

Musing McKinney

When Mountain Lions Attack – or Don't

By: Scott McKinney

Given the warnings along the American River bike trail in February, it's best to try to not look like a turkey, bunny, deer, or any other critter that might be on the menu for a mountain lion.

That said, I'm overwhelmed by the swift response to the Mountain Lion CRISIS by public agencies and media alike. At the height of the EMERGENCY, I saw a Channel 10 TV News van loitering in William B. Pond Park at dusk, no doubt hoping for live action shots of a takedown -- ala big cat meets gazelle on Wild Kingdom. Is this alleged cat sighting really news? Isn't one loose definition of news when "Man bites dog?" This story is about "Cat bites Man." Put more precisely, someone claims to have seen a wild cat of a species known to occasionally attack a human. Big whoop. My cat bites me every chance she gets. Not news, people.

The morning after the news stories, I counted three park ranger trucks in the vicinity of Goethe Park -- to serve and protect. Thanks, we applaud all that you do. Say, as long as you're there, could you double check for broken glass and make sure the maintenance crews don't leave trimmings from star thistles and goat-head puncture vines all over the trail. Thanks again.

Sacramento's multi-use trail is first and foremost a nature trail; a ribbon of wilderness bisecting urban sprawl. I'd be disappointed if there weren't deer, rabbits, coyotes, otters, hawks, turkeys, beaver and geese living among us. Come to think of it, with a sumptuous, all-you-can eat buffet like that, I'll bet mountain lions are more frequent "multi-users" than any of us realize. In fact, unsuspecting cyclists might want to start checking the trees that overhang the trail for large shapes poised to pounce.

Please indulge my skepticism but I read recently that just 10 mountain lion attacks have occurred since 1860. An individual has a greater chance of meeting the president, winning the lottery, or being struck by lightning. Meanwhile the chance of a cyclist being struck by a motorist is exponentially higher. In the US alone, 725, 629, 665, 732, and 693 cyclists died in auto-bike accidents in 2004, 2003, 2002, 2001, and 2000 respectively (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/departments/nrd-30/ncsa/>) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (http://www.hwysafety.org/safety_facts/fatality_facts/bikes.htm)). Reporting on the remote possibility of a mountain lion attack, while sexy, has little real impact on my safety or driver awareness. Hey newsies, how about educating drivers about bike safety? That would matter.

Despite the facts, I think we all still hold a deep, primal instinct to flee from wild predators. I find myself watching overhanging trees and brush a little more closely on my evening rides these days and riding a wee bit faster when I hear nocturnal animals rustling in the dry leaves. While irrational, fear is a stronger impetus for flight than the logical and real threat posed by commuting on the same streets with vehicles.