

Book Review

The beast in the garden: a modern parable of man and nature

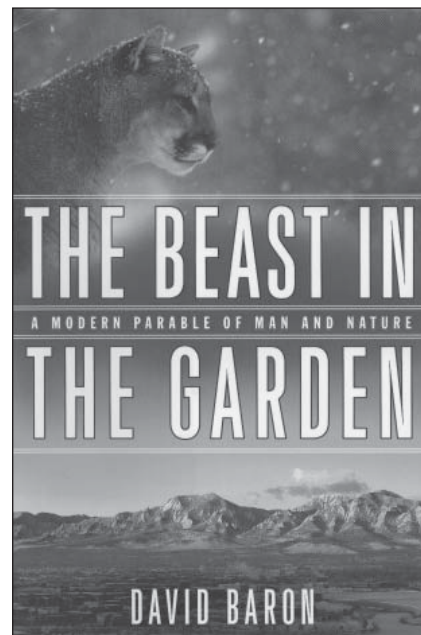
by David Baron. Norton. New York, New York, 2004. 277 pages.

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WHEN I FIRST READ *The Beast in the Garden* shortly after the release of the hardback edition in 2004, I was reminded of the exchange quoted above in the movie, “The Matrix.” Neo (Mr. Anderson) survived. Scott Lancaster, a teenage athlete running in the hills outside of his Colorado high school, died. He probably never heard the mountain lion that stalked and killed him, but after reading David Baron’s book, I believe *we* should have. Had our ears been attuned to the proper frequency, the mountain lion’s approach would have been as loud as the subway train that spelled impending death for Neo. Indeed, according to Mr. Baron, at least 2 biologists, James Halfpenny and Michael Sanders, did note the critical habitat and behavioral changes and signaled the alarm. Yet, those people with the power to pull the switch and redirect the train—policy makers, homeowners, and the general public—couldn’t hear it coming in the midst of the cacophony of their own agendas.

Scott Lancaster was the first adult killed by a mountain lion in more than a century. While it was a shock to the Idaho Springs and Boulder communities—the book quotes the *Colorado Daily*, which characterized Boulder as “peaceable kingdom where the lion lies down with the lamb and everybody eats”—the attack was, sadly, completely avoidable. The prologue informs us that what occurred is “a tale of politics and history, and ecology gone awry.” This is the most important lesson from the book—a mountain lion did not simply walk out of the mountains 1 day and kill a young man. While chance certainly played a role in *who* was killed that day, Baron takes the reader through the complex interplay of history, biology, and

You hear that, Mr. Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability. It is the sound of your death. (“The Matrix” 1999)



politics that set the stage for the inevitable.

The Colorado miners who decimated mountain lion populations in the 1800s unwittingly facilitated the cat’s return in the twentieth century; abandoned mines located in the hills surrounding the city provide ready-made dens for the growing mountain lion population. Boulder’s settlers planted trees and irrigated the plains, creating the proverbial Garden of Eden. By 1991 it was (and is) an idyllic place for humans and their pets. Deer and other wildlife species found the protective shelter of Boulder County’s no-hunting laws combined with the lush environment of the city an ideal place to co-exist with Boulder’s tolerant and protective humans.

In the book’s epilogue, Baron states: “America is engaged in a grand and largely unintentional

experiment.” If one were to design an experiment to investigate whether mountain lions would adapt to a change in the behavior of their prey species, the Boulder microcosm would have provided an ideal laboratory. Mountain lions followed and adapted to their prey. Deer rested during the dark hours and fed in lawns and parks during daylight hours. Mountain lions adopted these habits, which placed them in even greater contact with their diurnal human neighbors.

The howl of the oncoming train did not stop after Scott Lancaster’s death—mountain lions continue to attack approximately 6 people per year in the United States and Canada. Baron argues that “reducing conflicts between people and wild animals will require controls on human actions: where we build our homes, how we landscape our yards, the way we dispose of our trash and house our pets”. While I agree with the sentiment, I disagree with Mr. Baron’s advocacy of control. We can no more control human behavior than we can control the wildlife with whom we now share so much habitat. What we can do is acknowledge that managing human–wildlife conflicts requires us to understand the ecological and social consequences of our actions as we develop and implement policy.

If you are interested in managing human–wildlife conflicts, this book is a must-read. David Baron isn’t a scientist. As some critics of the book point out, the science behind cougar ecology doesn’t definitively support that a Boulder cougar killed a young man in Idaho Springs. The data don’t exist. Fortunately for us all, Mr. Baron’s journalistic background enabled him to take a leap of the probable where few scientific journals are willing to tread. The result is a compelling story that, while it benefits from hindsight, forces the reader to consider that with a little bit of foresight, perhaps we can hear the sound of inevitability. *