

INGVALD OPSETH WILDLIFE REFUGE

One hundred and sixty acres of wood and marsh land in the Crystal Springs district were dedicated as the "Ingvald Opseth Wildlife Refuge" in a ceremony last Sunday afternoon. Tourism and Renewable Resources Minister John R. Kowalchuk and Odd Opseth, a brother of the late Ingvald Opseth, unveiled a cairn on Highway 20, 3 miles north of Crystal Springs to mark the 14th wildlife refuge in Saskatchewan. The quarter section of natural habitat is located at the north end of Dixon Lake, 12 miles southeast of Birch Hills . . .

"Mr. Opseth was truly concerned about wildlife," the Minister continued, "donating this land to ensure its protection". Kowalchuk pledged that the government would work to ensure the land serves the purpose for which he intended . . . "Mr. Opseth's donation is a wonderful gesture, and I hope it will encourage others to follow suit. What could be a greater legacy than leaving a piece of the world, as we know it, to our sons and daughters and their sons and daughters?" the speaker asked . . . — *From Kinistino (Sask.) Post, September 17, 1975. Courtesy of Mike Vikanes.*



COUGARS IN THE QU'APPELLE VALLEY

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The Qu'Appelle Valley stretches for approximately 200 miles in an east-west direction from the South Saskatchewan River to the Assiniboine River just inside the Manitoba border. Cougar reports along its length have continued for the last 30 years and there are rumours of further sightings prior to that date.

The first report in some detail is that of Wilfred Rainville who came upon a cougar in a stubble field north of Sintaluta in 1942. Joe Brown tracked a cougar near Tyvan in the winter of 1946 and Frank Brazier observed a cougar cub in 1960 on Boggy Creek near Regina. There are concentrations of reports in the Vermilion Hills where the Qu'Appelle joins the south Saskatchewan and at Craven, Katepwa and Rocanville. It should be noted that reports occur where good local communications exist, but this does

not necessarily indicate where most cougar sightings occur.

The cub sighting in 1960 is close to where a pregnant female was noted by a railway crew 10 years later and this might indicate a denning area. Craven is at an intersection of valleys in four directions and if a 20-mile radius were taken from there, or any other point on the Qu'Appelle, it gives 1,000 square miles of creeks, coulees, trees and a substantial number of deer, the cougar's primary food. It is near this area that the latest reports have occurred.

George Polsom was driving to his ranch in the summer of 1975 when his headlights picked up an animal like a deer coming out of the ditch in front of his truck. He stamped on the brakes to avoid hitting it and realized that it was a cougar bounding across the road

only 20 yards away. George was familiar with cougars in British Columbia though he had no prior knowledge of cougars in the Qu'Appelle. A few months later, he went to see his cattle at the drinking hole at 4 p.m. on a clear fall day. When he got 30 yards away, he found a cougar drinking and when he got 20 yards away, the cougar paused, looked at him and slowly walked away, with his long tail sloping behind.

In May, 1976, the Palsom's children saw a year-old buck with velvet antlers lying dead in an open field near their farm house. It had a puncture behind the neck and its neck had been flipped back and broken; a substantial amount of meat had been eaten from its side. The Palsom's carried the deer to the side of the road though the deer was subsequently carried by the predator to some nearby trees where it was further eaten. The next evening the Palsom's were gardening when they heard a loud unpleasant series of cat snarls "like a tom cat in the mating season". They looked towards the sounds and saw a cougar walking in the open field 75 yards away. Mrs. Palsom had a clear uninterrupted view and said it had a 4-foot long body, long tail and "it was beautiful". New tracks were found measuring 5 inches in diameter on the side of the road by the dead buck near where it had been carried into the bush. There have been a number of other cougar reports further east of the ranch.

Evaluating reports of cougar sightings is an important aspect of cougar research. People frequently use the term "cougar" indiscriminately for any large cat, and there is a tendency of some people to exaggerate. In the Palsom report the observation in the headlights is the least reliable as mistakes are most easily made when people are taken by surprise and have only a brief look. Uncertain light and driving conditions make mistakes easy.

The report at the drinking hole is excellent as the sighting was at close range, a clear and uninterrupted view in good light, and it was a fairly

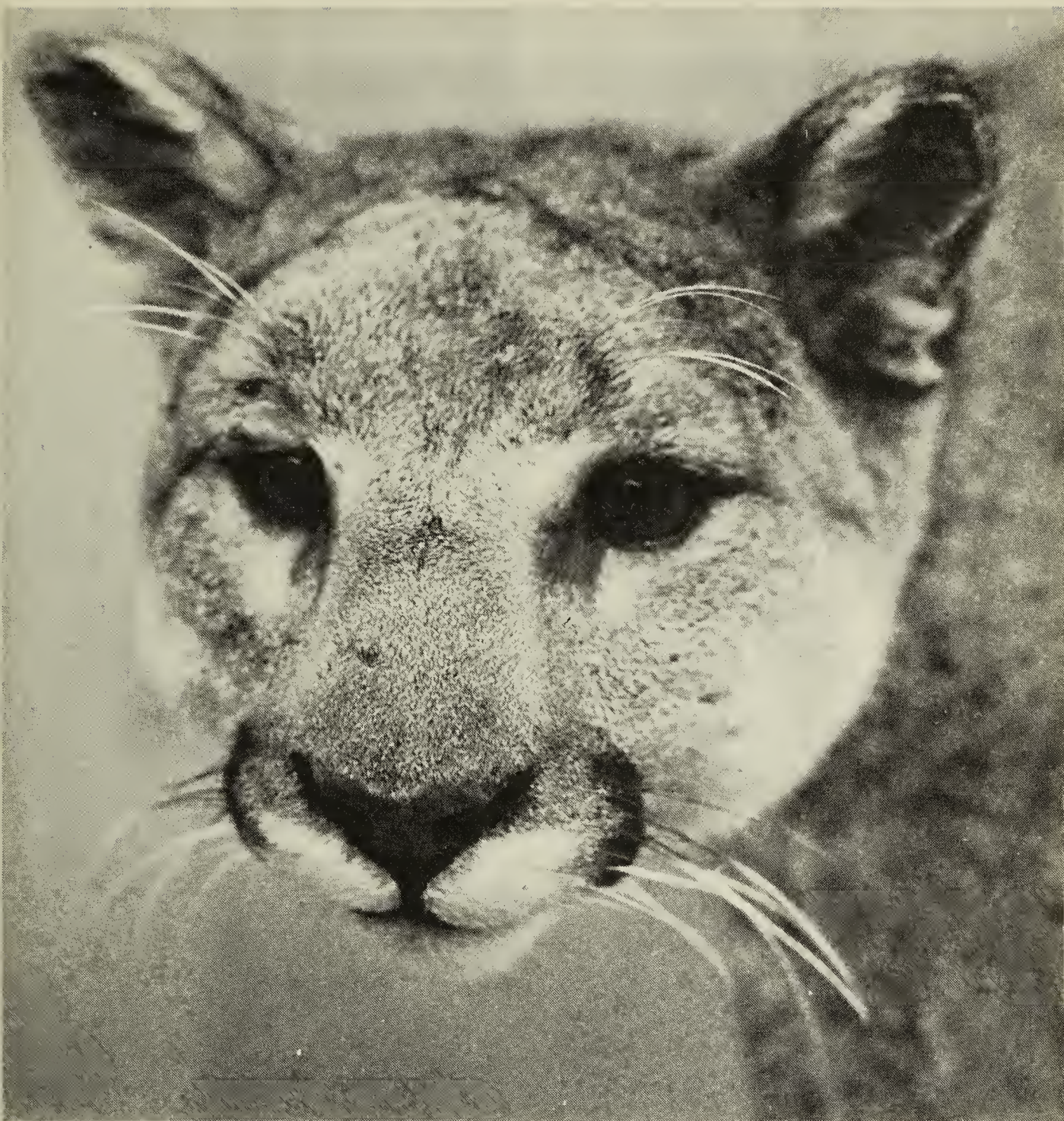
lengthy sighting by a man familiar with cougars.

The deer was killed with a bite behind the neck and the neck flipped back and broken. The deer was subsequently carried off into the bush. This is a typical method for cougars to kill their prey. The carrying of the deer into the bush is very characteristic. Mrs. Palsom's report of the scream are similar to the other cougar screams in textbooks and in other parts of Saskatchewan. The most consistent comparison people make is that of a woman being murdered or strangled on the late night show. All reports emphasize the unpleasantness of the scream. In isolation it would be difficult to be certain that it was not a bobcat or a lynx as they can be loud at night but, as Mrs. Palsom saw the cougar in the open field for some time, it is an interesting corroboration of the cougar screams.

The cougar is described as having a long body and long tail, tawny in colour and as "beautiful". This is often used by people after a chance encounter. The track being 5 inches in diameter is probably the front foot of an adult male cougar. It should be noted that male tracks are larger than female and the front foot is larger than the rear. Female track diameters are normally 3-1/2 to 4 inches for the front foot.

This series of reports indicates one or more cougars occurred near the Palsom ranch in 1975 and 1976.

Reports along the Qu'Appelle, and other parts of the province, occur in all seasons of the year and go back in some cases before the turn of the century. This indicates a permanent resident population which has probably struck a balance with the local deer population. There are no means of relating one report to another as it may or may not be the same cougar. While reports occur over this extended area, it is not known how far a cougar ranges. Most contemporary research suggests the cougar ranges are relatively small though larger than that of bobcat or lynx.



Cougar. A mounted specimen.

Gary Seib

Recently a young male cougar was killed 100 miles away from where it was tagged on Vancouver Island a month before. Possibly young males range widely in the mating season or when they are weaned and leave parental care looking for a territory. Young females may also range for some distance. There would seem little point in mature cougars ranging far from their territory when there is so much cover and prey species. Cougars with young are known to keep close to their denning area. The number of cougars in the Qu'Appelle must be few. It is probable that there are a number

of small groups and an occasional young, free-ranging while searching for territory or mating.

The mysterious cougar will break cover periodically though specimens at Cutknife in 1975, Beau Sejour, Manitoba in 1973, Pasquia Hills in 1948 and the South Saskatchewan River in 1939 are all positive evidence of the presence of this rare prairie species. Consistent recording of cougar observations will improve our knowledge of this rare feline and how it lives in Saskatchewan.

