

The Cougar Behind Your Trash Can
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YOU have to admit, the cat had moxie.

The 140-pound cougar that was spotted last month among the estates of Greenwich — and was later struck and killed on the Wilbur Cross Parkway — has been the talk of southern Connecticut. New England, along with most of the Eastern United States, hasn't been cougar country since the 19th century, when the animals were exterminated by a killing campaign that started in colonial times. So where had this cougar come from?

Now we know the answer, and it couldn't be more astonishing. Wildlife officials, who at first assumed the cat was a captive animal that had escaped its owners, examined its DNA and concluded that it was a wild cougar from the Black Hills of South Dakota. It had wandered at least 1,500 miles before meeting its end at the front of an S.U.V. in Connecticut. That is one impressive walkabout.

You have to appreciate this cat's sense of irony, too. The cougar showed up in the East just three months after the Fish and Wildlife Service declared the eastern cougar extinct, a move that would exempt the officially nonexistent subspecies of the big cat from federal protection. Perhaps this red-state cougar traveled east to send a message to Washington: the federal government can make pronouncements about where cougars are not supposed to be found, but a cat's going to go where a cat wants to go.

Indeed, if a cougar can walk from South Dakota to Connecticut, a cougar could show up anywhere. Vermont. Tennessee. Queens. (Don't laugh: in 2008, another cougar from the Black Hills found its way to Chicago, where it was shot and killed by the police.) For years, a relative handful of people throughout the Eastern United States have claimed to see cougars, claims that the authorities have generally taken as seriously as Sasquatch sightings. Now, those sightings can't be so easily dismissed.

A single cougar, especially one that is now dead, is not going to transform the lives of many Americans, but what that cougar represents just might. Cougars possess a kind of Pleistocene wildness, reminding us of a time — deep in our evolutionary past — when we were prey to big cats. Even today, cougars in the West on rare occasions kill and eat people (more commonly they kill and eat dogs), and they are reclaiming former habitat, moving into the suburbs and onto the Great Plains. The Greenwich cat may have been a lone scout, but you can be sure others will follow. The resilient, elusive cats that haunt the Western landscape will increasingly haunt the East.

Some will find this a frightening prospect. Others will celebrate it. Eastern forests are overrun with deer, so the presence of cougars — which eat deer — could improve ecosystems. It could also, paradoxically, make people safer, since deer kill far more humans than cougars do, if you consider the sizable death toll caused by automobile-deer collisions.

Still, living with big cats takes some adjustment. As a former New Englander who now lives among Colorado cougars, I no longer hike alone. When I walk my dog in the early morning, I watch the bushes. I have educated myself on what to do if I encounter a cougar. Yell. Throw rocks. Fight back.

Yet in a decade of living here, I have not seen a cougar in the wild. The cats are masters at hiding and generally leave people alone, which means the biggest adjustment to living with cougars is psychological. It is knowing that a creature far more powerful than you could be crouched behind the trash can, around the next tree, under the porch.

Thanks to the South Dakota cat and its incredible journey, residents of the Eastern United States can now experience the fear and thrill that come with living below the top of the food chain. America has grown a bit less tame.

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Other references

www.cougarnet.org/network.html