IV fluids were started, and at 12:25 a.m., Marcia was secured in the helicopter as it lifted off, disappearing into the darkness.

Just like that, it was back to dead silence as the group of seven reassembled under the awning of the trailer and began to absorb what had just happened. At 1:30 a.m., someone's flashlight caught the cougar's eyes shining back at them, it was still haunting the edge of the camp site, eerily watching the group. A shot was fired, causing the cougar to flee into the night.

Back at Grande Prairie, officers from the Alberta Fish & Wildlife Enforcement Branch had rallied and began their response to the mountain top. Mike Trepianier, Grande Prairie Regional Problem Wildlife Specialist, District Officers Eldon Pullishy from Grande Prairie and Chuck Best from Valley View began the response, followed shortly thereafter by Problem Wildlife Technician Murray Howarth, also from Grande Prairie.

As dawn broke the next day, the cougar had not been seen again, but the keen eye of an officer located a fresh cougar track in the dirt near camp. By



the men tried to submerge themselves in the 2 inches of water. It was such a welcome relief. After the brief rest, the crew pushed forward. As we neared the mountain road the vegetation got so thick we could not see each other. We were forced to communicate by check in shouts. In the lead, I neared the road. As I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, I felt the hot wind swirl around me. Within that swirl came the foul stench of what my brain instantly recognized as a dead animal of some sort, and I knew from the potency of the smell I was too close.

Although I had a shotgun slung on my back, I immediately went for my side-arm and quickly unsnapped the holster. Throughout the day, we had been seeing fresh grizzly bear tracks, including a track larger than any of us had ever seen in our collective careers. A grizzly was forefront in my thoughts. At that moment, the brush in front of me began

to part as some unknown animal began its charge. Just as my pistol cleared the holster, a black bear appeared on a dead run, ears pinned back with full intentions of flattening me. In that instant, I remember settling the front sight of my weapon on the bear's head and thinking, "Front sight, front sight, front sight!" which is what our firearms trainers had drilled into our brains during close range training. At the shot, the bear whirled 180 degrees and vanished as fast as he had arrived.

Officer Howarth and P.W.T Rasmussen began yelling, and I responded "Bear! Bear!" Within moments they arrived at my side with a puzzled look as I explained a bear had just charged me. We began to look for some clues and located blood only 3 meters from where I was standing at the shot; that was too close!

After waiting for a half hour, the three of us took on a triangle type formation,

and began tracking the bear into the near zero visibility brush. After only 15 meters Officer Howarth's rifle safety clicked off as he yelled, "Bear!" A few seconds passed and we found the bear had expired, the bullet entered between its head and collar bone hitting its heart and a lung, killing it almost instantly.

We soon located the bear's kill about 15 meters away, which it had been lying on and protecting. We all felt sad that the bear had been killed doing what came naturally to it, but the shot had barely spared me from possibly joining Marcia in the hospital as another mauling victim. As we returned to the trucks, the sun was setting and not a trace of the ghost had been found. The trapping efforts went on for another 10 days, but with no results. The response finally came to a close for the time being.

Meanwhile, all attention had been turned to Marcia, and supporting her recovery. Upon arriving at the Grande



Prairie hospital, Marcia underwent a very lengthy surgery to reattach her scalp, which had almost been entirely ripped away in the attack. It took 144 staples and 1.6 meters of suture line to accomplish the task, but Marcia made it through with flying colors. At only 110 pounds, she did not have anywhere near the volume of blood to lose as most of us, but somehow she survived. Marcia's skull had not been crushed in the attack as originally thought, but the mess left behind by the cougar could only be interpreted by the first responders as such. They had saved her life with their valiant efforts. With friends and family constantly at her side, Marcia began her recovery with a gradual return to work after only three months. The following month Marcia returned to the attack site with Officer Trepanier. Marcia was always a beautiful young woman and remains as such with her physical injuries now barely visible.

In yet another cruel twist to this story, on January 15, five months after the attack, Marcia was revisited by another cougar. Standing in the kitchen of her acreage home on the outskirts of Grande Prairie, Marcia saw her partner Josh disappear behind the side of their house on the run. She walked out onto the deck to investigate, and within moments she found herself within two meters of yet another cougar. This time, the cougar bounded past her and dissolved into the forest without further incident.

As Marcia's partner Josh returned, he told Marcia he had ran after their German Pointer that had just chased the cougar off their deck. The cougar was hoping their dog would be its meal that afternoon. With some luck on our side, a hound's man was coincidentally in route to Grande Prairie, and arrived within 2 hours of the encounter. Grande Prairie FWEB Officers Pullishy and Bolland were able to successfully tree the cougar, and dispatched the animal within 500 meters of Marcia's home. Shortly after this second encounter, Marcia and Josh, her long time best friend and STARS air ambulance pilot, fast forwarded their engagement, and married on February 7, 2015!

In an undying effort to give Marcia some closure, Officer Howarth made

numerous trips back to the attack site both on and off duty, for six months trying to find and track the cougar, or call it in with an electronic call, to no avail. On one occasion, I had attended with Officer Howarth and we called in four grizzly bears within 30 minutes. What a wild spot! Between trappers and hunters in the area, two cougars were killed within 10 km of the attack site. DNA samples were submitted. One was a huge male weighing 186 pounds, but at this time there have been no DNA matches and the original ghost is still out in the vast wilds, somewhere.

In an effort to benefit and recognize the STARS air ambulance staff and service, the ESRD family had raised \$5500.00 in Marcia's name which was donated to the STRS Fund A Fight program.

Marcia continues her physical and emotional recovery with the unending support of friends and family. She reports having good days and bad days. The summer of 2015 saw Marcia back out in the wilds working with her team. Coincidentally, exactly one year had passed to the day of the attack, when Marcia and her co-workers saw a chunk of meat floating down the creek they were sampling. Fresh cougar tracks were in the mud all around its banks.

The good days are slowly increasing and Marcia is grateful to all of her friends, coworkers and family who have helped her out during this ordeal. Knowing how much her co-workers cared and how much effort they were willing to put in to find her cougar has greatly helped with the recovery. We all applaud Marcia's efforts in her fisheries conservation role which benefits all Albertans and are thankful for the heroic lifesaving efforts of all of her comrades on that fateful night.

I would like to thank Marcia and all of the staff involved in this event for their input into this story to ensure its accuracy and completeness. One should not be scared to enter the woods for any reason, but we must all keep our heads up, be prepared and continue to enjoy the wonders of nature. There are ghosts in the darkness. ☺

*By Alberta District Fish and Wildlife Officer Lorne D. Rinkel*