

# COUGAR SIGHTING AT ROSTHERN

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That the flap of a butterfly's wing in Brazil may set off a tornado in Texas speaks for the interrelatedness of things, particularly to ecology-conscious naturalists<sup>4</sup>. Certainly, the relocation of an osprey nest led to the following sighting three months later.

The nest, located on the bank of the South Saskatchewan River, just southeast of Gabriel's Bridge (9 miles east of Rosthern), was moved from the cross arm of a power pole to a specially constructed platform on a nearby dummy pole on 2 February 1999. The work was done by SaskPower officials and three members of the Saskatoon Nature Society : Stuart Houston, David Miller and Martin Stoffel.<sup>5</sup> The old nest location was a fire hazard, potentially causing power outages – not to mention a dead Osprey – should a wet fish carried by the bird touch the transmission wires.

On 12 May, my wife Dorothy and I were returning from yet another bird drive out Wakaw way,<sup>3</sup> when it occurred to us to check on the nest. Osprey numbers, like those of other raptors, had suffered because of DDT use, but were now recovering. Still, to have these fish hawks nesting this far south was unusual (I still remember my excitement a dozen years ago in seeing a transient Osprey with a foot-long sucker perched on a telephone pole 2 miles from the river). Would they have returned safely from their wintering quarters to resume nesting here?

On this May afternoon (4:30), we were approaching the river from the east. It was the third day of overcast skies – there had been snow two days

previously, with succeeding rain squalls – and the clouds were breaking, then closing in again with periodic showers of rain. A strong south wind was blowing.

On nearing the bridge, we turned a few 100 yards south down the Fish Creek (Rebellion) Road, then swung westerly onto the old ferry road, along which ran the power line. Our view immediately opened up to a large grassy area.

And there before us, moving leisurely south of the road was a Mountain Lion or Cougar, but 275 yards away (I later stepped off the distance). It appeared to be in no special hurry and paused twice to look back at our car. It had a duck in its mouth, possibly a nesting female that it had pounced upon, the bird's wings flapping about.

We were able to watch the cougar, and its prey, for about a minute before it disappeared into some bushes. Our view of it was unobstructed. Longer than a good-sized farm dog, its head and body would have measured about 4 to 5 feet. The head was smallish and round. I particularly noted its high hindquarters, compared to its shoulders, and the thick cylindrical tail sloping down in a curve from the body; but I could not see the tip, which was hidden in the grass. There was a sinuous flow to the big cat's movement.

I have had the privilege of once seeing a Lynx in the wild at a distance of 75 yards, on our farm, 3 miles east of Rosthern, when I was a boy. This occurred on 30 June 1941 as our family, with horses and wagon, was leaving our yard to attend the annual school picnic. The 1999 cougar seemed twice as long.

The Cougar's colour was fairly dark, not the customary yellow-brown, but rather a "dusky" brown, much like that in Allan Brooks' illustration in Banfield.<sup>2</sup> Banfield says that "very few people have observed a cougar in its natural haunts because of its extreme wariness."<sup>2</sup> This one, caught unawares in the open, paid no heed to us, other than looking back, and never changed its pace. (The Lynx of 1941 was equally remarkable in continuing its slow, deliberate walk alongside a poplar bluff without even turning its head, despite the jingling of the horses' harness and our cries of astonishment.)

White has provided an annotated list of specimens, tracks and sight records of Cougars in Saskatchewan for over 20 years prior to 1982.<sup>6</sup> He reports some 300 sightings, with 20 occurring along the South Saskatchewan River, but all of them south of Saskatoon. (A further specimen, 40 miles southeast of the city but not immediately along the river, was shot and killed near Swanson in 1997<sup>7</sup>; this incident led to more reports of tracks and sightings over the last "couple of years", some within a few miles of the city's southern limits.<sup>8</sup>) The nearest sighting to the present one at Gabriel's Bridge is listed for Macdowall in 1972.<sup>6</sup>

White speculated that there might be a native provincial population of 100 Cougars, animals which have been protected in our province since 1979. So, as he said, "the chance remains for an occasional fortunate observer to enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience – a sighting of this rare, beautiful and elusive symbol of wild nature."<sup>6</sup>

I wish to thank SaskPower and the stated members of the Saskatoon Nature Society for making this sighting possible. Like the flap of a butterfly's wings...

**Addendum** : After the sensation of the cougar sighting, we proceeded towards the osprey nest. From some distance away, through binoculars, we saw two adults on the platform, both facing into the gale force wind. They did not fly up. In mid-July two nestlings were banded at the site.<sup>1</sup>

1. Andrews, R. 1999. Young osprey nestlings banded. *Saskatchewan Valley News*, July 21.

2. Banfield, A.W.F. 1974. The mammals of Canada. National Museum of Natural Sciences, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

3. Friesen, V.C. 1997. A June bird drive. *Blue Jay* 55:214-216.

4. Lorenz, E.N. 1979. Predictability: does a flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas? Paper given to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C., 29 Dec.

5. Tratch, R. 1999. Safer home awaits osprey pair. *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*. Feb.3.

6. White, T. 1982. Saskatchewan cougar - elusive cat. Spec. Pub. No. 14, Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina.

7. Zakreski, D. 1997. Big cat startles farmer. *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*. Dec. 10.

8. 1997. Valley Road residents report cougar sightings. *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*. Dec.11.