

# Killer Cats Of



# Kumaon

*Neither Bullets, Bombs, Poison Nor Traps  
Could Stop The Rudraprayag Leopard.  
Now It Was Jim Corbett's Turn.*

*By Peter Hathaway Capstick*

It had been 15 years since Jim Corbett had hunted down the Panar leopard and 18 years from his — shall we say, memorable — meeting with the Champawat tigress when he set his sights on the great leopard of Rudraprayag. For roughly seven years the heavily traveled pilgrim route of torture from the lowlands to the south through the freezing mountains, the trail splattered with the blood and skin of the barefooted devout, had been a path of the purest terror. The man-eating leopard who prowled and ghosted through the blackness of the night around the resting places and native inns had caused the strictest of curfews; yet this deterred him hardly at all. Although past his prime, he was apparently supernaturally strong and equally determined, breaking into rural huts with ease and keeping the 50,000 inhabitants living between the Mandakin River and Alaknanda River in as great a state of horrified expectation as the 10,000 pilgrims who annually tried to visit the shrines at Kedarnath and Badrinath.

Like most of the big cats, leopards are not bashful about scavenging, and this trait is probably how the Rudraprayag cat took up man-eating. Man-eating leopards are casual hunters that go right on eating livestock and game as well as men. Unlike the tiger, man-eating leopards rarely carry injuries that force them into a career of people-purloining; thus, they are far less predictable than tigers or lions that develop a sweet tooth for thee and me.

After the great influenza epidemic of

1918, which killed more than a million Indians, the dead were so profuse that the normal Hindu cremation ceremony of the Garhwal Hills could not logistically be carried out, and lip service literally was paid by the ritual placing of a live coal in the corpse's mouth. Left to rot in the bush, these bodies almost surely taught the neophyte man-eater that he had been missing a good thing, and the transition between dead bodies and live ones must have been no great adjustment to an enterprising leopard like him.

By the time that Jim Corbett began hunting the Man-eater of Rudraprayag in 1925, there was quite a store of historical data on the cat for him to draw from. Already, the leopard had become probably the most highly publicized man-eater in history (with the possible exception of the African Tsavo lions), having been featured in the newspapers of at least 10 major countries. Reams of government reports existed on the cat's activities, detailing not only the circumstances of attacks but also those attempts made at retribution.

The closest call the leopard had survived after three years of marauding occurred when he had been hunted by two young British officers in 1921. Somehow determining that the leopard at times used a suspension rope bridge across the Alaknanda River to hunt both banks, they set up an ambush at each end, hoping to catch the man-eater crossing at night. For two long months the men waited, shivering away the nights, one sitting on each

suspension cable tower on the left and right banks. Then, one night the man in the left tower was astonished to see the leopard casually walk out onto the bridge and begin to cross. With admirable presence of mind, the hunter did not fire, waiting until the man-eater was well out on the bridge so that if he missed the first shot he would have another if the cat ran back toward him. Taking careful aim in the murky darkness, he fired. Like a bolt of spotted lightning, the leopard flickered away, across the bridge and straight toward the second officer. Whether this man did not have a rifle — which would be hard to believe — or was somehow caught off balance with his rifle out of reach is not known. He did, however, pull his service revolver and cranked out six shots at the cat as it ran by.

The next morning, although the leopard was nowhere in sight, some blood was

*Continued on pg. 58*

*Editor's Note: This is the third of a six-part series from Peter Capstick's book, Death In The Silent Places, reprinted through special arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc. Death In The Silent Places is available from the NRA Book Service, 4620 Lee Highway, Arlington, VA 22207. Copies can be purchased by using order number ASB17095. NRA member's discount price is \$12.55 plus \$3.00 postage and handling.*

## Killer Cats

Continued from pg. 13



found on the bridge. Through whatever logic it was they chose to apply, it was concluded that the leopard had been hit both in the head and the body. Corbett, who later spoke with one of the native trackers who helped try to find the wounded cat, disagreed with the Garhwal's analysis of the blood spoor, convinced that it could have been only a foot wound. Of course, the leopard was not found, but Corbett was later proved to have been precisely correct; the first bullet had creased the left rear paw and clipped off a small piece of toe. The *pistolero* missed with all six shots.

According to other government reports, a leopard whose description matches that of the man-eater to a tee was caught in a drop-door live trap. The Hindus, who were scared to death of the man-eater, wanted no part of killing the trapped animal for fear that the spirits of its victims would come back to haunt them. What the logic of this was I'm sure I couldn't tell you, but finally it was agreed to send for a Christian Garhwal to come and do the caged critter in. As might be expected the Garhwal region of the Himalayas is not overrun with Christians, the nearest living some 30 miles away from the trap site. By the time the executioner was sent for and arrived at the scene, the man-eater — if indeed it was the Rudraprayag leopard — had dug a hole under the bars and was long gone.

Shortly thereafter, after a man had been killed and eaten, a search party saw a leopard sneaking out of a small patch of jungle where it had been lying up and feeding. When the party chased the cat, it ducked into a cave with a small mouth, which was promptly plugged with thick thorn branches and heavy boulders. Word spread around the countryside of the leopard trapped inside the cave until five days went by. By this time a crowd reported at about 500 men had gathered outside, amazed that the leopard had not made the smallest sound in all this time. Inevitably, there arrived a man of considerable local influence who got it into his head that there was no way for a leopard to be in the cave so long without some sign of its presence. Scoffing at the credulity of the crowd, he marched up to the cave,

rolled away the stones, and pulled off the thorns. Instantly, the leopard rocketed from the darkness, dashed through the mass of people, and disappeared.

If it had had three miraculous escapes in its first few years of man-eating, this was just a simple drill in elusiveness compared to the weird quirks of fate that saved its life time and again from the bullet of Jim Corbett.

Corbett was called to hunt the Rudraprayag leopard in 1925 by William Ibbotson, later Sir William, who had been posted to Garhwal Province as Deputy Commissioner. A famed big game hunter in his own right, Ibbotson had been trying unsuccessfully to kill the leopard and begged Corbett, his good friend, to lend a hand. Corbett's first attempt lasted 10 weeks, beginning shortly after the leopard had dined on a *sauhu*, or holy man, who had overestimated the power of his faith by sleeping on an open platform with some other pilgrims outside a store along the road. Unfortunately, this kill had placed the leopard outside a well-organized beat going on at that time. It had been set up by Ibbotson, who was combing the cat's regular lying-up place with 2,000 men while the man-eater was digesting the *sauhu* several miles away.

With his usual analytical approach, Corbett set himself to making a plan that would enable him to have some idea of where the leopard might be at a given time in the rugged 500 square miles of mountains. Quickly, he realized the key to the area lay with the rivers, both tributaries of the Ganges. The leopard had never crossed the barrier of the Mandakini River to the west, but regularly killed on both sides of the Alaknanda, which ran west, forming a right angle with the Mandakini at Rudraprayag. ("Prayag" means a confluence of rivers.) Obviously, if he could determine which side of the Alaknanda the leopard was on, the area for the search would roughly be cut in half. Since there were only two points at which the Alaknanda's icy rushing current could be crossed, both suspension bridges, it should not be difficult to figure out which side of the river the leopard was on.

Since the holy man had been taken a few miles from the easternmost bridge at Chatwapal on the north side of the river, Corbett felt certain that after abandoning the remains of the man, the leopard had crossed this bridge to make its next kill. After a death the entire region closed up like a clam, making the securing of another victim in the same neighborhood difficult for a while, so the leopard would tend to move along. Despite the caution, though, over the eight years he was active, the Rudraprayag leopard did take six people from one village, five each from two others, four from one more and three each from eight other villages.

Corbett started to get a good idea of the

fascinating combination of boldness and elusiveness that marked the Rudraprayag leopard as nearly unique among killer cats a few days after arriving in the area. Since it was well known that the leopard killed livestock along with man, a pair of goats was tied up as bait on either side of the Alaknanda, one on the pilgrim path and the other in a patch of very likely-looking scrub jungle. The next day, one had been killed by a male leopard which for some reason had not eaten it. That afternoon and evening, Corbett sat in a tree over the carcass, but the lack of warning bird and animal calls indicated the man-eater had abandoned the goat.

From his experiences with man-eating tigers, Corbett was careful leaving the tree and walking back to his government bungalow even though there had been no sign of the leopard. It didn't work both ways. The next morning, directly outside the rest house were the pug-marks of the man-eater squarely in his shoe tracks. By following the spoor backward, Corbett learned with a chill that the big cat had shadowed him every foot of the way through the dark. There was no longer any question what side of the river the leopard was on.

That night, in a small village on a hilly ridge 4,000 feet above the bungalow, a couple sat finishing their evening meal by the light of the hearth fire. In a very few days, the wife would give birth to the first son of the house. Great with child, she waddled to the doorstep to clean the few metal pots used in cooking. As the husband sat smoking, he heard the pans clatter to the ground and, curious, called out to the woman. Again, more sharply. No answer. What did that brave and devoted soul do? He ran across the room and slammed the door, bolting it from the inside. It was clearly not an Indian version of *Love Story*, especially since Corbett tells us as delicately as possible that the husband's greatest grief came, when, after examining the mother's body, the exposed fetus in the dead woman's torn-open belly was a male heir.

Down the narrow lane between the houses, the Man-eater of Rudraprayag dragged his pathetic victim, all doors shut tight at the husband's first cries. Caught by the throat, she was still alive and probably conscious for the first 50 yards, until the spoor clearly indicated that the leopard had paused to kill her. The body in his jaws, the big leopard carried her easily another 100 yards into a little ravine along some fields and ate much of her.

When Corbett arrived at the village after a long, hot climb the next day, he saw the remains of the woman in the ravine where the leopard had left her, at the edge of a field which, 40 yards from the corpse, had a hayrick or stack built into a stunted walnut tree. This would make an excellent blind. On the dirt of a

tiny foot path running down to the body were the pug-marks of the same leopard that had followed him two nights before, a huge male whose print showed the old bullet wound received on the suspension bridge four years earlier. Very likely, Corbett knew, the leopard would come back up this path if he returned at all. A most inhospitable reception would be waiting. With cut bamboo staves, he rigged gun-traps with both his extra rifle and shotgun, slender lengths of fishing line acting as trip-wires across the path. Even if the leopard came from another direction, if Corbett missed him at the kill, he would probably run down the ravine anyway and would be shot on the way out. The body was naked, and in the shadows of the ravine, the leopard would be nearly invisible. So Corbett placed a white rock a foot from the near side of the remains as a relative aiming point that would show up through the blackness. Comfortably settled into the walnut tree, hidden by the hay, Corbett sat back to wait.

There are three terms used here that bear some explanation. First, the hayrick wasn't a haystack as seen in the West, but rather a pile of hay formed around the branches of the walnut tree, leaving a space beneath the hay of some four vertical feet and rising to a height of .10 feet from the ground. Also, the "fields" were terraces cut into the hillsides to take cultivation, some as narrow as two feet, as was the space under the tree. The last term, as Corbett points out well, is the relativity of darkness to night. Complete blackness is rare, especially in tall mountains where snow fields glare a diffused light even in mere starshine. When the eyes of a hunter are accustomed, visibility is often surprisingly good. Not, however, always. . . .

Night had come down like a shroud. No sooner had the last feeble illumination of the sun faded in the west than a ripple of lightning flashed across the blackening sky, and fat, stinging drops of gale-born rain pelted the hunter, the downpour increasing to a wild deluge. The stars, suffocated by storm clouds, went out, and true blackness lapped up over the terraced ravine. At the height of the ferocious storm, Corbett heard a stone slide down the cut and, a few seconds later, the light rustle of straw, four feet directly below his feet. The man-eater had taken shelter from the rain under the hayrick and was lying dry, patient and unaware less than five feet below the hunter!

With the cat invisible, Corbett sat motionless in the wet, freezing wind until the storm began to move on and gaps appeared between the rumbling, complaining clouds. Trying to keep his teeth from chattering, Corbett listened hard, staring as best he could through the remaining gloom. After a few minutes his white marker rock disappeared as the

leopard passed in front of it, and the awful sound of teeth crushing bone and ripping flesh was heard. Corbett had placed the rock on the wrong side of the corpse, since now that the rain had left puddles in the ravine, the leopard was feeding on the near side of the body. Ten very long minutes went by until again the rock shone dully through the night. Corbett covered it with his front sight only to hear a very strange rustling sound and see the yellow form of the man-eater drifting like a patch of pale fog back under the hayrick. The cat's unusually light color could be accounted for by age, but Corbett remarked he never heard anything like the soft, silk-like sound of his movement. The leopard was dividing his time between eating the woman and resting for a breather under the rick, so Corbett kept the rock covered and was ready to fire the instant the cat passed in front of it again.

The next two hours are properly a monument to Corbett's skill at concealment and patience. Every time his muscles holding the heavy express rifle would give out, and he'd be forced to rest for a moment, the rock would disappear. Three times this happened, the cat going back and forth between the body and the tree, until at last Corbett knew that sooner or later the leopard would detect him. How he managed to stay unnoticed at a range of a few feet for so long considering the super senses of a leopard was miraculous enough. A chance would have to be taken. As the man-eater padded his rustling, unnerving way back for a fourth rest under the hayrick, Corbett leaned over and fired at a range of six feet.

At dawn, his bullet hole was found precisely in the center of the two-foot wide terrace where the leopard was passing below, but there was no dead man-eater. Only a few clipped and scorched neck hairs marked the light bullet crease. Fate had decreed that 14 more people must die before the great Rudraprayag leopard met a reckoning, and in a frightening number of incidents, Jim Corbett was very nearly added to his list. ■

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Corbett, Jim (James E.). *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
- . *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.
- . *The Temple Tiger and More Man-eaters of Kumaon*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- . *Jungle Lore*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- . *Man-Eaters of India (A Corbett Omnibus)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Perry, Richard. *The World of the Tiger*. New York: Atheneum, 1966.