

APEX PREDATOR



BY RICK TRAVIS
CRPA PROGRAMS DIRECTOR

The fall traditions of hunters are in full swing. People of all ages have been preparing all summer taking advantage of sales on items needed for the hunt that range from new shoes to firearm necessities. Checklists are brought out, refined and triple checked. Time is scheduled off from normal responsibilities. Scouting expeditions are performed and adjustments are made to ensure a good hunt. Final preparations are finally completed the day before the hunt begins (maybe in the wee hours of the morning for those of you who procrastinate).

During the hunting expedition there is time where fellow hunters and travelers

will sit down and share stories and ideas about their passion for the hunt. This is where useful information can be passed to others but where many opportunities to pass on the love of the sport are missed. I offer up one story and what it means to the hunters of the past, present and future.

Legends are great sources of inspiring stories for passing on information about our sport. Everyone loves to hear about the great wilderness, survival stories like those of frontiersman Hugh Glass in the recent movie Revenant or classics like Jeremiah Johnson. Both films depict classic timeless traits and some real history mixed with fiction to make the great

story. Others chose stories from the sidelines of great events.

Arguably the greatest exploration event in the wilderness of North America is the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the band of individuals known as the Corps of Discovery. Much has been written, reenacted and filmed about the deeds of Thomas Jefferson the president who ordered the expedition and those such as Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and Sacagawea. I will focus on one member of the expedition who often goes unnoticed but without whom the expansion west would have been slowed.

John Coulter was 28 years old when



he signed on as a private with the Lewis and Clark expedition in October of 1803. From all accounts he served admirably as he was considered one of the best hunters and kept the expedition party fed during their transcontinental trip without any of the modern conveniences. Lewis and Clark called upon him many times during periods of illness among the party, tensions with native peoples and others to perform his hunting duties demonstrating both trust in him and his skills as a hunter. At the completion of the journey he was praised highly by Jefferson as integral to the success of the mission. His story doesn't end here.

Historians consider John Coulter to be the first American Mountain Man. This is in large part due to the fact he became the first white man to navigate, map, trap and return from what is present day Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. He made this trip into hostile country alone. According to historians, he did this walking barefoot, with a 35 pound

pack (not including rifle and ammo) for over six months during the dead of winter where temperatures are -30 degrees at night for over 18 months. He returned to Fort Raymond with no injuries and plenty of information that opened up present day Northern Idaho and Western Montana to further exploration.

Coulter was not finished leaving his mark on the country and the history of the American hunter. Like other famous mountain men he had a real life tale where he was chased by over 100 Native Americans after his partner John Potts was killed. Coulter outran the majority of the braves who chased him over several miles. Again he was barefoot and naked. The thorns of plants cut into his feet and his nose dripped blood from the exhaustion he was suffering under. He was forced to hide with nothing but a blanket stolen from the Native American he had killed in self-defense in the cold waters of the Missouri River. He was able to walk after the ordeal with his bare feet and blanket to

a small trading post that was ironically located on the Little Big Horn River where 66 years later the most infamous battle between the United States and Sioux nation would take place.

Coulter had lived for 6 years in the untamed wilderness before settling down for a short spell prior to entering the service of his country once again in the War of 1812. He died of jaundice shortly thereafter. John Coulter had walked thousands of miles, hunted numerous species of animals with his rifle, archery, pistol and traps to feed himself and others. He had done so in the harshest of times with primitive equipment under unforgiving circumstances. His life serves as an example to those of us who hunt today.

The life of Coulter was about opening the West and he did so with a set of key ideas. He used his hunting skills during a time where most city people did not hunt. He never shied away from an opportunity to respectfully demonstrate the value of those skillsets involved in

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hunting in a respectable mentoring manner. Throughout his life he taught new people to enjoy the great outdoors, mentored people he worked with on each of his adventures and reported to those who came before him. He kept all around him involved at some level in the pursuit of the hunt.

Today we have a nationwide plan being utilized by almost every major hunting organization and Fish and Game (wildlife) department known simply as R3. It stands for Recruit, Retain and Reactivate. Many of us do not understand how easy that is to accomplish. John Coulter did it naturally and from his example we can do the same 200 years later in the present.

Coulter actively recruited people around him using three different methods. The first was he shared his story with those new to the idea of hunting. This process inspired people to want to try their hand at the sport. He also taught basic skills to the uninitiated which again inspired others to hunt. Finally he actually took brand new people with him and taught them how to hunt. Nothing has changed in that timeless model other than your feet will never be subjected to the harsh environment his were.

Many today make the argument that retention that all the laws, costs, access issues and negative cultural input make it impossible to retain hunters especially in California. Early 19th century America east of St. Louis considered hunting to be out of fashion. Today states like Pennsylvania and New York have the highest percentage of hunters according to a 2013 study done by the Quality Deer Management Association.

Coulter retained hunters by helping them focus that the hunt wasn't just about them but about opportunities for others. He spent his life engaging fellow explorers, men and women at outposts and later in life the public by both invitation and sharing. Hunters today have been too quiet and silent about their passion. We all need to face the opposition not with verbal slugfests but by sharing our values collectively. You're never going to convince the opposition but you can convince the people listening on the sidelines. Remember conventional wisdom during Coulter's time was that everything he did was impossible. Sound familiar?

Reactivation is the concept that we

get former hunters and supporters back into the game. Coulter to his credit engaged everyone around him including the President of the United States. It is doubtful we are going to get the President on our side supporting us, but there are plenty of other politicians who hunt or support hunters that we need to cultivate. We also need to get our former hunters out mentoring those of us who still hunt. We live in a time period where we take information for granted. This is dangerous considering

how many hunters may pass without sharing their life history of the hunt with those of us who are younger. Find creative ways to do this and watch our numbers grow.

Coulter's life serves as an example to this day that hunting has never been easy, has always had seemingly insurmountable obstacles and yet with a little perseverance the impossible can and will become the possible. Now go out there and emulate John Coulter.

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