

The Mystery of Mountain Lions *continued from page 6*

book *The Cougar Conundrum* and director of Panthera's Puma Program.

The upshot of these intricate interactions is that hunters may cause social disarray if they kill too many cats, opening once-stable territories to an influx of younger cougars. That could boost cougar activity in residential areas, as well as complaints.

But there is also evidence of how little most cougars want to do with humans — and how well they avoid us, even at close range. Near developed areas and high human traffic, cougars restrict their activities to between dusk and dawn, when people hunker inside. Even close to homes, they heavily favor wild prey over easier-to-catch domestic animals. Studies have shown they will flee from hard-won kills at the mere sound of a human voice. “We would probably be dumbfounded if we knew how few encounters are even recognized as such,” said Justine Smith, a wildlife ecologist at UC Davis.

Satterfield hopes to explore similar dynamics here in the Methow, where cougars flow down from the mountains in winter, perhaps following mule deer seeking forage in the valleys — habitats people also favor. Fitbit-like technology on some collars helps her suss out how homes like mine affect cougars' hunting, for good or ill. They alert her crew to location-specific bursts of speed, so they can assess tracks in that spot, translating the animals' remotely sensed movements into readable language.

By afternoon, though, Satterfield's team had pursued only dogs through the hills, doubling back and again until the last was collected, still howling with the search. The most dramatic chase was one we found drawn in snow. Bound marks led from the shade of a big ponderosa into a wide depression, where one muscled body collided with another. A spreading pink stain. A drag mark. And finally, the spraddled remains of a deer, its ribcage hollowed, its hooves skyward. All around, tracks in blood and shadow — magpie, raven, eagle — the tracteries of wingtips brushing the drifts, a roil of life pouring in after the cat's kill, shown clear on the canvas of winter.

SCIENCE MAY NEVER fully dispel cougars' mystery, but it can suggest better ways for us to make space for their lives. After years of study in collaboration with universities, for example, in 2013, Washington became the first state to restructure its sport hunt to preserve cougar social structure. Yet a lot of research is still ignored or not believed, said Department of Fish and Wildlife cougar and bear specialist Rich Beausoleil. “We've made incredible progress in some aspects of cougar management, but perception still outweighs science on so many fronts.”

And though public cougar appreciation has swelled, it's distributed unevenly between urban areas and the rural places where people are more likely to contend with the animals. Out-sized fear remains. In Alberta, Canada, in 2008, for instance, researchers found that more than half of survey respondents believed that their risk of a cou-

gar attack was at least as great as their risk of a car wreck. That might be due to “cognitive illusion,” where people overestimate the occurrence of rare events because they're memorable. And no

thing researchers attributed less to a rise in cougar activity than to hyper-vigilance stoked by fear.

Something similar may be happening in Washington. The state logged

increased the number of cougars it killed in 2018 and 2019 for attacking livestock and pets.

Those removals are concentrated in the state's conservative northeastern corner, where wolves' return has frazzled local nerves and left some feeling powerless. At a March 2019 wildlife commission meeting, area residents testified for two hours that a “serious overabundance of predators” was obliterating deer, slaughtering domestic animals and threatening people. The commission initiated an early revision of the cougar hunt, raising worries that the state will increase



wonder: Many get wildlife information from the media, which typically covers only extraordinary cougar behavior, like attacks on people.

In California, the number of complaints resulting in permits to kill cougars climbed steadily with human population growth from the '70s through the '90s. Then, after cougars killed two people in 1994, they ballooned — some-

nearly twice as many cougar reports in 2019 as in 2018, largely due to a jump in unconfirmed sightings. Cougars could be changing their movements because of changes in prey, and the state has stepped up efforts to encourage reporting. But it's also notable that a cougar killed a person in Washington in 2018 — the second in state history. And like California in the 1990s, the state steeply

hunting in places where it already regularly exceeds guidelines set to preserve cougar social structure.

“We are at a precipice now with large carnivores,” said Anis Aoude, Washington state game division manager. With many species recovering, the next generation of biologists will face difficult questions: “How do they live

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Lions Provide Help for Vernonia Cares

Members of the Vernonia Lions Club were at the Vernonia Cares food pantry on Monday, May 11, 2020 to present a check for \$500 to help Cares provide food to those in need in the community. The Lions Club members also pitched in and helped unload the weekly freight delivery. Pictured (left to right) are Lions members Jerry Keenon and Rick Hobart, Cares Executive Director Sandy Welch, Cares volunteers Tina Brewington and Tobie Finzel, and Lions member Tweedy Brucken.



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