

## National Majestic Tree Hound Association

By Lee Newhart, Jr., 155 West Haven Road, Ithaca, NY 14850  
website: nmtha.com

During the past month we heard from Donald Stevens of Wellston, Ohio; Carl Lupo of Trumansburg, New York; and Chad McCauley of Loganville, WI. We appreciate your news, photos and inquiries. Let us hear from you.

This month's historical feature is a 1910 magazine article titled a *Blue Ridge Bear Hunt*. It was authored by Frank W. Bicknell.

Then if you want to go in a Blue Ridge bear race, here's your chance," said the chief hunter of Linville Mountain one cloudy day in October. "It's go in' to be a mighty rough chase and mebbe too much for you, but you can start, any-w a y," patronizingly continued this sinewy man, who could climb a mountain covered with rocks, briars, thickets and fallen timber with less trouble than many a city dweller finds in walking a score of blocks to his office. John is a mountain product. Three generations of his ancestors have found ways to live in these beautiful North Carolina mountains. Little appreciation they have for the scenic charm that captivates the visitor, and sends him into ecstasies over the wilderness. The natives, of the purest Anglo-Saxons on the continent, have been too much concerned in forcing food and raiment out of the barren hills and narrow, fertile creek bottoms to give thought to the beauty all about them. Hardy, self-reliant, and resourceful, within their limitations they are contented, hospitable and extremely independent.

From October to May they are keen sportsmen, pursuing 'coon and 'possum, wild turkey, quail and pheasant, but, most exciting of all, the little black bear. Ownership of a home and several mongrel hounds seem to be essentials to the happiness of the mountaineer, for more than nine out of every ten are so provided. The freeholder far outranks the renter, however humble the home may be, and without dogs the hunter cannot join on equal terms in the sport of his fellows. The dogs are well trained to trail the bear or his little cousin, the 'coon, and hold him until the hunter can get near enough to kill the game with a cheap, single-barrelled shotgun.

"I reckon this bear is the daddy of 'em all," John explained, "from the tracks they tell about over the ridge, and the way he's tore up the fodder and made him a supper off Rom Vance's fat pig. We'll have to hurry if we want to do any good—the other boys has started already. Fine day for a race—little damp, so the dogs '11 work fine, and there's no wind to bother."

Getting my Winchester .30-40, and putting on the best available armor against the briars, I started with John to join the rest of the party about four miles away. Eleven hounds and thirteen men and boys took up the trail where the bear had last been seen. The dogs were led by three good trailers, and before noon we were near enough to inspire increased speed in both bear and pursuers. All that afternoon the race went on, across ridges, down hollows, up steep mountain sides, through tangles "of briars and thickets of laurel and occasional locust thorns. At night a truce was declared, for the only blood thus far drawn in the chase was from the faces, hands and legs of the hunters, where the various kinds of thorns had found them.

I was glad to drop down for rest in the cabin of a hospitable mountaineer, but most of my companions in arms walked home, seven or eight miles across the pathless mountain. They would be back again next morning, eager and fresh for the race. In fact, the dogs needed the rest, rather than the men, having traveled several times as far.

It was not long after daylight next morning when the party reassembled and the hounds were let loose upon the track. Off they went, soon sending us back word in short, sharp barks that it smelled fresh to them, so Mr. Bear had evidently also taken a rest when relieved from the urgent need of keeping distance between himself and his yelping enemies.

"See where he left his mark," observed one of the hunters, pointing to some fresh scratches on a chestnut oak. "Yes, and he sure went up the tree, too," exclaimed another. "If we hadn't called the dogs in, they'd 'a' treed him in a little bit."

Meanwhile, the dogs were getting far ahead as we came to a little clearing in the forest, where we could see across a deep, wide ravine to the briar-covered mountainside beyond. Searching over all visible territory before us, the keen-eyed John suddenly called out: "There he is!" and following his direction we soon could see the black object hurrying up the mountain as easily as a pig crosses a meadow, only much faster.

"Now's the chance for your Winchester," suggested one of the boys, "and quick or he'll be over the ridge." It was about 600 yards, but I gave it a trial to satisfy the boys, getting rid of the five bullets before the animal disappeared over the horizon. Hastening the bear's pace seemed to be the only effect, and comments were considerably withheld.

"Now the 'ain't no use goin' down in that hole and up again," commanded John. "We'll divide here, and, Mex, you go around that ridge and come in by Devil's Gap and we'll go the other way, towards the falls. If he goes on north the way he's p'inted, you git 'im, an' if he goes to the river we'll git 'im, an' whichever way he goes, one of us '11 head 'im off and mebbe git a clost shot." With but little argument this was agreed to and the party divided. It appeared later that John's plan was a deep one. He had hunted bears in that locality until he knew which way they were most apt to go. He counted on Mex, also an old hunter, heading the bear off, but being such a big one, that it would do nothing less than whip Mex's dogs and get away, perhaps, with a wound that would make capture easier, when he turned out of the way of this obstruction to seek safety in the gorge of the Linville River below the falls.

This almost impenetrable rocky fastness has been the refuge of animals fleeing from pursuit since the time when William Linville and his son, early in the eighteenth century, chased a deer into it, only to fall themselves into an Indian



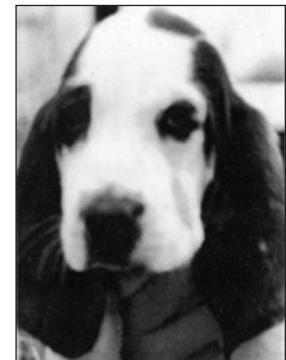
A 1910 photo of some of the terrain where the Blue Ridge Bear Hunt took place.



A 1910 photo of the hunters, hounds and the bear taken on the Blue Ridge hunt.



A nice six week old Majestic female from Tree Song Kennels, Ithaca, New York.



A 12 week old Majestic female from the kennels of John DeSimone, Monticello, New York.

ambush. Both lost their lives, but won enduring fame by giving their name to the crystal stream and the long, evergreen-covered mountain that lies alongside. For thirteen miles below the falls the ragged, usually precipitous walls of the canyon rise from 300 to 2,000 feet above the turbulent stream. Erosion has been going on for so many centuries that the walls are covered by trees, mostly coniferous, with some hard woods, and dense tangles of rhododendron, laurel and azaleas. It is full of hidden pitfalls, and the anglers who go into it for the splendid rainbow trout fishing it offers, find strenuous sport indeed.

Mex knew all the short-cuts, so he decided to get well ahead of the race, leaving his fourteen-year-old boy, already the hero of one bear fight, to watch a narrow pass where bears often crossed. The boy had not long to wait before the "black beauty" came tearing through the brush and for thirty or forty feet was in full view, not thirty yards away. Edgar, the boy, brought his single-barrel into action and sent a charge of buckshot after Bruin, who did not seem to mind it at all, the dogs were pressing him so closely. He merely changed his course, Edgar and the dogs pursuing, and started for the river. Leaving Edgar and the dogs and two or three of the other hunters who had joined him far behind, and Mex still further, out of hearing, with the wind against him, the bear at last turned on the dogs and verified another of the crafty John's predictions. Two of the best hounds had their backs broken in the bear's powerful jaws, while the rest were content to keep at a safe distance behind the hunted animal.

It was now nearly noon, and while my spirit still desired to go on, my legs rebelled. So the captain of the chase put me on what he assured me was "a right likely stand," and told me if I heard the dogs pass toward the river I should follow, whether I saw the bear or not. He would go across to another stand and between us "we orto come mighty clost to that bear," he concluded, after outlining the secret hopes of his plan of campaign. With some misgivings lest I, too, might be sidetracked like the unfortunate Mex, I sat down on a log to enjoy, I think, the sweetest and most welcome rest of my whole existence. The wait was only an hour. Hearing the unmistakable crashing through the brush and the voices of the hounds, I climbed a great rock-no, not for safety, but to get a good look about. I could hear the bear, but could not see him until he burst into view less than 100 yards away. I got in one shot before he disappeared, the dogs close at his heels. He seemed to be going slower and making straight for the rocky gorge. It was not long before I heard the report of John's gun and the sounds of another fight, which soon died away. The pace was too fast for me, and by the time I reached the edge of the gorge it was all over.

The bear had passed close to John, and he let go a charge that must have missed, for the mountain hunters do not pre-

tend to much skill in shooting at moving objects. His presence encouraged the dogs and they soon closed in. The old bear was very ugly by this time, and as John put it he "whipped the dogs clean outright now and went on. But I made 'em go to it again," he related to me, "and follered 'em acrost that last holler as fast as I could, and found where they had cornered him in a rock den on the edge of the gorge. I seen blood on the trail, so I knowed he's hit, and it's lucky he was, or he'd 'a' killed my best dog. But you see his jaw was broke, so he couldn't bite. "As soon as I got up to the fight I climbed down where they was, and got up within ten feet of the bear, and had to give him three loads of buckshot afore I was sure he was dead."

And there was the bear to prove it. An examination of the broken jaw showed that it was done by a rifle, a terrible soft-nosed bullet. Aiming for the shoulder I had overestimated his speed and held a little too far forward, or the bear would have stopped right there. I thought I had first blood, but when Edgar and some of the boys who had overtaken him came up, he claimed it, and said they found blood back of where I was. We looked the carcass over and easily found a shot low down through the belly, undoubtedly Edgar's. Later, when the bear was skinned, I got my honor back, for a small flank wound was found, inflicted from the rear, that could have been none other than my long distance rifle shot, that chanced to make a mark that did not hurt the bear, but gave me glory.

Now the question was, how to get that bear to the settlement. We were only two miles away now, as the bear had run in a big semi-circle to get into the gorge. But such miles as these were! "The worst briar patch in the country is between here and the ford," one of the boys pointed out, but that was the only way. Removing the entrails to lighten the load, the paws were tied together and the burden carried on a stout pole. After many resting spells and much rending of already ragged garments and bloody, stinging flesh, we got the bear to the ford, waded the river and sent a wagon to bring the trophy to the little store at the settlement.

Just before we came in sight of the houses we observed the mountain custom of announcing our success, by firing off what ammunition we had left, as rapidly as possible. When a dozen hunters come in together this lets everyone know what has happened, and the whole population turns out to welcome the nimrods.

What was left of the bear weighed 251 pounds when brought in, and the hide measured seven feet from nose to tail, a very large bear for the Blue Ridge. According to mountain bear hunting law, a piece of the meat was given to every man and boy in the race, while the proceeds of the sale of the pelt were divided equally among the four men who had dogs in the chase, regardless of who shot the bear.