

Feature Photo...

Leave Only Footprints

Text Copyright and Photography Copyright Guy Tal
All rights reserved.



- Camera: Wista 45VX
- Lens: Fujinon 150/6.3
- Support: Tripod
- Film: Fuji Provia F (4x5)
- Exposure: 8sec. at f/45

The day started like many days in the outdoors - I woke up before dawn and stepped out into the freezing darkness. The previous week, I had scouted a number of locations for fall color scenes and the recent snow combined with peak color, held much promise. I stopped at a local convenience store for a scolding cup of bad coffee and proceeded to roll down the empty freeway towards my destination - a vast wilderness area in the southern region of Utah's Wasatch mountains. Little did I know what magic awaited me just a few hours ahead.

I left my Jeep by the roadside about a mile from my previously scouted and GPS-marked destination, piled on the layers, shouldered my pack, and began the trek down a steep slope. It was still dark. My world became a narrow circle of pale light shed by the headlamp on my forehead. Not nearly enough to illuminate the grand view ahead and the deep canyon below, but even if I had not known they were there, I could feel their presence and sheer vastness in the deep, silent, darkness.

The sunrise shoot was very successful. I got the exact scene I was hoping for - bright snow-covered peaks over aspens glowing in warm yellows and pinks. I planned to spend the rest of the day exploring around the area, looking for intimate compositions, enjoying the clear mountain air, and generally taking a much needed break from civilization. In the distance, coyotes were howling and scurrying through fragrant sagebrush to their dens, deer were waking up for a morning browse, steller's jays were engaged in some noisy domestic dispute over who knows what, and me, the odd one out - a single human presence as far as the eye could

see, soaking it all with great joy and reverence.

Camera in pack, quick breakfast, compass bearings noted, and I'm ready to go. I proceed to make my way down the slope through a forest of aspen and large fir. The ground is covered in a thin layer of snow which, in turn, is covered by a tapestry of aspen leaves and conifer needles, and everything is shining and shimmering in the glow of the rising sun. The cold air is intoxicating. And then I noticed them - fresh tracks in the snow. From a distance I thought they must belong to a coyote or a lone deer. A closer look left no room for doubt - feline paw prints. Large ones. Much too large to be a bobcat's. I am in the presence of the great beast itself - the mountain lion.

Mountain lions hold an almost mythical reputation - lone, fierce hunters, beautifully sculpted beasts, all flexible muscle and graceful motions, alluring, elusive, and reclusive. At that moment, the forest became a magical place. The mere knowledge of the lion's presence was enough to infuse mystery into every tree and branch and leaf. At any moment, a wonderful or terrible being might morph out of the earth and confront me. I had to follow the tracks. Chances are I would never get an opportunity like this again.

I kept walking, growing ever fearful and more excited and happier with every step. Every now and then a large chunk of snow would lose its hold and come crashing down from a tree, sending an adrenaline rush into every cell in my body. I was tense and thrilled. This went on for more than half an hour and over a mile of walking along, up, and down the steep slope, going into and out of aspen groves, under and around conifers, over boulders and downed trees, through thick brush and knee-deep snow.

Finally, the defining moment arrived. I was just about to step out of a thick grove, when I looked up at the slope above me, and there it was - walking along the edge of another grove about 1/4 mile ahead. My heart jumped. I slowed down. It slowed down. I watched its graceful and purposeful movements, smooth as if it was moving through liquid rather than tackling rocky talus. Then it jumped on top of a large boulder and just stood there, slowly wagging its long tail, surveying the panoramic scene below, enjoying the crisp morning air and warm light. I don't know how long I stood there, watching.

After a while, I slowly retreated. The hike up the steep slope was not easy, but I was only partially aware of what my legs were doing. It was still fairly early when I got to my car, but I decided to just end the trip and go back home. I was given a chance to visit another world and share a moment with an ancient and magical beast. What else could I hope for?

Guy Tal - NPN 440

Comments on this article? Send them to the [editor](#).