

UCSC cougar options weighed

Animals
By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The mountain lion that chased a jogger and his dog this weekend on the UC Santa Cruz campus was probably a young cougar, curious and enticed by the running movement and the dog but not intent on killing, according to Fish and Game wildlife biologists.

But Fish and Game officials, who are evaluating reports on the lion's behavior, still may decide the lion is a threat to humans and should be killed, according to Bruce Elliott, of the Department of Fish and Game.

"There are two options: Leave it alone or remove it as a public safety decision," said Elliott. "At the moment we're not doing anything. There's not enough known yet to take an action. We're still attempting to get accurate information."

Meanwhile, university officials have advised joggers to stay out of the remote areas on campus and to leave dogs at home when they use the fire trails through the lion country.

"We really want to discourage people from jogging back there, or at least go in a group and make lots of noise," said Deb White, animal control officer for UCSC. "The thing is just to not run," said White. "That's when you start resembling a prey animal."

The cougar generating the concern was encountered by Santa Cruz attorney George Smith and his dog, Daiquiri, Saturday morning they ran through along the Chinquapin Trail through a meadow just north of campus.

Smith said he heard a high-pitched scream, louder than a human could make and lasting about 10 seconds. Smith and his dog, which was on a leash, continued to run about 15 minutes.

When they looked back, a tawny-coated lion was loping behind them. It screamed again.

Smith ran as fast as he could, until he reached a barbed wire fence that separates the meadow from Empire Grade Road and then, with the lion closing in on him, turn and raised his arms and yelled. The lion stopped and backtracked about 10 to 20 feet and then started after Smith again.

Smith crawled under the fence, pulling his dog behind him. The lion, meanwhile, had run down the fence to an opening and stood in the middle of the road blocking him.

Smith managed to hitch a ride with a passing motorist.

He estimated that the cougar weighed 70 to 80 pounds, which would be small for a cougar.

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Lion at UCSC

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"If that weight estimate is correct, it sounds to me more like a yearling than an adult," said Elliott. "It's very likely this was engendered more by curiosity than anything else."

Elliott said the combination of an adult man and large dog would be an imposing prey target, even though the two were running, giving the impression of flight.

He speculated that the lion was more curious than seriously hunting.

"If a lion wanted to make a kill, he could have done it much more quickly than what appears to be a fairly long, protracted episode," said Elliott.

A young lion would also be more likely to go after small game, like the dog, said Elliott. "They may not be big enough and strong enough to go for deer so they'll go for small game — raccoons, squirrels, possums, wild pigs or house pets if they can get them."

"Pets, especially larger dogs, can also be perceived as competition so the lion will make some effort to kill it. But lions, as a rule, won't stand up to a very large dog," said Elliott.

"It sounds to me like the lion might have been more interested in the dog than the man," said San Jose State University biology professor Michael Kutilek, who has studied lions in the Mount Hamilton area.

"Dogs are appropriate prey for mountain lions and humans are not, especially not adult males," said Kutilek. "That lion was probably very confused. He had one thing running that didn't look right and the other that looked perfectly delicious."

Kutilek agreed that the lion didn't seem particularly determined to eat.

"They're ambush predators. They like to sneak up and give a short turn and they either get it or don't. This animal seems to be very conflicted."

Kutilek said that the lion's scream, however, was unusual. "I studied them for a dozen years and have never heard one scream," he said, noting that vocalizations have more to do with mating.

Lion sightings on the rural campus are not uncommon. Since May, there have been five, according to White. The university has posted warnings periodically and two years ago issued a widespread lion notice after a cougar-killed deer carcass was found near the student health center.

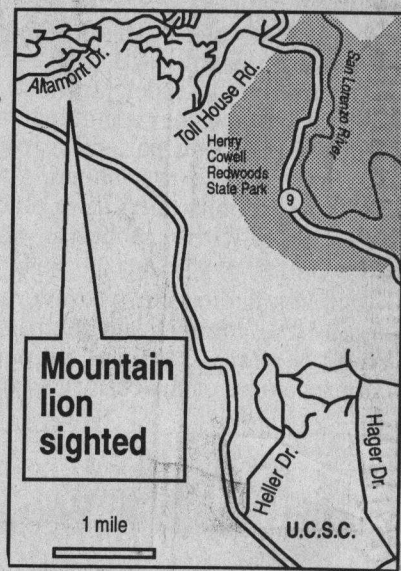
But Smith's encounter was the first time a lion was known to have chased someone, said White.

In addition to the sightings reported to the university, White said there have been several reports to the Department of Fish and Game of a lion ranging along Empire Grade Road.

White speculated that at least one lion includes the university in its range. The university lies in a swath of prime lion habitat that includes Wilder Ranch State Park, Gray Whale Ranch, the university, Pogonip Park and Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park.

White said the university will give all students, who resume classes Sept. 29, the mountain lion notice and will post the warnings on campus and in the vicinity.

The warning posted by university officials notes that "mountain lions may perceive a dog as a threat to its territory" and recom-



mends the canines not be taken on the fire trails.

The regional office of the Department of Fish and Game has been given all information about the lion and will decide whether it should be killed, said White.

According to Elliott, lions are not relocated because it would only move problems. Lions, which are protected from sport hunting, can be killed if they threaten livestock or are a threat to public safety.

"It's a difficult situation in Santa Cruz County," said Elliott. "You have many people who would also prefer nothing be done and if something tragic happens, their reaction is, 'That's too bad.'"

Among those who don't want to see the lion killed are White and Smith.

"It seems to me, first of all, that it isn't going to solve the problem. These creatures are plentiful," said Smith. "Second, I see a lot of problem with sending hunters in a place where kids, and cyclists and runners frequent."