City of Los Angeles

Department of Animal Regulation

THE HUNT

When Nicholas Metrick, 57, left his kitchen to water the back lawn of his Granada Hills home on a recent bright May afternoon, his thoughts were not fixed on the prospects of big game hunting.

At the same time (it's safe to assume) a mountain lion, resting behind some foliage in Metrick's back yard, wasn't dwelling on the prospects of being hunted with a garden hose.

The confrontation, inevitable, was disconcerting to both parties. The lion saluted Metrick with a swish of its tail, prompting Metrick to react with purposeful adjustment.

He dropped the hose, strode briskly back to the house and telephoned the police. The police immediately notified the Los Angeles City Department of Animal Regulation.

Not far from Metrick's home, Animal Control Officer Richard Felosky was driving his animal collection vehicle on a routine patrol, when he received a radio call.

"Lion reported loose at 18258 Dometz Street, Granada Hills, "the VHF crackled, "investigate." Felosky changed direction and headed for the address.

Inside the Metrick residence, Nicholas' wife, Mildred, kept the lion in sight through a picture window. Mildred wanted to go out and take a picture of it for the family album. In Mildred's words "you don't find a cat like that every day in your back yard."

Nicholas told her to forget it.

Felosky pulled up in front of the house, left his vehicle, and made his way cautiously to the backyard. He needed only one look at the big cat.

"Sure enough," he told Nicholas on entering the house, "you've got a mountain lion out there."

Nicholas, a retired liquor store owner, said later he was glad to hear the news. "I was glad to realize I wasn't going bananas," he said.

Felosky telephoned for assistance. Within minutes, reinforcements were rolling. Dr. John Pastor, department veterinarian, and Senior Animal Control Officer Herman E. Kula, armed with a tranquilizer gun, departed the West Valley Animal Shelter. Fifteen police patrol units and a police helicopter from Devonshire Division in the San Fernando Valley converged on the scene.

Probably no one mountain lion in the past had drawn so many hunters at one time as had the unwelcome visitor in Metrick's back yard. With shotguns at the ready, police closed in on the area. The helicopter hovered overhead ready to track the lion from the air, if and when she bolted.

Felosky took the tranquilizer gun, and in company with Kula, quietly approached the bewildered lion who obviously had taken a wrong turn somewhere in its travels. The beast, with all its senses communicating danger, rose to its feet, making a perfect target. As Kula distracted the lion with a wave of his arms, Felosky squeezed the trigger on the tranquilizer gun and scored with his first shot.

Stung, the lion burst into action, traversing the yard in wild angry sweeps. It charged, at one point, to within five feet of Felosky and Kula, then abuptly turned and leaped a six-foot high redwood fence surrounding the yard. The two animal control officers scaled the fence in pursuit. The helicopter observer bellowed instructions through his loudspeaker overhead.

In the adjacent yard the lion searched wildly for another exit. He leaped another fence, this one also six feet high but composed of concrete. Felosky and Kula, like rookies on an obstacle course, scrambled up and over. At this point, the voice of the helicopter observer sharpened with new excitement.

"Look out! There's two lions in the yard."

Felosky, crouched near the concrete fence, turned nervously to survey the new threat. He could see the one lion growing woozy as the tranquilizer began taking effect. But another lion? Felosky wished he had taken the day off. It was then that he saw the second animal. From the air, it may have looked like a lion. It was big enough. But it was only a pet dog. Felosky still wished he had taken the day off.

The real lion had dropped in its tracks as the potent irresistible tranquilizer invited the deep sleep. No sooner had the lion's head slumped to the ground than Felosky and Kula were at the side of the big cat. Quickly, they began the task of trussing it securely for transportation to the West Valley Animal Shelter.

As the two officers pulled into the shelter's carport with their "bring 'em back alive" cargo, Shelter District Supervisor George W. Mason was busy nearby making a last minute check of his weekly cargo lashed to a warming helicopter nearby. Since September, 1969, Mason and the 'copter's pilot, Ray Schutte, had made weekly flights to Angeles National Forest, 35 miles away, in a small wild animal relocation program. Now, safely stowed away in ventilated carrying cases, strapped to the helicopter, was a contingent of these small wild animals bound for freedom. On this occasion the flying cargo aboard the animal airlift consisted mostly of raccoons and opposums. They had been humanely trapped in the City of Los Angeles and now were ready for relocation in a safe natural habitat. Since 1969, 1375 wild creatures had been relocated in this unique program dedicated to wildlife conservation.

The sleeping mountain lion, however, wasn't destined for the airlift.

Awakening with effects no worse than the giddyness associated with a mild hangover, the lion spent the remainder of the day and the following day awaiting the arrival of a wildlife team representing the California State Fish and Game Department from Sacramento. Meanwhile, shelter personnel had determined the lion really wasn't a lion at all, but a lioness. They theorized she had blundered out of a Granada Hills canyon into the flatlands while searching for food, and particularly water. The winter had been exceptionally dry.

Larry W. Sitton and Richard Weaver of the Fish and Game's wildlife Management Branch in Sacramento were skeptical when they reached the Valley animal shelter in Chatsworth, but they brightened perceptibly when they saw the object of their mission. Behind the bars of her cage, the lioness greeted them with jaws open and teeth gleaming. She was sleek, beautiful and spoiling for action. Her hour of triumph was in the offing. She would be transported north to a wild area in Mona County for relocation and restored freedom.

But first, she had one more date with the deep sleep. Again, the tranquilizer needle was brought into play. Again, the taunt muscles relaxed, the quick golden head sagged, and the body, quietly without protest, sunk back into the limbo it had known two days previous in Granada Gills.

Sitton fastened a collar, a special collar, around the neck of the sleeping beauty. The collar contained a transistor, automated to emit signals for purposes of tracking and study. Twice a week, Sitton planned to track the lioness by sound, to measure its range, to study its habits and ajustment patterns in her new environment. Sitton would log the movements of the lioness with a short wave receiver from the cockpit of a Cessna aircraft at an altitude of four thousand feet.

In the months ahead, Sitton will be interested in the meaningful reactions of the lioness in her new surroundings. How will she adjust? How will she survive? And will she divulge any romantic inclinations? The last point is particularly interesting to Sitton because he knows there are two males of her species roaming the wild Mona County region and "baching it" at the monent. Sitton is hoping he will have the opportunity to translate his transistor signals into the language of love.

Sitton is wondering if the lioness will ever kiss and tell.

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