

Journal from the James

Shepherds of nature ...

BY DIRECTOR JENNIFER GEE &
 ASSISTANT DIRECTOR JOHN LAUNDRÉ

Greetings from the James Reserve. In the first installment of our column, we introduced the James Reserve and promised further “peeks into the natural world” in future columns. In thinking what this first “peek” should be, I have decided on mountain lions. I decided this because I have studied them for many years and as a recent trail camera photo from the James demonstrated, they do use the Reserve, as well as the rest of the San Jacinto Mountains. Being a big cat (America’s lion), mountain lions are the only large predatory animal we have in the Idyllwild area. As one of our wildlife neighbors, I thought it would of interest to talk about this elusive resident of the Hill.

What can I say about mountain lions? That subject can and has filled books. Here I want to talk about the ecological role they play in our “sky island” home. Besides being big, and to some a bit scary, what do mountain lions do? We know they kill and eat mainly deer. And for that, many think badly of them, killing poor Bambi. In fact, they and most predators are considered by some to be “vermin,” or as one fellow put it, “weeds” in the garden of nature. Are they indeed weeds that should be pulled out, eradicated, or do they play a role in the garden that is, in this case, the San Jacinto Mountains? And if so, what is it?

Though predators kill their prey to live, recent research is showing that predators actually have the greatest impact on their prey, not by killing them



A mountain lion caught on video at the James Reserve.

PHOTO COURTESY JAMES RESERVE

but by scaring them. Imagine a mountain lion attacking five deer. If she catches one, it is dead, end of story for that deer. However, in the process she scared the hell out of four others. What do they, the survivors, learn from that experience? They should learn to be afraid, be really afraid, of getting attacked again, especially in that area. The repeated near-death experiences of the survivors should shape in their minds the risks they face in different areas they live in, where it is more dangerous, where it is safer. This information should, and studies indicate does, alter their use of the landscape; some areas are just too dangerous to use. These dangerous areas become refuges for the favored plant food of deer. Without these refuges, deer can and do, seek these plants out, removing them and reducing the diversity, the makeup of the ecosystems in which they are found.

The result is that the true ecological role of predators such as mountain

lions is very similar to that of the shepherd, guiding his flock over the landscape to avoid overuse of the vegetation that supports them. So predators are not the weeds of the garden, they are the gardeners, keeping grazing herbivores in their ecological place and maintaining the integrity of the various ecosystems we enjoy here on the San Jacintos.

Wildlife Watch: We will be ending our column with updates and highlights of wildlife sightings in and around Idyllwild. If you have an unusual observation to share, please let us know. You can contact me (John Laundré, assistant director of the James Reserve) through our website (james.ucnr.org). This week, Diane D’arcy and Charley Burk reported to us about a dead Great Horned Owl they found near the parking lot of the Idyllwild County Park. As we don’t have one of these in our teaching collection at the James, this specimen will be preserved and be used in our educational curriculum.