

# HERE KITTY, KITTY,



BY JEFF MURTIFF

It was one of those late March Interior Alaska mornings. One that promised you so much with a cloudless, brilliant blue sky that ran from horizon to horizon. The mid-morning sunlight was reflecting off the snow with such intensity that even though my eyes were still pretty good back then, they watered as I gazed off toward the east. The temperatures betrayed the illusion and brought you back firmly into reality. It was too warm for working in a black “arctic grade” Carhartt jacket, but because of the west wind it was too cold for a blanket-lined one.

It was my second, and what eventually would turn out to be my final, winter working at a small heating and cooling business in Fairbanks. The owner had built a new shop, and my apprentice Andy and I were moving materials and inventory from the old shop to the new one. It was time-consuming, boring work; the monotony broken only by the incredibly short drive between the two shops where the radio provided a nice diversion.

The route we followed with the pick-up wound its way around the west end of a small airfield. Our truck was laden with what was referred to as “inventory” in Alaska, but possibly “junk” if you were fresh in the country from the Outside. We’d pass the owner’s

hangar and go down a bit of gravel road before splitting off onto a two-track flanked by window-high banks of dirty brown snow, bearing somewhat north.

The scenery along the two-track could be best described as post-pipeline apocalypse. In an old yard to the east, long and short lengths of large diameter pipe lay in somewhat sorted piles that were themselves separated by late 1970s vintage pick-ups. Intermixed with that were various sizes and makes of wheel loaders, their tires long flat and rotted into the moss. Most of the cabs of these had lost their glass years ago. The largest one was an old Terex, still wearing its pea green factory paint and still sporting most of her glass. She supplied the only color contrast in a white and rusty brown landscape in that yard. On top of the Terex, the ravens had constructed a very large nest of pretty impressive proportions made with sticks and laced with random wire and cable lengths. This nest was a marvel of avian architecture. Hare and fox tracks weaved in and out of the weeds. Willows had gained a foot-hold in the gravel beneath the snow and now grew haphazardly along both sides of our route.

It was just after lunch when our misery had a chance to be shared. Being early spring, the service department was kind of moving slow and most of the good work was given out based on shop seniority. As luck would have it, a newer tech named John was lucky enough to get to hang out with us cool “installer guys.” Yes, he was one lucky bugger.

Now, John was pretty new to Alaska. He came from some God-forsaken place where they milked cows and grew corn in fields. The kind of place where cow tipping is a sport. Maybe it was Wisconsin or Indiana? Like I said, some God-forsaken place down there.

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Anyway, he was that guy in your shop that would sit quietly at the end of the day and nurse a beer -- pretty mellow -- not much of a talker -- shy, I guess. What we did learn though was that he liked to hunt white-tailed deer and was moderately successful. John also did a little raccoon trapping and liked to fish crappie. I still have no idea what a crappie is.

Anyway, we finished lunch and made our way out to the old red Chevy diesel plow truck. This old girl leaked about every fluid she had in her, and needed a wisp of ether on a hot summer day or a pretty healthy snort if there was any snow on the ground. With very little fanfare, I got behind the wheel, John got situated in the middle and Andy did the honors with the ether. After a bit of lifter chattering the Chevy started, and Andy saddled up next to the passenger door. I remembered trying to make small talk with John as we chugged across the shop yard toward the two-track, but he wasn't really enjoying our company. Or maybe he didn't like that we were so willing to share our misery and belly aching, I dunno.

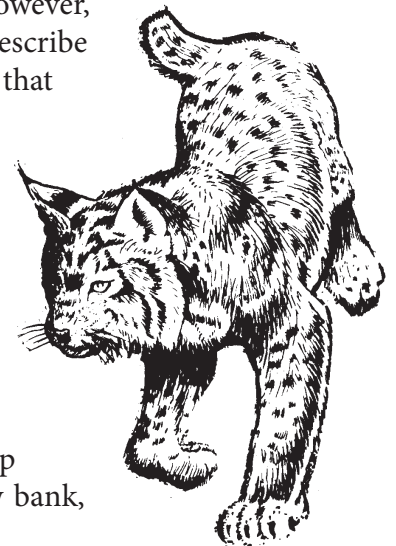
As we just got onto the two-track, John perked up and asked me about some tracks running down the slightly depressed center of our wheel tracks. I ground the Chevy to a stop and casually replied they were fox. All of a sudden he started to get talkative. Apparently, he was living out in the small community of Fox, north of Fairbanks and he had been seeing a lot of fox on his way to and from work, both cherry reds and a few cross. As we sat there, I explained the ten year cycle of snowshoe hares and their predators, and that we were in a super peak year. I also mentioned that Andy and I had seen a gorgeous blue fox walking near the old shop a few months earlier. He asked if we had shot it and I replied "no." Being in a work van we didn't normally carry a

firearm with us, something we were soon shortly going to deeply regret.

We entered a rather thick patch of willows, brambles and weeds that was doing its best to cover up what even in Alaska would be termed junk. Just before we reached the old pipe yard, John asked me about a singular larger set of tracks that crossed directly over our less than hour

old, noon-time tire tracks. Andy perked up instantly, he leaned against the glass of the passenger door and was scanning the brush on his side of the truck looking for the tabby that was obviously hunting in the brush. In the meantime, I was explaining to John that he was looking at a lynx track ... a very large, fresh genuine Alaskan lynx track. He was wide eyed now, almost like the proverbial kid in a candy store. The two of us were now turned toward Andy who was still looking out into the weeds. Andy has eyes like a hawk. He always sees that odd statue-like hare, or the spruce hen at dusk tucked up in black spruce. But nothing was to be seen today, just tracked up snow and rusty steel. With the precision of a military drill team, the three of us all turned at once to look down the two track and resume our journey to depression.

I have seen many men react to many different events in the almost sixty years of my life, some tragic, some incredible. However, it's awfully hard to describe John's reaction when that big cat ambled back across the road in front of us at that moment. The big tabby had walked past us at something less than twenty feet distance from the front of that rattly old idling diesel pick-up and up onto the snow bank, into the pipe yard.



I had never noticed John's blue eyes before. They were normally squished behind his tight, nearly too-small

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eyeglasses. Now, they looked as big as the headlights of a semi truck on the Haul Road, and a shade of blue as intense as the blue lights on the cruiser of an Alaska State Trooper. At that same moment, his normally pale skin had taken on the red color of a hot barrel stove. On top of all that, his muscles were super-charged with adrenaline, and made him appear to grow at least a foot in each direction. His arms extended out of his jacket, making it look two sizes too small. His neck was stretched out like a lead dog on the Yukon Quest starting line. All this time, he was craning and floundering around the truck cab to get the best view he could of that big tabby.

Finally, the cat faded into the brush of the pipe yard and at that instant John seemed to collapse. John The Hulk was now back to the timid Service Tech John. Rather embarrassingly, he adjusted his eyewear and screwed his cap back down tight. Andy and I just looked at our compadre and then at each other. Not knowing what else to do I put the truck into drive and we silently restarted our journey. As I pulled up even with those cat tracks, I couldn't resist saying, "So John, you want me to call him back?"

I turned rather nonchalantly toward him and studied his face, trying to decide if his glasses were in fact two sizes too small. Meanwhile, Andy could hardly contain himself. His smile was one of those from a toothpaste commercial, and ran from ear to ear. Hardly able to contain himself, he quickly turned his head to look out the passenger side window. I could see John's adrenaline starting to build up again. In a rather lightly quaking voice he asked, "Can you?" "Sure," I replied.

I don't know what came over me to offer to call that lynx back that day. I had no call, no squeaker. Hell, there wasn't even a blade of grass to try and whistle with, but I was in too far now. So, I slowly lowered the window with one eye on John and one eye desperately looking for that cat. John was again slowly growing into The Hulk and that lynx was nowhere to be seen. With the window all the way down now, I took a deep breath and gave it my best shot. "Here kitty, kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty, kitty," I called into the willows. I will say that at the time my heavy Northeastern Vermont accent gave it a rather operatic flare.

Andy snorted, not able to control himself any longer. He was almost bent over double with laughter, tears started

to form in his eyes. John instantly collapsed, realizing he was the butt of our "calling back the lynx" joke. I felt bad, really bad, but I managed to keep a straight face. Just as I started to take my foot off the brake pedal, I saw that Andy was looking out my window and his eyes were wide open. John had also transformed back into The Hulk! I turned toward the driver's side window and looked toward the snow bank and willows beside the idling truck and there it was!

The big lynx was on a mission. He angled this way and that way, keeping his whiskers free from the willow whips; his yellow eyes pegged on us. At last, he worked his way into the clearing. Ever so regal, he walked past the old Terex. Steady step after steady step, the cat maintained his eye contact with us the whole time. He pushed on, thirty feet, twenty-five, twenty feet, fifteen, on in he came. My pulse was moving up to freight train speed now, complete with that tight feeling you get in your chest right before things go wrong. Ten feet. We were running out of room but I was mesmerized by those emotionless yellow orbs and I was unable to raise the window! At last he was on the snow bank, a bit more than an arm's reach away.

The world was dead silent at that moment. It's hard to believe in a city of thirty thousand or so, but it was dead silent. No traffic, no planes, nothing but dead silent. I realized I wasn't breathing; I couldn't seem to. I was still locked into those yellow eyes. Slowly, in true feline indifference, that big lynx sat down. I suppose he was curious if the three shmucks in the clunker truck deserved his precious time. He was a stunning animal; everything that made the Interior a special part of Alaska. I don't know how long we sat there, but at some moment as if on a cue, I turned away and looked up the two-track and pulled the pick-up transmission into drive and we moved on. The world came back, the cat faded behind us, and the three of us made small talk. John just smiled, I felt good, and Andy ... well he just kept on grinning from ear to ear.

Time has moved on in the fifteen years since that day. John has since pushed on, moving down toward Juneau last we knew. Maybe back to the land of milk cows and fields of corn, I dunno. However I will swear on my grandmother's grave that this story is true. I am also so very happy he never went moose hunting with us, because I don't know what I would have had to say to bring in a big bull.