


# LIGHTS and SHADOWS


from the  
Dishman Hills

May 2004

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS



It was typical spring day and Wanda thought a short hike in the Dishman Hills was just the thing to round out the day. She hiked along the northern side of the Natural Area intending on cutting up one of the steep rocky canyons that are seldom visited despite their proximity to busy Appleway. From what seemed to be out of nowhere silently appeared one of the State's most impressive beast, a cougar and Wanda was a bit scared. She was at a loss of what to do next but was very aware that she could be someone's meal in a matter of seconds. Wisely, she slowly backed away. The cougar did not appear scared or did not run but watched her. With heart pounding she moved off, giving the cougar back its territory and left the area immediately.



The Dishman Hills Natural Area is managed to be a good home for the native plants and animals of our region, so we are quite pleased to have indications that we have a resident cougar or two in the area. There have been three or four reported sightings in the past couple of years and some warning signs have been posted at trailheads. This spring a deer carcass was found on the west side of the Natural Area that may be a cat kill. Traditionally, cougars, also called mountain lions, pumas, panthers, or catamounts, were associated almost exclusively with deer and elk herds, but have expanded their range to include semi-urban areas, feeding on smaller mammals such as raccoons, coyotes, and various domesticated house pets. Cougars are territorial and maintain ranges up to 100 square miles. Ours probably wanders all over the Dishman Ridge and Tower Mountain area. Most active at dusk and dawn, cougars are lone hunters, preferring to ambush their prey and drag their kills to secluded spots where they will eat and then cache it for a later meal.

These beautiful beasts can weigh up to 200 pounds with a body length of 42-54 inches and tails nearly 3 feet long ( a third of the lion's total length). Their scientific name is *Puma concolor*, meaning "cat of one color." There are about 2,500 cougars in the Washington State and the rocky terrain along Dishman Ridge is perfect for cat dens. They mark their territory by making "scratch piles" of leaves, dirt, and grasses and urinate on them for the personal touch.

An encounter with a cougar need not be dangerous. Their numbers are increasing since the removal of bounties and trapping while their habitat shrinks, so your chances of meeting one in the Dishman Hills has increased in the last few years. There are some recommended procedures from Washington Fish and Wildlife for cougar encounters. Hike in small groups and make enough noise to prevent surprising a cougar. Keep small children close to the group. Do not approach dead animals, especially recently killed or partially covered deer or elk. Be aware of your surroundings. Look for tracks, scratch piles, or droppings. Leave pets at home. If you come face to face with a cat stop, stand tall and don't run. Pick up small children. Avoid rapid movement and remember that a cougar's instinct is to chase. Face the beast, talk to it firmly and slowly back away, leaving the cougar an escape route. Do not take your eyes off the animal, or turn your back. Try to appear larger than normal by stepping up onto

*There are homilies in Nature's work worth all the wisdom of the schools, if we could but read them rightly*

—Washington Irving

a stump or by holding your jacket open. Do not crouch down or hide. Never approach or corner the animal, especially if it is near a kill or with kittens. If the animal does not flee and shows signs of aggression (crouches with ears back, teeth bared, hissing, tail twitching, and hind feet pumping in preparation to jump) be more assertive. Shout and wave your arms or throw rocks. The idea is to convince the cougar that you are not prey, but a potential danger. If the cougar attacks, fight back aggressively and stay on your feet. Generally if you are aggressive enough, a cougar will flee, realizing that it has made a mistake.

Overall, cougars are an important part of our natural inventory and should elicit respect and wonder rather than fear or anxiety. And if you see one please report it so we can track their success in making the Dishman Hills their home.

## PLANT TOUR

The Native Plant Society of Spokane ventured this month onto our new Tower Mountain parcel to survey the native plant population. Part of good stewardship is to have an accurate inventory of the plant and animal communities that you plan to support with management goals. So, this was a good start. The plant people moved over the land at a snail's pace, combing the hillsides for interesting "species" and often clustered for spirited discussions about "leaf arrangements", "varieties", or "flower type". Although we have not established public access yet for the land we plan to visit it often for maintenance and improvement projects.

## ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month at 7pm. Our next meeting will be June 14, Monday night at Camp Caro on the north side of the Natural Area. This will be our last meeting before the summer break.

The following are our April donors that have consented to be listed: Joyce Alonso; Joseph Collins; Memorial for Bill Marchand, Pat & Eddie Crawley, Frank Gleason, Loren & Laura Heyn; Don Griffiths, Larry & Judy Hatch, Karen Jurasin, Tim & Arlene Stromberger, Dorothy Torney, Jeanne H. Wilson, and two anonymous donors. Thank you all for your generosity.

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