



In the Driveway

Following a mountain lion from my house to the forest.

By Bruce Smith

Aldo Leopold once wrote, “There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot.” Like Leopold, I’m one of the latter. So moving from rural Montana to a subdivision on the outskirts of Bozeman was a risk.

Bozeman is surrounded by spectacular public lands, but my wife Diana and I were used to walking out our front door, onto our own land, and finding ourselves immersed in wild things. Despite all the town has to offer, we wondered if Bozeman had enough nature to satisfy us.

But just 10 minutes south of town, we found a lovely little spot. The subdivision bordered a riparian zone that burst from the conifers of the Gallatin National Forest into a cottonwood gallery. Although just one-twentieth the size of our former property, the lot’s habitat connected to vast public lands that made our new homestead a petite wildlife paradise. As my sister Sandy from Michigan said on a recent visit, “It seems so much larger than two and a half acres. Are you sure it isn’t bigger?”

As a career wildlife biologist, I wanted to live on land big enough to support a wide diversity of birds, mammals, and reptiles. Considering Gallatin County’s high property prices, I was seeking a spot that “seemed so much larger.” Even on the edge of a major Montana town, the possibility of living among wild things does exist. As Diana and I have found in our new habitat, all you have to do is watch.

Two bird feeders hang outside the window of my home office. One day last December, as chickadees, finches, and other cheery species flitted to and from the seeds and suet, a whitetail fawn longingly examined the energy bonanza suspended from a zipline beyond a tall bear’s reach. Suddenly the fawn went on high alert—tail flicked upright, ears pivoting right—then

Bruce Smith is a retired U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service wildlife biologist. His latest book is Stories from Afield.

turned 90 degrees and faced something I could not see from my window. The deer stomped its front feet and trotted stiff-legged out of sight. Guessing that a neighbor’s dog had wandered into the yard, I stepped to the window. In the middle of the driveway sat a bobcat, laser focused on the fawn. Then the bobcat rose, stretched, and slunk into a nearby shrub thicket as the brazen fawn returned and sniffed the spot where the predator had sat. After following the scent a short way, the fawn apparently lost interest. It wandered down our driveway toward the neighbor’s ornamental plantings that poked through the blanket of snow.

Two mornings later, I opened the garage door to find suspicious tracks. They coursed the full 200-foot length of our driveway. Clearly registered in the overnight snowfall, the animal’s clawless footprints measured three and one-quarter inches wide, the stride nearly three feet long. The first evidence of a mountain lion at our new home.

Having watched a lion glide effortlessly through a forest in Wyoming years ago, I could picture this one treading silently past the garage, through the wheatgrass meadow beyond, and down the bank toward the frozen creek. What most impressed me about that Wyoming lion was how purposefully it placed each paw. Picture your house cat slinking through the garden as darkness falls at dusk. It too moves deliberately, but on a scale one-tenth the lion’s size.

An hour later, when I returned from an appointment in town, the lion’s trail remained perfectly preserved in the snow. I told Diana I planned to track it awhile. Knowing me all too well, her urge to talk me out of it quickly turned to suggesting I take along a canister of pepper spray.

For a joyful 20 minutes I stalked the solitary hunter, much as the fawn had followed the bobcat—a carnivore capable of bringing down a young deer. But like me, the fawn was merely inquiring. What’s this cat doing in “my territory,” the place where I live?

Down the bank, then through alder, hawthorn, chokecherry, and wild rose thickets beneath the cottonwood gallery, the lion had padded beside the creek. Farther ahead it followed the same game trail I often walk looking for kingfishers, mink, and grouse. The tracks indicated nothing exciting or even especially interesting. The hunter neither stalked a deer nor returned to a previous meal stashed beneath branches and litter. It just continued along the stream, perhaps patrolling its territory to ward off intruders. Like other predators, mountain lions spend endless hours just roaming the places where they live. They commonly do

Experience with nature breeds familiarity that allows us to replace fear with respect and even admiration.

so unnoticed by humans, though they see, hear, and smell us.

Later that day I e-mailed my sister about tracking the lion. She lives in a far more civilized setting, where wildlife encounters are largely limited to squirrels, rabbits, and frogs. During her fall visit, she’d been taken aback when I pointed out fresh black bear tracks in the moist soil just a few yards from our house. A lion in the yard might confirm it was only a matter of time before some famished beast devoured us.

Her reply to my e-mail read, “I would have been scared (just a little) but would have loved to see those footprints or better yet the real thing from inside the house! Hope you had a gun with you when you tracked him.”

Like Sandy, most people consider wild carnivores a potential threat. I once shared

that fear. But after years working around bears, lions, and wolves, packing a gun that day never crossed my mind. Out of curiosity, I’ve tracked lions before. And while studying the travels, survival, and ultimate demise of elk, I’ve on occasion displaced lions and bears from the remains of radio-collared research animals. That lifetime of experience has shaped my views of these integral components of ecosystems and how to move and live among them. Like those of so many lessfortunate than I am, my sister’s reaction was shaped not by experience but by a survival instinct passed down through our ancient ancestors’ DNA. Fear fostered survival when early human hunters were just as likely to be prey. Experience with nature breeds familiarity that allows us to replace fear with respect and even admiration.

Nowadays it’s the wild animals that have the most to fear, as humans blanket the planet and redesign nature to suit our needs and whims. As the wildland-urban interface expands into previously undeveloped wild spaces, contact and conflict between wildlife and humans intensifies. Space-limited deer, moose, and elk tolerate barking dogs, speeding cars, and run-ins with people as they try to fulfill their vital needs. Coyotes, bears, bobcats, lions, and other predators profit from unsecured garbage and pet foods or follow their prey into our neighborhoods.

Sustaining our wildlife heritage requires respecting each animal’s right both to coexist with us and to stay independent from us. Wildlife needs to remain wild. Resisting the urge to feed and coddle wildlife keeps potentially dangerous animals from losing their fear of humans while allowing us to harmoniously share the land with them. That arrangement is both a privilege and a responsibility in an increasingly human-dominated landscape.

For many of us living in the mountain West, and elsewhere, sharing our surroundings with wild things enriches our lives, be it the flitting of wings outside our windows or tracks that one morning unexpectedly appear from nowhere in the driveway. 🐾