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WILLIAM
STOLZENBURG

|
HEART
OF A
LION

|
A LONE CAT'S WALK
ACROSS AMERICA
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To Kathy, of course, and the memory of Jean

HEART OF

A LION

A Lone Cat's Walk Across America

William Stolzenburg

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CONTENTS

Prologue

One: Black Hills

Two: Into the Void

Three: The Search

Four: Crossroads

Five: Attack

Six: Northbound

Seven: The Deer Shepherd

Eight: The Gold Coast

Nine: Resurrection

Epilogue: Tolerance

Acknowledgments

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Index

PROLOGUE

Half past midnight, June 11, 2011, on a highway seventy miles outside New York City, a mountain lion met his death on the fender of a northbound car. He was nearly eight feet long, tip to tail, and a solid 140 pounds. He was the first physical proof of a wild mountain lion in Connecticut in the last century. Soon thereafter he was to become the most famous mountain lion in North America, in any century.

The news of his demise triggered a flurry of national press and gossip. That such an unlikely beast from so deep in the past had so magically materialized in America's iconic megalopolitan corridor came with a certain irresistible irony, serving as fodder for wild speculations.

He was a drug kingpin's abandoned pet. He was an escapee from a roadside zoo. To an ardent sect of conspiracy theorists, the Connecticut cat was the smoking gun, proof at last that wildlife authorities had been clandestinely airlifting the big predators into the eastern woods to rein in a runaway population of deer. To the multitudes of citizens who swore they'd long been seeing such lions roaming their streets and backyards and local woods—the same such lions that just three months earlier had been officially declared extinct by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—he was vindication in the face of all the authoritarian dismissals. He was undeniable evidence that eastern mountain lions—by the hundreds, maybe thousands!—were in fact still thriving beneath the experts' condescending noses.

He was in fact none of those things, but far more. Six weeks after scientists sliced and probed and sent bits of the lion's body to a genetics lab in Montana, his tests came back and his incredible saga emerged from the molecules. He was a three-year-old mountain lion from the Black Hills of South Dakota. And he had wandered under his own power for the better part of two years and more than two thousand miles across the eastern two-thirds of North America. His journey had spanned at least six states and, most likely, Canada's largest province.

The lion had not simply walked a long distance, in the *Guinness Book* fashion easily imagined by any human pedestrian with a few months' spare time and a supply chain of cool beverages and warm lodging along the way. This lone cat had threaded a gauntlet that would have given an elite force of Navy SEALs the night sweats. He had slinked and scampered across five hundred glaring miles of naked prairie and industrial cropland, patrolled by a certain culture of guns and antipredator hatred that had already dropped dozens of his fellow pilgrims in their paths. He had slipped through metropolises of millions, abuzz with four-wheeled predators and guarded by skittish cops armed with orders to shoot. He had forded many of the mightiest rivers east of the Rockies (the Missouri, Mississippi, St. Lawrence, Hudson) and the busiest of eight-lane freeways, some of them rumbling to more than a hundred thousand vehicles a day. Through ferocious heat, cold, rain, and snow, feeding himself on the fly

in a foreign land, he made his way as far east as a land-bound animal could go, to be stopped only by the Atlantic Ocean and two tons of speeding steel.

Only after the lion's headlining tragedy in Connecticut did America come to realize they'd already met this cat more than once along the way. He had made his first public appearance eighteen months earlier, on a December night outside Minneapolis, with a waltz through a suburban neighborhood captured on a police cruiser's video camera. The video went viral. The lion went east. After swimming the Mississippi and scampering around the north end of the Twin Cities, he stopped for a couple days in an urban nature preserve surrounded by freeways and car dealerships, to eat a deer and—more important, for history's sake—to leave behind his first fresh samples of urine and scat.

Before his pursuing biologists were through bagging that evidence, the lion was seen crossing a busy town ten miles east, on the icy banks of the St. Croix River, bordering Wisconsin. Every stop of the way, reporters followed. The lion was adopted and named, written up like an outlaw on a cross-country getaway. He became at turns the Champlin cougar, the Twin Cities cougar, the St. Croix cougar. There were cheers, there were fears, there were threats of his demise by police fire should he be caught loitering in town. Citizens were publicly warned and instructed on defending themselves against attack. The lion fled for safer surroundings.

Through his first winter on the run he continued leaving his trail of crumbs eastward across Wisconsin: a line of pancake-size paw prints and a thatch of fur at the wooded edge of a dairy farm; at another farm, another sixteen miles east, more fur, more astonishingly intimate glimpses caught by a hidden video camera. In February 2010, in Wisconsin's wintry North Country, he treaded within two miles of eight thousand cross-country skiers at that moment gliding through the woods in the continent's largest ski race.

Late in May he made a couple more cameo appearances on trail cameras, the last one catching him as he passed into the wilds of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, eastward bound still. And then his trail went cold. Over the following months the lion went out of sight and out of the public mind.

So, when he next made his grandest entrance upon the public stage, more than a year later and another seven hundred sixty miles due east—amid the gated estates and manicured greens of Greenwich, Connecticut, thirty miles from Manhattan—it was just too much to imagine. Nobody could think to connect the dots. So far as anyone knew, here was a lion fifteen hundred miles and nearly two centuries removed from genuine lion country. He could be explained only by less fantastic scenarios, as in the odd pet gone loose or the government's secret weapon air-dropped from black helicopters.

The big cat's Greenwich splash played out on TV and YouTube, in the daily papers and social media. The Greenwich Mountain Lion's Facebook page, which sprang up during the commotion, would soon gather five thousand friends. A blurry photo of him scared a prestigious boys' school into closing its campus and the American Cancer Society into moving its annual charity walk to an indoor track in another town. Fanciful sightings streamed in from nearby communities caught up in mountain lion mania. It was lively theater while it lasted.

One week later and another forty eastward miles down the highway came the car

and the end of his trail, with the DNA bombshell to follow. All those tokens of hair and bowel meticulously gathered in the wake of his Midwest crossing now revealed the genetic fingerprints linking the Connecticut cat with his South Dakota origins and the improbable chain of sightings between. This was history.

The lion's trans-American trek had reached more than twice as far as that of any such cat on record, conducted by a barely weaned teenager venturing solo across strange and perilous lands. For students of dispersal biology, the journey was a godsend of data and scientific discovery. Never before had such a secretive creature, untagged and uncollared and so free to wander, left such a revealing chronicle over so wide a terrain.

For conservationists championing the return of his kind, and for public officials fearing the same, he was either emissary or omen of wild things to come. He testified to all that a certain shrinking window into eastern America's ailing wilderness had not yet closed.

But among those following him from the sidelines, his passing carried the sadness of a lost friend. He was more than a statistic or symbol. He was a mindful creature with untold ambitions and emotions, so many of them hauntingly familiar. The lion at turns had displayed cockiness and fear, aloofness and laser-like focus, recklessness and rashness and tenacious resolve. He had survived on varying parts stealth and dumb luck, over half a continent hiding in plain sight like an Apache scout, then suddenly blundering before cars like a wino and parading across patios in the middle of the day. All, it turned out, was in blind pursuit of a mate. The lion had ultimately come so far looking for what some would call love.

His was, by any measure of natural history or emotional gravity, a heroic journey. It was a remarkable odyssey of one lone, impassioned cat that, in keeping to its endless turns of irony, would begin in the most idyllic and dangerous piece of lion habitat for two thousand miles.

ONE Black Hills

Once, in every corner of this continent, your passing could prickle the stillness and bring every living thing to the alert.

—WALLACE STEGNER

The Black Hills rise along the western border of South Dakota as a long dark island adrift in a prairie sea. They are a rogue eastern outlier of America's Rocky Mountains, one hundred miles from the nearest range to the west, the last major uprising before the land lies open, the trees fade away, and the Great Plains take hold for the next five hundred straw-hued miles across the midsection of America.

It is from the distances that the Hills were so shortsightedly named. Their amorphous blackness is a muted reflection of what on closer approach become bold granite mountains and green pine forests cut by sheer chasms, the whole of the kingdom ringed by floral valleys and a wall of red sandstone.

People gather here as desert trekkers to an oasis, in towns pressing against the foothills and wedged into the canyons. They come in tides of summer tourists to the monument of Mount Rushmore and the casinos of Deadwood, and in one rowdy torrent of more than half a million Harley riders rumbling to their yearly rally in Sturgis. The wildest residents of the Hills congregate most conspicuously as herds of bison, deer, pronghorn, and elk grazing the intermountain meadows, and as mountain goats and bighorn sheep tiptoeing about the cliffs.

Then there are the lions. By the summer of 2009, arguably more than two hundred mountain lions had come to live in the Black Hills. It was not an abnormal number, as lion populations go. But these lions seemed to have risen from the dead, and their resurrection had caused more than a little stir among the people whose ancestors had driven them from the Hills.

Obliterated as vermin a century before by westward settlers, the forgotten lions had recently returned from distant mountains. They had in just the previous thirty years evolved from the rumored existence of an occasional phantom drifting through, to a ubiquitous presence that had frantic citizens reporting missing house cats and unearthly screams in the night. The apparitions eventually began to assume living shape. Lions in the flesh occasionally took to lounging on roofs and back porches, sauntering through town, and leaving the odd deer dead on the streets of Rapid City. And soon enough, former lions in the flesh were appearing by the dozens each year, as carcasses.

In those thirty years, the mountain lion was officially reassigned, from a rare and guarded species of the state, to a targeted animal drawing hundreds of hunters to the Hills each winter. Police and game wardens took to shooting town lions as a rule. The courts came to grant all citizens year-round license to kill lions, so long as they claimed to have felt threatened.

Conservationists from across the country came in turn to the lion's defense, with lawsuits and letters to the editors, billboards and civic center seminars, all pleading for more tolerance toward the Black Hills' comeback cougars, all to be repeatedly overruled in favor of killing ever more of them.

It was one of the survivors, who on a late summer evening in 2009 came to stand on the edge of the Hills, looking out. He was little more than a year old and not long separated from his mother. He had survived his first year as hunters' quarry, public enemy, and roadkill candidate, dodging the armed sportsmen and police and the vehicular predators speeding through the heavily travelled Hills. He had dodged his own kind as well. Had any of the Hills' reigning males caught him trespassing, they might well have killed him. The young tom had reached a leap point in the life of male lions. He was a teenager toeing the line of adulthood, heeding a hard-wired imperative to find a mate and a place of his own. The hills of his birth promised him death if he stayed. Eastward before him lay the black abyss of alien prairie.

Of Lithe and Splendid Beasthood

For seventy million years the Black Hills had stood apart. They were at birth a turtle-shaped dome of molten granite arching through crusts of old seabeds and chasms of time during the last days of the dinosaurs. Over the eons the hills would become mountains rising four thousand feet above the plains, and the world of dinosaurs would give way to one of colossal mammals, magnificent beyond anything earth would ever again produce. They were giants by modern standards, and prolific in number and form. In North America there was a beaver as big as a modern bear, a ground sloth as big as an ox. There were elephantine mastodons, and a mammoth fourteen feet at the shoulder. There were deer, elk, moose, caribou, mountain sheep, and mountain goats little different from today, but also towering camels, wild horses reaching Clydesdale proportions, and a bison with horns spanning seven feet. All were chased by several varieties of wolves and a particularly frightful form of bear that stood as tall as a racehorse and apparently ran like one, too. There was a long-striding, pack-hunting hyena. And there emerged a guild of great cats as a carnivorous force unto itself.

Saber-toothed cats roamed the American wilderness, the most spectacular bearing six-inch canines for slicing through the thickest hides of mammoths. This same wilderness harbored the American lion, a blood relative of the African lion, but about a quarter again as large. An oversize jaguar—close kin to the spotted cat now typically associated with southern jungles—lived as far north as what would become the states of Nebraska and Washington. Across the open spaces sped the American cheetah, a sprinting cat with a whipcord spine and stilted legs, unleashing violent bursts of speed to overtake the second-fastest land animal on earth, the pronghorn. The line that led to the cheetah split off to yet another big cat, which, though neither the fastest nor the biggest nor the flashiest of the clan, was destined to inherit the Western Hemisphere.

The mountain lion—to be technically classified as *Puma concolor*, or “cat of a single color”—retained somewhat the trim runner's skull of the cheetah, while adding the muscled forearms and massive paws more befitting a true lion. Its hind legs compared to nothing else in the world of cats. They were heavily thighed and

apparently too large by half, hinting at kangaroo. They were built for leaping. While its cheetah sister hurtled in high-speed pursuit over the open spaces, the mountain lion took to lunging and pouncing in explosive acts of ambush from behind the wooded edge, over the boulders and cliffs of canyon country.

Stretching seven to nine feet from nose to tail, females weighing about a hundred pounds and the biggest males more than twice that, the mountain lion yet amounted to an underling in the pecking order of the Pleistocene's land of giants. The quintessential saber-tooth, *Smilodon*, of the famously oversize fangs and muscle-bound physique, outweighed the mountain lion by six times. *Panthera atrox*, the original American lion, was bigger still. The mountain lion gave way to these alpha cats whenever paths crossed or a pile of fresh meat came under dispute. But the mountain lion bowed to none as the great cats' apex of athleticism. It could vault thirty-foot chasms, and scale trees like a squirrel. Its oven-mitt paws could pluck a rabbit on the fly or grapple a bull elk five times its mass. It had evolved a particular expertise for slinking invisibly to within striking distance, closing with a rush, and dispatching big prey with a surgical, spine-severing bite to the neck or a suffocating lock on the windpipe.

"Of all the beasts that roam America's woods, the Cougar is the big-game hunter without peer," wrote the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton in his 1937 opus, *Lives of Game Animals*. "Built with the maximum power, speed and endurance that can be jammed into his 150 pounds of lithe and splendid beasthood, his daily routine is a march of stirring athletic events that not another creature—in America, at least—can hope to equal."

Thus forged in a crucible of intense competition, the mountain lion emerged as a carnivorous embodiment of adaptive versatility, every trick and talent of which would be tested in the forthcoming cataclysms. Late into the Pleistocene epoch, with the receding of the last glaciers, a tribe of people entered the North American continent from the west. They migrated over a temporary arc of exposed seafloor bridging Siberia to Alaska, Asia to North America. Entering the New World some fourteen thousand years ago, their tribe may not have been the first to arrive, but it was by far the most obvious. The people left their calling cards rather conspicuously strewn across the land, set in stone and bearing a bold universal message. They left spear points, massive beyond imagination, emerging from the dirt as sharp and deadly as the day they'd been flaked. The spear-wielding Clovis people—named for the little town on the dusty plains of eastern New Mexico where, in 1929, their weapons were first uncovered—would rapidly spread across the continent. A curious lot of their spear points were to be found embedded among the remains of mammoths, elephantine monsters who vanished from the American landscape within a millennium of the spear makers' arrival.

The camels and the ground sloths and the horses soon vanished, too. Those that had fed on them (the dire wolf, the giant short-faced bear, and the great cats) disappeared in turn. Suspiciously soon on the heels of the pioneering Clovis, three of every four of the Pleistocene's North American megafaunal forms were reduced to dust and bone. Scientists of the twentieth century would come to argue themselves hoarse over who or what did it, whether the continent's most mysterious mass extinction had stemmed from the environmental chaos of a glacial reversal, or from the business end of the Clovis spear. But with the megafauna's record of having survived a score of climatic

upheavals over the previous one hundred thousand years, yet failing to survive their first meeting with the meat-seeking Clovis, the last-minute meltdown acquired an indelible odor of massacre.

Of the hemisphere's once-crowded suite of big cats, two survived, if barely. The jaguar retreated southward; the mountain lion appeared to have fled North America entirely. Of the two, only the mountain lion would ever fully recover—and then some. In time, after the smoke of the Pleistocene immolation had cleared, a few refugee mountain lions crept back. They entered their ancestral home, gutted as it was, to find the place not only habitable but positively inviting. The mammoth-hunting Clovis, with no more mammoths to hunt, had given way to cultures of smaller ambitions and shrinking spear points, turning to the hooped herds of bison, elk, and deer that had survived to thrive in the newly peopled continent. The list of apex predators had been pared to a species or two of wolf, a grizzly bear more apt to dig for roots than to chase down meat, and a race of hunting and gathering humans who seemed to have struck a precarious semblance of balance with the land that fed them.

The homecoming lions found the landscape rearranged to their liking. By the time European explorers made landfall in the sixteenth century, the mountain lion had settled the New World from Atlantic to Pacific, Canada to Patagonia, rainforest basins to alpine peaks. And by the time the Europeans took to settling themselves, America's lion was soon again fleeing in full-bore retreat.

All Things Fierce and Savage

The first Europeans to glimpse the New World discovered a creature the likes of which they could only imagine as kin to the king of African beasts that adorned their medieval artwork back home. Amerigo Vespucci and Christopher Columbus, in separate reconnaissances of Central America, had both come back with reports of *leones*.

The English colonists who followed bestowed a welter of new names on America's singular cat (cougar, catamount, wildcat, tyger, puma, panther, painter, Indian devil, mountain screamer, and mountain lion, among many more) and an equally creative narrative of its anatomy and natural history. "It has a tail like a Lyon, its legs are like a Bears, its Claws like an Eagle, its Eyes like a Tyger, its countenance is a mixture of every Thing that is Fierce and Savage, he is exceedingly ravenous and devours all sorts of Creatures that he can come near."

The mountain lion was said to wail like a sobbing child lost in the woods, or perhaps like a woman being murdered. His hair-raising roars—later to be debunked as acoustically impossible, given his vocal equipment—could only be confused with those of the Devil himself.

Though the lion's chroniclers were hard-pressed to conjure solid evidence of human injury, any creature with such a hideous howl must surely be a devoted man-eater. The lion gained a reputation for chasing people, with the curious twist of hardly ever catching them. "Panthers have not seized any of our people, that I have heard," reported the pioneer botanist John Bartram in 1738, "but many have been sadly frightened with them. They have pursued several men, both on horseback and foot." The irony of such stories was not lost on Bartram, given that it was almost always the

lion who got the worst of the encounters. “Many have shot them down, and others have escaped by running away. But I believe, as a panther doth not much fear a single man, so he hath no great desire to seize him; for if he had, running from him would be a poor means to escape such a nimble, strong creature, which will leap about twenty feet at one leap.”

The lion was said to pounce upon its victims from the limbs of trees, where in fact it was the lion who was typically pounced upon. Those limbs were typically the last refuge of a lion on the run, where the savvy hunter following his hounds would casually approach to within spitting distance and shoot the treed cat at his leisure.

A few of the early chroniclers got it right, squaring the mountain lion’s astonishing verve for tackling the fiercest four-legged beasts with its near-pathologic reluctance to prey on the most defenseless people. “As formidable as this Beast is to his Fellow Brutes, he never has the confidence to venture upon a Man, but retires from him with great respect, if there be a way open for his Escape,” wrote the Virginian plantation master William Byrd II in 1728. “However, it must be confesst, his Voice is a little contemptible for a Monarch of the Forest, being not a great deal louder nor more awful than the Mewing of a Household Cat.”

In their 1846 account of the cougar, the painter John James Audubon and his naturalist colleague John Bachman gamely attempted a balance between the tall tales of the frontier people and the few facts that could have been known of an animal so seldom seen. The stories they gathered told of silent footsteps treading the blackest of night, of the wilderness camper awakening to the snorting of terrified horses and the “glistening eyes of the dangerous beast glaring upon him like two burning coals.” This was the cougar that ambushed people on their horses, in their houses, in their sleep, and ultimately, in their minds.

“We have given these relations of others to show that at long intervals, and under peculiar circumstance, when perhaps pinched with hunger, or in defence of its young, the Cougar sometimes attacks men,” wrote Audubon and Bachman. “These instances, however, are very rare, and the relations of an affrightened traveller must be received with some caution, making a due allowance for a natural disposition in man to indulge in the marvellous.”

The authors admitted that they themselves had only seen this animal—of which they so authoritatively wrote—all of three times in their lives. Each encounter featured a lion fleeing up a tree. The first was chased there by a schoolboy’s little terrier. “We approached and raised a loud whoop, when he sprang to the earth and soon made his escape. He was, a few days afterwards, hunted by the neighbours and shot.” The second cougar sprang, too, heading for far horizons and an unknown fate. The third never left the tree alive, to be finally dropped thudding to the ground by a dozen blasts from a shotgun.

Mercy rarely figured in the settlers’ meetings with the forest’s great cat. Colonists from the beginning were offered bounties to kill all such predatory vermin as wolves, bears, and lions. In the late 1500s, Jesuit priests in Southern California were offering a bull as reward for anyone killing a cougar. South Carolina enacted a law in 1695 requiring “all Native American braves to bring in the skin of a wolf, panther, bear, or two bobcats each year.” If the brave brought in more, he would be rewarded; if he brought in fewer, he would be whipped. New Jersey, as of 1697, was offering twenty

shillings per lion, regardless of the killer's race. The demonic panther burned in the witch hunters' fires of colonial New England. And rarely did a red-blooded settler of the new country pass up the chance to parade his dead lion through town, or to tack its hide to a shed as a badge of manliness.

Lions were rounded up in ring hunts and massacred. One such hunt was led by an ominously named character, Black Jack Schwartz, who one day in 1760, along with two hundred of his henchmen, all but surrounded an entire Pennsylvania county. With their bells clanging, fires burning, and guns popping, Black Jack and his men began driving all manner of wild creatures before them. Foxes, bears, bobcats, elk, deer, buffalo, otters, beavers, wolves, panthers, and myriad smaller creatures ran ahead, until meeting the opposing line of gunmen. Some of the animals in their panic broke through the lines and escaped; the rest were cornered and executed. The shooting went on for hours. When it ended, more than a thousand bodies were tallied, stacked, and burned, the stench of which was said to have driven settlers from their cabins three miles away. Among the dead were forty-one panthers. The hunters dressed themselves in the panther skins—an ill-advised boast that soon put a target on their backs when the local Indians came looking for those who had just plundered their livelihood.

There were many ways to kill the panther. Besides shooting, trapping, snaring, axing, knifing, or bludgeoning—all of which were commonly boasted of in the chronicles of panther slayers—there was a more roundabout method that never required touching the animal. The cat could be starved off the land.

As the burgeoning American colony spread westward, clearing forests and wildlife as it went, so too went the forests and food of the mountain lion. By the mid-1800s, upward of 80 percent of the eastern forest had been cut for lumber and firewood, converted to pasture and cropland. The deer, bison, and elk that had lived there were rendered for meat and hides to feed and clothe the growing masses of the eastern cities, to the demise of the native peoples and predators who depended on them.

The bison and elk, presenting the biggest targets, were extinguished outright; the smaller deer, all but so. In 1830, market hunters were collecting a dollar a deer; venison was selling for pennies on the pound. Few forested enclaves remained safe. Railroads eventually punched through the last inviolable tracts of the northern woods, and the market hunters loaded the trains to the last.

Deer evaporated across the countryside. The bottomless herds celebrated in the pioneers' journals inevitably gave way to rare sightings of skittish survivors. New Brunswick, New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Virginias, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee—all watched their herds driven to desperate little enclaves in the last wooded pockets of refuge. In 1842 the state of Connecticut reported a single deer killed.

What the bounty hunter and the ring hunter and the local potshot couldn't quite finish in their quest for lion extermination, the logger and the deer hunter did. As much as a lion might survive the lean times on meat of beaver, turkey, rabbit, or even porcupine, such appetizers were ultimately lacking as long-term staples for a creature so purposefully built for hunting sizable prey. Nor was there any hint of last-minute reprieve from their gunners. For what the clear cutters and market hunters had done to the colonies' deer, the last mountain lions conveniently took the blame and the bullet.

So it went that the baby-snatching, horse-thieving, game-plundering, myth-shackled

mountain lion fled before the settlers' advance. By the mid-1800s, signs of eastern lions had grown scarce. Delaware, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, the Carolinas, Maine, Vermont, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and on down the line recorded their final bountied cougars and panthers. The sole survivors retreated to the last hidden peaks and hollows of the Appalachians, until the last hiding places were overrun. Deep in the mosquito-fogged Everglades and cypress swamps of southern Florida, a few refugee panthers held out for lack of enough people to finish exterminating them. But everywhere else swept the gunners.

Through the Midwest plains of Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, the settlers cleared cougars like prairie flowers under the plow. The last prairie cougars gravitated toward the ribbons of riverside forests to shelter and rest and to hunt for deer, until the settlers did, too.

Not long into the 1900s, the cougar of the eastern forests and Midwest plains was gone, and those of the great mountains and badlands of the American West were already fast on the run. Rare was the gun-toting Westerner who didn't instinctively fire upon the hint of a mountain lion. For most, the killing of lions had become an unspoken civic duty; for others, a deed as mindless as crushing spiders underfoot. For a few, the killing of lions was to become a vocation bordering on obsession. And above and beyond all was Ben Lilly.

Lilly

Born in 1856 in southern Mississippi, with gun and knife soon thereafter in his hands, Benjamin Vernon Lilly would grow to become the country's most celebrated assassin of mountain lions. By the time he was finished eighty years later, Lilly had been variously credited with killing upward of a thousand lions and bears, from the swamps of the Deep South to the sky islands of the desert Southwest. They were many of the last.

Lilly as a boy took to the woods early and often. He ran away at twelve and roamed across Mississippi and halfway through Louisiana, sleeping in the woods and feeding himself on wild game along the way. He came back for a while with the idea of farming and starting a family. Yet farming and family life suffocated Lilly, who wandered away at every temptation into the bottomland thickets and swamps, where he gunned the deer and wild hogs by the score, and harpooned the biggest alligators. And here Lilly grew particularly fond of killing the swamps' remaining bears and panthers.

Somewhere early in the slaying of the great predatory beasts, something triggered in Lilly's soul. (He killed his first bear, goes the story, with a pocketknife.) Lilly came to take his readings from the Bible, his killing orders from God. He adopted hounds as his living weapons, training them to track and tree the panthers and hold the bears at bay. He would end the chase at close range with his rifle, or wade into the scuffle with his knife. Lilly was said to have yanked a panther from a tree by its tail. He killed another by bashing its skull in with a rock.

Lilly was a solid, compact man with an incongruent blend of bearish strength, pantherine agility, and cervine swiftness. He would sometimes entertain audiences by lifting his blacksmith's anvil with one hand, arm straight out, so the story goes. He

would leap for the simple joy of it, leaving tape-measured legends of his broad-jumping ability. He could run ten miles on a whim. On the hunt, Lilly was a tireless predator, scouring the most ungodly unknowns for days or weeks on the run. He armed himself with a Winchester repeating rifle and a knife of his own design. The signature Lilly knife was a sinuous, eighteen-inch, double-edged dagger Lilly used to hack his way through the Louisiana jungles, to slice the vital organs and arteries of the monsters he met in close-quarter combat, and then to butcher them into hides and meat. Lilly tempered the steel of his blade with panther oil.

With Lilly's rising lust for lion blood, the outings grew longer, the farming business more sporadic. Legend has it he came home one day to a scolding wife, who suggested he at least make himself useful by shooting the resident chicken hawk. And as Lilly's biographer J. Frank Dobie recorded, "Ben took his gun. The hawk flew. Ben followed. More than a year passed before he re-entered the house."

Lilly's second marriage continued on a similar course of dissolution by absenteeism. He bought another house, fathered three kids, and visited once in a while between his self-appointed missions to rid humanity of its forest-dwelling demons. He became a wild denizen of the woods, developing an almost telepathic ability to navigate the deepest thickets and swampiest mazes. Lilly's predecessors had already driven Louisiana's apex predators from common occurrence to dwindling scarcity; before his arrival, a single hunting party had in one winter killed seventy-five bears. The last great beasts of Louisiana made for the thickest bug-infested hells remaining, only to meet there the most fearsome swamp monster of all, named Lilly. In his wake sprouted the Lilly legend, growing with every new telling of epic endurance and hand-to-hand slayings of supernatural beasts.

Those who met the great hunter were invariably surprised to find a soft-spoken man of pale blue eyes and a cherubic face draped by a beard cascading to the breastbone. He was honest to a fault, never drank or smoked. He carried a Bible, loathed the foul language of his fellow woodsmen, and honored the Sabbath as if his eternal life depended on it. If a hunt went unfinished through Saturday night, his quarry was granted a day's stay of execution; Ben Lilly would not lift a finger to work or hunt on Sunday.

But come Monday, woe to any creature that raised its head in Lilly's sights. Wild or tame, coming or going—it mattered little to Lilly. He was known to ax the horns off a belligerent cow. He was a pitiless wielder of the bullwhip, slashing through living hides with a crackling report like gunfire. He all but hated horses, shooting those who angered him and leaving one tied unfed for a week while he tended to other business. For a few of his most loyal hunting dogs, Lilly occasionally ventured a hint of sentiment, going so far as to inscribe an epitaph on the coffin of one hound named Crook, A BEAR AND LION DOG THAT HELPED KILL 210 BEAR AND 426 LION SINCE 1914. But woe again to those who fell short of his standards. He would gather the rest of the pack to witness, proclaiming for all to hear his formal judgement of execution, and then shoot the dog—or beat it to death.

Lilly grew into an accomplished marksman, practicing as he did on the universe of living targets. He practiced his aim on bees, bats, and songbirds. He blasted the bills off ducks. He hunted some of the last survivors of the ivory-billed woodpecker, en route to its extinction, and sold their skins to the Smithsonian Institution in

Washington, D.C. Lilly didn't much care to hunt deer, but rarely passed up an opportunity to shoot however many he might happen upon. In one two-mile stroll to his neighbor's house, he shot eleven along the way. He plugged vultures circling on high and knocked squirrels out of trees, and for good measure peppered them all again as they fell. It was all in proper training for his ultimate quarry. "If a bear or lion ever jumps out of a tree and I am in sight, I will get three balls in it before it hits the ground," he wrote. "I never saw a lion that I did not kill or wound."

In 1901, Lilly left home and family for good. To his wife he signed over his land and all but five dollars, and went hunting. He normally traveled light, shouldering his gun and trailing his dogs, sometimes on a mule, but preferring his own feet to those of a horse. He subsisted on the corn he carried and the meat he shot along the way. He spent the next five years in the Tensas River bottomland of northern Louisiana, and began a long, slow meander into east Texas and beyond.

Lilly wandered west, leaving great voids of bears and lions in his wake. (It is arguable whether his westward leanings stemmed from wanderlust or the ratcheting scarcity of anything left to shoot.) He continued on across the Rio Grande into Mexico, killing lions as he went and shipping their skins and skulls to the Smithsonian Institution.

In 1911 he reentered U.S. territory, into the boot heel of southwestern New Mexico. At fifty-five years old, he was just embarking upon the golden years of his fabled killing career. He added the grizzly bear to his Most Wanted list. But with the rimrock and canyons and high pine forests of the Southwest, he was entering some of the last bastions of the mountain lion, and he developed an especial passion for hounding them in particular, and with recently added incentive.

The wild open ranges of the West had given rise to millionaire empires built on sprawling herds of cattle and sheep and bounties on any varmint that might eye a single one of them. The Indians had been all but driven away, and wild game was on the run, leaving the livestock predator as the last bogeyman standing in dominion's way. The new hoofed stock, bred for slowness of foot and mind, and a surfeit of fat, wandered loose on the open range, where their cowboys and shepherds and other would-be caretakers were few. Certain enterprising lions quite adroitly took to killing the deer's dumbed-down replacements. Others came hunting in desperation. Such lions often came wounded or maimed by a bullet or trap. Young lions orphaned by the hunters wandered confused and starving into the flocks. And for the indiscretions of a few such stock killers, all lions came branded with bull's-eyes.

By the time Lilly the lion hunter had reached his mecca in the Southern Rockies, the war against the predator had advanced beyond the randomly sniping cowhand shooting on sight and sowing strychnine like chicken feed. It had become an organized offensive spearheaded by the U.S. government. In 1914, with an appropriation from Congress, the American citizenry began subsidizing the extermination of America's native predators, sending an army of mercenaries afield, with salaries and orders to kill. Walking into this land, with the predators now officially branded as vermin and their exterminators elevated to hero status, Lilly became a hired gun in highest demand. His first year, he cleaned bears, wolves, and lions from the Diamond A Ranch in the Animas Mountains. He took his pay and moved north to find the next infested ranch in need of his services. Along the way, he killed ten bears and lions in a single

week and sold their scalps for ten dollars apiece.

Lilly blamed all dead livestock on predators, turning a blind eye to disease, weather, accidents, and the sundry other greater dangers of open-range ranching. He figured stockmen were losing five hundred dollars every year for every bear or lion on their land. The ranchers revered Lilly's reputation and bought his math. They gladly paid as much as fifty dollars each for as many scalps as he could produce.

The deadliest mercenary in the war against lions preferred working freelance, selling his services and wiping landscapes as he went. Occasionally Lilly took a salary as hired hitman for the U.S. Biological Survey, earning one hundred dollars a month. He had become at once the mountain lion's leading student and chief executioner. He was "the dean of lion hunters," and far and away the most eccentric. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote famously of his first meeting with Lilly, whom he sent for in 1908 to join him on a bear-hunting trip in Louisiana. Lilly had walked for a day and a night without food or water through hard rain to reach Roosevelt's camp, where he arrived near dawn to find the ground too wet to lie on. Roosevelt awoke to find the man "perched in a crooked tree in the beating rain, much as if he had been a wild turkey." For one who prided himself on his own machismo, Roosevelt had to bow to this strange and feral creature from the woods. "I never met any other man so indifferent to fatigue and hardship."

Lilly as a habit slept outdoors through the seasons, his bed amounting to a canvas drop cloth, adding a blanket or a warm hound for the coldest winter nights. He never wore a coat, making do with several shirts or a light sweater he could peel or add as the weather dictated. So attired, he once followed for three days on the path of a particular grizzly in the White Mountains of Arizona, through snows drifting twelve feet deep, with no food. To keep from freezing, he slept sitting by a fire.

"I felt weak," Lilly later wrote. "My dogs and I both needed water." As he was stumbling toward some ice to quench his thirst, he and his dogs crossed the fresh track of lion. "I felt like a new man and took out in a run. The lion was soon treed and killed. We got water and went back to the grizzly bear. After I skinned him, the dogs and I had a good meal. I wrapped up in the skin by the carcass and slept as warm as if I were in a stove."

Lilly bathed in streams and ponds. If the pond was frozen, he would break the ice to get in. If no pond was near, he would bathe in the snow. The soles of his shoes tended to evaporate from all the mountainous miles, so he took to resoling them with old tire rubber. For good measure, he tacked on a set of mule shoes. One pair of Lilly's fortified boots weighed in at nearly twelve pounds.

Lilly's backpack weighed upward of another 125 pounds, depending on how many lion skins and dog chains he was carrying. He was oblivious to the burden, particularly once he'd struck the trail of a lion. He would pursue as a man possessed, following and fasting for as long as the trail led him. He would then break his fast with equally epic displays of gluttony, one of which involved an invitation to a campsite dinner whose host watched in astonishment as Lilly downed a succession of steaks and loaves of bread, cantaloupes, and watermelons, one after the next.

As his legend grew, anybody seeking wisdom on the mysterious lion was automatically referred to Lilly. All manner of hunters and trappers, young and old, referred to him as Mr. Lilly. When tracking cats, Mr. Lilly could tell by the wear of the

heel pad whether he was hunting a young fledgling or a battle-scarred lord of the mountain. He could tell female from male, and by the spread of the outside toe on her hind foot whether she was carrying unborn kittens. He could read in a swath of flattened grass the belly print of a crouching lion the moment before launching.

Yet for all his dedicated dirt time, for all the wild country he traversed, Lilly was no great naturalist. He didn't know a walnut from an oak. To him it didn't matter. His antennae were tuned to all things lion. He listened to the alarm call of the jay, not with the enraptured curiosity of a birdwatching Audubon, but with the cold calculus of an assassin seeking clues to the whereabouts of his quarry.

Lilly studied the cats he chased. He opened their stomachs to see what they'd eaten. He sometimes watched before killing. "One family I followed went eight miles with only one stop. The lioness lay down under some rocks; the kittens sucked and played all around her. When I killed her I saw that she was giving plenty of milk."

Hunters' lore would suggest that the greatest of their fraternity was he who became one with his quarry. Lilly came close. He lived the better part of his life on the lion's path, thinking like one. He anticipated its line of travel, and met it at the pass. And when he finally caught and killed one, he ate it, for the stealth and grace he believed its meat bestowed on him.

Lilly most closely resembled his prey by his wanderlust. Half a century before biologists armed with radio trackers and motorcraft began spying on the unseen meanderings of the lion, Ben Lilly was already long on their trail. Over hill and dale he followed, for as long as the scent stayed warm. And from his travels, he came to recognize what would later be reconfirmed as one of the pivotal tenets of lion life. "Some individuals seem kin to the gypsies," wrote the man who packed his world on his back.

Lilly tracked one lion for four years through the Blue River country of eastern Arizona. He had first identified her by an odd five-toed print she made with her left front paw. "She had, I judge, been caught in a trap that pulled one toe out of joint in such a way that it printed two points on the ground," he wrote. "She was being followed by two yearlings."

Over the following four years, and another hundred and more miles along the trail, Lilly twice again came upon the track of the five-toed female. He lost the first in a snowstorm; the second was fresh. "And after following it all afternoon, I killed the maker of it about sundown. That night a man and son in camp with me, asked me how far a lion travels. My answer was, 'As far as the ranges suit it.'"

For all he knew about lions, Lilly knew little of their place in the larger world of living things. He didn't anticipate what science would come to decipher of the lion's role as shepherd of the deer, as guardian against the overbrowsed forest. He believed there was no purpose for lions but to die for their sins. His God-given duty was to vanquish them as the "Cains of the animal world," cleansing the landscape of them wherever they might still roam.

He nearly succeeded. Lilly's diaries from his Southwest crusades speak of a hunter's feast followed by famine. In one week of 1914, he killed nine mountain lions and three bears. Yet for two months in the summer 1916, he "never struck a lion track." He typically averaged less than one dead lion or bear per week, hardly a chest-beating feat compared to the Boone-and-Crockett exploits of his frontiersmen predecessors.