

## **Animal safari — Kansas style**

*Marsha Henry Goff*

Lately, I cannot take a walk with husband Ray without worrying about being attacked by a vicious, spitting, snarling cougar. That's because my friend Bill wrote a column about cougar sightings in our area in which he also reported that Wilt Chamberlain once claimed to have killed a mountain lion (aka vicious, spitting, snarling cougar) with his bare hands. Wilt even displayed a claw mark on his arm to prove the feat.

While Wilt may have been prone to exaggeration with regard to his love life, I think it is entirely possible that he could have dispatched a cougar using only his hands as weapons. A hand big enough to palm and hide a basketball could easily span the throat of a cougar and choke the life out of it. My protector, however, is on the small side compared to Wilt (but, then again, who isn't?) so -- while Ray's hand could span the throat of a neighbor's ill-tempered kittycat bent on attacking us -- a cougar would have a big advantage in a fight with Ray.

Until now, I have worried only about a random attack by a pit bull, dumped in the country by its felonious owner after the poor beast lost one too many dog fights. I didn't realize that the plethora of deer in our neck of the woods might attract cougars. I'm sure any deer would stand a better chance of outrunning a cougar than Ray or I. Further, I realize that Ray, who runs faster than I, wouldn't have to outrun the cougar -- only me -- but that would be difficult since I would have a death grip on him. Dragging me would undoubtedly slow Ray down and allow the cougar to catch both of us and be rewarded with sufficient food for lunch AND dinner.

I'm not sure he'd enjoy it though. Decades ago, when Ray was a police officer, deer killed by cars were occasionally donated to the Fraternal Order of Police for a banquet. That's only because, for a while, those dead deer were donated to an orphanage until the residents rebelled. "Just because we're orphans," they complained, "doesn't mean we should have to eat these darn deer."

At one FOP venison dinner, we were seated across the table from Ray's partner when another police officer observed, "They say if animals are scared when they die, it makes the meat tough."

"Well," said Ben, who'd been chewing on the same piece of venison for about five minutes, "this deer sure didn't die with a smile on its face!"

However, cougars likely aren't as particular in their culinary tastes as humans. Also, they do have much bigger and sharper teeth, but I think sheer terror would make Ray and me so tough that our cougar would need them.

Frankly, I don't know why a cougar would want to chase us when he could dine without breaking a sweat simply by taking advantage of the many deer alongside our road

who came out on the losing end of collisions with cars. The fact is, SOMETHING is eating those deer and it's clearly not members of the FOP.

We assumed the little band of coyotes we hear yip-yip-yooooing in the middle of the night have consumed the deer, leaving only bones, hair and an occasional set of antlers. However, a large buck that lay on the south side of the road one morning was in a ditch on the north side of the road the next. That got our attention because he had been dragged across the road and halfway up a steep hill.

“What kind of animal do you think did THAT?” I asked Ray.

“A really BIG one!”

“Either that,” I said, “or the coyotes teamed up.”

However, I don't believe that is likely because our experience with coyotes is that the word teamwork is not in their vocabularies; it's every coyote for himself. Even when there are plenty of meat scraps under our deck where Ray tosses them for Susie/Pepper, our vicarious dog, three or more coyotes will always fight over the same scrap of meat. Coyotes may indeed be wily, but the famed cartoon coyote who bears that name confirms they're not real smart. Hmmmm ... I wonder if coyotes can outrun a cougar?

Although one of the recent cougar sightings has been within a few miles of us, I'm trusting that living near a hunting reserve might be a good thing. While we have been known to celebrate the pheasants, quail and chukars (all prey that got away) which occasionally pass through our land heading east, the sound of shotguns just may keep the cougars away.

That's assuming, of course, that cougars are smarter than coyotes.