

THE BAY AREA'S MAGAZINE FOR CONSCIOUS COMMUNITY SINCE 1974

common ground

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The Green Issue

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PHOTO: ERIC YORK

Bay Area Puma

{ BY ZARA MCDONALD }

The Mountain Lions Among Us

PHOTO: TRISH CARNEY



Anesthetized lion being fitted with GPS collar

The runner's pace was steady. She was tired but aware as she turned onto a trail to head up the final stretch of her route on the deserted headlands north of the Golden Gate Bridge. The sun was low. Dusk was approaching. Her mind was focused on the hill and her breathing as she ran up the winding fire road. Due to the dense scrub lining the sides of the trail, she couldn't see much beyond her next few strides. Rounding yet another corner, she came to an immediate halt. At eye level, 4 or 5 feet away, a large mountain lion was watching her from the scrub, his body still mostly hidden by dense brush. His intense, unfaltering gaze jolted her to the present in a way she had not experienced before. Her mind went blank. He continued to focus on her. She didn't move. She took notice of his deep presence and magnificent features, but remained still, watching him as he took in every detail of her, his vast awareness projecting an air of intimate connection to the landscape. Too quickly, it seemed, he lost interest, and turned his head away. In seconds he had disappeared, fully concealed again by the brush, only his long, thick tail still visible, brushing the ground as he silently dissolved back into the landscape. The runner took a deep breath and after several minutes, slowly walked the last quarter mile back to the parking area. This was a run she would not forget.

In Native American tradition the puma was known as a powerful and successful hunter, with almost supernatural physical and sensory abilities that embodied the characteristics humans most desired. Peruvian shamanism asserts that the puma symbolizes the power of an awakened higher mind to transform life challenges, opening new possibilities for living with expanded presence and grace. The puma is powerfully present and alive in each moment, and when you take this animal into your psyche, you become more fully awake to the nuances of each moment, giving you greater wisdom, fluidity, and joy.

Throughout the Americas, the puma picked up new monikers with every story of folklore that added to the legend of this shy, mysterious wildcat. Known most commonly as the mountain lion, puma, cougar, and panther, these familiar names not only describe the same animal but are accompanied by 40 or so less-familiar names in English alone, along with many more derived from Spanish and Native American languages, making it the most widely named of any mammal.

One of its many names, ghost cat, describes its ethereal presence as it moves furtively through the landscape, rarely seen by humans. This is in part likely an adapted behavior due to the heavy hunting of this animal, which led to its extirpation in the Eastern US and other patches in Central and South America by the early 1900s. It was headed in a similar direction in California when Governor Ronald Reagan's administration put a moratorium on lion hunting, and in 1990 the passage of Proposition 117 made the mountain lion a "specially protected mammal" in the Golden State.

Half Tail (F13) was killed for taking an unprotected goat in South Bay



PHOTO: TRISH CARNEY

California is now the only state where hunting the mountain lion for sport is prohibited.

Many who live in the Bay Area are proud to have this last remaining top trophic predator in our midst, silently weaving through the region's forests and meadows, unseen by the vast majority who frequent our spectacular hiking terrain. However, the mountain lion continues to rattle and anger some in the community, largely through unsupported fears, including that of a mountain lion lurking in the brush waiting to pounce on a passing runner, hiker, or child. The reality of our cumulative experience does not validate these perceptions. The last time a mountain lion attacked a human in the greater Bay Area (an urban and wildland patchwork with over 7 million people) was in 1909, over 100 years ago.

Contrary to sensationalized media reports and some public beliefs, mountain lions are exceptionally shy and elusive, and they work very hard to avoid humans. In fact, they do a remarkable job at remaining unseen considering the escalating level of encroachment, bar-

riers, and threats that humans are introducing into *their* habitats. Our native lions are wide-ranging, low-density animals, and like many predators, tend to thrive in areas where they have adequate water, cover, and prey species. Yet finding these three together has become increasingly difficult for them due to the expansion of urbanization—former contiguous habitat has been split up into smaller fragments of unconnected habitat, and terrain quality has become degraded by new barriers and development. It has become a risky proposition for a mountain lion, with home range needs upward of 100 square miles, to move safely throughout its territory.

The problems of human development affect all species, but few, if any, more so than the mountain lion. The threat of being hit by a fast-moving vehicle on one of our many freeway arteries halts some lion movement altogether, and if pathways are blocked, the challenge of upholding genetic diversity within and across populations becomes a serious predicament. Mountain lions must also contend with the

risk of being sighted while navigating around human areas to reach an adjacent patch of quality habitat. Once spotted near a town or neighborhood, a lion's chances of survival are suddenly diminished. An even more likely bad ending for the lion occurs when it mistakes unprotected livestock or roaming pets as an easy meal. Over 100 lions per year are killed legally in California, and an unknown but certainly significant number illegally, as a result of real or suspected livestock "depredation." For a low-density species with a large home range size, this is a substantial number.

These growing conflicts from human activities are not just a problem for the lions. Having lost the other two top trophic predators in our region, the grizzly bear and the wolf, which once were part of the ecological balance of our lands, the mountain lion is now the only species left performing this critical regulatory function. In a very direct way, the health of our lion populations and the health of our region's ecosystems are deeply intertwined. For those who love the Bay Area's immense natural beau-

ty, losing the unseen lion would be a tragic loss bringing many visible and irreversible outcomes. Numerous ecological studies in other regions have started to reveal the complexities and cascading effects from the loss of the top predator in otherwise abundant ecosystems.

To examine our region's lion populations and to help preserve balanced and robust ecosystems, the need for baseline research on Bay Area mountain lions was recognized and initiated in 2007 by Felidae Conservation Fund and a number of partners including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, and the Oakland Zoo. Known as the Bay Area Puma Project, this effort is comprised of long-term, multifaceted research, education, and conservation projects spanning Bay Area lands. The East Bay Puma Project is the latest focus, where researchers are conducting an 1,100-square-mile lion study from Martinez to Mount Diablo to North Mount Hamilton.

Lions are being fitted with GPS collars with accelerometers to precisely track their movements in and around urban zones, wildland interfaces, freeways, ranches, and livestock. This data will enable the researchers to assess the increasing challenges lions face and to predict their future viability amid a growing human population with increasing encroachment on quality habitat. A number of noninvasive research techniques are also being used, including collection of hair and scat for genetic analyses to examine lion health, disease, and ancestry, and remote trail cameras deployed throughout the Bay Area to monitor lions and a myriad of other species. The cameras are placed in grids to determine presence or absence in different habitats, and in targeted areas to observe behaviors and activities of interest.

The scientific work goes hand in hand with an extensive set of school education and public outreach programs that have reached over 18,000 students and citizens, and are helping our communities appreciate the significance of these challenges and the need for action. Greater understanding and awareness will help us find solutions and develop approaches for coexisting with this important and mysterious native predator—one that is rarely seen, but whose magical presence is an essential strand in the ecological web of our Bay Area wildlands.

Klandagi, or Lord of the Forest, is the name for the mountain lion in Cherokee, and it powerfully symbolizes the role of the lion in our natural lands. A healthy ecosystem is nourished by the lion's presence, and if we value our wildlands, we recognize that natural landscapes should always hold some mystery. We can each contribute by encouraging others to understand and value this native predator and to discard rumors and inflated fears that are likely to lead to its extinction. 🐾

Zara McDonald is a conservationist and vet technician with the Felidae Conservation Fund and has worked in felid research and conservation since 2003.

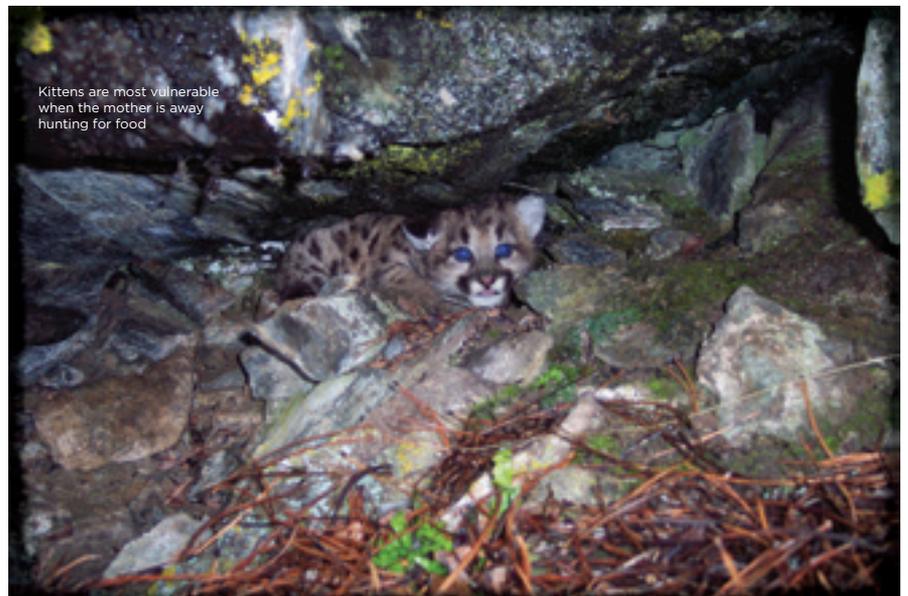
To learn more visit FelidaeFund.org, BAPP.org, and EastBayPumaProject.org.



One in two Kittens will survive into adulthood in California



Monitoring the vitals during a work up and collar fitting



Kittens are most vulnerable when the mother is away hunting for food