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INTRODUCING COUGAR

We are sorry to hear that Mr. Fred Cole is no better. Miss Ruth Johnson has been in for the past week with an ingrowing toenail. Mr. J. G. Johnson, merchant, is worrying considerable about his hogs eating so much corn and not fattening.

Messrs. Winfield Powers and Cleveland Gordon were calling on their lady friends last Sunday night in Loudoun, and on their way home were chased by a panther.

—SANDY HOOK NEWS, OCTOBER 19, 1906

Winfield Powers was my maternal great-great-grandfather and Sandy Hook is the small hamlet where my mother's family hails from. Today, the town is nothing more than a few ramshackle houses along the Potomac River in western Maryland, at the point where the Potomac converges with the Shenandoah River. Dense woods engulf the land, and to this day it remains surprisingly wild. Two hundred fifty miles away and three hundred years earlier in what is now Manhattan, a vast commercial operation was under way. Among the most sought-after items were cougar pelts: warm, soft, prized for their even color, but maneless. American Indians gathered from throughout the New World to trade and sell the bounties of their land to the Dutch West India Company. Europeans and early white settlers, familiar only with the maned skins of African lions, forever asked their indigenious trading partners, Why don't you ever bring us male pelts? Amused by the whites' ignorance of the New World's fauna — male

cougars, after all, have no mane—the American Indians explained with great emphasis that the male cats were so savage, so inaccessible, that they only lived far, far away, hiding “in the mountains.” And so it was that during my great-great-grandfather’s life, the great cats that early white traders—suffering a joke at their own expense—called “mountain lion” still roamed this wilderness.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century: cougars, where they once were, are no more. The vast eastern portion of the United States and most of the Midwest share this in common with Sandy Hook—the lineage of the “panther” that may have chased my great-great-grandfather no longer roams these wooded glens. Where the Rocky Mountains meet the plains, from north to south along the eastern borders of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico, cougars were triumphantly and unsparingly trapped, poisoned, shot, baited, hounded, and bounty-hunted from more than half their former U.S. range. Today, just fourteen of our forty-eight contiguous United States have sustaining populations of cougars.

Somewhat contradicting this fact, daily Google Alerts hail news to the contrary, that somewhere in the country where cougars are no longer believed to exist someone claims to have seen one. The media simplifies such random, mostly alleged sightings—in Arkansas, “Cougar Sighting Has White County Residents Scared” and “Panther Seen Near Plainview”; in Connecticut, “Neighbors Spooked by . . . Mountain Lion?”; in Illinois, “Is There a Cougar Among Us?” And then invariably come the sound bites from “experts” claiming that “cougars are expanding their range,” when in fact what comes closer to the truth is that the great cats are likely attempting to recolonize areas they formerly called home. In these places cougars may be seeking, and finding, refuge where they may be less likely to have to negotiate the threat of sport-hunting or confront the equally deadly threat of another cougar, or where prey may be more plentiful.

GIVING VOICE TO COUGAR

This collection of essays and stories attempts to give voice to a controversial animal that few people have or ever will see. Each piece

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is introduced by a brief statement that does nothing more than hint at what you, the reader, will discover through these authors' eyes. Their experiences are diverse yet connected through the common denominator of *awe*. They come from varying backgrounds – some hunters; some academics, artists and poets, researchers; and some simply going about their lives – and are linked by an encounter with this great cat that has affected the way they view some facet of their lives. Their stories are a testimony to cougar's power, both symbolic and literal.

The book has been compiled in a way that one might experience a cougar in the wild. It is underscored by a hint of cougar's presence, a common vein that runs throughout the collection, echoing what a few may have felt or many may imagine feeling – that pulse of wildness while in the out-of-doors, the desire to see a cougar coupled with a fair dose of realistic hesitation about the possibilities of this actually happening (“In Absentia,” “Lion Markers”). It may be that such a “sixth sense” leads to an encounter that, although not inherently threatening and perhaps even thrilling, gives way to the reality of dealing with a carnivore on your – or their – home turf. In “The Growl,” “Lion Story,” “Talking with a Cougar,” and “A Lion, a Fox, and a Funeral,” things begin to heat up and the authors' endorphins stir as they come face-to-face with cougar.

Sometimes such interactions prove enough to inspire a latent curiosity on the particulars of the species: its history, how and where it lives, what peoples revere it, what it hunts, and the kinds and functions of the landscapes it depends on to survive (“Sanctuary,” “The Sacred Cat,” “A Short, Unnatural History”). We are fortunate to have the voices of those whose dedication to better understanding this elusive species contributes to its long-term survival. Here, we learn about their work from the inside out; how these authors see, interpret, and react to the challenges that come from studying *Puma concolor* (“South Dakota Cougar,” “A Puma's Journey”).

Because the boundaries between myth and reality often run close and narrow, two stories speak to the darker side of popular lore in “Hunting at Night” and “Lion Heart.” And since this animal, both historically and in the present time, is capable of touching our

inner as well as outer lives, we've included pieces that incorporate the archetypal and psychological value of cougars, in dreamtime and beyond ("To Cry for Vision," "Border Cat," "My Bush Soul, the Mountain Lion," "The Shifting Light of Shadows"). Finally, no volume would be complete without those words that are nothing less than poetry and with their clear, precise beauty strike at our very core ("Closer," "Drought").

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF COUGAR

Before the widespread extirpation of cougars in the eastern United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these magnificent cats lived most everywhere throughout the Americas. But even though they were widespread, they were relatively few when compared to herds of herbivores like deer, elk, and bison. Cougars are a classic low-density species, meaning that a single animal needs around one hundred square miles to hunt, roam, and call its own. Males are staunch defenders of their territories whereas females, along with their offspring, are more tolerant of overlap from other family groups, allowing a male cougar to roam their territories for the chance to breed with them. When the time comes for cubs to leave their mothers, their goal is to establish territories of their own on land productive enough so that they may hunt their requisite one deer or elk approximately every week to ten days.

This proves a greater trial for male cougars. Sometimes, in an attempt to take over another male's territory, the two males may fight, often to the death, for the right to live in optimal habitat replete with prey or to mate with local females so that the victor might inject his genes into the pool of cougar DNA. The challenging male, if successful, may kill a mother cougar's kittens, who would otherwise remain in her charge until they reach an average age of eighteen months old. Oftentimes, the mother cougar also dies in the battle, trying to save her kittens from the harsh realities of natural order in the complex social structure of cougar life. Coined "intra-specific strife," this social mechanism executed by males within cougar ranks helps to keep their numbers in check. Ecologists and renowned researchers Ken Logan and Linda Swenor, in their

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seminal book *Desert Puma*, cite that in their non-hunted study area little more than half—around 60 percent—of the kittens survived, a testimony to the tough life of a cougar.

Despite the many challenges cougars face in the wild, their first and foremost cause of mortality is due to humans and their whims: deadly roadways slicing through their territories and sport hunting. Even hobby animals—including smaller-scale domestic livestock like sheep, llamas, and goats, penned but not enclosed, free-ranging but unattended, captive yet not protected—can prove fatal for a cougar who is tempted by one of these easy targets. Depending on the attitude of the landowner, that cat may be taken out on what's called a depredation permit, basically a one-way ticket to death row by a hired gun and his team of dogs.

So who *is* this tawny tiger, this ghost cat, this “panther”? It is, first and foremost, powerful. It is silent. It is large: the smallest adult females weigh around ninety pounds and the largest Boone and Crockett trophy males will tip the scales at over two hundred pounds. It is solitary; only mothers raising cubs form solid family groups and then only for the first fourteen to twenty-two months of their kittens' lives. Cougars are capable of killing a 700-pound elk and skinning out a porcupine—though not without consequence. And since they are gifted with such extreme prowess, such extreme skill at stalk, ambush, and kill, yes, they can also kill a full-grown man.

When viewed in motion, a cougar runs with a rocking gesture to its gait, front paws striking the ground nearly in unison as the rear paws follow. Its tail—long, sometimes as long as its body, so thick it appears to challenge the girth of its neck—acts like a creature of its own volition, a rudder steering and offsetting the course of stocky, muscular legs and skillet-sized paws with claws like those of housecats, retracting to muffle its steps or flashing out to grasp its prey.

There is a painting by artist September Vhay that portrays a mule deer doe; her body is in profile, her stance interrupted by a sound coming from the woods. One ear is up, askew, as she probes the environment for any hint of danger, a warning sign that may

save her life. This brief moment of awareness may be her last if that sound was made by a cougar.

We see this time and again in our lives, on television and often in real life: one being dies, giving another what it needs to survive. No animal evokes this sense of the cycle, this web of nature, on such a grand scale as the cougar. Awesome they are, and no matter how beautiful, they are not to be taken lightly.

Likewise, they are not as ferocious or as eager to attack humans as the rare news event may frighten us into believing. Shy and withdrawn, cougars are charged with the high task of surviving alone. Unlike wolves, they live completely on their own, without the support of a pack to care for their young and help make their kills. Pure carnivores, cougars are meat eaters by nature's obligation and so must live without the omnivorous options enjoyed by bears, who are able to survive on roots, berries, pine nuts, and shoots with only the occasional dose of pure protein thrown in when opportune.

What has helped craft the narrative of fear surrounding cougar has also allowed this animal to survive, resulting in a fate far better than that of its fellow carnivores: wolves were eradicated and grizzly bears persecuted to the point of earning a place on the list of Endangered Species. Cougars are masters of landscape and can adapt to the rugged isolation of high mountain cliffs or the slimmer pickings of a remote desert habitat. Prairies are no more a challenge than any other place, with riverways and stands of deciduous trees where deer may take shelter, where cougar can wait at meadow's edge, crouched in grasses, not unlike the lion of Africa's savannas. What more could we expect from *Puma concolor*, the "cat of one color," which was once the largest ranging mammal in the Western Hemisphere?

This ability to adapt and to blend in is reinforced by a schedule that falls during the crepuscular hours of sunrise and sunset. The first word used in a scientific text to describe the species is *cryptic*: infrequently seen, this cat is even rarer a danger. It is astonishing, really, that more people have not come into contact with cougars considering this statistic: eight cougars have been collared and tracked in the Santa Monica Mountains since 2002. A conser-

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vative estimate of visitors to the state park is around six million people *per year*. Amazingly, not more than a handful of visitors have reported seeing these feline residents. And at that, many of the reported sightings were not cougars, according to scientists, but dogs, coyotes, and even housecats masquerading in the imaginations of those viewers as these stellar carnivores so many people simultaneously would love, yet dread, to see.

Cougars can powerfully call forth our innermost fears because it is on this very edge that cougars reside in our psyches, straddling both fear and awe. We want to see one—even just a glimpse, just once—yet we don't want to be confronted with a situation outside our control. But rarely are encounters with cougars on human terms.

In the United States, thirty-two people died by dog bite or attack in 2003 alone and around twenty people per year die of bee stings, versus the twenty cougar-caused deaths since 1900 (see table, p. 176). Cougars draw our interest and spark the imagination just as their presence is capable of quailing even the most seasoned outdoorsmen, the most rational of individuals. Some written accounts capitalize on this primal need to recognize that which can hurt us, to call it out of the dark. Often, the efforts result in a sensationalized view of a creature who is simply trying to survive, to hold its place in the world among habitats that are increasingly fragmented, degraded, or inhabited by humans. Teddy Roosevelt said it best—about ten years before my great-great-grandfather was reportedly “chased by a panther”—when he observed, “No American beast has been the subject of so much loose writing or of such wild fables as the cougar.”

Roosevelt's critique reminds me of the power of story, and the need for us—as a civilization and as a community—to hold our stories, to keep them alive through their telling. At no previous time has *Puma concolor* needed its stories to be told as much as right now.

LISTENING TO COUGAR

Cougar cries have been likened to a woman screaming or sometimes a baby crying, a sound described as both haunting and haunted, a

primal wail that settles into a place that exists within us and that we know to avoid; a sound that awakens a deeper and older side of our humanity, calling forth the instincts of our cavemen predecessors and their ability to survive, relying primarily on instinct. To listen to a cougar is to feel what it means to be *wild*.

In this sound are the beauty and the reminder that we are rarely alone in the wild. And when we most think we are is likely the time when we most owe it to ourselves, and the wild, to know better. Having traveled much of the world, I find there are few countries more gifted with wild places than the United States. An admirable history of conservation—although one not immune to criticism—has mostly protected tens of thousands of acres of land from the fingerprint of humankind. In places like Yellowstone, practically my backyard, one sees this immediately. Leave behind the busy park roads and concession stands and within a half hour you find yourself in some of the rawest, most unbridled backcountry—complete with the full complement of wildlife—in a matter of minutes.

But with cougar, we don't always have to go there. More and more, the wild *is* a part of many people's backyards; we have come to it, and it, having nowhere else to go, has stayed. Now it rubs up against new tract-home developments and the peaceful promise of suburban and rural life, where so many people are seeking refuge from the chaos of other people, traffic, pollution, and noise. In these cases, as more and more people close in on the realm of wildlife, especially large obligate carnivores like cougars, public awareness, coupled with human tolerance and a conscious effort to prevent encounters, may be this species' only hope for long-term survival.* Their future rests in human hands.

As with wildlife in general and carnivores in particular, the stakes run as high as the emotions generated by their presence: Will these big cats still be around fifty, one hundred years from now? Will there still be self-sustaining populations of cougars, or will there be only a few random sightings here and there, with some people

* Cougar safety tips can be found in the back of this book.

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trying to prove – while others aim to disprove – cougar’s existence, as is now the case in the Midwest and the eastern United States? Or will the United States more closely resemble the European Union, with our states so fragmented by human settlement that large carnivores simply have no place left to roam?

The players in this game are made up of a diverse rubric of stakeholders: those invested in conservation, wildlife management, science, stockgrowing, and the enduring livelihood of their families; hunters with their preferred pastimes; urban refugees with second or retirement homes in the New West and other areas; those concerned with ethical issues surrounding wildlife and dedicated to animals and their existence as sentient beings in their own right; and more.

In such a climate, the boundaries become blurred. Oftentimes wildlife management veers from doing what is scientifically sound, or prudent, and wanders into the arena of making decisions not principally based on conservation but more heavily on perception, politics, and, most always, the almighty dollar. But the problem begins behind the scenes, with statutes in place that hog-tie many state agencies to depend solely on money generated from hunting licenses. The problem with this bureaucratic business model is that each year, fewer and fewer Americans hunt – already the statistic holds at around a paltry 3 percent. Even so, with the proliferation of media networks broadcasting animal stories 24/7 coupled with an increased awareness of and care for animals overall, more and more people are interested: in animals, their welfare, and in how well state agency professionals may, or may not, be doing their jobs. It is hard to place blame on the increasingly outdated culture of wildlife management, whose origins grew from, and whose efforts have historically been funded by, the “hook and bullet” constituency, those who literally consume wildlife, be they hunters or fishermen.

At The Cougar Fund, members of the public sometimes contact us because they are concerned about the hunting and pursuit of cougars with dogs for sport. We regularly hear, “I hate and disagree with cougar hunting! Why don’t you just buy all the cougar

tags?!" But the issue there—besides ostracizing those who do hold a place at the table, no matter where one's ethics lie—is that cougar tags are sold in *unlimited* quantities although for meager sums between \$5 and \$30 for state resident tags. The stopgap measure for actually killing "too many" cats is set by a quota limit determined by state wildlife agencies and their governing commissioners: political appointees, most of whom have little to no expertise in biology or conservation.

A more thoughtful model might involve decreasing the number of cougar tags sold but increasing their cost. Most people who want to kill a cougar hire a professional outfitter to take them to find the cat, and that person will get paid anywhere from \$2,000 to \$6,000. The financial benefit the state game agency reaps then is only a small fraction of the hunters' total dollars spent—from 0.08 to 1.5 percent of the outfitter's fee. This is a pathetic amount, really, considering that the cougar is a rare and enigmatic big game species almost always hunted to provide a trophy.

On the other hand, houndsmen—people who train their dogs to scent-track certain animals, especially cougars—have proved surprising allies in the goal to bring better and more sound science to setting cougar kill quotas. In the purest sense of hounding, the entire activity could be compared to a much larger version of catch-and-release fishing. The cougar is tracked and then treed by dogs. The houndsman may photograph the animal and then call off his dogs and go home for the day. Does the cougar experience stress? Most certainly, just as a housecat would if it were chased by a neighbor's dog. But much of the time with hounding, the cougar is not shot, and although kittens may sometimes be mauled, they are less likely to be orphaned, the hierarchical male territorial society is usually not affected, and the greater cougar gene pool is not shortchanged by the loss of one of its individuals. Of course many times houndsmen do contract out as outfitters and will guide hunters, who will kill the cougar, but this is the easiest part of the "hunt" and anyone who has seen a cougar being shot out of a tree understands this (killing treed cougars has been likened to "shooting fish in a barrel").

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In 2000, when Tom Mangelsen and I met with the representative from the Northern Wyoming Houndsmen Association, we compared notes and discovered that we were calling for four out of five of the same things, beginning with strict female subquotas, or caps, to prevent the unintentional orphaning of dependent cougar kittens. Winter 2007 found a similar alliance formed among Colorado conservation groups, including Sinapu and houndsmen's organizations. Emulating Montana's hunter education program to train outdoorsmen to distinguish between grizzly and black bears, the Colorado Division of Wildlife amended their hunting regulations to include mandatory testing of prospective hunters, who must be able to distinguish male from female cougars. These kinds of changes are occurring as the interest and engagement of the general public increases, and with state game agencies accountable, they understand that few people will tolerate orphaned young being left behind by irresponsible policies and practices that may not only compromise the health of a species, but further damage the general public's perception of hunting.

When it comes to cougars, or any species, the current game management setup provides little opportunity for financial contribution and, thus, buy-in by the non-hunting public. The architecture in most states for an average person sympathetic to any given animal and interested in donating money simply does not exist. Instead, these people look for an outlet that will specifically benefit the species they are concerned about (which is how and why The Cougar Fund came into existence—with stakeholders who found themselves voiceless and disenfranchised by the current management of *Puma concolor*). Most venues to support state game agencies come in the form of hunting tags; buy a tag and it counts as a vote for the consumptive—versus conservative—use of wildlife. Likewise, those consumptive users—hunters—are quick to remind the non-consumptive public that they “pay for wildlife.” And it is difficult, after all, to find a way to charge a bird-watcher or nature photographer or hiker to pay for something that they don't technically take with them. What may help, then, is a rebranding effort on the part of these state game agencies to include all stakeholders

with the goal to generate a more dependable revenue stream and better funding for both the animals and the state game professionals who are charged with their conservation. No small feat, to be certain.

Today, much has been accomplished but much remains at stake. A friend of mine remarked that refocusing state game agencies' priorities on science is tantamount to moving glaciers. True progress, like anything of value, takes time. Wyoming, although still concerned with maximizing hunting opportunities, researched and implemented a mountain lion management plan that is based on landscape ecological models, including the idea that habitats that generate wildlife (source areas) may compensate for less productive habitats (sink areas). But as my coeditor, Marc, frequently points out in his talks around the world, "Science is not value free." My home state, Wyoming, serves as an excellent example of how professional and personal agendas and biases inform the implementation of wildlife management programs. Recently in Teton County, in spite of sound and quantifiable biological evidence conducted independently of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department that a certain Hunt Area 2 is producing no female recruits to the cougar population—they are simply being killed, or dying, too fast—both the department biologists and the governing body, the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, suggested and approved continuing with the liberal hunting program that is adversely affecting the area's cougars. This point is especially worrisome given that females are considered the "biological savings account" of any wildlife population. To make matters worse, Teton County's governor-appointed commissioner further shunned sound science by appealing, unsuccessfully, to his fellow commissioners to double kill quotas in an adjacent connected area and to do away with the few protections female cougars in the area are given in the form of subquotas. This Wyoming case is a classic example of the clash between facts and values, and what still occurs in spite of a populace largely made up of well-educated citizens who grasp the important role of carnivores in ecosystems.

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Of course, scientists, policy makers, politicians, special interest and animal rights' groups, and wildlife bureaucrats will continue to debate whether any animal needs to be "managed," along with whether management equals conservation. In the meantime, those who care about wildlife, regardless of their values, are coming closer and closer to arriving at the crucial common ground necessary to make sure this elusive but important predator sticks around into the next century and beyond.

At the end of the day, the question is not whether to hunt – the old arguments for or against have little to do with cougar's long-term survival when we, as a society, have the proverbial bigger fish to fry of rapidly diminishing habitat and vanishing wild corridors coupled with attitudes that may or may not be tolerant to the presence of the big cats. One hundred years ago my great-great-grandfather probably couldn't imagine that the wild panther might not survive the twenty-first century.

So now, on behalf of our contributors' efforts to shed more light on and bring more awareness to the animal we fondly refer to as America's Greatest Cat, Marc and I invite you to read and enjoy *Listening to Cougar*.