

Heart of a Lion: A Lone Cat's Walk Across America

By William Stolzenburg. 2016. Bloomsbury Publishing. 256 pages, 27.00 USD, Cloth.

I've had a lifelong love and fascination of Cougars (*Puma concolor*), also called Mountain Lions, Catamounts, Pumas, and Panthers, among dozens of other names. So perhaps it wasn't surprising that I could not put *Heart of a Lion* down once I started reading it. It is a fascinating account, tracing a Cougar from its probable origin in the Black Hills of South Dakota to its death (by vehicle) in southwestern Connecticut, about 2000 miles away – including a point when he was only 23 miles, a two-nights' jaunt, from New York City (p. 172). This is the longest known terrestrial dispersal in the animal kingdom and Will Stolzenburg does a masterful job of weaving in the stories of all of the players, from local police to homeowners to wildlife experts, involved in documenting this young male Cougar's nearly two-year odyssey.

In addition to this individual Cougar and his cult following, Stolzenburg weaves in a treasure trove of infor-

mation about Pumas from human's shameful history of eradicating them, to protecting them, to the current overhunting taking place in many western states. In fact, Stolzenburg used so many sources in researching this book, that he generated a website, www.lionstrek.com, to produce a detailed list of references complementing the selective bibliography. Yet even with all the technical and comprehensive information that is provided, it is a very understandable account. And in addition to being an enthralling read, it's also a fabulous resource for information about Cougars and humans' (mostly negative) history with them.

One theme that resonates throughout the book is the bizarre and seemingly ubiquitous sightings of 'eastern cougars', despite the clear majority of them not being confirmed and there being no breeding population of the cats in the East except in south Florida. There are people, some of them even affiliated with academia,

who swear to the presence of Cougars despite the contrary evidence that no verified picture or physical proof (e.g., road-kill) of a big cat has come from this region in nearly a century.

That was the case until 11 June 2011, when a 139-pound Mountain Lion was hit and killed by a car on a Connecticut parkway. Initially there was speculation that this animal was a remnant survivor of the 'eastern cougar' race, but an amazing DNA trail quickly led to the discovery of this animal taking a six-state journey from the Black Hills of South Dakota to the Northeast U.S.

Even though I was aware of this particular Cougar and his travels from the internet and professional associations, I was still captivated reading *Heart of a Lion* and Stolzenberg's retracing of this lion's two-year journey, as articulated on the book's cover, "from his probable birthplace in the Black Hills, across the Great Plains and the Mississippi River, through Midwest metropolises and remote northern forests, to his tragic final resting place upon Connecticut's Gold Coast. Along the way, the lion traverses lands with people gunning for his kind, as well as those championing his cause". This Cougar travelled as if to defy people's groupings of natural objects and places. Its sign, verified six times through DNA testing, was picked up 15 times over 18 months, showing clearly that if a Cougar is there, sign will be found. Despite travelling past thousands of people, including through many residential areas, he never threatened a human soul nor caught scent of a female Mountain Lion (p. 198).

The book's cover jacket notes that "*Heart of a Lion* is a story of one heroic creature pitting instinct against towering odds, coming home to a society deeply divided over his return. It is a testament to the resilience of nature, and a test of humanity's willingness to live again beside the ultimate symbol of wildness". This predator – like others – can also bring out the worst in certain people, such as state legislator Betty Olson (Republican-South Dakota; pp. 135–137, 202), who has vilified them with unbridled fear, delusion, hatred, and outright uneducated reactions to a supposedly dangerous animal that rarely hurts humans. In fact, one is statistically more likely to get hit by lightning, killed in a deer-vehicle accident, killed by a bee sting, heat wave, or deep freeze, or die from a host of other natural factors than to get attacked by a Cougar. Yet, many states have laws that allow their destruction even where they do not currently live. This is the case despite recent peer-reviewed research suggesting that Mountain Lions make it safer for humans because they prey on deer, which kill about 200 people a year nationwide, mostly through vehicle accidents. In fact, Gilbert *et al.* (*in press*) found that a recovered Cougar population in the eastern United States could prevent 21 400 human injuries, 155 fatalities, and \$2.13 billion in avoided costs within 30 years of establishment! Ironically, that article also states that South Dakota, which has recently hammered its lion population with increased human hunting, saves \$1.1 million a year with their recently estab-

lished Cougars. In the chapter *The Deer Shepherd*, Stolzenberg does a great job of illustrating the importance of maintaining large predators (Coyote size and up), and specifically Mountain Lions, toward the functioning of a healthy ecosystem with reduced deer densities.

Another main character in the book is Chris Spatz, President of the Cougar Rewilding Foundation (CRF), who was skeptical of 'native' Mountain Lions inhabiting the East, based on his years of investigating reported "sightings" that turned out to be everything but Pumas. He and the CRF collectively put out dozens of remote wildlife cameras but failed to document a single Catamount. Spatz did obtain plenty of images of house cats (many of which were initially believed to be Pumas), dogs and their tracks, Bobcats, bears, Coyotes, deer, turkeys, and many of the other common animals living in the East. Re-evaluating his goals once Cougars were found to be nonexistent in the Northeast, Spatz and his organization now (and, I would argue, appropriately) advocate for lion restoration to the East. He (and other carnivore advocates) chastises Midwestern states for killing Cougars because they enter towns and sends them press clippings of California's new law (pp. 206–207) requiring non-lethal procedures when lions enter populated areas. California's progressiveness and saneness give one hope that other states will follow. So, too, does research from Washington State University (pp. 139–140) showing that the more Cougars are killed, the more livestock and pets were attacked – due to the social chaos of the surviving lions.

The Black Hills are the source of many of the eastward dispersing Cougars which have left their birthplace in search of females and a territory of their own. All the other documented long-distance dispersers have also died as a result of human actions, mainly through vehicle accidents and gun-shots. Virtually all of them have been young males. For instance, another Cougar that made it to Chicago, Illinois in 2008 was heartbreakingly gunned down by police "to protect public safety" (pp. 97–103). Spatz and his organization lament that South Dakota and other prairie states, with their hostile policies toward Mountain Lions, are preventing Midwestern and eastern recovery of these big cats.

Overall, I really enjoyed reading this story about one of my favourite animals although, admittedly, I became sad and angry at the many depictions – starting all the way back with Ben Lilly in the late 1800s and early 1900s – of how people have treated Mountain Lions as vermin and exterminated them including right up to modern times. I only have a couple of very minor complaints about the book. First, there is only one black and white picture throughout. I thought it would have been cool, if possible, to have pictures and documentation of the animal throughout its eastern journey including trail-camera pictures and stills from videos. Also, the cover insert had a great map of the cat's travels but there were no localized maps or figures within the book as it went from state to state; rather, there were only text descriptions, albeit very detailed and meticulous.

As I write this in November 2016, there is good news on the Puma front: a female Florida Panther – the local lingo for *Puma concolor* living in south Florida – has crossed the Caloosahatchee River to the north and may be the source for a population expansion of Panthers to central Florida. This is welcoming news for sure, but too little to celebrate until state wildlife agencies nationwide start recovering carnivores like they have for numerous other now common “game” animals. Reading *Heart of a Lion* gives me hope that lions will continue trailblazing to the East and state wildlife agencies and their citizens will do a better job of welcoming them, including reintroducing them to old haunts. One sug-

gestion I have is for environmental groups to purchase many copies of this book and to give to all Midwestern and eastern legislators to show how ecologically, ethically, and culturally important having Mountain Lions on the landscape is!

Literature Cited

Gilbert, S. L., K. J. Sivy, C. B. Pozzanghera, A. DuBour, K. Overduijn, M. M. Smith, J. Zhou, J. M. Little, and L. R. Prugh. *In press*. Socioeconomic benefits of large carnivore recolonization through reduced wildlife-vehicle collisions. *Conservation Letters*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12280>

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