



Postcard From the Field: Lion Dreams
 By Margaret Neff

Margaret Neff is a graduate student in anthropology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

She was a crew member on a week-long archaeological survey on the Arizona Strip in the spring of 2008. On the last day of the survey, she was treated to what may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

We spent most of the day surveying below the rim of a side canyon of Grand Canyon, edging around looking for archeological sites that had been noted a while back. We found a few, recorded them on the GPS, took new photos, filled out new forms.

Near the end of the day, we decided to go a little farther to search for a few granaries mentioned in the old field notes. The ledge got thinner, the walk got longer, so we decided to turn back, try it from above where the going was easier. An hour later, we were back to where we had quit, and sure enough the very next bay held some granaries—maybe the ones we were looking for, maybe new ones. We GPSed them too, in case anyone wanted to refind them later, then admired the view before heading back into the trees. I studied the alcove, and decided we could have gotten around to it, if we'd known earlier that we were almost there. I tried to get a view of the granary just below me, but instead spotted a furry leg.

Coyote, I thought? Why was it there? Dead? Alive? In an instant I knew it was alive, an elegant, tawny back leg poised to run off under the overhang. I followed it—I've never seen a coyote this close--followed the leg a long ways, actually, and got not a sharp snout but a broad, whiskered, glow-eyed mountain lion staring straight at me! Instant recognition, and no doubt in my mind what

this beautiful animal was. I turned to Amy, the Park Service archaeologist who was in the alcove recording the granaries.

“There’s a mountain lion!” I said, with some bemusement.



“Huh, really?” she asked, with the careful concern of someone sure I’d ambitiously misidentified a coyote and didn’t want to hurt my feelings.

I looked back down in time to see a very fat tail vanish at great speed beneath a juniper, and reemerge a quarter ways around the alcove. Amy leapt to her feet and started shouting for our other companion. I quick-drew my camera, got four shots as the lion sped around the corner, cleared talus, took an eight-foot cliff in a single leap, and disappeared into the trees.

I blinked, stunned thoughts tumbling through my mind. Huh! Mountain lion. I’ve never seen a mountain lion. I’ve seen a mountain lion! Wow that was fast, Amy and I exclaimed. When our companion rejoined us we asked, “Did you see it?”

“See what?”

“The mountain lion—there was a mountain lion just down there!”

“No way!”

A few minutes more, waiting, staring ten feet down to the sand below the layer we were on, a nice, shady, cool place for a lion to spend the afternoon. Ran another scenario: *if we’d been on that*

layer, *if* there were a corner for the lion to duck around, *if* we'd have been in its way, trapped it in its alcove. Lots of "ifs."



When we got back to Kane Ranch, I proudly showed my pictures around to the rest of the crew. Not stellar images, pretty fuzzy actually, but heck, I'd gotten four shots off! And I had my first lion! No one else in my family had seen a lion that close, much less stared it in the face! Usually the stories run more like "flash of lion butt off an elk carcass as you ride around the corner." Nawh, my story was gonna' be way better!

Everyone slapped me on the back, metaphorically at least. My lion was the story of the hour. Only the next day, after being chased through my dreams by a giant mountain lion—only I was rooted to the spot, typical, right?—did I seriously consider the luck of not being down on the same rock shelf as the lion, of not trapping it in a corner, and instead looming over it from far above. Positions reversed, I'd not have taken it near so lightly.

Still, I'll keep my camera at the ready, for future moments of mutual astonishment in the great good luck of sharing this land with the wildlife.