



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Wildcats, Panthers, Jaguars—Oh my!

We could make a map of the roads around here and mark the places where a local observer has seen a big cat cross the road. “Cross” is not the word most of these folks use, though. They describe a leap or a bound, from one side of the road to the middle, and then a mighty jump right to the other side. These accounts have so many similarities I wish we had a road marker with an image, like the ones we see alerting us to the possible presence of “Slow Children” or salamanders or ducks. Even if we don’t see the pokey kids as we motor cautiously by, or the salamanders or the ducks, we do entertain the possibility. We can imagine, stir our hearts for a few minutes.

As social creatures, we talk to each other, comparing our lives and experiences. Most of us enliven our accounts a bit, just to stand up and show excitement. Our eyes sparkle, our vocal cadence gets spiffy, putting in audible exclamation points and italics. We wave our arms around, pause for drama. This is because we have experienced real action in the world, right here, right where a great cat jumped across the road and into the woods. We want to tell about it, live it again, bring a listener along with us in this marvelous life.

In sheer eagerness and crescendo, we may build it up. Maybe add things we heard somewhere else and have linked to what we saw just because that’s the job of the raconteur. That’s how you carry the gift of experience and put it out to others, also to yourself once again.

The person listening has experience and imagination, too, and will add these to the mix. Pretty soon what began with a cat crossing the road has soared off to wonderful possibilities, informed by myriad elements, too many and too remote to be put into words.

Every time I hear about another mountain lion leaping across Route 23, or Lake Buel Road, or trotting purposefully from east to west across Tyringham Road, I am there. I see it for myself, as only I can do it, even though I have never seen a mountain lion in the wild east of the Mississippi.

Nowadays folks often have a camera at the ready, so if one of these cats holds still long enough, there may be a photograph adding to the account. So far the biggest cats, the mountain lions, have been too much on the move to be caught by a camera.



Bobcats are another kind of creature, much more common hereabouts and less skittish of people. Spotters send in their photographs and their accounts. “Here is a big bobcat at my place, just leaving after having gobbled down a squirrel while I watched.” It’s show and tell with the visible treasure and the story, the embellishment, including, “and this is how it made me feel. . .!”

The words matter, as we give our accounts, especially as we want to say what kind of cat it was. Now we are in the difficult land of taxonomy, of names, of identifying details. We may know we saw a “panther,” and that makes us think right away of “black panthers,” and if the light was poor we may conclude that this is what we saw. Panther is a perfectly good common name for many a type of cat. The scientific Latin generic name for many species of large cats is *Panthera*. In this group right now we have lions, leopards, tigers, and jaguars. Also snow leopards, which are sometimes called “ounce cats,” but I don’t know why. Their scientific name is *Panthera uncia*, and we won’t see them here. All the *Panthera* cats can roar, except for the snow leopard.

Our mountain lions are in another group, the Felinae. Their scientific name was once *Felis concolor* but the taxonomists now call them *Puma concolor*. Puma! A name we can relate to.

But these mountain lions, pumas, also called catamounts, cougars, and painters, are not in the taxonomic *Panthera* group and they do not come in black.

There are “black panthers” of course, just not around here. The Black Panther Party started by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton has been gone since the early 1980s. Black panthers among cats are melanistic jaguars or leopards. So far the jaguars never come this far north and the leopards stay in Asia and Africa.

Our bobcats, called by some “wildcats,” are cousins to the lynx and they don’t roar. They can purr. They are in the Felinae group, like the mountain lions, which also can’t roar but do purr. Bobcats are much smaller than mountain lions. They are still lots bigger than our domestic cats, but they have short tails and weigh about 30 pounds. The mountain lions can be 200 pounds. They are tawny with a body length of 6 feet, plus a three-foot tail. They can take Route 23 in a double leap, or bound. I feel like I have seen this myself!

— Bonner McAllester

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