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Cougar mom adopts pair of orphaned male kittens

Researchers say mixed family of six could be a first in the world of cougar research.

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Laden with a spotting scope and tracking gear, biologist Howard Quigley heads up a butte overlooking a section of the Gros Ventre River. At the butte's easternmost tip, the executive director of Craighead Beringia South sets up shop next to a gnarled little pine tree.

While its sunny and somewhat warm, a strong wind from the west hammers the exposed point as he shuffles his snowshoes over crusty snow, opens a backpack and attaches a slightly bent antenna to a hand-held radio receiver. For several minutes, he leans against the tree, waving the antenna slowly back and forth, sometimes twisting it or raising it in the air, sometimes holding the receiver up to his ear. As he rotates a small knob on the device, various beeps sound from the speaker.

Eventually he holds his arms out in front of him, indicating a roughly 100-yard wide swath toward another butte about a half mile away on the north side of the river.

"There are five mountain lions between us and those cliffs," he says, explaining a sixth kitten in this elusive family group doesn't have a radio collar, but likely is nearby.

Quigley says the cats probably are hunkered down in the trees to avoid the wind.

Though we never see actual cats, the cluster of beeps indicates an anomaly in the world of cougar research: likely the first documented wild cougar adoption in history.

The matriarch of this family, known to biologists as F27, wears a GPS/radio collar combination. The \$3,500 device sends a signal to the Globalstar satellite network, allowing researchers to download her location four times a day.

Late last year, a hunter shot a female cat named F1, orphaning her three 20-month-old kittens. Researchers used F27's collar to document how she adopted F1's kittens, allowing them to eat, sleep and play alongside three 8-month-olds of her own.

One adopted kitten, a female named F69, has since gone out on her own. Quigley said she appears to be fending for herself quite well. But the two males seem content to stay with their new family. Now more than a year-and-a-half old, the male kittens are as large, if not larger than their five-year-old stepmother, F27.

This adoption is one in a number of odd cougar encounters that researchers have documented in recent years, Quigley explains. Unlike African lions, which live and hunt in prides, scientists previously thought mountain lions live out most of their lives in solitude.

"This solitary carnivore is actually pretty social when it comes down to it," he said.

In F27's case, Quigley said the kittens she adopted probably are related to her, and could even be half siblings. Since female cats like F27 tend to stay close to where they were born, and since F1 was 11 years old when she was shot, there's a good chance that F27 is F1's daughter.

"You'll have kind of a matriarchal society where all the females are somehow related," he said. Also, male cats tend to control a territory that includes the ranges of several

females, so F27 and F1's current litters might have the same father. Quigley said it will take some time to work out the genetics.

While a female cat might normally go into heat and kick out older male kittens, F27's younger kittens ensure that she will remain in mother-mode for at least another year.

The deal likely works out well for F27's two adopted males. Not only do they get a little extra tutelage from an experienced hunter, but F27 is "a killing machine" who is able to take advantage of the abundant game along the Gros Ventre River, said Quigley. Craighead Beringia South researchers have documented at least eight ungulate carcasses in the area, and, while wolves may have played a part, F27 probably did most of the killing in just a few weeks.

But why would F27 tolerate two males sponging off her hard-earned prey? Quigley said wolves might be the answer.

While one cougar on an animal carcass is no match for a pack of hungry wolves, three full-sized cougars might be a deterrent to marauding canids.

There is little scientific evidence to back up these theories, Quigley said. Researchers have documented similar so-called altruistic social behavior with matriarchal family groups among bison, wolves and elephants, just to name a few species.

"You could theorize that these social relationships could be good for prey capture, information, or there might be simply a protection benefit from being together," he said. "Why would you put energy into raising something that is not related to you? It's a great thing to speculate about from a scientific standpoint."

A few days later, Marilyn Cuthill, a wildlife researcher with Craighead Beringia South, observes wolf behavior that lends some credence to Quigley's hypothesis. As she walks up the same butte overlooking a section of the Gros Ventre River, low light and heavy snow makes for poor visibility. But she's able to spy three wolves running down the hill before they disappear in a thicket of willows and evergreens where she knows at least five cats are waiting.

"I heard kind of a wailing sound and lots of commotion, not quite barking, but dog sounds," she said. "As soon as I set up my scope, I saw two black wolves shoot out like a cannon. The third one, maybe a grey wolf, eventually comes limping along."

A few days later we again head up the butte, this time with field biologist Travis Bartnick. Bartnick spent the morning peering through the spotting scope at yet another kill, this one located in a group of trees just below a cliff. Elk and deer are everywhere.

F27 is alone on the kill, but radio collars tell Bartnick that her kittens, both adopted and natural, are close by. At one point she gets up to investigate an elk walking on the hill above her. The ungulate is only 20 feet away, but whatever she's eating now seems to have satiated her appetite.

The cougar sits down and we get our first good look at her face. It seems as though she's peering through the branches right at us. Maybe we're too far away to constitute a threat.

She then lies on her side slowly closes her eyes, dozing in the afternoon sun.

On her neck, the GPS collar continues to send out signals to satellites orbiting above the Earth, giving researchers an unprecedented look at one of the most secretive predators on the planet.

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