

Cougar could cope with nature, not man

By Penny Maldonado | Posted: Wednesday, December 18, 2013 12:15 am

Life is hard. There are beginnings that seem like endings for all of us. From the moment we take our first breath we depend upon that special someone to love and nurture us until we can take care of ourselves. We are vulnerable to just about everything else, some of which we have control over and some of which we do not.

Life is no different in the natural world. In that wild place where chance and selection meet we might assume that there is little choice about consequence and survival. But our story illustrates how a human decision can shape the lottery of natural selection.

This is a true story of a mountain lion kitten in northwestern Wyoming.

This kitten was born to a mother known by a number, but this is just the way the scientists do things — nothing personal, you understand. The kitten was one of three born to F51, and she had a hard time leaving her devoted mother's side to play with her brothers. The boys enjoyed the adventure of getting just a little too far ahead of the rest of the family. One day they were out together for their "nature walk," which is when mom showed them about hunting to eat so they would become self-sufficient. Sadly, the boys' energy and curiosity led them into danger. There were other animals, whose home is the wild, also learning how to survive, and these animals were afraid F51 and her family would make it harder for them to get food and space and the things that all wild animals need. Just as dogs and cats have competition problems in our homes, the wolves felt the only way to be safe and assured of the food of the forest was to kill the cats, although once in a very great while a cougar may reverse the outcome.

The boys were the first to perish, but the little female was able to keep up with F51 as she sought refuge for her offspring. They ran, and I am sure that mother looked back more than once in the hopes that her sons could follow. Alas, only her daughter joined her on a band of rocks that the wolves would not be able to climb.

F51 stayed there for six days, never letting her kitten leave the feline aerie she had created to protect her. She hunted within sight of her little one. She brought back only the smallest of mammals and probably fed her kitten before herself. After the sixth day they returned to the scene of the encounter from which they had fled. Maybe F51 had to be sure the boys did not need her anymore. She visited their remains and realized that her daughter alone would be her priority from now on.

After that, mom and shy kitten ate, played and grew together. F51 excelled as a nurturer, and the kitten that the researchers had now named Lucky, grew to know how to hunt and fend for herself.

Lucky's mom was an ideal subject for scientific research of mountain lions. Her social and maternal interactions were often captured on trail cameras and provided exciting new insight into the secret lives of cougars. It was not long before a male cougar overlapped F51's territory and sensed that his genes and F51 would produce strong offspring.

When Lucky was only 9 months old she became big sister to another set of kittens born to F51. Even though Lucky was not quite an adolescent the demands of the new family meant she must head out alone.

Lucky had been fortunate to survive and to be the "only kitten" since losing her brothers. She had worked hard to learn everything F51 taught her. To be able to survive and one day raise kittens of her own is the definition of success in the wild.

She set out to hunt and eat using the skills and abilities she had developed at her mother's side. Plucky little Lucy took on nature and for two months made it. She caught her food, she ate a little, and she cached some for later, just as she had been taught.

This was Lucky versus the odds, and she was winning.

Humans rarely see cougars. They often have to use packs of baying dogs to locate these indigenously named "ghost cats" that will climb into a tree to escape. This is how the human world interacts with the Luckys of the wild. Humans justify their actions by something they call a "right." Her short lifetime had not given her enough experience to elude the human factor that viewed her death as "sport".

Nature is harsh. Nature had tested Lucky and she was triumphing over it. Yet at barely a year old she would face an unnatural challenge, and she succumbed. The hazards of life did not kill her; it was a human decision to kill her. Killing predators in their native habitat is not for food or safety but for the opportunity to dominate something wild and free — to prove somehow that man is superior. Every living creature has a story, and the short life of Lucky illustrates that we do not need to add to the trials of survival. There is enough to endure with decreasing habitat, expanding urbanization, fragmentation and natural risks. We, as human beings, must seek to behave in ways that mitigate, not complicate, wildlife's survival.