

Skunked by

By: Dave Schmitz



It was the mid-1970s and I was in the Brooks Range living in a tiny trappers cabin along a creek named Bull Run. I had no dogs or snowmachine that year and was using a sturdy pair of 10" by 60" wood and babiche snowshoes to check my traps. A few days before,

I had broken out a trail downstream and made a few sets for lynx using both snares and foot-hold traps. I had stayed around the cabin cutting wood cut and getting other chores done and now was the time to see if my sets had caught any fur.

Strapping on the "webs" I was thinking, "Man, those snare sets that I made were in good willow country with lynx tracks. I sure hope I find one tangled up." It was fairly mild (around 5 below zero) and the animals should be moving. I was two miles down the snowshoe trail when I got to the place where my trail turned to the right, into the willows where I had seen tracks. I was excited when I saw fresh lynx tracks heading down my trail. I was already thinking about how I'd be skinning this first lynx of the season.

When I reached the snare, there were lynx tracks going up to the snare, and on the other side there were lynx tracks leaving it. I said to myself, "I made the loop too big and the lynx slid right through it without setting off the snare." It was a big disappointment. After adjusting the snare size, I did a high kick and turn-step with the snowshoes and headed back on the same side trail I had come down.

Continuing down my main snowshoe trail, I passed several sets that were unchanged with no fresh tracks around. My next set was a cubby next to a nice white spruce that I used for the backing. I had wired a foot-hold trap to a three inch alder. As I got within thirty

yards, I could tell my set had made a hit. The snow and brush were torn up and the cubby sticks were flattened. When I snowshoed up to the trap, it was sprung but there was nothing in it but a few gray and black hairs. "Lynx," I thought to myself, "but what in the world happened here?" The spruce tree had claw marks all the way up to about six feet off the ground. It looked like a battle had taken place. Then, I read the jumble of tracks around the set. "A wolverine was here and stole my lynx," I said out loud to no one in particular. Sure enough, beyond the tracks of the big struggle were a set of big wolverine tracks with the bloody imprint of the lynx being dragged away. I followed those tracks to where my trail ended and they continued on down the creek in the snow.

Something didn't look right in the deep snow I was now breaking through. Around a corner, the creek had overflowed pretty good but had frozen over



Lynx tracks leading into the willows



Wolverines

thick enough for me to walk on safely. I took off my snowshoes and carried them under my left arm while I had my Savage over and under .22/20g shotgun slung over my right shoulder. The overflow was covered with a one inch thick layer of feathery ice crystals known as “hoar frost” in the North. In the frost, I could clearly read the story of my lynx. It was being dragged away

When I got to the John River, there was a dark spot hopping around about 100 yards away.

by a large wolverine that was now having easier going because the surface was solid ice with a thin layer of frost. What surprised me was that just off to the side of the wolverine dragging the lynx was a second set of slightly smaller wolverine tracks loping along. This was the first time I was tracking a pair of wolverine and it was pretty exciting.

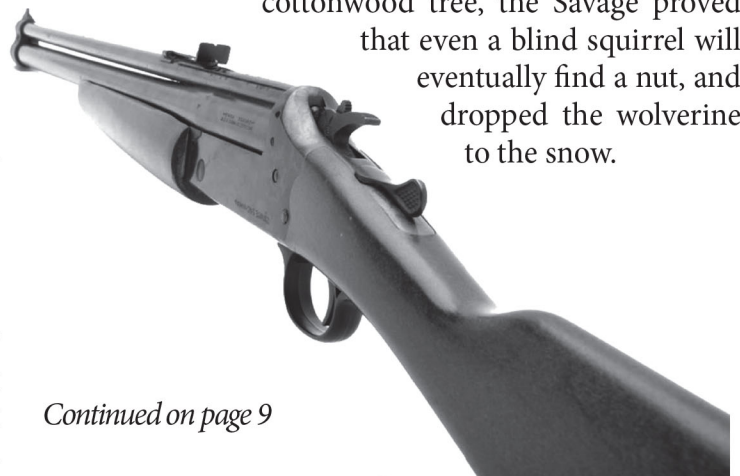
I walked and jogged along on the creek, knowing that in about a quarter of a mile, the creek would dump into the much larger John River. As I approached the junction of the two frozen waterways, I could hear the wind howling down the John River. I tried to mentally prepare for whatever scenario I would find when I reached the river. I hoped to see the wolverine but figured that was a real long shot. When I got to the John River, there was a dark spot hopping around about 100 yards away.

The Savage with the .22 in the top barrel and a 20 gauge shell in the lower barrel is not known to be super-accurate at long distances, or even medium distances for that matter. The “sight” is a simple affair, a springy groove that can slide around a bit while bouncing around on the shoulder of some young guy jogging after a wolverine. Knowing the rifle’s limitations and

factoring in the strong noise of the wind, I jogged toward the wolverine that had not yet seen me until I figured I was about fifty yards away. Then I dropped to my right knee, controlled my breathing, and took a shot. Nothing. The wolverine kept diddling around lumps of snowdrift. The Savage over and under is a very slow reloading rifle combo. You have to open the breach, eject the shell and manually slide another .22 long rifle shell in by hand. Being exposed to the cold and wind (shaking like a Labrador puppy) didn’t help. I dropped one of the shells but got the second try into the barrel, snapped it closed and pulled back the hammer to fire the upper barrel. My second shot miraculously caught the wolverine just forward of the hips and rolled him over. In true wolverine style, it was back on its feet headed for the other side of the river.

My next plan of action was not a textbook hunter move but I remember it clearly even now. I dropped my snowshoes, held the Savage in my right hand, and ran as fast as my 25 year old legs would carry me, yelling at the top of my voice like a madman. It seemed a good idea at the time! Thank God, the wolverine figured I was some kind of Arctic demon and ran to a big cottonwood tree and scuttled up 30 feet to the first fork and tried to hide.

Five shots later and substantial bark knocked off the cottonwood tree, the Savage proved that even a blind squirrel will eventually find a nut, and dropped the wolverine to the snow.



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End of the story, you say? Hold your sleddogs pardner, there is more!

The wolverine was now deceased but I said to myself, "Where in the heck is my lynx and that other thieving wolverine?!" I quickly back-tracked and found its tracks headed downstream with a bloody groove in the snow next to them. I put my legs into a higher gear and headed downriver with rifle in hand scanning for any signs of my lynx and the wolverine. The tracks were starting to blow out but I found them at the end of a gravel bar where the river took a turn to the left and the tracks turned to the right and angled up a steep hill. With no warning, I spotted movement above me in time to see a dark wolverine loping uphill. Again, I dropped to my knee and tried a shot with the .22. However, this time thick alder brush and the uphill angle combined to let the wolverine travel up and over the rise without any damage.

I hiked up to where he had first been, only to find a sad sight for me. The wolverine had spent some time there, eating nearly all the lynx. The only thing that remained

was a packed, bloody stain in the snow and the head of the very deceased kitty. "Rats!" I yelled, "an hour or so earlier and I woulda caught him napping." Of course, it wouldn't have hurt a bit to also be packing a better rifle and scope. Skipping the woulda, coulda, shouldas ... I walked back to the wolverine that I shot earlier.

On the walk back to the cabin, it was me dragging the wolverine in the snow and what was left of my lynx making a bulge in my parka pocket. They were a testimony to hard work, persistence, and, of course, God's grace.



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