

On being a farm wife - And other hazards

Joyce Bupp



The cry of a kitten, that's what it sounded like.

In the shadowy darkness of early morning, I listened for a repeat of whatever had wakened me. The Farmer stirred, also awake.

"Do you think the bobcat's back?" I whispered to him.

About 10 yards from where we slept on the screened sleeping porch, an injured mule deer fawn recuperated in a sturdy, wire enclosure. After tumbling over a high cliff upriver — probably escaping a predator — the fawn had been rescued from a pile of river rocks by a group of white-water rafters. Its injured leg and mangled rump were healing nicely, after examination and treatment by a later group of rafters — six veterinarians.

Faced with the choice of letting the spotted fawn die, or bottle feed it as she had so many calves over the years, our daughter was raising the orphan here at the ranch.

In fact, the fawn had become the major attraction at Kirkwood Historic Ranch, Idaho, in Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. Hells Canyon is the deepest gorge in North America — and incredibly isolated. Travel is limited, by river on tourist jetboats that skip over the Snake's dozens of turbulent, white-water rapids, or rubber rafts that plummet through them.

Roads are almost non-existent in the canyon's 100-mile wild river stretch. Trails — two feet wide and either blasted from the sides of sheer rock cliffs or clinging to steep, brushy slopes — are as high as 400 feet above the waters of the Snake. They are surmountable by foot (do not look down!) or by extremely sure-footed horses or mules. Rattlesnakes, scorpions and black widow spiders are among the canyon's year-round

"residents."

For the second summer, our daughter and her husband were living here, working as rangers for the U.S. Forest Service at this historic site. No longer an operating ranch, Kirkwood is tribute to a way of life that tough sheep ranchers scabbled from an incredibly harsh and isolated world unto itself. Neither the small museum they tend, nor the snug little house in which they live, has electricity or phone.

They love it. So did we in the few days we'd been here.

And now, on this last night of our stay, we puzzled at what had wakened us. Was the bobcat back that had days before come hungrily snooping at the fawn's cage in broad daylight? The Farmer snatched the flashlight kept nearby, eased through the door to the small porch outside — and gasped one adrenalin-spiked word.

"COUGAR!"

Striking to the bedroom across the hall, I hammered on what I hoped was a door, calling our son-in-law. In split seconds, six of us

watched, dumbstruck, at the drama unfolding yards away. The cougar, dead fawn in mouth, was trying to escape the wire cage. Our son-in-law breathlessly uttered a phrase he'd repeat numerous times: "Man, that's a BIG cat!"

Though it seemed minutes, the huge cat fled the pen in probably 30 seconds, easily clearing the five-foot-high garden enclosure adjoining the fawn's pen. Hovering together we turned the light on my watch: 3:40 a.m.

No one volunteered to go investigate. Brushy, rocky canyon walls frame the very edge of the lawn. Returning to sleep seemed impossible; The Farmer kept jumping up every 10 minutes to spotlight the stretch of lawn.

A bit braver in sunsplashed daylight, we surveyed the killing scene. The heavy fencing was buckled and pushed inward on all sides, and the top mashed where the cougar had jumped up on top. From there, it leaped down into

the adjoining, fenced garden, finally ripping a corner of the wire loose from the post holding the fence between the two enclosures. In the process, it mashed their onion patch and left behind paw prints as wide as The Farmer's big hands. Telltale bits of beige fur clung to numerous spots on the wire.

Later that day, we had to leave the canyon to return home. Our son-in-law accompanied us part way downriver, having overnight business to attend to, leaving our daughter to hold down Kirkwood Ranch. Alone.

Left behind when the cougar fled hours before was the dead fawn. Though we disposed of its body, we all knew the probability of the cat returning again that night. No one said much about it — but we all knew.

Leaving Kirkwood Historic Ranch in Hells Canyon was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

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