

Mountain lion kills bicyclist in Orange County

Woman survives 2nd attack when witnesses fend off animal, which deputies later shoot

Los Angeles — Orange County officials confirmed Friday that a male mountain lion killed and partially ate a lone cyclist in a wilderness park around noon Thursday, four hours before a female rider was savagely attacked by a mountain lion that was driven off by some other cyclists.

Officials said they are all but certain both attacks were by the same animal, and were performing tests to determine if that was the case.

The first victim, Mark Jeffrey Reynolds, 35, a competition cyclist who worked for a sports marketing company, was found dead and partially buried under sand along a quiet stretch of rocky, hilly trail in the Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park in Foothill Ranch.

The second rider, Anne Hjelle, 30, a former Marine who works at a health club, survived after being rescued by four or five other cyclists who pummeled the lion with rocks and even a bicycle, forcing it to flee. She was airlifted to Mission Hospital in Orange County and was listed Friday in serious condition with lacerations on her head, neck, arms and back.

Officials described it as an exceptionally unusual attack by a type of animal that, while savage when provoked, rarely comes near humans and even more infrequently attacks humans for food. But the people who rescued Hjelle and witnessed the encounter said the lion had locked its powerful jaws around her head and was dragging her steadily into the brush before their shouts and battering forced it to release her.

"This was a predatory attack," said Jim Amormino, the spokesman for the Orange County Sheriff's Department. "It's just so out of the ordinary."

The lion suspected of being responsible for both attacks, a 2-year-old, 110-pound male — which is not large for an adult — was shot around 8 p.m. Thursday night by two sheriff's deputies, just 40 yards from where the first cyclist's body had been discovered. The lion had been spotted by deputies in helicopters using infrared scopes, then pursued by officers on the ground.

"He was definitely stalking the deputies when he was shot," said Amormino. "There's no doubt that lion was threatening."

Amormino said that an autopsy had been completed on the first victim, Reynolds, with gruesome conclusions.

"The autopsy concluded that he died from the removal of organs in the chest and abdomen," said Amormino. "It seems he was partially eaten."

The lion's strength also stunned some officials, since it attacked two strong and fit adults and apparently had no problem overpowering them. The lion would have easily killed Hjelle, an Orange County resident, had it not been for several other riders who pulled her away and smashed the lion with rocks.

Debbi Nicholls, a friend of Hjelle who helped in the rescue, burst into tears at a news conference Friday as she described a terrifying encounter. She said she rounded a curve on the trail after hearing Hjelle's screams. She said the lion was already on top of Hjelle and had almost her entire head in its mouth. Hjelle's biking helmet, Nicholls said, might have helped save her.

Nicholls add that Hjelle was conscious throughout the attack, even as other cyclists began to batter the animal to drive it away.

"This guy would not let go," Nicholls said of the lion. "He had ahold of her face."

The encroachment of suburbs into wilderness areas has pushed the lions into closer contact with people, making hunting more difficult. The park in which the attacks occurred, in the southern end of the county, is a mere 1,600 acres. The attacks occurred only about a half-mile from the closest homes.

Steve Eppley, a resident of the area and a frequent bike rider in the park, said it is a popular spot among mountain bikers and trail runners because of its easy access and challenging terrain.

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James Sterngold, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Walk Softly and Carry a Big Gun

Please bear with me. I am an Alaskan, and Alaskans, for better or worse, are given to looking down on the rest of the nation. We mean no offense; it is just in our nature, and because of our place on this Earth, which leads us to be confused from time to time when we visit the Lower 48.

I am puzzled now by the strange way people here are dealing with mountain lions — which is to say, letting them kill you.

Nature killing people is no big deal for Alaskans. That's the way things are in Alaska.

When you step out into it, you are at risk. If you are wise, you prepare for it. Alaska does not suffer fools. It eats them.

It also eats people who are not fools, those who prepare well and try their best to stay alive. I have lost too many close friends to her, sensible folks who came up against something too tough to handle. Our stories of untimely death are endless, and I will not burden you with them.

I would just mention that I have been breathtakingly close to extinction myself, sometimes for making a mistake but often just for being out there.

About a year ago, in the Arctic coastal village of Kaktovik, my son, Nick, and I were walking from our office to our residence when we came upon huge polar bear prints in our path, going the other way. It being cold and dark and very windy, those tracks would not have lasted more than a few minutes. And so that bear was close behind us. We had passed it without seeing it.

In case you think otherwise, polar bears hunt people down and eat them. And I have eaten polar bears. And grizzly bears. And black bears. And a lot of other critters. Cooked right, bears taste really good.

Apparently the feeling is mutual. This particular night I did not intend to be eaten nor to see Nick eaten. So I drew my .41 magnum revolver, a modest bear gun but better than teeth and fingernails. As luck would have it for all three of us, we missed each other.

I love bears, and not just to eat. I used to study them. I have friends who have spent all their professional lives studying them. You can't spend

time around bears and not admire them. But none of us go into bear country without the means to protect ourselves.

I don't know much about big cats. We don't have them in Alaska, and the few I have encountered southward were pretty spooky. They are elegant creatures, and I do respect them. I do not go where they are without the means to protect myself. And I keep my eyes peeled. It is in my genes not to be eaten by bears, large cats or anything else.

Why would anyone go into mountain lion country without the means to protect themselves from attack? I notice the police are armed. The wardens and rangers are armed. Indeed, anyone with any clue where they are would be armed.

I have a buddy, an Albuquerque cop. She likes to ride mountain bikes in remote places. She is a beautiful lady, but tough. I asked her once what she does when she is out there and has an encounter with something nasty.

It has happened. In silent response, she unzipped her fanny pack, which she carries on her belly, exposing both her badge and her .357 magnum pistol. Evil backs away from that lady.

Now that makes sense to me. But then, I'm not from these parts. ■

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COMMENTARY

By Karl Francis, Karl Francis, a former professor and congressional lobbyist, lives in Fairbanks, Alaska.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-francis19jan19,0,2888494.story?coll=la-news-comment-opinions>

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Instill Hefty Dose of Fear Into Wild Mountain Lions

I have worked in the wilds of California for more than 20 years — and in mountain lion habitat for all that time. I have never seen one while working, but I constantly see signs of them. I know that they are there and that they are often aware of my presence in their territory. I have often worked alone many miles away from any other humans. Nonetheless, I have never felt threatened by mountain lions.

The Times has reported that there have been 21 mountain lion attacks in California since 1890, and that 19 of them occurred since 1986. Only two mountain lion attacks were reported in California before 1986. I question the theory that encroachment in their territory is the cause of recent attacks. Humans have been encroaching on mountain lion territory here since the 1849 Gold Rush, but attacks were rare until recently.

What has changed is the ban on mountain lion hunting since the 1970s. Since then, the number of mountain lions has climbed modestly, but attacks on humans have skyrocketed. Lions have apparently lost their fear of humans since people stopped chasing them with dogs and shooting at them.

I have worked in the Santa Monica Mountains for the last five years, and I constantly see mountain lion tracks, scratch marks on trees, scat and deer kills throughout the area. The recent attacks in Orange County forced me to reassess my lack of fear while working in lion territory. Then I remembered that a month ago a lion that killed some goats was chased and shot at by hunters in Malibu. I have great respect and appreciation for these magnificent creatures and am thankful that the hunters didn't kill

it. I am glad, however, that those hunters scared the daylight out of the animal.

Lions are quite intelligent. I am confident that the only known male lion that lives where I work learned from the experience and will leave me alone as I hike through its territory.

I don't condone killing mountain lions. When they are afraid of people, we can coexist without conflict. Perhaps some kind of Department of Fish and Game program to pursue the ones that live close to humans would instill in them a renewed healthy fear of humans, allowing us to coexist without further fatal encounters. ■

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VOICES / A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES

By Matthew Horns

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<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-vo-horns17jan17,1,2687317.story?coll=la-news-comment>

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