

T R A C K O F T H E C A T



In New Mexico, 2008 could have been called the year of the cat. Hands-off predator management began showing consequences. A modest preventative lion control program in place since 1985 was scrapped by the state's game commission on October 2, thanks to pressure from Wild Earth Guardians. It was a bizarre ending to a scary year.

In May, Las Cruces residents were warned to be cautious because a lion had killed a poodle in the backyard of a suburban home. On May 17 in the Sandia Mountains, Jose Salazar

Sr. and his wife Charlotte, 38 weeks pregnant, took their children on a hike at the popular Balsam Glade trail near the Sandia Peak Ski Basin. Charlotte and Jose held the younger children and walked along the trail, while five-year-old Jose Jr. trotted along a few yards ahead of them, a situation that later garnered criticism from animal activists. Charlotte suddenly heard her son yelling. She looked up and saw him lying across the trail with a big cat on top of him. "He was fighting, flailing his arms, while the cat was biting and clawing his back and shoulders," she says. "Then the cat grabbed him by the head and took off down the mountain."

The boy's father leaped into action, sprinting down the steep hillside while his wife screamed not to lose sight of the cat and their son. The chase ended about 300 feet down the slope when the cat lost its grip and stopped. Jose made a last leap at the animal.

"In just the instant when my son's scalp tore and the cat lost its grip, my husband got there," says Charlotte. The cat looked up, dodged and ran.

Thankfully, little Jose was lying where the lion dropped him. His father scooped him up and ran up the mountain. Hoping to spare his wife from seeing their injured child whose scalp slid off the back of his head and lay on

Cougar politics and predator policy make people fair game.

By Laura Schneberger

the trail to confirm the location of the attack. They located one of the child's boots near the scene of the attack. His other boot was found 30 feet downhill from where the attack had ended. The boot appeared to be covered with saliva. It had numerous punctures. Jose was horrified to see that there were dozens of families exploring the exact same area. The trail was still open to the public.

With media on the scene, G&F officers reported the injuries the boy had suffered as serious scratches. Jose called his wife from the scene and, fearing a second attack on yet another family, they agreed to make a statement to the media. They felt the agency had downplayed the incident and government officials publicly speculated that it could have been a small bear, despite the Salazars' insistence it was a cat. Charlotte says that she couldn't tell for sure whether it was a bobcat or lion because of the way facial hair stood out from its body, but they knew it was a cat.

The trail finally was closed three days later. Game officers collected little Jose's shirt, his boots and hair from the attack sight. The articles were sent to the University of New Mexico for analysis. DNA samples extracted from the chewed boot were identified as human and *Puma concolor*—or mountain lion. For several months the director of Game & Fish and several commissioners persisted in informing the public that the attack was not a confirmed lion attack until Charlotte made public the DNA test results. The lion involved in the incident has still not been captured.

Four weeks after little Jose's encounter, New Mexico had another attack, this one fatal. In mid-June the people of Piños Altos in southwest New Mexico were tying up phone lines comparing stories of lion sightings in their small community. The brother of 55-year-old Piños Altos resident Robert Nawojski was on the phone trying to reach him, but Robert wasn't answering. Walter Nawojski, who expected to meet his autistic brother for a hike later in the week, decided to report him missing. Robert was able to care for himself, but not being able to reach him was still cause for alarm.

On Friday, June 20, Grant and Luna counties' search and rescue teams, looking for Robert, encountered an aggressive lion near his home. They also found what seemed to be

a human body buried in what lion hunters identify as a kill cache. G&F field officers and state police were called in. The lion was shot with a shotgun and escaped. Officers were able to examine and recover Robert's body from what family members say were five different caches. The Office of the Medical



Jose Salazar Jr. was taking a walk with his family in the Sandia Mountains of New Mexico when a cat dragged him off.

Examiner determined he had been killed June 16 or 17 by a large cat.

USDA Wildlife Services (WS) were called to the scene. Local officers with lion-hunting experience discovered more than one set of fresh tracks. Snares were set because dogs couldn't work a track in the heat. A week after Robert's body was found, WS officers snared a lion. It was an average-sized adult male, about three years old and healthy, weighing approximately 125 pounds. It had four small holes in its back that appeared to be from buckshot. It was considered to be the lion at the scene where Robert's body was found due to the buckshot holes. A second lion was caught several weeks later in the same area.

Relative Amber Dolan says investigators told them that an area resident was reported for feeding whole chickens to lions on private property not far from Robert's home. No wildlife baiting charges have been filed in the area since Robert was killed, even though baiting protected wildlife species is a crime in



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Jose's hand, the young father used his Sunday shirt and a pocket knife to bandage the wounds. The family regrouped, carried the children back down the trail and called 911.

The air ambulance met the couple at the Sandia Peak Ski Area parking lot, and the boy was airlifted to the hospital. The child's injuries resulted in several surgeries to clean and repair punctures to his arms, shoulder, neck and face, deep lacerations to his back, and reattachment of his scalp.

While the injured boy was in and out of surgery the following day, his mother at his bedside, Jose Sr. guided New Mexico Department of Game & Fish (G&F) officers along

New Mexico.

Unfortunately, Robert's death was not a wake-up call. State officials instead insinuated that Robert was somehow responsible for the attack because he was eccentric. They never recognized his autism. Environmentalists say the encounters were due to the community being in the lion's territory. Piños Altos is an old mining town founded in 1859. In the town's 149-year history, no record exists of lions stalking humans until 2008.

The most recent attack resulting in injury occurred in late September when 29-year-old Adam Wheat was hiking near the Taos ski

fend off mountain lions, instead of proactively and properly managing their growing numbers."

The control program scrapped on October 2 was called a "scorched earth cougar killing policy" by Wild Earth Guardians (WEG). It had been a depredation program aimed at controlling mountain lion spillover from the Guadalupe and Carlsbad national parks. Some dubious hyperbole was spoon-fed to media outlets via WEG press releases. The following statement is from that glossy ad campaign.

"Since the mid-1980s, New Mexico has paid nearly \$1 million to a private trapper for trapping up to 20 cougars per year in this zone to 'preventatively' deter potential negative interactions between cougars and livestock—primarily domestic sheep. Over the last 17 years this policy alone has resulted in the killing of over 315 cougars."

The preventative lion control program began in January 1985. Its purpose was to find a cost-effective

program was implemented as a cost-effective measure by G&F to ensure use of department resources and expenses was minimized and private-property protection was maximized. For almost 25 years, through many different administrations and game commissions, the program was considered extremely cost effective.

WEG targeted the depredation control program with a campaign aimed at establishing a quota on female lions hunted in the state. The game commission had already been waffling on the necessity of protecting private property (livestock) owners from public predators. So they took the Wild Earth Guardians' complaint that the Unit 30 program was a waste of taxpayer money and ran with it.

On October 2, despite three and a half hours of testimony by both ranchers and the general public, the commissioners voted overwhelmingly to stop the depredation control program. The Salazars attended the meeting to oppose any further restrictions on lion hunting and managed lion control in New Mexico. Like the rest of those who testified, they were ignored by the game commissioners.

Not long after Robert Nawojski's death, G&F employees issued a letter of no confidence in their director and asked Gov. Bill Richardson to replace that leadership. This was because of the director's conviction for violation of two game laws that occurred in the fall of 2008.

At the game commission meeting in October, the commissioners tried to reassure attendees living in southeast New Mexico Game Unit 30 that they didn't need their lion contractor. They could always call on their local game warden and/or USDA Wildlife Services' officer to take care of any problems.

Locals don't have much confidence that game wardens would be more help than their local contractor was in these same situations. Internal planning documents on depredation regulations rewritten in 2005 allow game managers to remove funding for predator management and replace it with more public education. This is supposed to include providing information on how the public can reduce the likelihood of conflicts between cougars and people.

Unfortunately, nobody has told the cougars about the education program. ■

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COURTESY SALAZAR FAMILY

Jose Salazar Jr. was saved by his father from the lion attack. Approximately 10 aggressive human/mountain lion encounters have occurred each year since the '70s. More than 40 were confirmed in 2008.

lodge. He was jumped on by a lion. His account is eerily similar to that given by Jose Salazar Jr. Both victims describe hearing a loud hiss before looking up and seeing the cat. The lion hit Adam square in the chest, knocking him down. A physically fit young man, he was lucky enough to land with his hand on a rock and he pounded on the cat until it let him go. He hiked two miles, drove to his place of business and found someone to take him to the hospital. The lion that attacked Wheat was not found.

In the wake of the attack on their son, Charlotte and Jose Salazar learned that encounters had been on the rise across the state. Approximately 10 aggressive encounters had occurred each year since the '70s. More than 40 were confirmed in 2008.

Charlotte says, "It's disturbing that the New Mexico Game Commission is following the same tired recommendations of extreme animal rights and environmental organizations, which feel the solution is just more education for the public on how to live with and

method to manage mountain lions that made a habit of preying on local livestock in Game Management Unit 30 located in southeastern New Mexico. The costs began at around \$30,000 per year and by 2008 had increased to approximately \$40,000 per year. The contractor was responsible for furnishing equipment, transportation, fuel and supplies. He was not provided state health insurance or retirement benefits.

Unit 30 borders the Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Caverns national parks. The program targeted only excess problem lions that migrated from the wildlife refuges, forced out by more dominant cats. To "prevent potential negative interactions" as claimed by WEG was not the purpose of the contract. Ranchers in the region had clearly demonstrated confirmed depredations for several years running. Losses of 350 to 400 sheep per year, along with confirmed horse kills and aggressive human encounters, resulted in severe personal and economic challenges to the communities. The pro-