

Zara McDonald was running on a fire trail in the Marin Headlands at dusk when she met her first mountain lion. One moment it wasn't there and the next moment it was, about six feet away.

"It's head just popped out of the brush. We both stood there and stared each other down. Then he turned on his heel and walked away."

McDonald is a competitive marathoner who runs regularly, at all times of day, on remote trails. She was stunned. That single, simple encounter reorganized her life and shattered the anthropocentric illusion that she – like most humans – held about her place in the world. Just like that, she had encountered something so intense, so powerful, so *other*, that the entire equation of her life had to shift to accommodate it.

Meeting an alien from outer space could not have been more startling. Suddenly the familiar world – Zara's world – was a very different place – there were lions in it. And it would never be the same again.

"I walked back," she remembers, "and

in the next hour I suddenly realized how incredible that had been."

There is an intense gleam in Zara McDonald's dark eyes, something both feline and religious when she recalls the story. And truth be told, her puma epiphany was a religious conversion of sorts. She couldn't shake the presence of that big cat from the circle of her awareness, so she set out to learn everything she could about it.

Mountain lions are members of the felidae family, which encompasses all felines, including 37 wild species, most, if not all, of which are threatened or endangered, victims of steady pressure from expanding human populations, the subsequent loss of habitat, and continuing predation by people who are too scared or ignorant to respond to big cats in any way other than with fear and violence. In other words, most of us.

The felidae circle includes mountain lions and snow leopards and tigers and cheetahs and lions and jaguars, oh my!

The ignorance we share about large creatures with fangs and claws is one of

living with lions

**Just because you
don't see them,
doesn't mean
they're not there.**

STORY DAVID BOLLING
PHOTOS FELIDAE
CONSERVATION FUND

the things that most threatens them, and as McDonald burrowed into the big cat information bin she found how little most people know and how much there is to learn. Gradually, the seeds of a new life took root.

The roots grew slowly as she sorted out the strategies and logistics and focus of the work she felt increasingly compelled to do. That first encounter occurred in 2000. There was a second one three years later when she saw another lion on the ridge right above the last Sausalito freeway exit before the Golden Gate Bridge, scant seconds above the kinetic hum of commuter traffic. It was further confirmation of a parallel reality to which

most of us are completely blind.

Finally, by 2006, the cat thing reached critical mass inside her and McDonald gave birth to the Felidae Conservation Fund. The ambitious mission was, as the organization's brochure puts it, "to advance the conservation of the world's wild cat species and their habitats through a combination of pioneering research, compelling education and advanced technology." Put more simply, Zara McDonald wanted to expand everyone's perception of this new world she occupied so that humans and big cats could occupy it together, in relative comfort and safety.

It wasn't that McDonald was in desperate need of a career path. She had an MBA from UC Berkeley, experience as a high-tech entrepreneur – she developed and marketed the first wrist-held GPS devices – and she was a partner in a socially-conscious equity fund. But big cats had begun to crowd much of the more conventional furniture out of the office of her life.

"It's become personal," she says. "It started with that one experience. I got it in that moment that these cats have been here forever. They belong in the landscape. They are majestic, charismatic beings."

In less than four years, Felidae has become an international presence, with projects in

nine or more countries – including Borneo, Mongolia, Iran and Pakistan, where the Felidae team attached a GPS collar to a female snow leopard and initiated a long-term tracking study.

But despite the international work, a big part of the organization's efforts remains focused on Bay Area mountain lion studies and outreach to students in area schools. Zara makes countless classroom presentations to help both kids and adults understand what it's like to be a mountain lion in today's urbanized, habitat-shrinking world. And central to that work is the simple question that first touched her on that fire road six years ago: is it possible for humans and mountain lions to coexist in the same, overlapping environment?

The question begets a question. What's it like being a Mountain Lion?

McDonald uses the Santa Monica Mountains as an example of the fate too often awaiting mountain lions. Down there, she says, "extinction is underway. The population has gone from 20 cats down to 3 over 20 years."

Very soon, McDonald says, there will be no more mountain lions in the Santa Monica mountains.

"If you're a cat," says McDonald, "you're

not only going to face a landscape in which you're not safe, you're facing increased encounters with human beings you don't want anything to do with. In all of my experience in which a cat comes in contact with humans, the cat wants to get away."

But the fundamental issue in the whole discussion, at least in the eyes of most citizens, is not the safety of the cats, it's the safety of the people the cats encounter. And for that question McDonald has some surprising answers.

First, she points out, there has not been a mountain lion attack on a human in the Bay Area since 1909, when a mother and daughter died from rabies after being bitten by a big cat.

Then she adds, "the chances are 150 times greater that you'll be killed by a deer than by a mountain lion. It's a very, very low risk."

And the irony about the human/lion interface is that, notwithstanding their relative scarcity and the huge territories they patrol, mountain lions are around people all the time.

"There's research on cats moving next to humans," she says. "They're 20 or 30 yards away and we just don't know it."

That's not entirely true of Sonoma Valley residents, who have had a spate of sightings in recent years.



Felidae staff member Ally Nauer looks on as Zara (right) holds a 7-week-old mountain lion in the Santa Cruz mountains.

In 2007 a lion was spotted near Broadway and MacArthur Drive. A police officer followed it into the Nathanson Creek riparian zone, where it disappeared.

In May of 2008, a two-year old lion weighing about 60 pounds was sighted resting in a backyard tree in Aqua Caliente. It was eventually shot with a tranquilizer dart and relocated.

At least two residential sightings occurred during 2010, and a number of confirmed and unconfirmed sightings have been reported on the property of Sonoma Developmental Center, where Sonoma Creek and several tributaries provide unbroken game trails from Highway 12 to the top of Sonoma Mountain. Last year a mountain lion was seen leaping out of a tree across the Overlook Trail.

No one really knows how many mountain lions exist in the Bay Area, or in California as a whole. State estimates usually suggest 5,000 to 6,000, and since sport hunting was banned

in 1990 by Proposition 117, the number of attacks on livestock and household pets has increased significantly according to anecdotal estimates.

McDonald has encountered more big cats through Felidae research than most of us will in a lifetime. She doesn't dismiss the possibility of a cat attacking a person, but says each case is unique and the proper response depends on the type of encounter.

Always assess the situation carefully, she advises, before acting. "How close is it? Is it looking at you? Is it in a defensive posture? Is it in a crouch, are its rear legs preparing to pounce?" Most importantly, in cases of direct encounters, don't turn your back and don't run.

McDonald argues that the single most important piece of the lion-human equation is habitat infrastructure. Is there enough of it, is it connected by viable wildlife corridors, and how much if it is intersected by streets, roads

and freeways?

In the Bay Area, McDonald insists, “We first need to make a decision as humans, do we want this keystone species in our landscape? If so, we have to have a plan, and we have to have viable pathways, because the cats absolutely have to have those.”

In the Santa Cruz Mountains, where Felidae has a major monitoring program, with 17 cats wearing GPS collars, three or four cats have been killed crossing Highway 17 because there are no undercrossings animals can follow to get across the road.

If cats can avoid encounters with people, they will, says McDonald. But they need pathways to do so.

When cats do come into developed areas, McDonald says motion lights at night may help discourage them, keeping pets and pet food in at night is important, and hiking in lion habitat with horns and bear spray could be wise.

Equally important is keeping deer away and not providing them with easily available food.

Whether the effort to protect and preserve mountain lions will ever be given enough public priority to succeed is an open question.

But for Zara McDonald, one thing is abundantly clear. Mountain lions belong here, they have a right to survive, and it’s up to us to find a way to make that happen.

“The point for us,” she says, “is to really shed light on the subject with a rational mind. To understand how difficult it is to be a big cat in our world.” s

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