

## Our Mountain Lion Teacher

By Carol Henning

Let's begin on the other side of the Atlantic, in the U.K. Given that wolves and moose expired long ago in England, the country's largest land predator today is the European badger. I admit I didn't know this until I read an article in *The New Yorker*, ("Not Your Average Bear," by Anna Russell, Dec. 29, 2025). Russell lists other aggressive species in the U.K—the horsefly, a venomous and burrowing fish, and the pine marten, "a kind of cute but angry weasel."

Russell points out that, deprived of cougars, wolves and grizzlies, Britain has Paddington, "a polite, anthropomorphic bear in a red hat and blue duffel-coat." Paddington first arrived in the U.K. in 1958, in a children's book written by Michael Bond. There followed more books, a BBC program, a Netflix show, and three feature films. In 2022, an animated Paddington met Queen Elizabeth II for tea. When the queen passed away, people placed toy Paddingtons at the palace gates, (Russell, op. cit.)

In the U.S.A. we still have lots of large, four-legged predators. California is home to many of them, and folks who live near Griffith Park, on the eastern side of the Santa Monica Mountains, had our own celebrity predator. This was P-22. (The P stands for puma concolor), a wild mountain lion who lived in the park and was known as the "Hollywood Cat." His photo appeared in the December 2013 issue of *National Geographic Magazine* with the HOLLYWOOD sign as the backdrop

Griffith Park's cougar was first documented in early 2012 by a camera trap set up by the Griffith Park Connectivity Study. P-22 was captured by National Park Service biologists in March of 2012 and outfitted with a GPS radio collar.

P-22 persisted for more than 10 years in the smallest home range ever recorded for an adult male mountain lion. Griffith Park proved as much of an island of habitat as the rest of the Santa Monica Mountains. Hemmed in by freeways and urban sprawl on all sides, Griffith Park's nine square miles was an isolated patch of habitat. Alas, it was an unlikely place to find a female with whom to mate.

Despite his failure to find Ms. Right, P-22 became an ambassador for urban wildlife. But his sojourn in Griffith Park was not without problems. In 2014, cameras showed P-22 looking thin and ill, with facial distortions probably from mange. Mange is generally rare in mountain lions, but its connection to anticoagulant rodenticide (rat poison) found in local wildlife is an important area of research. P-22 was treated with medication and vitamin K for rodenticide exposure, and he seemed to recover. A National Park Service study had previously documented two mountain lion deaths as a result of rodenticide

poisoning. Anti-coagulant rodenticides are designed to kill rodents by thinning the blood and preventing clotting. When humans put bait traps outside homes or businesses, they may not realize that the poison works its way up the food chain, becoming more lethal as the dose accumulates in larger animals.

P-22 had been captured in late March in order to replace the battery on his GPS collar. Biologists noticed his “mangy” appearance and treated him. Despite his bout with mange, P-22 continued to spend the majority of his time in the most natural areas of Griffith Park, occasionally exploring more urban locations. He continued to hunt and to successfully bring down his natural prey—mule deer. (One day, while I walked through Forest Lawn cemetery, I chatted with a man who worked there. He said a colleague was tending the grounds one day when he saw three deer racing down the hillside. He wondered what had induced the deer to “run for their lives.” Almost immediately the mystery was solved. In hot pursuit of the deer was a mountain lion. (Was it P-22? In pursuit of lunch?)

Genetic testing from UCLA and U.C. Davis revealed that Griffith Park’s celebrity cougar was likely from in the Santa Monica Mountains. Thus, he would have had to cross both the 405 and the 101 Freeways to get to Griffith Park. That was a risky route, but he managed it. The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area is the largest urban national park in the country, containing more than 150,000 acres of mountains and coastline in Ventura and Los Angeles counties. It includes a network of local, state and federal parks, interwoven with private lands. One of only five Mediterranean ecosystems in the world, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area has provided habitat for more than 450 animal species and 26 distinct plant communities.

P-22, who had become a sort of ambassador for urban wildlife, began to show more aggressive behavior after his bout with rat poison and mange. In 2026, he was suspected of killing a koala at the L.A. Zoo. In 2022, he attacked and killed a dog being walked on a leash at night near the Hollywood Reservoir. This incident was followed by attacks on other leashed pets in communities surrounding Griffith Park. His change in behavior raised concern, and National Park Service biologists worked with the California Department of Fish and Game to capture P-22 in the Los Feliz area and transport him to the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance. He was found to have several severe injuries, trauma to his head, right eye and internal organs, probably from a vehicle strike. He also had an extensive parasitic skin infection over his entire body.

Some officials had initially thought he was in stable condition. They were considering many options. Upon closer examination, however, serious injuries continued to be revealed, including herniation of abdominal organs into his chest. In addition, longer-term medical problems, including stage two kidney failure, heart disease and

weight loss, made it clear that P-22 was a very sick cat, so sick that, on December 17, at 9 a.m., he was euthanized. A necropsy found that he had a systemic ring-worm infection with a concurrent mange infection. The multiple injuries and chronic conditions would continue to impair his ability to function in the wild. Being placed in human care would have lowered his quality of life.

When P-22 died, local Native American tribes, who call mountain lions “teachers,” requested that P-22 be buried near Griffith Park with a ceremony that would honor his spirit. He was transported from San Diego to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. A blessing ceremony was held by museum officials and descendants from Tongva, Gabrielino-Tongva, Tataviam and Chumash, Gabrielino-Shoshone, Akimel Ootham and Luiseno tribes to welcome P-22 back to his homeland.

P-22 was buried on March 4 in the Santa Monica Mountains at an undisclosed location. The funeral was performed in collaboration with local indigenous partners, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Natural History Museum and the National Park Service. The Greek Theatre in Griffith Park was a site of celebration of the life of P-22. He became the poster puma for the promotion of the Wallis Annonberg Wildlife Crossing over Highway 101.

P-22 was a focus of study for the National Park Service, helping researchers understand mountain lion survival in fragmented landscapes.

In December of this year, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife recommended granting Threatened Species Status to roughly 1,400 mountain lions roaming the Central Coast and Southern California. The Department pointed to “grave threats posed by freeways, rat poison and fierce wildfires.”

Lila Seidman, writing in the Los Angeles Times (December 12, 2025) explained that “The determination...” is not the final say, but signals a possibility that several clans of the iconic cougars will be listed under the California Endangered Species Act.” Supporters say this would give the vulnerable a chance of recovery. Opponents claim the listing “would make it harder to get rid of lions that pose a safety risk to people and livestock.”

During a California Fish and Game Commission meeting, Charlton Bonham, director of the state wildlife department, voiced his opinion that the recommendation was long overdue. “It arrives about six years after the Center for Biological Diversity and the Mountain Lion Foundation petitioned the commission to consider listing a half-dozen isolated lion populations that have suffered from being hit by cars, poisoned by rodenticides and trapped by development,” explains Seidman in the L.A. Times article. In 2020, the commission found the request might be warranted, giving the lions

temporary endangered species protection as “candidates” for listing. The next step is for state wildlife commissioners to vote on the protections.

If the commissioners adopt the recommendation, then the final listing of the species removes any doubt about the state’s commitment to conserving and recovering these ecologically important and charismatic species. The area requested by the petitioners includes the Santa Ana, San Gabriel, San Bernardino, Santa Monica, Santa Cruz and Tehachapi mountains. However, it trims off portions along the northern and eastern borders of what was proposed, including agricultural lands in the Bay Area and a southeastern portion of desert.

The L.A. Times article notes that “most of the lion groups proposed for listing are contending with a lack of gene flow because urban barriers keep them from reaching one another. The late P-22 “personified the tribulations facing his kind. Rat poison and collisions battered him from the inside out.”

Imperiled lions, observes Brendan Cummings, conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity, need their habitats stitched together in the form of wildlife crossings—such as the one being built in Agoura Hills over the 101 Freeway. Cummings added that developments that could restrict their movement should get more scrutiny under the proposed protections. In her article, Seidman notes that “California’s lions already enjoy certain protections. In 1990, voters approved a t that designated them a “specially protected species” and banned hunting them for sport.

We have seen that local Native American tribes call mountain lions “teachers.” Close observation of all living things teaches us empathy and, one hopes, humility. We are members, not masters, of the chain of being on this planet, students, not teachers. The late P-22 showed us the tribulations facing his kind. Let us respect and protect all living things, including one another.