

The Sighting

By Barbara Leeds

I was hiking at my usual place, Rancho San Antonio County Park. To be closer to nature, I prefer to hike alone. I glance down often, checking for rocks, ruts, roots, and rattlesnakes. For the first three possible dangers, I adjust my step. For the fourth, I believe that snakes have the right of way; I give them plenty of space. The trails are well marked (so I can't get lost) and crowded (so if I ever have a problem, other hikers are on hand to help). I am safe.

It was Tuesday, and I was taking my regular route. I had started up the Hill Trail and continued onto the Coyote Trail. As I turned a corner, I caught a glimpse of something big and brown walking toward me. Darn! a horse! It's hard to get out of the way without stepping into poison oak. The trail turned again—no; it wasn't a horse, but a deer, with good-sized antlers. We both stood still for a long moment, admiring each other. Then the buck darted into the woods.

I resumed walking, appreciating my good fortune. I appreciated the trees, too, and told them so—another reason I prefer walking alone. Other hikers would scoff at a woman who talks to trees. I do speak to fellow humans, but only to acknowledge them with a brief “Hello” when we pass each other. But ah, the woods—birds singing, squirrels scurrying, trees groaning. This is where my heart lives.

I had progressed to the Farm Bypass Trail, just before it connects with the main trail, at the base of the Wildcat Loop Trail. It was about noon. Suddenly there was a major commotion, about 25 feet to my left. I saw, on the branch of a tree, a large rectangle of light brown. Something massive had leapt onto the branch—something that seemed too big for the tree. The branch undulated alarmingly.

Another woman was hiking nearby. No hellos; we went immediately to “What was *that?*” A bobcat? No, too big. A coyote? Too big, and coyotes are *dogs*; they don't stand in trees. The other hiker had gotten a better view. She mentioned a long curly tail. She pointed, trying to help me see clearly. Then she said it was

gone. But what was it? Maybe, just maybe, a mountain lion? I had never seen one before. The park posts warnings (“Look big. Talk loud. Fight back if attacked. Don’t hike alone.”) We resumed walking—independently—and both cut short our hikes, turning onto the main trail, which led back past Deer Hollow Farm toward the parking lot.

I reported the sighting to the first official I saw, a volunteer at the farm. Soon I was talking with a ranger, then another ranger. That evening a biologist called. Was I willing to talk about it? Willing?! I *wanted* to talk about it. The experts confirmed that what we had encountered was indeed a mountain lion. Mountain lions are *cats*; of course they can leap into trees. A mid-day sighting was unusual, though; mountain lions are normally active only at night. The authorities needed information to decide about closing trails. I was able to pinpoint the location, but I wished they could have interviewed the other hiker—the woman who had actually seen an *animal*, when I had seen only a brown rectangle—the torso, I presume. They all asked how I felt when I saw it; was it aggressive? At the time, I had been *curious* (What *is* it?) But as the weeks have passed, I have become more and more *afraid*. How did a large, dangerous animal get so close to me without my awareness?

I haven’t been back to Rancho San Antonio—or any other trails in the hills. My only walking has been on flat land by the Bay. No mountain lions. Nothing larger than a rabbit.

A few weeks later I am driving to choir practice. As I pull into the church driveway, I notice a large car ahead of me on the left, in the parallel-parking lane. The car was still, but now it is moving, backing up, into my lane. I brake. I honk. Then “Clank!” as the big car smashes into my sturdy little Honda.

Is *anyplace* safe?

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