

A WOLVERINE VERSUS TWO BEAR

By Walter Fry

It was on the evening of June 30, 1906, with United States troopers, on duty in Sequoia National Park, I established camp for the night in Buck Canyon at an elevation of 7,800 feet. Our camp was located beside a beautiful mountain stream in the center of a green meadow, by rough, broken country of red fir forest and brush thickets. It was the best game region of the park, and we saw many deer, bear and other species.

Scarcely had we made camp when we heard the growlings and mutterings of bear. In order to locate the disturbance, we walked out on a near by precipice, and reaching the edge of the cliff, we saw below us a small grassy opening, some 150 feet away. There in plain sight were two large bear, one a black and the other a brown, standing on the decomposed carcass of a cow. The animals were disputing over the right of possession, but after much growling and fussing, they both squatted side by side in friendly, if malodorous, repast.

Undetected, we watched the bear for some fifteen minutes. Then we saw a large wolverine emerge from some brush about one hundred yards to the rear and above the two bears. The wolverine seemed to have nothing in particular on his mind, but was just ambling along at a slow walk with an occasional glance to either side.

Whether the wolverine was returning from a long, unsuccessful hunting trip in an effort to obtain food, or was just starting out for his evening hunt, was not certain, but I am of the opinion of the former, for the animal showed signs of both fatigue and hunger. He first lay down for a few minutes; then got up, turned over a good sized log under which he found a few snails, which he ate; next he walked a few paces to a large fir tree from the base of which he jerked a large fungus and swallowed it with one gulp; then he directed his attention to catching and eating frogs from some puddles of water.

The wolverine continued on his frog hunt for a few minutes only, for a sudden shifting of the wind brought to his nostrils the scent of carrion wafted on the breeze up the canyon. At this he sprang on top of a large boulder, pointed his nose, looked in the direction of the scent and espied the two bears. He watched them for a few moments, eyeing the space between him and them, stood for a short while studying in a thoughtful mood, then slid quietly to the ground and sat down. He hung his head in serious meditation as if trying to reason out the best possible method to obtain possession of the carcass. Soon his bristling hairs told of his decision. It was fight to death if need be, but have the carcass he must.

Shifting his position a few paces to the right, he secured protection of a large boulder within thirty feet of the bears, which shielded him from their sight. Advancing cautiously but quickly to the boulder, behind its shelter, he brought his passions of anger to full height and preparation, ready for the affray. He stood up rigid, peered around one side of the boulder, his passionate anger glittering in his bead-like eyes, while the hair on his back and neck was erect and rough like that on a dog when going into a fight. His short, brushy tail was hoisted to an almost perpendicular angle. Then, after having bristled himself up to what appeared double his natural size, in this queer and picturesque attitude the wolverine shot down the mountain side, landed directly on top of the carcass between the two bears, and ferociously growled and snapped his powerful jaws and teeth in their very faces.

Never in all my mountain experience have I seen wild animals more suddenly and thoroughly frightened than were those two bear when they looked up and saw the wolverine so close and in such a hostile attitude. Every combative impulse gave way to hysterical fright. The brown bear gave three enormous bounds and landed high on the side of a large fir, to the top of which he climbed. His companion turned a complete summersault backwards, and landed on his feet, head foremost downhill; and he departed at such speed that only a cloud of dust drifting towards the western horizon marked his course.

Then the wolverine began devouring the carcass in an effort to satisfy his ever gluttonous appetite; but when one of the boys of our party approached him, he gave a course growl, grabbed a large bone in his mouth, and walked slowly into the depths of a cherry thicket. Whereupon, the brown bear came down the tree and ran away.

Never have I been able to figure out why the bear were so outrageously frightened at the onslaught of the wolverine; unless they had been taught by long experience that the wolverine is an animal that once engaged in combat fights to the death.

For many years past it has been my privilege and pleasure on various occasions to watch certain wild animals when in fight and in play within the park; but the incident which I cherish most and at all times seems uppermost in my memory is that of the fracas of the wolverine and the two bear.