

PROWLS LIKE A LION
FROM ECHOES OF EDEN
(Similar to one in March 2000 *United Caprine News*)
BY ALICE EBY HALL

I waltzed out of the house to do chores on a gorgeous Southern California morning with a song in my heart, “Zippity Doo-Dah” from Disney’s *Song of the South*. Then to a German beat, I polkaed my way through the pasture to the goat pen.

The lilac perfume from blooming ceanothus washed over and through me on soothing spring morning air, cleansing inner cares. The rosy lips of sunrise caressing Mt. Baldy’s snowy dome stroked my eyes with pleasure.

I was, therefore, not prepared for the horror that awaited me in the goat pen.

Six mature Pygmy does lay dead. The remaining Pygmies and Nubians cowered in the back corner of the barn. I tried to clear the cloud in my head and swallow past the nugget in my throat.

I poured grain in the stanchion feeder and encouraged the remaining does to take their places. From the house, I retrieved my herd list from under the magnet on the refrigerator so I could take inventory.

Besides the six dead animals, one was missing. I ruled out dogs because there was no blood anywhere. The dead animals looked untouched, so I assumed they had died of fright, a reaction to whatever had taken the missing animal.

After the goats raced to pasture and chaparral forest browse, I searched the pen. I could see no footprints because of all the hoof prints. One dead doe lay crumpled against the west fence with a front leg, stripped of its flesh, dangling through the livestock wire.

I went outside to examine the hanging leg. A colossal foot print revealed that an animal had tried to pull the doe through the fence. The enormous print engulfed my hand. My neck prickled in apprehension, and humming in my ears made me dizzy. I stumbled into the house and put the paw of the bobcat hide on our living room wall into the palm of my hand. Two or even three of them easily fit, so I knew we were dealing with something voluminously larger than a bobcat. I assumed cougar, as I assumed the dead, unmarked animals had died of fright, but I couldn’t prove anything.

Nor did I have time to try. I pulled carcasses out of the pen and heaved them into the pickup bed before I went to work. I was teaching gifted students in a magnet school in San Bernardino.

Just before Christmas, the herd was attacked again with the same results--several dead, including my best producer, four months pregnant, hanging in the fence by one foreleg. How she got

there, I could not imagine! And another doe was missing.

For two weeks, I slept in my car parked near the goat pen so I could hit the light switch if I heard anything. That was not conducive to getting enough rest to do a good job at school, especially when the barn cats climbed on the roof of the car, meowed, and batted my face through the slightly open window causing my heart to attempt escape.

A few weeks after I came back to my bed, we were hit again. This time, I heard the goat bells ringing about 8:15 p.m. I grasped a flashlight and stumbled to the pen. Stephen, aged 14, grabbed the .22 rifle and ran behind me. As I approached the goat pen, a mountain lion jumped out and ran across the road right in front of me.

"It's a lion, and it went west," I yelled at Stephen as I limped forward on a deteriorating left hip.

While Stephen tried to see where the puma went, I entered the pen and found one dead mature Nubian doe. I thoroughly examined her body and found no scratches, punctures, blood, or any evidence of attack—until I touched her throat. It was still wet with lion saliva.

I marveled at the clean kill, but then I had to face the fact that the numerous dead but uneaten goats had also been killed. What kind of monster was I up against? My previous study of big cats had taught me they only hunted what they ate.

The next day, Roger explored the area down the canyon where I'd seen the lion go. He found its lair in the brush littered with goat and sheep skulls, bones, wool, collars, ear tags, and bells. The whereabouts of many of our missing animals was discovered. Roger lay in wait and dispatched that particular lion, and since we assumed we had been dealing with a rogue, we rested easily for a few months.

The respite, however, was not permanent. A lion jumped right into our fenced yard and killed a 200-pound Suffolk ewe ten feet from our bedroom window. We were totally unaware of its presence while it ate the hind leg off its prey.

The next day after discovering the kill, I called the Department of Fish and Game. I was not able to reach the right person, so we suffered yet another hit. A cougar paraded in front of the barn, dead goats strewn about, and knocked the fencing panels down when we shot at it.

A warden finally arrived and verified that we did, indeed, have a cougar problem. He wanted to see any lairs we may have found and was shocked that they were in canyons downhill from the pens. His impression was that lions would look for solitude and shelter higher up. We all learned much about lions from our losses.

He issued a depredation permit but emphasized that, even with the California law protecting

cougars, we were allowed to kill them when protecting our property. The only stipulation was that we were to call the wardens to retrieve the carcasses so they could add the genetic information to their computer data bases.

The purpose of those data banks was to, hopefully, help them catch poachers who claim to be legally hunting mountain lions in other states, when in reality, they illegally kill California lions. My sympathies are with the poachers! Seeing sneaky cougars before they do any damage is a limitation. We know they are watching us, but we can't see them.

I wondered why, in the 1920s, when the mountain lion population in California was estimated in the hundreds, there was a bounty on them, and in the 1990s, when the lion population was estimated in the thousands, they were protected by law as being "endangered," but no one had an answer to that question. Recently the *National Geographic* ran an article on cougars. Apparently the plan is that animals from the over-populated West will migrate east to help take care of deer over-population. The problem is that every rancher and farmer between the two coasts will pay the price.

After I finally connected with the warden, we were often in contact, and he told me that in corral conditions, lions will kill anything that moves. So, all those dead goats were killed. They had not been scared to death. That's called "surplus killing," and cougars are good at it.

Now I was barning all the goats at night, but the warden had to come again the winter day I discovered that a lion had jumped the nine-foot fence into my buck barn. It entered one of the eight by twenty-foot pens that was a third covered by roof, and killed my last mature Pygmy buck. Because it could not leap the fence with its prey, it tore a hole in the enclosure and pulled the body through.

Although the warden was sure the kill had been by a lion, all footprints had been obliterated by hoof prints, so he refused to issue another depredation permit. Even though he couldn't "prove" a lion had done the kill, he again made it clear that we were allowed to shoot lions to defend our property. From that kill, we learned that mountain lions will enter confined areas.

"I'm convinced it was a lion," he said, "but I have egg on my face for calling out government hunters in an urban area and having the culprit be a Great Dane. I'm not going to make another mistake like that."

"Okay," I said. "I'm turning everything from the buck barn loose so everyone can be barned at night in the secure doe barn. What are the chances these animals will hunt during the day?"

"No, they're nocturnal. They won't do that," assured the warden.

The very next day, which had been rainy so the goats had stayed penned all day, I came home from school about 3:30 p.m. Because the sun had appeared in a cloudless, cerulean sky, I opened the

goats' pen. They joyously frolicked behind me to the house. Nothing is more fun to watch than happy goats!

I entered the house to start the wood stove for our evening warmth but, before I struck the match, I heard goat bells clanging. A cougar had stalked right to the corner of the house where the goats nibbled a downed tree branch and dragged the biggest Pygmy doe across the pasture.

I grabbed the nearest gun, a .22 rifle, knowing it was not enough to do the job, and I shot the lion. It wasn't very far away, and I had a good, clear aim into its chest. It dropped the goat and ran. My second shot put the mutilated doe out of her misery.

All my reading had taught me that predators were good because they took the old, halt, lame, sick, laggard animals. That was not our experience at Hallcienda. We lost the strong, young, chubby, or pregnant animals. Fuzzy was a prime example. She was a 13-year-old toothless Suffolk ewe who lived primarily on goat milk. She outlived all the lion attacks that had taken over a dozen of her kind, each weighing around 200 pounds.

When I asked the warden about that, he said, "What do you expect around here? This is the lions' McDonald's. They can get good food fast and easily. They're not going to follow any rules we thought they had."

Roger and Stephen stretched chain link over the open top of the buck pen, making it completely secure. I moved my bucks back in so I could control my breeding program, and I housed pregnant mothers and does nursing kids there.

The sheep were still pretty vulnerable in the yard by the house because the only shed available there was not large enough to hold eight ewes. How did the count become eight? I'd had two dozen Suffolk ewes and a few Tunis when the lions first came.

In December, 1998, my Pygmy count was down to six does and a buck, and a lion took our best doe just three weeks from kidding. I'd had close to 80 Pygmies before lions, and I figured I didn't want to feed any more local predators. I sold the remaining five Pygmies and left a gap in my heart.

In January, 1999, our most beautiful young Suffolk ewe was killed in the backyard by a very young lion. Now that we were down to five sheep, we expanded the shed space so the remaining sheep could be confined at night. It's not an ideal solution because the ewes are combative in confinement. By 2003 the sheep count was only two, and we gave those away after the fire. The up side of the fire is that cougar hideouts no longer exist!

In spring of 2000, animals started disappearing from pastures all hours of the day. Several does came home with swollen heads, and treatment indicated that they had very nearly been scalped.

To prevent further losses, someone stayed with the herd every hour of the day when they were out of their barn. Roger saw one doe resist a young lion, and she had to be treated for multiple puncture wounds. One in her throat was almost dime-sized, and the spray medication puffed her throat with air. The throat punctures created abscesses reminiscent of the *Corynebacteria* abscesses capriculturalists fought through earlier decades. Such injuries, compared with the earlier clean kills, indicated a family of cougars, the young of which were being taught to hunt on our stock.

We have really learned to know our animals intimately since we're now watching them every moment they are out of the barn. For instance, we learned that in the morning they range the upper browse for prickly oak and holly leaf cherry, pungent white sage, blooming buckwheat, and powerful Yerba Santa.

In the afternoon they graze the lower pastures for sweet fresh and dry grasses. We learned that when goats are frightened, their normal vocal facilities shut down, and they stand mute before their attackers. We learned that when they are startled, the entire herd stands at attention facing the threat. They will not turn their backs on the enemy, even when they are called or enticed with delectable tidbits. However, if the enemy turns away, they will follow it.

And we learned that cougars are probably never far away. They stalk through the scrub, hide in its shadows, observe from its depths, and nab prey whenever they think they can succeed unopposed. We learned that from Qiana. She was taken when I went to the house for just an hour, and I'd even left the pickup truck with the herd. The cougar had watched me walk away.

One exception to cougar silence occurred when I sat in a lawn chair, 30-30 rifle in my lap, watching grazing goats and deer in the south pasture about 3:00 p.m. A scream like a banshee brought me out of the chair in time to see a cougar slink off a verge of ground on the border of the scrub. I went after him, praising God for a warning from an animal that is essentially silent during the day. He disappeared into tall weeds, so I never saw him again. I still can only see that yell as a divine blessing, although the trapper says it was probably a female looking for a mate.

All these lessons have resulted in some changes at Hallcienda. I don't sing much any more. Instead, I maintain a strict vigil outside or talk loudly or yell as I survey the area. I don't waltz out of the house. Instead, I peer onto the roof while I'm still within reach of the eaves, in case a predator lurks. I don't polka across the pastures. Instead, I drive to the barns because I know I am probably watched. My lips are pursed much of the time.

I count my animals every time I see them to make sure I haven't lost another one. I wear my glasses even though they become milk-splattered, and I carry a 30-30 rifle instead of the .22 pistol with

me at all times, no matter how inconvenient that might be. I rejoice when I see a few deer, which is far different from my attitude of imperturbability over the herd of 18 that used to share pasture with our domestic flocks and herds.

The small deer herd seems to feel safer with us and our rifles than in brushy seclusion with predators, so we're able to watch goats and deer interact. Kids and fawns cautiously approach one another and gently touch noses. Two types of does silently challenge one another and somehow come to an understanding about who will yield territory. And we all pay more attention to the calls of the lonely peacock. He's an outstanding overseer, even though he's lost 26 relatives.

Oh, but the lilac air smells just as luscious, the stately San Gabriel Mountains kissed by sunrise are just as enchanting, the solitude is just as priceless, and we're enjoying all of it more now that we're out with the animals constantly. It's not how we'd dreamed of spending our retirements, but it has its moments of loveliness.

Post script from 2013: The lonely peacock was taken. For some reason he decided not to sleep in the buck barn any more.

Since the 2003 forest fire we had a glorious ten-year respite from cougar attacks. In that time, one corner of the secure barn settled leaving a five-inch gap in the gate, which I filled at night with a 2X4 and a pitch fork to keep in the kids. It worked until November when a cougar slapped away the board and pitch fork, entered the barn about 2:00 a.m. on the 13th, and exhibited "surplus killing." Of the 19 animals in the barn, five were slaughtered, and none were eaten.

One was badly torn. Three showed no obvious wounds. The milker's udder was eaten off. I called the Department of Fish and Wildlife (it used to be Game), and they referred me to the County Hunter (a new position since our previous cougar problem). He came with a depredation permit issued a week before on some goats lost about a mile east. He returned the next day with three houndsmen and about 18 hounds. The dogs easily tracked the cougar to Devore because it had returned and stolen one of the goat carcasses out of the pickup. The hounds treed the cougar in the yard of the house closest to the hills. The hunters killed the cat and brought it back to Hallcienda.

They hung it in a tree near the buck barn so the trained dogs could show the young ones what they were supposed to do.

That was a mature female cougar with a head much wider than the five inch gap in the gate. I'm not convinced there aren't smaller lions around, so we still have to be vigilant. Vacation's over!