

A World Without Native Cats Would be Less Wondrous

Whether Snow Leopards or Cheetahs on other continents, or Mountain Lions in North America, we should find ways to share many parts of this planet with native cats. AOK supports management and conservation policies and practices designed to enhance opportunities for co-existence with big cats.

Mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) are native to Kansas, Nebraska and all of the contiguous states, but they were extirpated in the central Great Plains following settlement by European immigrants due to unregulated hunting, trapping and poisoning. Deer, elk and other large prey were also decimated for decades.

For eighty years following extirpation of wildlife in the Great Plains, the slaughter of Cougars continued in the west with much of it being conducted by federal wildlife control agents. Public outrage against indiscriminate “predator control” started to slow the killing by the mid 1970s and Mountain Lion populations started to rebound in western states.

Mountain Lions in The Black Hills

During the last twenty years Mountain Lions have gradually reoccupied some of the most accommodating habitat within the Great Plains, establishing the most notable population in the Black Hills in the late 1990s and 2000s. A few recolonized the badlands of North Dakota. Recently a small population estimated to peak at 22 has colonized in the Pine Ridge of Nebraska. Following the devastating wild fires of 2012, the unburned habitat was expected to support fewer, 15 to 18. Most other Mountain Lions observed, photographed or killed elsewhere in the region (from Minnesota to Oklahoma) have been dispersing young (usually males) coming from the Black Hills population, or the Rocky Mountain region.

A population of more than 200 Mountain Lions have co-existed with people in the Black Hills in the most recent decade without any serious assaults on humans—even though millions of people hike, camp, picnic, fish and hunt there each year.

A quarter million residents are also interspersed throughout this highly fragmented but remarkable landscape, and almost every lion territory includes human residences. Thus, many lions live in close proximity with people and human activity. Biologists with the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department and partnering universities have conducted extensive research on Mountain Lions in the

area and this investment provides a foundation of knowledge on their behavior, survival and emigration.

Rural residents have a diversity of livestock, companion and novelty animals without widespread or sustained problems. Offending cats (usually subadults) are routinely removed, even though lax husbandry is often the underlining problem. Llamas, goats, sheep and miniature donkeys closely resemble natural prey and are tempting when exposed within prime lion habitat. Predation on cattle has not been documented in the Black Hills. Mother cows are usually protective. Deer and other natural prey are abundant.

The speculated prospect of lion predation is almost always exaggerated by uninformed people in other areas without a history of first hand knowledge. Likewise, the media often uses stock photos of a snarling lion that unnecessarily alarms people with news articles when they occur elsewhere in the Midwest. Better-informed and enlightened coverage, and conversations among all stakeholders, are needed for acceptance of this apex predator as a part of our wildlife heritage.

The acceptance of a Mountain Lion population in the Black Hills by the state’s sportsmen and sportswomen—and other residents—is commendable. They are willing to accept the recommendations of biologists to maintain a population around 175. The big cats take a share of the deer herd, and some elk, but most residents recognize this as a part of the delicate natural system and many people value their presence.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there are about 1 million car accidents with deer each year that kill 200 Americans. Many of those deaths occur when a second vehicle slams into the first vehicle or passengers who got out on the road.

Unfortunately, a prominent leader/lobbyist for a sportsmen organization and outfitter in Nebraska has exemplified the attitude of total intolerance by promoting the idea that Mountain Lions do not belong in Nebraska. It is not unusual to hear persons boast that their approach is to “shoot, shovel and shut up,” as was relayed to me first in Logan County, Kansas.

Cougars in Nebraska

Conversely, it is most refreshing to note that some ranch landowners are receptive to accommodating Cougars. An example was reported in the Omaha World Herald. Deric Anderson, a cattle producer (electrical contractor and hunter) from northeast Nebraska who owns a ranch near Harrison in the Pine Ridge area (the first area to allow limited legal hunting) said he doesn't mind Mountain Lions on his land along Hat Creek. "The cats don't bother me," he said. "They don't bother cattle. I kind of like having them around."

That positive philosophy reminds me of a stockman in Namibia, in southern Africa, who told my son Ryan and me of an extraordinary effort he made to save two Cheetah cubs on his ranch. The ranch couple said that livestock losses are a part of stock operations and he is willing to lose up to five percent to Cheetahs and an occasional Leopard. Livestock guarding dogs of many breeds are effective at protecting sheep and goat herds even as they range through thornbush terrain. Anatolians Shepherd and Kangals are trained and provided to

stockgrowers by the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia. Far too few Americans are willing to accept the prospect of ANY losses to predators, or implement such husbandry practices to accommodate co-existence.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission biologists have been working with all available information for the past several years with the objective of developing protocols for conservation and management plans designed to sustain breeding populations in areas of sufficient suitable habitat, with consideration given to social acceptance and other factors. Part of the department's goal has expanded to provide a restricted hunting season with a



Ron Klataske photo

A wild Cheetah crossing the edge of a stock pond on a ranch in Namibia. Worldwide 75 percent of large carnivores are declining, many are endangered. Threats include habitat destruction, loss of prey and persecution by humans.

limited quota to secure more acceptance of the species both as a game animal among sportsmen and ranchers, and as part of the state's delicate wildlife heritage among others. The sale of permits also helps provide funding for research and management.

The initial staff recommendation published in May for a hunting season restricted hunting to the Pine Ridge area with an allowable take of no more than three— with no more than one female. All other parts of the state would have remained closed to Cougar hunting.

Unfortunately, the Commission discarded that balanced science-based plan. Three commissioners then came up with an approach that opened up 85 percent of the state to cougar killing at any time of the year and with allowable use of dogs and other means that dramatically diminish the prospect for any extended survival. It also opened the door to the prospect of illegal killing in the three management units. Of 83 letters to the commission, 80 were reportedly against this type of season. Unless violators are caught red-handed, they can simply claim they shot any Cougar in their possession in the always-open "Prairie Unit." They also increased the take to four and doubled the quota on females to two in the Pine Ridge. Maintaining females in a small population is the most critical requirement for sustainable management.



One of a series of photos by Lori Iverson / USFWS

The National Elk Refuge Outdoor Recreation Planner in Wyoming witnessed a spectacular standoff between two juvenile Mountain Lions and five Coyotes. The Coyotes let the cats know they weren't welcome in their area. The Mountain Lions sought safety on a buck and rail fence for over an hour while the Coyotes lurked in the background.

The Niobrara River Valley

The Nebraska Game and Fish Commission documented a female, and a daughter of that female east of Valentine in 2012-2013. Thus, initial reproduction has occurred. An adult male, which was determined by DNA to be the father of the young female, was shot by a deer hunter north of Long Pine in November 2012. It is difficult to envision establishment of a sustainable population in this area if immigration is cut off and if any that venture more than 15 miles south of the Niobrara River are subject to year-round hunting.

At least one lion was periodically documented by tracks and trail camera photos within and in the immediate vicinity of the **Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary** from May 2010 to April 2012. Mountain Lions do their best to avoid interaction with people—that is the only way the species has been able to survive the last 150 years. We are pleased that the sanctuary is part of a relatively accommodating natural and pastoral landscape in the Niobrara River valley extending from Valentine to the river's confluence with the Missouri River. A 100-mile reach of river valley bluffs and wooded canyons may eventually support a *very small* breeding population. An abundance of White-tailed Deer, Raccoons, Wild Turkeys, Porcupines and other prey is available.

In mid-September a trail camera on a Platte River island near Freemont captured 19 images of an adult Mountain Lion over two days. This particular cat had distinguishing markings on a rear leg, and amazingly this camera-ready cougar had been photographed by another trail camera near Silver Creek, sixty miles upstream, twelve days earlier.

Cameras Provide Confirmation in Kansas

By 2007 I received confirmation of two Mountain Lions that had been shot and killed in northeastern Kansas, and another wounded in the Smoky Hills. Heaven only knows how many have been shot within the state. We do not condone wildlife violations, but maybe amnesty for those who killed Cougars prior to the

existing statute of limitations (five years) would provide scientific insight on their dispersal into the state.

I saw one briefly south of Manhattan in 2007. Two months earlier a neighbor with a guest watched and photographed one walk across an open meadow nearby. It was possibly the same lion. We posted the photo on our website. At one time or another over a span of several years numerous residents of this rural area saw *the lion* and some referred to it as their “putty cat.” Sightings within the northern Flint Hills have been widespread. Unfortunately, the frequent sightings within the McDowell Creek valley ceased several years ago and it has probably perished.

In 2004 Oklahoma authorities found a lion hit by a train 40 miles south of the Kansas state line in the Arkansas River valley. It was wearing a tracking collar from the Black Hills. Scores of people may have had a fleeting glance of the young male as it traveled in four states between points separated by 660 miles.

An unknown number have traveled within or through Kansas, although they only started showing up on photographs made by trail cameras in recent years as these devices have blossomed in every neck of the woods. The photos have now provided confirmation throughout the state. Prior to that, an untold number of individuals who reported sightings were generally told by agency officials that they were likely mistaken, and the reports were not “confirmed.” Some sightings were based on a brief glance and some were misidentifications, but we have heard the details of scores that were convincingly correct in detail, going back to at least 1965. Many observers, however, felt that they were treated by agency skeptics as if they were

reporting extraterrestrials. As a result, many solid sightings went unreported. With the agency's eroding credibility it wasn't unusual to hear suggestions that our state wildlife agency (KDWP) was releasing Mountain Lions and keeping it secret. That, of course, was a myth.

A Cougar was killed by a landowner in the Red Hills of southcentral Kansas in 2008. It was only discovered by law enforcement officials when word got out that he took it to a Texas taxidermist. A biologist with KDWP proclaimed it was the *first confirmation* of a lion in Kansas since one was shot more than a hundred years earlier in 1904 in Ellis County.

Nebraska's agency didn't get painted with the same brush of suspicion because they published a brochure on Mountain Lions, established a policy for dealing with potential conflicts, had more confirmations, and publicized the emerging population in the northwestern panhandle.

The only misfortune has been the unnecessary killing by agency personnel of young lions that came too close to communities or a farmstead and took refuge in a tree or elsewhere waiting until they could proceed the following night. Almost all habitat corridors along major streams are interrupted by towns and cities, and young lions have been killed in recent years from Scottsbluff and South Sioux City to St. Paul.

An extreme example of this type of official absurdity was recently demonstrated in Wall, South Dakota. Around 8 a.m. on December 9 a city employee spotted a lion crawling into a



Two of the first trail camera photos made of a Cougar in Rock County Nebraska. They were made at the same location on private land near the Niobrara Sanctuary by Lana Micheel.

hole “within” but on the outskirts of the small community of 766 people on the north edge of the Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland. A conservation officer was called, threw smoke bombs into the crevice but it did not emerge. Around 11 a.m., a city employee secured a backhoe and began excavating until the animal was exposed. The healthy 2-year old male was “dispatched” with firearms. The same fate awaits most lions that occur outside the Black Hills in South Dakota; sadly now most of Nebraska and those that cross the Missouri River into Iowa are always at risk as well.

Obviously there are many places in the Midwest where the presence of these big cats cannot be accommodated. Unfortunately, however, by pursuing a path of broad-brush extermination it is as if some wildlife commissions are turning back the pages on a century of increasing enlightenment in conservation. Rather than creating a world devoid of Mountain Lions and other native cats, it is time to reimagine the possibilities of co-existence. —Ron Klataske

Update on 2014 Mountain Lion Legislation

Following the outcry from Nebraska residents who opposed the Commission’s changes in hunting regulations to allow year round killing of Mountain Lions across 85 percent of the state, Senator Ernie Chamber of Omaha introduced legislation to close hunting seasons. The Unicameral is expected to pass his priority bill.

Two measures introduced in the South Dakota legislature that would have resulted in more killing of Mountain Lions have been defeated. One (HB 1068) would have allowed the use of dogs to hunt lions throughout the state beyond the Black Hills management area—where hunting with dogs is generally prohibited. The other bill (SB 76) would have allowed people to kill a lion whenever they felt they were “a threat to humans or livestock.” In other words, pretty much whenever they saw one! Paul Lepisto, representing the S.D. Isaac Walton League, told legislators that Mountain “Lions are a big game animal worth \$5,000 each and deserve to be treated with respect. Predators are a necessary part of the fauna.”

MAKE THE JUMP!!!

Don’t be Afraid to Enjoy the Natural World, and Please Join with Others to Protect it



JOIN AOK, OR GIVE A FRIEND A GIFT MEMBERSHIP.

This young lady, age 5, is one of AOK’s youngest members—with a “Wildlife Partner” membership. Olympia has been a member for several years. Her parents control the purse strings, but they make the investment on her behalf because they know she loves the natural world; and they want all that we can conserve together to be there for her and others to enjoy now and in the future.

A \$20 membership is half the cost of an ornamental ceramic bird house we saw recently in a gift shop. It was pretty but not very practical. We are confident that Audubon of Kansas will do far more for birds and other wildlife with every membership contribution. And in terms of pretty, the natural world of wildflowers and native prairie grasses along roadsides is an example of the natural beauty we strive to create and protect.

AOK has membership levels that range from \$10 for Student/Senior/Subscriber and \$20 Annual Member to \$100 Wildlife Partner and higher levels of support for AOK programs and conservation initiatives. We have a choice of two items that can be used to further acknowledge membership and support for the Black-footed Ferret reintroduction initiative. As a way of saying thanks, we welcome an opportunity to send either to any new member or anyone renewing. They are an AOK ball cap or BFF print illustrated below. Simply include a request and an extra \$10 (simply to cover production and mailing cost) with either of the two lower membership rates, or request as a membership premium at no added cost with any higher level of support.

The ball caps are great, featuring a Greater Prairie-chicken in full display at sunrise in a prairie setting—the AOK logo. When we have a full selection in stock, we have a choice of green, black or khaki bill colors. The alternate choice is a 9 x 12 inch print of a Black-footed Ferret suitable for framing. It was photographed soon after being released on the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank ranch complex in western Kansas.

