

Cat Fight

By Paul Ciotti

For years mountain lions were thought to be the scaredy-cats of the feline family; shy, reclusive, wary of dogs, and afraid of people. No longer. Suddenly, mountain lions are showing up in suburban counties all over California, jumping fences, running over rooftops, crouching in schoolyard trees, prowling through backyards and eating Dobermans, house cats, goats, and pet pigs.

"There is terror in the foothills," says Tim Leslie, a California state senator whose district includes most of the Sierra Nevadas. "There are so many sightings, so many cat tracks in residential areas, that people are afraid to let their children play in their own yards."

Within the last year, mountain lions have chased women on horseback, run after men on mountain bikes, and scared two hikers in the hills above Pasadena so badly that they climbed a steep ridge, couldn't get back down, and had to be rescued by helicopter. The frequency of the attacks seems to be accelerating. In May, in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park near San Diego, a lion had charged to within five feet of a three-year-old boy on a hiking trail before the boy's father drove it off with a stick. In August, in Mendocino County, a rabid mountain lion attacked a woman near a campfire. While two of her companions held the lion down (one of them losing a thumb in the process), a third killed it with a bread knife. In September, a jogger at the University of California in Santa Cruz was stalked by a screaming mountain lion until he managed to climb a fence, flag down a passing car, and escape.

In the most gruesome incident of all, last April, an 82-pound female lion attacked Barbara Schoener as she was jogging along a park trail in the Sierra foothills northeast of Sacramento. The lion bit her neck and crushed her skull. Then it dragged her three hundred feet down a hill and ate her face, upper back, lungs, spleen, pancreas, kidneys, stomach, liver and small intestines.

Biologists offer several reasons for this sudden spate of lion attacks. California's human population has grown 25% in the last eight years, forcing humans and lions into closer contact; a continuing drought in the high Sierras has reduced the state deer herd by more than a third, forcing the lions to look for other food; and, most impor-

tantly, the mountain-lion population has exploded during the last quarter-century.

Some complained that the mountain lion was protecting her cubs; others pointed out that there were mountain lions in California before there were humans. A Sacramento Bee reader was prompted to write: "We should take into account that this noble creature may well have been venting centuries of mountain-lion anger against the humans who have driven it from its land, destroyed its home, ruthlessly hunted it down, and, as the final indignity, debased it to an advertising device to sell cars."

Though Fish and Game officials, were stunned at the outpouring of sympathy for a predator that had killed and eaten a mother of two young children, others saw the reaction as a predictable part of a larger pattern. "An amazing number of people have confused ecology with religion," says Los Angeles-based outdoor writer Mike Dickerson. "They have adopted some set of beliefs around eco-awareness that performs the function that religion used to perform... (They) believe a lion should never be killed for any reason whatsoever." It has gotten so bad that a female ranger who killed a lion that had bitten a 10-year-old girl at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park burst into tears over the animal, fell into depression, and had to take time off from work for psychological counseling.

Two state legislators have introduced bills to modify Proposition 117 to allow the resumption of sport hunting. But both bills are strongly opposed by the Mountain Lion Foundation, and neither has made it out of committee.

Environmental groups say they aren't terribly worried about additional attacks on people. For one thing, they say, mountain lions are highly territorial, and once all available territories are filled, the population will stabilize automatically. "The olden days where the only good predator was a dead predator—those days are gone," Says Paul Beier, assistant professor of wildlife biology at Northern Arizona University. "Today we value predators as part of the environment in which we live... so we are going to accept a couple of deaths per decade."

Pro-hunting groups reply that mountain lions are very adaptable animals. When population pressures increase, they will simply begin to live and hunt in groups. And in any case, with the mountain lions

population now as high as 8,000 by some estimates, the animals won't be killing just one or two humans per decade; there will be multiple maulings and deaths, with many of the victims being children, who more closely resemble mountain lion's natural prey.

Meanwhile, the Fish and Game Department is caught in the middle. It has a legal responsibility to kill mountain lions that attack or threaten people. Yet when it does, it gets mauled by animal-rights activists who demand that the offending officer be fired.

When a mountain lion attacked five-year-old Laura Small as she fished for tadpoles in an Orange County park in 1986, it left her with permanent brain damage, partial paralysis, and only one eye. Still, some people who called the Fish and Game Department were adamant that the lion not be killed. "It was terrible what happened to Laura Small," one caller said. "But you can always replace a human. You can't always replace a mountain lion."

Source: *The National Review*, *American Trapper* Jan/Feb 95

Rancher Convicted Of Killing Eagles

On May 10, Juan Maya, 43, a Johnson County (Wyoming) sheep rancher was convicted in U.S. District Court in Casper, Wyoming, on four counts of killing eagles, one bald and four golden eagles, between January 1, 1994 and March 18, 1994. Maya was given a sentence of 15 months in prison and fined \$16,175.

Killing eagles is a federal offense under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Under federal guidelines, Maya could have received a maximum of seven years in prison and fines of more than \$800,000.

Strength of the case was upon ballistic and forensic evidence conducted on the eagle carcasses and testimony of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Special Agent, Robert Priksat, who testified that Maya had made self-incriminating remarks.

Source: *Casper Star Tribune*, 5 12 95. pg. A1.

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