
A friend of mine who lived outside of Boulder, Colorado, once told me of a neighbor who returned home to find that a puma had cached a deer kill under her porch. The University official who greeted the Conservation Biology annual meetings in Bozeman told us that the previous day a puma had bitten the head off someone’s pet cat. I thought these 2 incidents were curious and amusing in a mammalogist-sort-of-way until I read David Baron’s book.

I now think that these incidents are grim pieces in the puzzle assembled for us in The Beast in the Garden. The book opens with an account of the discovery of the body of a high school runner killed by a puma—the 1st adult human known to have been killed and eaten by a puma in a century. The puma, a young adult male, was found to have fragments of a human heart in its stomach.

In this book, the author sets out to explain why an animal said to be timid and afraid of humans has become a predator of humans. His answer, laid out in great detail, details the changes in land use, demography, and human values on the Front Range of the Rockies, and in particular in the city of Boulder. The puma and its reappearance as a predator of humans along the Front Range is cast in a lead role in a story that centers around changes in the ways Americans think about nature.

The book details the decline and reemergence of puma populations in the United States as European settlers inexorably changed the continent. The earliest recorded bounty on pumas was in the 1500s, when Jesuit priests in Baja California offered natives 1 bull for each animal killed. Pumas were extirpated from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Indiana, and Kentucky by the 1850s and by the end of that century they were gone from the eastern United States, with the exception of Florida. When the campaign against pumas and other predators shifted to the west, even national parks were targeted, with Yellowstone National Park staff owning their own pack of lion hounds to help provide protection for more “desirable species.” By the early 1960s, the United States was home to as few as 4,000 pumas, with Colorado’s population as low as 124.

Then, as Baron writes, “once the lions were gone, people wanted them back.” In a series of chapters with dramatic titles like “Trouble in the canyon,” “Final run,” and “Exegesis,” Baron builds the case for why what happened in Boulder should be a lesson for many other parts of the United States. The 1st full chapter (“A land without carnivory”) describes the founding of Boulder and the decisions to protect green space and prohibit hunting, which inexorably led to large, tame herds of deer. When, as could be predicted, the pumas came, they were welcomed by the residents until the inevitable conflicts arose, pets disappeared and people were attacked.

This story of the pumas of Boulder is woven into a narrative that integrates human evolution, the impacts of European colonization, and the biology of Puma concolor. Having convinced themselves that they were in charge of nature, Americans then decided they wanted to maintain what was left, but only in terms acceptable to humans. This dynamic was most pronounced in the American West, with Boulder leading the way in the environmental movement, particularly in preserving large swaths of open space. This is where Baron makes a key point in his argument: the nature so valued by Boulder was not “natural,” but a carefully tended garden that required constant maintenance. Pumas were the beast in this garden.

If the star of this story is the puma, the costar is Michael Sanders, a resource specialist for the Boulder County Parks and Open Space Department. Through his efforts to map and understand the growing puma population in Boulder, we are introduced to the city neighborhoods, the pet owners bemoaning the loss of their pets to puma attack, the agency people, and their philosophical and jurisdictional fights.

The book builds, in a very self-aware style, to the death of the high school runner, killed by a puma outside his school. However, this is not the point of the book, at least for this reader. The point is not made until the epilogue when Baron says: “America is engaged in a grand and largely unintentional experiment. As wildlife invades suburbs, and as suburbs invade wildlife habitat, we are changing animal behavior in unexpected and sometimes troubling ways.” Attacks on humans by pumas, and coyotes, bears, raccoons, and numerous other animals have increased. We say we want nature, but in fact what we want is a garden—a garden where wild animals thrive, but behave like tamed animals. In the typical human way, we want it all exactly our way. Because we thought that long ago we had won the war against nature and that any survivors were grateful for their existence and would forever behave themselves, we are shocked when animals continue to behave like animals. The Beast in the Garden is an important cautionary tale of what lies ahead.

The author is a science journalist and tells a story in a breathy, breaking-news style that is well suited for the popular audience at whom this book is clearly aimed. Based on extensive interviews and review of documents and a close reading of newspapers, which are liberally quoted in the text, he tells his story with extensive use of enjoyable detail about weather, terrain, personalities, personal stories, and history, woven with dialogue and the deftly turned phrase.

I found the book provocative and educational. However, I found the style intrusive, straying to voyeuristic, and the reproduction of newspaper headlines and other devices such as dictionary entries annoying and distracting. If you decide to read The Beast in the Garden—and I recommend it—be prepared for a different style of writing than is usually reviewed in this journal. You should also be prepared to find your thoughts returning often to the lesson taught in this book. —KENT REDFORD, WCS Institute, Wildlife Conservation Society, 2300 Southern Boulevard, Bronx, NY 10460, USA; kredford@wcs.org