

WHEN MOUNTAIN LIONS ARE NEIGHBORS

WILDLIFE IN TODAY'S CALIFORNIA



BETH PRATT

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This is an early preview of a chapter—still in draft—from the upcoming book *When Mountain Lions Are Neighbors: Wildlife in Today's California*, written by National Wildlife Federation's California Director, Beth Pratt. The book, to be released in the fall of 2015 by the award-winning publisher Heyday, celebrates the remarkable wildlife of the Golden State along with the people caring for it—sometimes in their own backyards. To frame the larger issues at stake, Beth shares her own wildlife adventures, which include tracking mountain lions in the middle of Los Angeles, visiting the Facebook campus in Menlo Park to meet its family of gray foxes, watching a peregrine falcon from the mayor's office in San Jose, and gazing at porpoises swimming under the Golden Gate Bridge. When published, the book will be the center of a statewide public education program.

Donors to the project will receive special recognition in the book and can sponsor a dedication or a chapter. Please contact Beth Pratt at prattb@nwf.org or visit www.californiawildlife.org.

ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

This sample chapter, "A Mountain Lion in Hollywoodland," tells the story of P22, the mountain lion living in the middle of Los Angeles, and shows how National Wildlife Federation's new partnership campaign strives to ensure that mountain lions have a future in the Santa Monica Mountains, in part by helping to support vital research and by working to create a wildlife crossing at the 101 freeway. NWF is proud to support this particular campaign and, more generally, to educate Californians and Americans everywhere about ways in which we can successfully coexist with and even help wildlife prosper in an increasingly urbanized landscape.

To support these projects or for more information, please contact Beth Pratt at prattb@nwf.org or visit www.nwf.org/LAcougars.

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Above: P22 with the Los Angeles skyline in the background.
On the cover: The famous portrait of P22, featured in the December 2013 issue of *National Geographic*. Both photographs by Steve Winter.

CHAPTER 1

A Mountain Lion in Hollywoodland

Can People and Wildlife Coexist in the Second Largest City in the Nation?

“The mountain lions have not learned, like the wolf, to get the hell off the land....They have an odd, powerful dignity that does not understand the endless catches and snags of the human race. That is why they are still at the fringes, still fighting.”—Craig Childs, *The Animal Dialogues*

P22MountainLion: All this talk about #sharkweek. Whatevs. Call me when a shark moves into a huge park in the middle of a city.
—P22’s Twitter account

Imagine the second largest city in the country asleep. Or if not asleep, as close as the City of Angels will ever come to slumber—perhaps an active stillness. The dark obscures the city’s own north star, the forty-five-foot-tall letters of the Hollywood sign, as after midnight the late parade of club-goers cruise home along Sunset Boulevard, some making one last stop at that famed California institution, In-N-Out Burger. As ever, LA’s unrelenting pulse, the notorious highway traffic, has not entirely ceased. This is, after all, the city that termed a weekend freeway closure “Carmageddon.”

For the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, home to almost ten million people, the deep hours of the morning provide as quiet a time as it ever experiences. The Spanish named the hours between midnight and dawn *madrugada* a poetic term appropriate to describe the period when most of us descend into dreamland. But one new resident of Los Angeles, awake and alert, strolls through the magical time of the *madrugada*, dreaming not of fame or riches but of something far simpler and humbler: deer.

Unlike many who journey to Los Angeles, this recent arrival has not been lured by the dazzle of Hollywood or the fantasy of celebrity but by the promise of a good meal.

This newcomer is a mountain lion.

A relative youngster, P22—as he will soon be known to the world—heads east toward the city at age two, probably starting roughly twenty miles away in Topanga State Park in the Santa Monica Mountains. His leaving home, called “dispersal” by biologists, marks a typical milestone for a cougar at his age, as young males must seek out their own territory. The Santa Monica Mountains house plenty of deer to eat, but those deer can come with a high price if located in the established home range of another male. Cougars can fight to the death over territory, and a teenager like P22 knows he is no match for an older, more experienced cat.

Finding unclaimed space that includes a deer herd within a wilderness squeezed on all sides by a megalopolis can prove to be challenging. P22, however, fully utilizing the stealth that he has inherited from his ancestors over millions of years, creeps quite improbably unnoticed through the neighborhoods of Bel Air and Beverly Hills, his paws perhaps leaving impressions on the impeccably manicured lawns.

Mountain lions evolved in the Americas and, unlike their cheetah cousins during the last ice age, did not venture across the Bering Land Bridge to Eurasia in search of food. Why? Some scientists have theorized their reluctance to follow their kin was because they are ghost cats, averse to open areas and plains. So we might owe the unique presence of a top predator in the United States to a case of collective agoraphobia. That evolution has shaped one of North America’s largest carnivores into a shy, introverted, and enigmatic creature is not without its irony, as Craig Childs notes in his book *Animal Dialogues*: “So now the biggest, most dangerous animal is also the quietest and the

hardest to see.” P22—in Hollywood terms—is more Greta Garbo than the Kardashians.

Given the elusive nature of cougars, the obvious question becomes Why did a cat known for its embrace of solitude chart a course into the most crowded area in the United States?

Scientists will provide a basic answer: he found an unoccupied space with food. While this explanation is not technically wrong, it’s too simplistic to reduce P22’s journey to a routine trip to the grocery store; something else was also at play in this adventure, something beyond the need to escape the wrath of other lions and to answer the demands of the stomach. Certainly there are easier ways to secure deer than to march into the middle of Los Angeles.

As P22 wandered through the neighborhoods featured on Maps of the Stars—possibly stopping to nap among the oak trees at the Mountain Gate Country Club, its members teeing off unaware that a 120-pound cat dozed within swinging distance—what guided him? What urge kept him heading east despite the constant human presence he encountered?

Even if we reduce the answer to dispersal and food, how did he know his own personal deer park—where he could reign like a medieval ruler—existed miles away, past the maze of congested streets, past the hillsides with every inch of green blotted out by seemingly endless sprawl?

What could you hear or see in the dark, aided by the artificial starlight of the city, that compelled you to go east, young cougar?

Although unlikely, one cannot help wondering (or perhaps in this all-too-rational world hoping) that he was led by ghostly footsteps of the sabertooth cat who once lorded over LA. He wasn’t far from the La Brea Tar Pits, where their remains rest in a sticky, gooey grave. Could he have been guided by an ancestral memory, passed along by successive generations of mountain lions from elders who remembered when the entire Los Angeles area bloomed with flowers and trees instead of concrete and steel? As Father Juan Crespí described in 1769, the area was “a very spacious valley, well grown with cottonwoods and alders, among which ran a beautiful river.”

Maybe P22 was following the abundance of deer trails—invisible to us—that crisscross the subdivisions and golf courses. Or could it be that the revived flow of the Los Angeles River, daylighted after having

been buried in concrete for fifty years, was once again singing the promise of prey and enticing a top predator into the city limits? Was it pure instinct, or something more?

Whatever his motive, this cat's sense of adventure enralls me. As a student of biology, I've been trained in the scientific method and warned against anthropomorphizing, yet if we share 92 percent of our DNA with a mouse, isn't it ridiculous to keep asserting that animals operate solely on instinct and nothing more? Science is beginning to prove that traits we once considered uniquely human are not unique to us after all. Dolphins recognize themselves in mirrors, rats display empathy, and elephants hold funerals and mourn their dead. So would it really be a stretch to say P22 possesses a sense of adventure?

Mountain lions are no exception to this new zeitgeist of finding a consciousness in animals that surpasses mere instinct. Researcher Kerry Murphy, who has logged countless hours observing cougars, agrees: "What's impressed me most is their individuality. Each of them has a life that's as real to them as ours is to us." P22 is an individual. This cat is the Neil Armstrong of his kind. A quick glance at his route on a map shows he had to be a bit mad to even attempt his journey. P22 wanted to see beyond where the known cougar world ended, no matter what the cost.

And it could have cost him everything. To get to his new territory of Griffith Park, he crossed two of the busiest freeways in the United States.

When those soft, padded paws fitted for bounding over snow and boulders touched the asphalt of the first eight-lane highway—known as one of the worst roads in the country—what did he sense? Even in the middle of the night, the 405 never slows, and the highway still thrummed with mechanical noise and exploded with the mad dance of headlights. Most cats when faced with the living, breathing monster of the 405 would have done an abrupt about-face or gotten mangled by a few tons of moving steel. But P22, with his tenacity, or luck, or both, somehow managed to cross. There is no way of knowing how he navigated the formidable obstacle of the road, whether he used an under- or overpass or bolted straight across. All have been attempted by other cats, and many haven't lived to tell the tale.

My guess? He probably did what most of us do when confronted with the Los Angeles freeways: floor it and hope for the best.

Imagine that bound! One large step for cougarkind and a leap into the history books. Mountain lions can jump a span as wide as forty-five feet. How many lanes did he cover at a time? Someone might have seen P22, startled by the view of him dashing across the road in a blur of maniac motion. Since mountain lions are not a usual reality for the LA motorist, anyone that caught a glance of that twitch of a tail or that autumn brown coat in their headlights probably thought it a large dog, not realizing they had just witnessed a miracle of wild things.

His miraculous feat, however, only pushes him into more densely populated areas, where he must keep going, perhaps thinking to himself he might have hit the point of no return. I imagine those final miles akin to a thirsty man wandering in a desert, hoping for signs of water with every step. Then, like a mirage of a cougar dream-world, the Hollywood Hills appear, a green expanse he guessed would be filled with deer. Even more importantly, he senses no indication of another male lion. Cougars leave scent marks of urine or feces, or scrapings on trees, to designate their territory and warn other lions to keep out. With every step, P22 becomes encouraged by the lack of No Trespassing signs in cougar-ese.

One last push. He might have stood on the Mulholland Overlook at night, gazed at the city lights of downtown to the south, and the lack of lights on the landscape due east, another promising sight. He might have considered his options for crossing the 101, peeking out of his hiding place while he rested during the day, perhaps also curious about those giant white letters jutting out of the hillside; for all we know, in the language of cougars, "Hollywood" means "welcome."

P22 somehow navigates the 101, ranked by some as the worst commute in America. He might pause a moment with a triumphant look back at the speeding cars, then pick up his pace for the last half mile to his destination, sauntering through the winding roads and quiet neighborhoods (the Hollywood Hills possess one of the lowest population densities in the city), taking note of the Hollywood Reservoir, a place he will soon frequent. If cougars feel relief, I am sure P22 did at this moment. No houses. No other male cougars. Plenty of deer. #winning

And then he creates a marking as significant in the cougar world as the famous boot print on the moon: he scrapes a tree with his claws, forcefully and with much satisfaction, and claims Griffith Park for his own.



The first photo discovered of P22 from a remote camera in Griffith Park. Photo courtesy of the Griffith Park Connectivity Study.

“On February 12, 2012, at 9:15 PM, we collected the ultimate evidence.... The discovery of this mountain lion remains one of my proudest moments as a wildlife biologist and as an Angelino who grew up on the edge of Griffith Park.”—Miguel Ordeñana, biologist

Griffith Park, although five times the size of Central Park, represents a small fraction of a normal home range for a *Puma concolor*. An adult male usually occupies 250 square miles; P22 somehow makes do with eight. His incredible journey of dodging semitrucks and sneaking through country clubs inspires awe, but his ability to survive like a castaway stranded on an island surrounded by an ocean of city ranks in the category of incredible. And for P22 there is not much hope of a rescue boat. He'll have to swim through more traffic to escape.

Although at over four thousand acres Griffith Park ranks as the nation's largest municipal park that houses wilderness, Los Angeles is no distant point on the horizon. Here is a park merged with the urban

experience, a hybrid of city and nature surrounded by a spiderweb of notorious freeways. From the famous Griffith Park Observatory, the downtown skyscrapers and LA's trademark smog slowly creep toward the park. P22 would have to travel only another two miles to stroll down the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Ten million people visit Griffith Park annually (over double the visitation to more famous national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone), and within its borders they can play a round of golf or a set of tennis, attend concerts at the Greek Theater (with acts like Mumford and Sons and Crosby, Stills, and Nash), ride the historic merry-go-round or miniature train, cheer on youth soccer or baseball, take their kids on pony rides, canter their horses along the equestrian trail, and picnic, hike, bike, or run.

All while a mountain lion might be wandering in their midst.

As a young Angelino, Miguel Ordeñana rode the miniature train and frequented the pony rides, played hide-and-seek among the oak trees, and hiked with his family up to the Hollywood sign (when you still could). His backyard of Griffith Park is as inextricably linked to his childhood adventures as it is to his adult pursuits. A Nicaraguan American who grew up in LA, Miguel is one of those quiet and unassuming individuals whose calm manner should not be mistaken for a lack of passion or ambition. He has studied bats in the Mojave Desert and tracks jaguars in Nicaragua, proof that a childhood in the heart of a large city can still foster a love of wild things—or, argued another way, proof that nature does exist in Los Angeles despite our best attempts to banish it.

Miguel's employer, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, has a mission to not just dispel the notion that LA is an urban wasteland without so much as a fluttering butterfly but to also promote the city as a wildlife hotspot. This quest isn't as improbable as it sounds. With over five hundred avian species recorded in the county, Los Angeles ranks as “the birdiest county in the United States,” and its diverse geography of ocean shoreline to mountain peaks houses an immense amount of biodiversity. But the museum's initiative is not just about gathering anecdotal superlatives—it is conducting the world's first and only long-term study of urban biodiversity.

The museum's new interactive and technologically sophisticated Nature Lab and Nature Garden celebrate the city's urban wildlife

through video games, real-time mapping, an “opossum cam,” and an outside habitat complete with raptors, dragonflies, and raccoons—wildlife liberated from the stuffed-animal dioramas of the past and reimagined for the younger generation. This is wildlife for the social media age—coyotes in video games, rattlesnakes posing for selfies, and people taking as much part in the exhibits as the critters themselves.

Miguel serves as a researcher for the museum, and while he gave me a tour of the Nature Lab, many photos of his wildlife sightings flashed on the gigantic LA Nature Map, an interactive touch screen that maps wildlife and plants observed throughout LA by both scientists and the general public. One of my favorite parts of the exhibit—aside from the “What you look like to a rattlesnake” thermal imaging mirror that portrayed me as a series of red, purple, and yellow pulsating blobs (fun fact: rattlesnakes don’t see you, they sense your body heat through pits in their nostrils)—is a series of comic strip–inspired panels on raised 3D displays. I noticed one titled “Miguel’s LA Nature Memory: Real Kids of Griffith Park.” When I point out his name on the exhibit, Miguel smiles modestly.

He recounts what the cartoon version of his memory illustrates: his dog getting sprayed by a skunk, the surprise and delight of seeing his first rattlesnake with his mom, and dodging coyotes while learning how to drive in the LA Zoo parking lot. “Griffith Park was my first wilderness. I didn’t know the difference between that and a Yosemite. Now I know the difference doesn’t matter, at least to a kid discovering nature. Griffith Park is more accessible and just as meaningful.”

That Miguel spent his childhood frolicking in Griffith Park makes it even more fitting that he discovered the presence of P22.

As part of the Griffith Park Connectivity Study, Miguel is a member of a team that includes Erin Boydston (US Geological Survey) and Dan Cooper (Cooper Ecological Monitoring, Inc.) and that collaborates with Laurel Serieys, a PhD student at UCLA (and founder of the website *Urban Carnivores*), and National Park Service biologists Seth Riley and Jeff Sikich, all of whom study the impacts of urbanization on cougars, bobcats, and other wildlife. All stepped up to the plate together—volunteering much of their time—to give this understudied city park the research attention it deserves.

Miguel has monitored wildlife movement between the park and the Santa Monica Mountains to the west since 2011. For most of its

history, the city managed Griffith Park almost entirely for the needs of human recreation, and not until 2007, long after some native plants and animals had already gone extinct from the area, did anyone conduct a formal survey of its biodiversity. Local residents, such as Friends of Griffith Park founders Gerry Hans and Mary Button, became tired of the inattention paid to the park’s flora and fauna and decided to do something about it. “We wanted to give the wildlife a voice before it all disappeared,” Gerry said. They helped fund the connectivity study, key to the future of the coyotes, deer, bobcats, foxes, and other wildlife marooned on the island of green. By using remote cameras, the team investigates how wildlife navigates (or doesn’t navigate) the barriers that surround the park, and this includes monitoring crossing sites along the 101, 5, and 134 freeways.

Although admittedly voyeuristic—the coyote didn’t sign off on our broadcasting all over the Internet the footage of him defecating or mating—remote cameras are an important dimension to wildlife field research, as they are allowing scientists to witness behavior that either would have never been observed or would have required thousands of hours of field study to understand. In fact, without this new technology, P22 might still be roaming in Griffith Park without anyone knowing it. Another remarkable fact about this cat? In a park that ten million people frequent, there have been few confirmed sightings by the public. P22 has taken his ancestor’s gift of stealth and tested and perfected it in the most extreme scenario possible.

Possessing a business card with the job title *Wildlife Biologist* sounds romantic and exotic—visions of Jane Goodall hugging chimpanzees or the late Steve Irwin wrestling alligators probably come to mind—but in reality it involves a significant amount of time staring at computer screens. For the Griffith Park crew, sorting through the thousands of photos acquired each month from the remote cameras can be a tedious job. In February of 2012, while flipping through yet another batch, Miguel, admittedly bored with the monotonous flow of coyote and deer images, and frustrated at the lack of bobcats appearing on screen, kept clicking the mouse in autopilot mode.

Coyote, coyote, deer, squirrel, cougar...

Cougar? That jolted him out of his boredom. *Are those the hindquarters of a mountain lion?!*

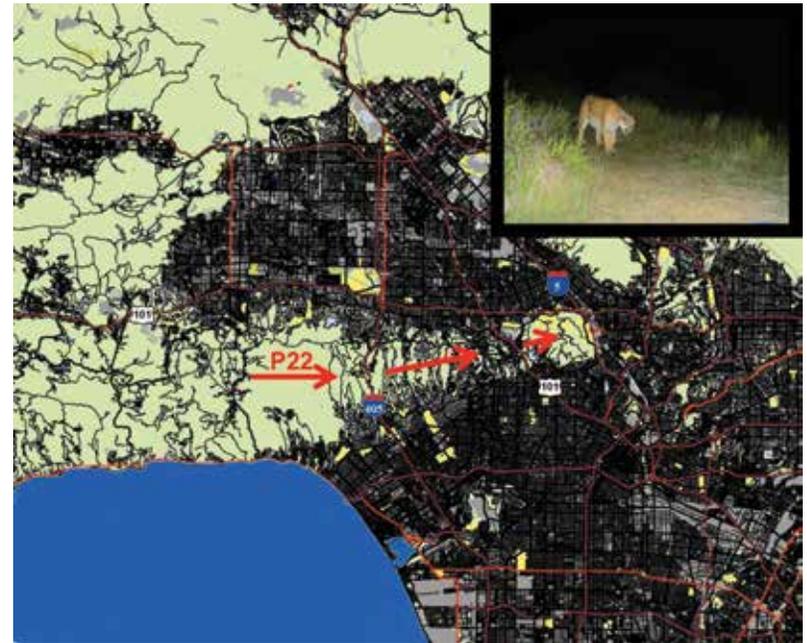
As Miguel remembers, “I gasped and stared for a while, astonished at the size of the animal’s tail, body, and paws. I went through the photos again...trying to see if my mind was playing tricks on me—maybe it was just a Great Dane that got loose late at night that had stood very close to the camera. But I immediately knew what it was. Then I thought, ‘You should probably call somebody.’”

Miguel called his partners on the Griffith Park study and left a series of excited and frantic voice messages on their cell phones. For Dan and Erin, receiving the news of a cougar in Griffith Park was akin to hearing they had won the lottery.

Each of the Griffith Park scientists could probably be studying—and do at times—wildlife in more exotic locales like Yellowstone or South America. But they have become as enchanted as I have with this new urban wildlife dynamic and have dedicated their work to ensuring that wildlife thrives in LA.

The researchers are the sort of people I like to hang around. They keep dinner conversations lively with their tales of gruesome scavenger hunts for carcasses, performed to monitor the diets of carnivores. You can’t help but have an affection for people who get excited about things like disemboweled raccoon remains and the dissection of bobcat poop. When Miguel and Laurel stumbled upon the first evidence of P22 eating a coyote, their exuberance clearly showed in the blog post Miguel published about the discovery—“What’s on P22’s Menu”—complete with the gory photos. One line reads: “Laurel shouted out to me with excitement!!! ‘It’s a coyote!’”

What *is* on P22’s menu? many ask, either out of fascination or fear. For the answer we can thank the researchers who bushwhack through dense chaparral and poison oak in order to kneel beside pungent, rotting meat for insight into the cougar’s palate. What the collaborative study has told us to date is that you can take the mountain lion out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the mountain lion. P22 eats almost exclusively deer; the team has found no evidence of his making a meal out of a house pet. As Miguel observes, “This dispels myths about urban mountain lions seeking out pets or becoming dangerously habituated to human-subsidized food resources. P22 is retaining the same natural behavior of his more rural counterparts and going after deer and other natural prey in the wildest patches of the park.”



P22 traveled from the Santa Monica Mountains to the middle of the second largest city in the country in search of a home. Map courtesy of the National Park Service.

Photo courtesy of the Griffith Park Connectivity Study.

If deer can be said to possess a nemesis, it’s the mountain lion. All of its muscle and might are dedicated to the pounce and take-down of deer, and a cougar’s “lithe and splendid beasthood,” as described by wildlife author Ernest Thompson Seton, seems wasted on smaller prey. Considering the energy required to make a kill, a raccoon or a house cat is hardly worth the lion’s effort.

When deer are scarce, however, cougars are opportunistic killers, especially since they can’t nibble on berries or acorns. Unlike coyotes or bears, a mountain lion is a true carnivore and rarely, if ever, consumes vegetation, as its digestive system rejects it. In the animal’s ongoing quest for meat, evolution has provided the right tools for this highly specialized ambush predator. Powerful haunches propel a cougar into leaps of up to fifteen feet and can launch short sprints up to forty miles per hour. Even the teeth—canines that can grow as long as an inch and a half—possess a secret weapon: an abundance of nerves to help the cat sense when it has penetrated the precise kill point.

Faced with this formidable predator, the deer have two defense mechanisms: either running or hiding. Deer in Griffith Park probably made for an easy meal at first. As happened during the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone, many of the prey animals in Griffith Park had entirely forgotten the long-absent predator. In Yellowstone, the reintroduced wolves could simply walk up to an unsuspecting moose or elk herd and snatch their young. Similarly, the Los Angeles deer had perhaps forgotten the mountain lion, but P22 quickly reawakened their memory. He kills about three or four deer a month, and the evidence of his carnage signals to the researchers a promising development. As Miguel points out, “These grisly scenes also may provide a sign of hope for Griffith Park remaining a functional urban oasis”—meaning the appearance of apex predators like mountain lions are a good indicator of the overall health of an ecosystem, sort of nature’s thumbs-up that all systems are a go.

To call the park an oasis, however, implies it is a way station, a place where a weary traveler can stop and refuel before moving on. P22, unless he attempts once again an extremely perilous journey, has nowhere to go. Although the seemingly all-you-can-eat deer buffet might be able to sustain him indefinitely, his solitary existence may not. For him, the need to abandon this oasis will be dictated by the heart rather than the stomach.

P22 needs a mate. And for that he must travel.

If he defies the odds and the LA traffic and makes it back to the Santa Monica Mountains to find a mate, will his memory of his carefree younger days—leaping over the freeways, hearing the music of Mumford and Sons as he hunted, touring the opulent grounds of the mansions of Beverly Hills, and dining on plentiful deer while overlooking the LA skyline—be inserted into the collective cougar mythology of this population of cats?

Since its beginnings as a modern settlement, Southern California has promoted a myth of paradise, from citrus to celebrity. I like to think that Griffith Park might also become legend for the Santa Monica Mountains’ lion population—a mecca worthy of a pilgrimage, a far-off place to which they will all aspire to travel.



Despite living in an urban park with ten million annual visitors, P22 is rarely seen, in part because he is mainly active at night. Photo by Steve Winter.

“In addition to her youth, good looks, independent spirit, love of the great outdoors, and proven ability to bring home the bacon, P23 does not appear to be related to P22. So what’s keeping these would-be soul mates apart? The 405. Yes, the east/west LA divide has defeated many a romance before, but knowing what we do about these two, we think they can defy the odds. Go get her, lion! (But safely, please.)”—Shayna Rose Arnold, *Los Angeles Magazine*

P22 has won over the heart of Los Angeles. He has his own Twitter account, where he tweets requests for good restaurants serving “raw meat and hikers,” bemoans the perils of the 405, and claims he ate city council member Tom LeBonge. His bachelor status rallied Angelinos to his plight, and he might be the first cougar in history with a dating site and an entire city playing matchmaker. If he had a Facebook page, people would be avidly watching for changes in his relationship status. When a photo of P23, a young female cougar, taking down a deer on Mulholland Highway went viral on social media, many a blogger, like *Los Angeles Magazine*’s Shayna Rose Arnold, thought she had found his ideal mate.

Even the celebrities like knowing he is there. During a party I attended in Los Angeles around the time P22 made his first appearance, actor Bryan Cranston was fascinated by my tales of the cougar in his city, although if anyone isn't going to be intimidated by a large predator, it's *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White. When I told my friend David Crosby that the lion might make an appearance at his upcoming show at the Greek Theater, he asked me what song he thought the lion would request. My pick? "Love the One You're With."

Except P22 can't love the one he is with—he is alone in Griffith Park. Cougars are both fighters *and* lovers, and have been known to mate up to seventy times a day. Clearly, with this heightened libido, P22 probably won't want to remain a bachelor forever.

Jeff Sikich is one biologist concerned with P22's love life. His interest as a National Park researcher relates more to genetics, inbreeding, and connectivity issues than romance, but nonetheless what P22 will do to find true love is an important consideration in his work. He and Seth Riley, the foremost expert on urban carnivores, have collaborated on a long-term cougar study in the Santa Monica Mountain National Recreation Area since 2002. They work closely with the Griffith Park team and even share an office with Erin. When she received the excited call from Miguel about the photo of P22, Jeff and Seth were the next to know.

Tracking and studying lions in Los Angeles—and beyond—is Jeff's occupation. I've been out with him on the job three times now and would ride shotgun with him endlessly just for the chance to hear more fascinating tales of cougars and his theories about cougar behavior. As photographer Steve Winter, who took the famous photo of P22 next to the Hollywood sign, told me, "Jeff is the man." I could not agree more. Jeff has built an impressive resume that includes studying big cats in the Peruvian Amazon, Indonesia, and South Africa, and scientists all over the world fly him to their locales so they can learn his "safe capture" technique for cougar research—a combination of modified snares that send immediate text message alerts to the scientists monitoring the trap. As the *LA Times* said in a recent profile, "Sikich's instincts in the wild and his humane captures have earned him a place among a cadre of go-to carnivore trackers." Despite his global renown, his heart remains with the Los Angeles lions.

When I first meet Jeff, he stands in a grove of live oak on the edge of a parking lot adjacent to the famed Griffith Observatory. People

casually walk or jog by, consider the decidedly science fiction-like radio antenna he's holding in his hand, and either pass it off as another Los Angeles eccentricity or a scene being filmed for a movie, a sight to which Angelinos are largely indifferent unless someone with real star power is involved. Since Brad Pitt doesn't wield the antenna, most continue walking or jogging without comment.

Some passersby, however, are curious enough to ask what in the heck he is doing.

"Tracking a mountain lion," he replies.

Probably not the answer most expected. Yet for those who inquire, not a single person—even the woman walking two adorable but admittedly, in cougar country, vulnerable corgi dogs—expresses fear. Responses range from "Cool" to "Wonderful that he is here" to "Can I see him?"

Public relations come as part of the job when you are studying lions in a city of millions, and Jeff acts as a gracious and also refreshingly witty spokesperson for cougars. People truly want to know more about this cat, from his height and weight to their likelihood of being mauled. And without Jeff's talents, we would not know much about P22. He's the one who captured the cat and fitted him with the radio collar that tracks his movements. He is also the one who named him. Although some advocate for a better moniker (Jimmy, Hollywood, and Griffith have all been suggested), P22 appears to be growing on people. As part of a numbering system for tagging animals, P represents "puma," and 22 denotes his sequence in the number of cats that have been collared in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Jeff has spent intimate time with P22 not once but twice. A failed GPS device necessitated his recapture, which Jeff did, quite remarkably, by simply sneaking up on the cat. After picking up residual transmitting signals, Jeff spotted P22 crouched in a ravine. Jeff climbed an overhanging limb and darted the cat with tranquilizers from ten feet away. "He knew I was there and made no move to attack," he recalls. "He was probably hoping his strategy of concealment would keep working. This shows you the lengths these cats will go to avoid a human encounter."

In the world of cougar research, captures are usually made with hounds treeing an animal, then the researcher tranquilizing it. In an urban area, however, you can't have dogs chasing a cougar into someone's backyard gazebo or up their apple tree. Jeff improved upon an

existing solution—the foothold snare method—which lures the animal into the trap usually by playing a recording of a female in heat or a deer in distress. Once the animal springs the trap, the system issues an immediate text message to researchers, minimizing the animal’s time in the snare. The method isn’t foolproof, and there is no question that using the hound method, which he does whenever possible, would make Jeff’s life easier. As he puts it, “This is an animal that can roam 250 miles and we’re trying to get him to step into an area the size of a dinner plate.”

The study of urban lions, given their proximity to people and all of our idiosyncrasies, almost guarantees you’ll acquire quite a repertoire of tales ranging from bizarre to inspiring. My favorite involved the frantic calls Jeff once received from a landscaper and local law enforcement officers about a cougar lurking menacingly in a garden. Jeff, respectful of the panic in their voices yet a bit skeptical (cougars don’t usually linger in rose gardens in daylight hours), went to investigate. He took out his binoculars, checked out the cat, and then alarmed the two onlookers as he walked right up to cougar and picked it up. It turned out to be a statue, but in their defense a fairly realistic-looking one.

Once, when Jeff needed to replace a failing collar on the cougar known as P10, he tracked the cat to his hiding place in a bushy area right outside a garage in the residential area of Pacific Palisades. He knocked on the door, assured the homeowner, Jeanette Kowell, that she “had no reason to be alarmed,” and then informed her a mountain lion was napping in her yard. “Do whatever you need to do,” she responded. “I love kitty-cats.”

While he blow-darted P10 with tranquilizers and did measurements on the animal, Jeannette brought him a sandwich and a cold drink. After the animal had been tranquilized, Jeff allowed Jeannette and a neighbor, Bill Fado, to get a photo of the cat. Bill recounted the once-in-a-lifetime experience in the *Palisadian-Post*: “As I watched P10 slowly walk away from us, occasionally looking back, it brought to mind images of the plains of Africa. Then he was gone, or so we thought. Suddenly, there he was, 50 feet away looking right at us. He stared at us for 10 seconds as if to say, ‘Thanks for getting me out of that jam,’ then turned away and went off into the night. It was a mystical experience that I will never forget.”

Mountain lions in neighborhoods make for good stories, but they prove to be the exception to the rule. What Jeff’s research demonstrates is that for all their urban living, cougars actually don’t like to spend much time near people. Of the over forty thousand GPS readings from the cats in his study, 98 percent occur in natural areas and two-thirds register greater than a kilometer away from urban spaces. So it’s likely that even if P22 kills a deer near a house or a high-use recreation area, he will hide or bury it as cougars typically do, then retreat for the day to a remote part of Griffith Park until he can return for solitary midnight snacking.

Snacking is his main business. As Jeff jokes, “He’s like Rocky right now. Getting in shape, fattening up. At some point he will probably go somewhere to challenge a male or take over a dead male’s territory.” Which brings us back to the love life of P22. How long can or will he keep up this duck and cover, this solitary and stealthy existence in the middle of LA, before he gives up his home to either human conflict or the urge to mate?

During one of our drives around Griffith Park, I asked Jeff about P22’s options. Is it possible he might remain a bachelor forever and just stay where he is? Jeff considers it. “This cat has already done things we’ve never seen, so anything is possible,” he says.

As to his attacking a human, Jeff underscores that attacks by cougars are very rare; the chance is about one in twenty-five million. You’re more likely to win the lottery or be struck by lightning than be killed by a cougar. “These are large carnivores capable of attacking people, and they deserve a healthy respect,” Jeff says. “But clearly mountain lions don’t think of people as prey, and this is good news for both people and lions. If they wanted to eat us, they would.”

Jeff also points out that in Los Angeles, for both P22 and people, the freeways pose the greater risk. In Los Angeles County alone, automobiles cause on average about 750 deaths and 85,000 injuries each year. In California, mountain lions have attacked only sixteen people and killed just six since 1890. These statistics don’t diminish the tragedy when a person is killed or injured by a lion, but it puts the risk in perspective. Living in lion country is much safer than living in car country.

The other scenario many have proposed, for the safety of both the lion and people, involves the possibility of relocating P22. Jeff appreciates the sentiment and the logic behind the idea yet doesn’t believe

it's an option. "Rarely is relocation successful. Usually the lions just come back or get killed doing so. You are dropping a cat into unfamiliar territory and probably forcing an encounter with an older or more experienced lion—and perhaps increasing the chances of a human conflict with a scared cat. Most common is that the relocated cat gets killed by a dominant male," he says.

But the more likely outcome—that he heads out on his own—probably won't produce a very happy ending either. "I don't know what will happen if he leaves," Jeff says. "He did find a safe way across once, but chances are slim that he will make it past the freeways again."

The survival of P22, and indeed the survival of all the cats in the Santa Monica Mountains, largely depends on one factor: connectivity. Translated into non-biology terms: they need to be able to get across freeways and roads from one natural area to another. The superintendent of the Santa Monica Mountains, David Szymanski, started a public briefing about P22 reinforcing the need for vital linkages: "If the lion didn't exist as a poster child of the importance of connectivity of open space, we would have to invent him."

As much as we like to play matchmaker for P22 and impose our thoughts of romance upon him, the biologists are not so much concerned about his loneliness as they are invested in his role in increasing the genetic diversity of the lion population. Inbreeding leads to birth defects, such as kinked tails, weak spines, and single testes, and the fewer viable males you have in a population, the faster it implodes. With animals unable to reliably cross highway barriers, and automobiles taking out most who even try, the cats of the Santa Monica Mountains display one of the lowest genetic diversities in the state. The researchers look to the almost extinct Florida panthers as a low bar they do not want to reach. Ultimately, if these cats can't move and find mates from other areas, the entire population is at risk, not just the charismatic P22.

"The Santa Monica Mountains alone just cannot support a viable mountain lion population. There just isn't enough room," says Seth Riley, Jeff's partner in research. Yet he is optimistic. "Personally I am hopeful despite the challenges. They continue to survive naturally. But landscape connectivity is key and it's pretty darn bad right now across the 101."

Seth, another dedicated advocate for the Santa Monica Mountains cats, is known as one of the leading experts in the science of urban cougars and other wildlife, serving as coauthor of the book *Urban Carnivores: Ecology, Conflict, and Conservation*. He gets passionately animated when he talks about what he considers the ultimate goal of his and Jeff's research: a wildlife crossing along the pinch point they have identified on the 101 at Liberty Canyon, a key passage for mountain lions and other animals. "This is a vital crossing in one of the last undeveloped areas on the 101, and building a safe passage gives us a chance to ensure the future of the cougars in the Santa Monica Mountains and Los Angeles area," he says.

As Jeff offers, P22's current dilemma could have been solved if this crossing had been in place at the time he needed to disperse. "This would have given him an escape route north and much more access to open space."

Jeff and Seth took me on a tour of the site and pointed out where the crossing would be located. We hiked up a hillside and from our vantage point could easily see the undeveloped land funneling toward the highway on both sides into an animal dead end. I imagined this tunnel, or bridge, stretching across the 101, and the first tentative footsteps from a bobcat or a mountain lion. It's a massive undertaking and would come with a price tag of at least \$10 million, and public support would be essential. Christy Brigham, the National Park Service's Chief of Resources, underscores this last point: "We are not going to be able to keep lions in the Santa Monica Mountains unless we all think it's a good idea."

P22 probably also stands on a hillside at night considering his options to leave Griffith Park. He might view with longing the mountains of the Angeles National Forest, less than ten miles away as the crow flies, nothing much for a cat used to traveling twenty-five miles a day. But even the most direct route would entail crossing the 5 and two other freeways, and traversing the city streets of Burbank or Glendale. Most mountain lions would go back the way they came, to the Santa Monica Mountains, but this is our adventurous P22, so all bets are off. If he did return, the wildlife crossing that Jeff, Seth, and others dream about would give him access to the greenery to the north into the Simi Hills and the Santa Susana Mountains.

When I ponder the plight of P22, I conjure up an image of shutting down Los Angeles for a day. I picture the cat sensing the unprecedented quiet, sensing that the monotonous noise of the cars has ceased, and then sprinting up Highway 5 with onlookers cheering him on (is a ticker tape parade too much to add to the fantasy?) as he heads north, perhaps as far as Los Padres National Forest, where he could lose himself in the almost three thousand square miles of protected areas and leave his freeway-cruising days behind him.

Shutting down freeways is unrealistic, but building a bridge for cougars is not. A wildlife crossing in the most populous county in the United States would send a message to the world that wild things are welcome everywhere. For a city built of dreams, for a city that has long been the poster child for environmental degradation, will the plight of P22 be the tipping point, a chance for redemption?



National Wildlife Federation staff and National Park Service researchers survey the possible site of a wildlife crossing over the 101 freeway at Liberty Canyon. Photo by Beth Pratt.



P22 gazes at the city lights of Los Angeles from his urban oasis. Photo by Steve Winter.

“Then it suddenly occurred to me that, in all the world, there neither was nor would there ever be another place like this City of the Angels. Here the American people were erupting, like lava from a volcano; here, indeed, was the place for me—a ringside seat at the circus.”—Carey McWilliams, 1946

In 2013 Kathryn Bowers, coauthor of the provocative and fascinating book *Zoobiquity: The Astonishing Connection between Human and Animal Health*, invited me to speak on a panel for Zócalo Public Square called “Does LA Appreciate Its Wild Animals?”

Just a few years ago, my answer would have been a resounding no. Los Angeles didn’t come natural to me, as I suppose it doesn’t come natural to most of us. I have since changed my mind, and my conversion nearly echoed that of Carey McWilliams in the 1950s. He shares in his book *Southern California: An Island on the Land* that the city at first appalled him. But then, after developing a begrudging respect over time, he suddenly realized he wanted to be a part of this explosion, the new, emerging “lovely makeshift city.”

For me, a young girl who yearned to live and work in national parks and then eventually achieved that dream, I once considered Los Angeles an abomination, a place that, as author William Deverell described, “willed itself by shoving nature around.” It was P22 that lured me and

P22 that allowed me to see LA in a new way. He opened a Pandora's box of urban nature for me, for if LA can support a 120-pound predator, it can also provide homes for foxes, bobcats, birds, insects, reptiles, and amphibians.

Miguel Ordeñana agrees: "It didn't take me too long to recognize the scientific and conservation significance of P22's story, and the media coverage helped me learn that he was going to be a special ambassador for Griffith Park, LA wildlife, and urban mountain lion conservation. Knowing that there is a mountain lion in LA's most popular and accessible park provides a bold statement that there is plenty of nature to explore even in urban Los Angeles."

Schooled in the manner of thinking that says wildlife should be in tranquil and remote settings like Yellowstone or Yosemite, if you had informed me a few years ago that I would become an advocate for urban wildlife, I would have laughed. Today, I consider urban wildlife conservation vital. In a state where 90 percent of people live in an urban area, where wildlife is running out of space, and where people are becoming increasingly disconnected from nature, the mountain lion in a city park provides hope for a new way of thinking. People need to build a relationship with nature, and it might not be in the hands-off, take-care-not-to-anthropomorphize, us-verses-them way that scientists have preached for so long. Developing relationships with wildlife is essential—for their survival and for ours.

This doesn't mean approaching P22 and giving him a friendly pat. But it does mean seeing wildlife as part of the landscape, as part of our neighborhoods.

"Nature has had a mixed career in Los Angeles," notes professor of urban studies Roger Keil, and I agree, but signs point to the city fast-tracking Mother Nature for a promotion.

LAX, one of the largest airports in the world, makes way for the endangered El Segundo Blue butterfly by restoring habitat on its property, and Travis Longcore of The Urban Wildlands Group works throughout the region to expand these restoration efforts. Elementary school students at the UCLA Lab School, under the tutelage of watershed expert Marc Abramson, daylighted an entire creek on their campus. In Glendale, a whole community rallied around the famous black bear named Meatball, even fundraising for a place to relocate him after he stole one too many Costco meatballs from homes. Leo Politi

Elementary School, in the middle of Los Angeles, installed an onsite wildlife habitat with the help of LA Audubon and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. They added *Sibley's Guide to Birds* to their curriculum, and the students participate in the annual Christmas bird count with their dedicated principal, Bradley Rumble. Perhaps most tellingly, in the current fight over the restoration of the Los Angeles River, the mayor's office supports the most environmentally progressive option of the conservation planning.

And let's look at green LA by the numbers: The city's 468 square miles of land and 34 square miles of water extend to the Santa Monica Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, include nine lakes, one river, and a million trees. Within its borders are 390 public parks and 15,710 acres of parkland.

Surprised? Most people—even some who live in LA—are not aware of the immense connection the city still retains to the natural world.

Los Angeles has made nature its own, woven its own unique cultural landscape onto the physical one, and perhaps shaped the tale of Mother Nature into a structure it's comfortable with—that of a Hollywood blockbuster screenplay. Jenny Price, author of the brilliant essay "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA," writes: "The history of Los Angeles storytelling, if more complicated, still basically boils down to a trilogy. Nature blesses Los Angeles. Nature flees Los Angeles. And nature returns armed."

Isn't the story of P22 the stuff of which blockbusters are made? It's the puma version of *Star Wars*, or *Rebel Without a Cause*—a rebellious young man with a troubled past comes to a new town, finding friends and enemies—with maybe a bit of *The Big Lebowski* thrown in. And what better setting than Griffith Park, where scenes from *Rebel* were actually filmed, and today a statue honoring James Dean stands next to the observatory.

Los Angeles has been deemed a "land of magical improvisation," and in this new zeitgeist of urban wildlife relationships, it seems to be fulfilling this description as well. As LA City Wildlife Officer Greg Randall offers, "Los Angeles is wildlife habitat with houses on it." Shifting our perspective to that view opens up possibilities beyond thinking the coyote a villain and the mountain lion a monster.

When staying in Thousand Oaks for a briefing about the Santa Monica Mountain Lion Study, I arrived very late to the hotel, and an

obviously bored but very friendly night clerk checked me in. She gave me directions to the nearest Starbucks for my morning tea, then asked why I was in town. I told her the story of P22 living in the middle of Los Angeles. She looked at me, fear-stricken for a moment. I prepared to launch into my usual speech about how you are more likely to be struck by lightning than attacked by a mountain lion when she said, “He’s safe there, right? No one is going to hurt him?”

P22 has captured the imagination of Angelinos—and people across the globe—bringing them a glimpse into a wilder world, one that refuses to be contained even by the boundaries of endless paved freeways. Even some who fear P22 and his brethren still cheer him on, sharing the sentiment expressed by Gregory Rodriguez in the *LA Times*: “I have no illusions that the Glendale bear or P22 wouldn’t hesitate to dine on me given the right circumstances. But I’m still rooting for them. Deep down I’m hoping that if they can survive at the margins of human civilization without forsaking their wildness, so can I.”

Yes, I think the people of LA appreciate their wild animals. Perhaps not in the same manner people appreciate and relate to the vast bison herds of Yellowstone, or the grizzly bears in Alaska, or for that matter how most of us are taught to value wildlife—as larger-than-life creatures standing in pristine and glorious nature scenes reminiscent of an Albert Bierstadt painting.

Wildlife isn’t just about idyllic nature settings, or science or environmentalism, it’s about art and culture and history and spirituality. In Los Angeles, wildlife is about coexistence, about human and non-human residents sharing space and adapting to life together in this grand metropolis. It is a coexistence that is fraught with difficulty, and that doesn’t always have a happy ending, especially for the wildlife (don’t fret—just wait for the sequel), but that ultimately can be beneficial to all.

Truly, it’s something to celebrate that the city that gave us Carmageddon also has allowed a mountain lion to thrive. Los Angeles now needs to prove to P22 his journey wasn’t for naught. Let’s give him—and all his Santa Monica Mountain kin—a Hollywood ending. He deserves as much.

Author’s Note: At press time for this booklet, test results had just been released confirming that P22 has been exposed to anticoagulant rodenticide, commonly known as rat poison, and is suffering from mange. Eliminating the use of these poisons and creating access to green space is now even more vital for these cats and other wildlife. Visit www.nwf.org/LAcougars for more information and updates.

Photographing P22

Steve Winter, a famed international wildlife photographer for *National Geographic* who has been “attacked by rhinos in India, stalked by jaguars in Brazil, charged by an eleven-foot grizzly in Siberia, trapped in quicksand in the world’s largest tiger reserve in Myanmar, and slept in a tent for six months at 40 below zero tracking snow leopards,” says getting the famous photo of P22 in front of the Hollywood sign was the most challenging thing he has ever done. His photos accompanied the story “Ghost Cats,” which appeared in the December 2013 issue of *National Geographic*.

Using a series of sophisticated remote cameras and working with biologist Jeff Sikich, he tracked P22 for fourteen months before capturing the remarkable shot. “I am an eternal optimist. I kept thinking, ‘If I can’t get this shot, I am not a very good photographer.’”

But Steve isn’t just interested in a good photo. He is also passionate about cat conservation worldwide, serves on the staff of the nonprofit Panthera, and just published a book, *Tigers Forever*, dedicated to the world’s vanishing tigers. He hopes the photos of P22 will help people appreciate these cats and show that we can live among cougars without many problems. “I also hope these photos will rally Los Angeles around building a crossing for the mountain lions,” he says. “Living with these cats is something to celebrate.”

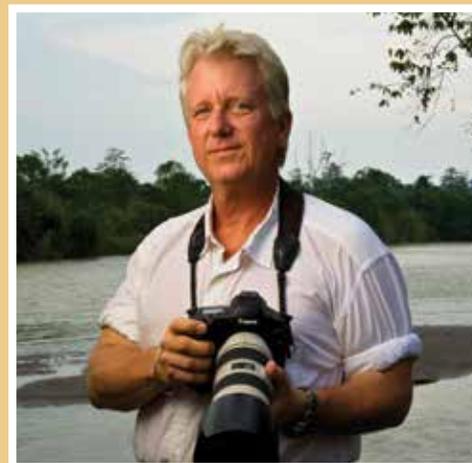


Photo courtesy of Steve Winter.

ABOUT BETH PRATT

Beth Pratt is National Wildlife Federation's California Director and loves frogs, pika, mountain lions, wolves (actually *all* wildlife) and wandering in the backcountry of Yosemite National Park. She has worked in environmental leadership roles for almost twenty years, and in two of the country's largest national parks: Yosemite and Yellowstone. Before joining NWF in 2011, she worked on sustainability and climate change programs for Xanterra Parks and Resorts in Yellowstone as its Director of Environmental Affairs. Prior to her role in Yellowstone, for nine years she served as vice president/CFO for the nonprofit Yosemite Association. Her work has been featured in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Sustainable Industries*, *Fast Company*, *Sierra Magazine*, *Yellowstone Discovery*, *Yosemite Journal*, *National Parks Traveler*, and *Green Lodging News*, and on CNN, the National Geographic Travel Channel, KQED, NPR, and the Peter Greenberg Radio Show. She is also the author of the official Junior Ranger handbook for Yosemite, the novel *The Idea of Forever*, and two stories featured in the new book *Inspiring Generations: 150 Years, 150 Stories in Yosemite*. Beth lives outside of Yosemite with her four dogs, two cats, and the many frogs who frequent her backyard pond.



Photo by Bill Pratt.



ABOUT HEYDAY

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As America's largest conservation organization, National Wildlife Federation works with more than four million members, partners, and supporters in communities across the country to inspire Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future.

For more information, visit www.nwf.org/LAcougars or contact Beth Pratt, NWF California Director, at prattb@nwf.org.



The first photo of P22 in Griffith Park taken by remote camera.
Photo courtesy of the Griffith Park Connectivity Study.



www.nwf.org/LAcougars