

Cougars at Magic Sky

A spring day at Magic Sky girl scout ranch, Amanda, Juniper, and I scattered ourselves about the living room, reading, writing, and drawing. Laura came back early from her morning walk and asked us, "Anybody want to see some cougars?"

We quickly put on our shoes and walked out the front door. We walked fast. Laura said, "I walked down to tent site one and sat at a picnic table. I saw movement up in the rocks. It took me a minute to figure out I was watching two cougar cubs playing. Mama's up there too, but she stays down behind a boulder. I only saw the top of her head and her eyes."

Above the south fork of Lone Pine Creek, large, old-growth ponderosa pines grow in the flat area of tent site one, at the base of a ridge where huge granite boulders jumble wildly toward the sky and share their space with small trees, flowers, bushes, and grasses in scant soil eroded from granite mountains. Cabin-sized boulders lean against or over each other and create a multitude of possible lairs.

We walked quietly into tent site one and sat down on a picnic bench. Smells of the spring creek, running full with snow melt from higher up on the mountain, smells of trees, shrubs, grass growing in spring and smells from damp spring soil rode the breeze turning almost without sound around us. Two half-grown cougars climbed a large boulder fifty yards above us, turned, played together, and ran across the boulder. Their mother stuck her head up from behind the boulder, just to her eyes. She watched her cubs and us. Warm sun shone on the ridge, cougars, the stream, and us.

We talked quietly. I said, "She's saying, 'I called you and called you. Don't you understand? Those are humans down there, and humans are dangerous. When I get my paws on you, you're gonna wish you'd minded me.'"

"She's smarter than they are."

"Maybe. Maybe she's blinded by prejudice against all humans, and maybe her children have more open minds and realize we're no threat to them."

The sun moved across the sky. The cubs scrambled down behind the

rocks, and they and their mother disappeared. We sat there a while and enjoyed the day, but we didn't see the cougars again.

Laura went on a longer walk. I sanded and varnished stairs at the big lodge. Juniper and Amanda pursued early summer interests in the forest, meadows and ridges of our mountain.

Two days later, everybody else in the family drove down the mountain to Fort Collins for groceries and other needs. I stayed home and worked. Midmorning, I took a break, picked up binoculars at the house, walked down steep, forested slope behind the house, and looked across the meadow at the ridge where we had seen cougars. I was still mostly shielded from view by a big bush and several trees, but the first thing I realized when I focused the binoculars on the big cougar lying in sunshine on a huge boulder projecting out into the sky from the top of the ridge, about a hundred and fifty yards from me, was that he was looking at me.

I thought I was hidden and quiet, but the cougar knew I was there. Warm sunshine soaked into my back as I watched him. Warm sunshine soaked into him. He looked down on the world and often at me. He turned and bit some itch on his flank and returned to looking at the world. I thought he must be the father of the cubs. I thought father rather than mother because he relaxed completely. He looked to distances and clearly didn't tend family. What little I had seen of the mother was a darker color than the mountain lion on the ridge in sunshine.

I moved slowly behind brush and trees, descended the remaining twenty feet of slope, and crawled into the deep but dry irrigation ditch, waited a while, then propped binoculars on the bank, so I was only exposed to the cougar's view from the binoculars up. He knew where I was and what I was doing. He looked right at me.

I crawled down the ditch until I lay behind a large pine tree that the wind had blown down several winters before. I lay on sun-warmed earth and soaked in sunshine for a while, then slowly crawled through meadow grass to the upthrust roots of the downed pine tree. I propped my binoculars on a broken root and focused on the boulder projecting from the ridge.

The cougar had gone. He had accepted me in his territory until I tried to get too close. Then he journeyed onward through his world of the entire mountain.

I walked back up to my day's work. Images of a cougar the color of winter-bleached grass in sunshine floated through my mind. I cleaned the upstairs rooms of the big lodge, then continued the slow process of removing tile from the floor in the small entrance room and sanding the hardwood floor that had been covered by tile.

Sun shone in the windows. I sang small, quiet songs of gratitude into warm sunshine to cougars we had seen for reminding us that wild animals and plants surrounded us on our mountain and lived in harmony with us, with all of nature around us, with eternal, wild mountains.