

aalborg...cat tracks...0

# **CAT TRACKS**

by **Gordon K. Aalborg**

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## ONE

The cry began as a fluttering rumble, deep in the cat's throat. As she lifted her striped face to the evening breeze, her voice rose and strained to emerge as a high-pitched, yodeling scream that soared and tumbled with its own echoes through the narrow valley.

Again, and yet again she screamed her imperative wail, until the echoes mingled to sound like a chorus of souls in torment. Then she paused with both large ears perked for an answer. She was perched on a broad, flat rock, well up on the rubble-strewn slope of the gorge, where her instincts told her the breeze would carry her mating call far beyond the boundaries of the territory she had claimed for nearly seven years.

A huge animal, with generations of feral wildness behind her, her skull was broad, as was the thick, solid tail with its faintly marked rings. There was no patch of pure white fur on her muscular body; her coat was a muddled crazy-quilt of stripes and blotches where the tones and half-tones of black and brown and tan and creamy fur took a distinct pattern only on her face and tail. Even sitting completely exposed on open ground, she was virtually invisible. Until she moved.

The first of the cat's more recent ancestors to run wild had been a medium-sized white female abandoned by an itinerant prospector. That had occurred during

the early gold-rush days in the Brindabella Ranges, a dagger of rough, rugged high country that stabbed north from the Snowy Mountains to divide the watersheds of the Goodradigbee River from the far larger drainage of the Murrumbidgee. Since that time, the strain of feral cats had been strengthened by periodic infusions from stray farm cats, the cats of various prospectors and bushmen and, in later years, the animals callously abandoned by residents of Canberra, Australia's national capital.

Included had been cats of all colors and breeds, but natural selection had weeded out the bright, easily seen ones, the natural prey of foxes---another introduced predator with devastating effect on native wildlife---the soaring wedge-tailed eagles or the silent night-hunters, the Powerful Owls. Long fur, a recessive genetic trait, had been lost in the mingling of breeds, so the old she-cat's fur was short in length, but solid and dense through exposure to the wet and chilling mountain winters. She was the color of survival, a moving shadow among other shadows as she prowled in a ceaseless hunt for food. A perfect killing machine, strong, powerful, quick and deadly, she was the classic example of her particular breed, a feral beast as truly wild as the great cats of Africa and Asia, having no further link, however tenuous, with domesticity.

Technically, she would be classed as a feral animal---a domestic animal gone wild, reverting to a state of natural wildness. Certainly, in Australia, no cat is a “native” animal, though no one is quite certain just how the first cats got there. With early European settlers? Chinese or Asian sailors? Or, perhaps, even earlier; before any contributor to Australia's recorded history. Freed by accident or design into a land with essentially no enemies and an abundance of food, feral cats are such an integral factor in the Australian bush that no place, however remote, is free of them. And those that have been savage for many generations are as large, as fierce and as truly undomesticated as the European wildcat, the primeval ancestors

of all cats.

As the evening faded through shades of purple into the darkness of the valley night, the she-cat gave one final, demanding scream, but she stayed hardly long enough to appraise the dying breeze for an answer. The cooling air was flowing downward as it had risen with the warming currents of the day, and she sniffed at it restlessly, her long, supple whiskers twitching as she searched the air currents for any message they might carry.

Had there been a tomcat within the sound of her mating cries, she would have known it. Like all cats, she depended more upon her ears and light-sensitive eyes for information than upon her nose, but her sense of smell was fully adequate for her needs.

She stood with both ears fully cocked as the echo of her final scream drifted into silence, then gathered herself to leap smoothly from her perch and lope down through the scrub toward the tumbling waters of the river. Despite her size, she seemed a ghostly presence in the dim light, moving silent as a wraith of smoke.

The point from which she had been calling was downstream from where tiny Condor Creek splashed headlong to join the Cotter from the west, and the old cat moved southward past the junction as she patrolled the valley, traveling steadily upstream toward the narrow concrete ford which humans called Vanity Crossing. The ford and the narrow gravel forest track leading to it were the only evidence of human intrusion into the old cat's domain, and to her the track was the most southerly boundary of her territory. Sometimes she crossed there herself, bounding lightly across from stone to stone on the piles of rock which were occasionally placed to mark the lower boundary of the ford.

This night, however, she didn't travel that far south. The tiny rustle of a scurrying rodent caught her broad ears and she turned aside. Step by step, each one

aalborg...cat tracks...4

a delicate, silent and invisible movement, she advanced on the sound, until finally she was within range. The epitome of patience, she would spend five minutes, or twenty if it were needed, in the resolute advancement of her stalk. Her heavy body hugged the ground, and each movement was so slow and deliberate that she seemed not to move at all.

Only her tail, hidden from her intended prey by the bulk of her body, seemed alive. Like an independent thing, separate from the camouflaged ghostliness of the cat herself, it moved in a delicate, tight-circling motion as her heightening senses built up the tension. Her striped face blended perfectly with the dry grasses and the scattered fronds of underbrush and shadow, and when she reached her decisive launching site, she was forced to consciously restrain a tiny growl of satisfaction. A last pause---the heavy muscles of her hindquarters bunched beneath her---then one surge of those mighty flanks drove her in a flying, slashing attack. Her mobile front paws smashed down on her prey, holding it pinioned until her flashing ivory fangs could clamp tightly in her favorite death grip, a single, snapping clasp on the neck of her victim. The rodent died without even knowing he had been attacked.

Ripping open the quivering small form with her fangs, the cat first licked at the entrails, using her rough, mobile tongue to remove shreds of flesh. She slashed off chunks of flesh and swallowed them in individual gulps. She ate everything, even the feet and skull. Then she carefully licked at her paws and used them to groom her face before moving on.

She was hungry, a hunger given by the growing mating urge inside her, and before the night ended she killed four small brown rodents, three tiny frogs and one fairly large bush rat. All but the rat died the same way, but with her hunger satisfied, she prolonged the rat's death by tossing it aside and then pouncing on it again and again.

She ate little of the rat, having fed quite adequately from her earlier kills, but the playing was a temporary release for her growing restlessness. Fully in season, the survival demands of her instinct had made her tense, irritable. It had been a full year since she had been mated, because the relative isolation of her territory had provided little incentive for roving tomcats. The last one had been a ragged stray from the Pierce's Creek forestry station to the northeast, and the result was four kittens of identical coloring to herself. Perhaps the tomcat's seed had been weak; two of the kittens died before their weaning. The other two hadn't lasted much longer. A roving dog fox had raided the den while the old cat hunted food, and she had returned to find only memories, and those overshadowed by the rancid scent of fox.

The mating before that had provided only two kittens, and both had fallen prey to the silent talons of a large Powerful Owl. The old cat knew the owl, but due to her tremendous size and ferocity the cat had no fear of him. She had, in fact, no real enemies; the fox who dared confront her would be foolish, and even the extremely rare dingo that wandered down from the Brindabellas to the west was no serious threat.

Her range in the Cotter Valley was a good hunting ground, with plenty of native marsupials, abundant bird life, and a wide range of reptiles, frogs and small lizards. She lived well, but alone.

The territorial instinct is far stronger in the feral cat than in tame house cats. The old female had defended her territory fiercely against any and all other females, including her own grown kittens, and except when her heat cycle demanded the need of a tomcat, she avoided their presence deliberately. She would allow no tomcat to settle within her territory at the best of times, and when she was with kittens she had good reason to fear the males' uneven dispositions.

Next morning, as the sun warmed the rocks and outcroppings along the river, she slowed her pace, then finally abandoned travel entirely to lie sprawled on a warm boulder and let the sunshine lull her into easy slumber. She didn't sleep soundly; her ears constantly twitched and turned to catch the sounds of the bush around her, and her nose sifted and catalogued the myriad scents that were carried on the rising breeze. It was almost noon before she stretched, reaching out with each paw and shivering the heavy muscles of her shoulders and flanks. Then she strode deliberately back into the scrub along the edge of the water, moving slowly, but with total alertness as she neared the man-made track to the ford.

A vagrant breeze brought her to a sudden halt, nostrils twitching at the combined odors of wood-smoke and people. But underlying it all, so faint as to seem almost a memory, was the tantalizing scent of another cat---a male. She had already turned in her tracks, automatically fleeing the smell of man, when she caught the other flavor, and her inner urgings took immediate control.

Her throat quivered as the mating scream poured from it.



## TWO

Jack Fielding halted his A.C.T. ranger-service truck in the middle of the ford and stared with angry disgust at the rubbish-strewn sand bank upstream from him. Beer cans, soft-drink cans and empty stubbies were scattered everywhere, along with brightly-colored wrappings and gleaming shards of tinfoil. On the far side of the ford, plumes of smoke proclaimed the presence of visitors, and although it wasn't yet the really dangerous bush-fire season with its stringent fire bans, he could tell from the smoke that this particular fire was far larger than any picnic required. His worries decreased slightly as he chugged through to the other side and saw the rump of Dave Bates' battered utility sticking out of the bush; at least old Dave would ensure that the fire was safely out once the offending picnic group had left.

Parking his own vehicle at the edge of the track, Jack strolled through the sand to where he could get a closer look at the scene, and arrived in time to see the form of a large Siamese tomcat hurtle into the arms of a blue-eyed five or six-year-old girl, almost knocking her over. Beside the fire, a burly man of about thirty-five tried vainly to keep some sausages from falling through a grill into the roaring flames while a huge chunk of T-bone steak burned beyond recognition. Jack sighed, not at all relishing the task before him.

Stepping into the open, he coughed to announce his presence, then said, "Excuse me."

The man didn't look up, although the pretty blonde woman beside him turned toward Jack and the little girl gave him a tentative grin.

"Excuse me," he said again, louder this time, then winced as the man flinched at the sound of his voice and tipped a sausage into the flames. Jack, who stood six-foot-four and had been compared to America's legendary Paul Bunyan, got an incautious, angry curse for an answer as the man turned to stare at him with hostile, angry eyes.

The man turned and looked down at the charring sausage, then his eyes rose again to meet Jack's. "Thanks a lot," he said bitterly. "I really needed that. Now what the hell do you want?"

"I just wondered if you know that you're not supposed to have fires except in proper fireplaces," Jack said easily. He called it his gentle approach, and the one he always started with, even when he knew it wasn't likely to work. Rangers in the Australian Capital Territory were trained to accept public relations as an integral part of their work, not least because they were so often in contact with diplomatic staff from all over the world.

The man at the fire was an Australian, by his voice, and not a happy one. He rose to his feet, scuffling his expensive track shoes in the sand. He looked down at his fire, which had swallowed up the sausage, then back at Jack Fielding. "What's the matter with this fireplace?" he demanded. Then, before Jack could answer, "Besides, I don't see any fireplaces around here. If I'm supposed to use a proper fireplace, where are they?"

"We don't have any here," Jack said, keeping his voice calm and composed, "because this isn't a place we want to encourage people to build fires."

“Rubbish,” was the truculent reply. “Good picnic spot, there should be a fireplace. And for your information, there aren't any fire bans on.”

The man's wife said, “I'm sorry...we didn't know.” She began pushing sand into the flames, gently, so as not to get it all over the smoldering meat, but her husband stopped her.

“Now look here,” he said to Jack. “If you want people to use fireplaces, you have to provide them. You can't just come in here and tell me I'm supposed to stop my barbecue halfway through because of some silly damned regulation.”

“It isn't a silly regulation, sir. It's for your own safety as much as anything. There are proper barbecues back at Pierce's Creek, and various others in other locations. There aren't any here because it's been decided this area isn't to be developed yet. And I'm not asking you to put out your fire right this minute, just to be very careful with it.”

He turned to go, afraid his own anger would escape if the argument continued. Clearly, this wasn't the moment to begin this family's education about proper use of the forest. But when the man shouted after him, “It's a stupid bloody rule,” Jack turned back in a single, abrupt motion.

“I didn't make the rule,” he said, “any more than I made the one against letting pets run loose out here. However, I must enforce the rules.”

He could have bitten his tongue when he saw the little girl clutch tightly at the big tomcat until it squalled. Jack hadn't meant to say anything, since the regulation was seldom enforced except in nuisance cases, but anger had stripped the caution from his tongue. Most people he had to deal with, however ignorant of proper behavior in the bush, were at least reasonable when approached the right way. This fellow, he decided, would be unreasonable at the best of times.

Jack's feelings were borne out when the man turned his anger on the child,

shouting at her to lock the cat in the car as she'd been told. Confused and hurt by her father's outburst, the child stood clutching at her pet, tears forming in her brilliant blue eyes. Her mother moved to ease the tension, but the man moved first. He snatched the cat from the child's arms, and, ignoring its angry attempts at retaliation, slogged through the sand toward his car.

“Don't you hurt Toby,” the child cried, running after him. But Royal Blue Tobias of Newcastle II was in little danger of being hurt. The large bluepoint Siamese, probably the finest example of his breed in south-eastern Australia, twisted his boxy face into a fierce yowl, flashed his razor-sharp claws, dug into the man's arm, and clawed himself free before they'd gone ten steps.

Howling with pain, the man scrambled for a fresh grip on the tomcat and received another slash across the knuckles. The cat was as angry as the man, whom he clearly didn't like, and he wasn't about to be picked up again.

He wasn't about to be picked up by anyone else, either. The incensed and frightened cat doubled back behind a large gum tree, circled the now-dying fire, and was cautiously eyeing all the people when the banshee wail of the female cat's mating cry surged down the valley.

Toby halted, bolt upright. His dark ears perked and he raised one forefoot like a dog on point. The bluepoint tail twitched behind him as he stood listening, especially the little crooked bit at the end. The second screaming yowl followed close on the first, and the Siamese moved from rigid stillness to blurring, silent motion as he bolted straight past Jack Fielding's legs and out across the track, where he disappeared into the heavy scrub along the riverbank. In the silence that followed, Jack heard Toby's own, distinctive Siamese voice raised in answer to the summons.

What followed was the tumult of the child's tears, her mother's vain attempts

aalborg...cat tracks...11

to soothe her, and her father's raging verbal attack on Jack Fielding---as if the cat's escape had been the ranger's fault. Forgotten were the charred snags and ruined steak, even the illegal and dying fire. The man's only interest seemed to be the loss of an expensive, prize-winning show cat that had vanished like smoke into the almost impenetrable scrub along the river.



### *THREE*

The sounds of an argument, rather than the cry of a female cat in heat, yanked old Dave Bates out of his peaceful nap. Leaving the shade of his truck, shaking his head at the disturbance, he rose to his feet. Then, finger-combing his still-thick silver hair, he strolled through the scrub.

He arrived in time to see an entire family---father, mother and child---surge forth to hunt for a missing, elusive tomcat; a costly show-cat named Royal Blue Tobias of Newcastle II.

Toby, however, was answering a far stronger, more alluring, and more demanding call than even a distraught child could provide. His instincts, for the moment, left him blind to his association with humans, deaf to the cries of his owners. While the family searched the jungle of scrub near the crossing for a glimpse of his soft tan coat, Toby was half a mile downstream, seeking a place to cross the twinkling waters so that he could join the huge feral she-cat.

“He'll likely come back in a day or two, once his business is done,” old Dave told his friend Jack Fielding, as they stared at the water and listened to the cries of the family. “That's if he comes back at all.”

“If he comes back at all,” Jack echoed. The fringe areas of the Australian

Capital Territory---areas near habitation, areas that favored picnic and recreation sites---had large populations of feral cats, enough that trapping and disposing of them was classed as an ongoing program. This far out, however, there were no traps and less likelihood of anybody catching up with the romantic tomcat...unless he returned to the picnic site of his own volition.

The two men discussed the problem of feral cats and their devastating destruction of native Australian wildlife until the family abandoned their search. Then the only course of action was to record a name and address, and promise to capture the cat should it return. There was little else Jack and Dave could do, despite the empathy both men felt for the little girl.

“I hope he does come back, for the kiddie's sake,” said Dave, fingering his salt-and-pepper beard as he strolled back to his truck. “But the man's a fool for bringing the tom out here in the first place. I'm a bit surprised, too, considering the value of the beast.”

“Personally, I can't imagine paying a fortune for any cat,” Jack said. “And if I did, I sure wouldn't be bringing it on picnics with me. You know, don't you, that there's not much chance we'll find it again?”

“Yes, I know, but you wouldn't want to tell them that. Especially not the child. And we could get lucky. I'll be camping down here for a day or two. The fishing isn't bad and I've nothing else to do. So I'll keep an eye open, and maybe if there's somebody here the tom will come back. You can't ever tell. I'd imagine he's never learned to hunt, and the old queen won't feed him for long. Unless he's awful stupid he'll come back to where he remembers people and tucker.”

“Thanks, mate, I'd appreciate it. If it weren't for the kiddie, I wouldn't care a bit. The cat's probably better off out there than anywhere near that bloke...the kiddie's dad. And I think the cat knows it. They didn't like each other, you could

aalborg...cat tracks...14

tell.”

The two friends parted, both aware that should Toby survive, he could join countless other cats running wild, brutally abandoned by owners too lazy to keep them. Pet abandonment was a continuing problem at the more popular campsites and picnic areas in the Australian Capital Territory.

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