

MOUNTAIN LION VISIT WAKE-UP CALL FOR LODE RESIDENTS

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SAN ANDREAS - Steve Stocking, a retired San Joaquin Delta College biology instructor, has spent much of his life outdoors in the Sierra and the Mother Lode.

For the past decade, he's lived in the oak woodlands on the edge of San Andreas.

In all his years, he never laid eyes on the animal that sits atop the local food chain: a mountain lion.

But that doesn't mean the lions didn't see him.

"I bet you I've been very close," Stocking said.

At times, Stocking has seen lion footprints not more than a few minutes old. "You can see the tracks and tell how fresh they are."

The community was reminded of the sometimes-tense relations between lions and humans last month when a Calaveras County sheriff's deputy reported coming face to face with a lion in the middle of San Andreas.

After finding the lion in a cemetery about 11:30 p.m. Aug. 14, the deputy advised other officers on the scene to return to their vehicles. He started walking back to his vehicle only to discover the lion following him, ears pinned back, as though it might pounce.

The lion did finally turn and leave, but not before the deputy turned to face the lion and reached for his gun, according to the Sheriff's Department.

State game officials and scientists say lion attacks on humans are extremely rare. According to the California Department of Fish and Game, there were only 16 verified attacks by mountain lions on humans in California between 1890 and 2007, and only six were fatal.

Yet the number of lion/human encounters is growing as human population increases where lions live. And experts on mountain lions say those who live in lion country - even in towns such as San Andreas - should take precautions.

"The main problem with any of these wildlife issues is animals habituating to humans," said Richard Coss, a professor of psychology at University of California, Davis and an expert in pre/predator relationships. "That is where risk can increase."

Normally, lions won't stay around people long enough to get used to them. But extremely dry conditions this year have prompted deer, the lions' favorite food, to come closer to human dwellings where they can munch on irrigated gardens.

"A mountain lion's main food is deer, and they will follow deer into populated areas," Lee Fitzhugh, a wildlife extension specialist for UC Davis, said in an email.

This year's lion presence may not be much different than usual, Fitzhugh said.

"I am somewhat familiar with San Andreas, and I suspect that mountain lions are close by most of the time. As long as the lion runs from people, there probably isn't too much cause for concern, except for children," Fitzhugh said.

Coss said that a variety of evidence, including 1.5 million-year-old bones found in Spain, indicate that predators are much more likely to kill very young animals or those that suffer from arthritis or other injuries that cause them to limp. Studies say it is something about the irregular walking motion of young and old that triggers predators, Coss said.

So to avoid being lion prey, don't walk like a toddler or like an arthritic elder. Coss also suggests carrying a stout walking stick made of manzanita or some other solid wood.

"That's protected people before where they've been able to hit the mountain lion. It doesn't guarantee lack of injury. It just gives you an extra edge," Coss said.

Calaveras County ranchers may be the most aware of the lions. Virtually anyone in lion country who owns goats or sheep either loses some to the lions or takes measures to combat them.

"We have guardian dogs," said Billie Hammer, who raises sheep on several properties just outside San Andreas. "I use mountain lion dogs, Akbash Anatolian dogs."

In almost 40 years using the Akbash dogs, she's only seen a lion on her property once.

"But it got off before I could shoot it," Hammer said.

"Without the dogs, I could not have sheep. They are mountain lion hors d'oeuvres."

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Living with mountain lions

Lion experts and the California Department of Fish and Game offer the following tips for reducing the chances that mountain lions will attack humans, pets or livestock:

- Don't feed deer. Deer attract lions.
- Fence your garden and choose landscaping that deer don't like to eat.
- Trim brush to reduce mountain lion hiding places.
- Don't leave small children or pets unattended.
- Don't leave pets outside when lions are most active — dawn, dusk, and night.
- Go in a group if you walk at dawn or dusk and carry a stout walking stick.
- If you encounter a lion, don't run. Instead face the animal, try to look large, throw rocks and shout. Pick up children. If attacked, fight back.

Source: California Department of Fish and Game