

November, 2003

Edition



Featured: Raccoon

NEBRASKA WILDLIFE REHAB, INC.

The Critter Chronicle

NWRI Needs Volunteers

WE NEED YOU ... portance of volunteer-as someone having a taking risks, meeting of it, as someone something and usually teering is giving to oth- role with NWRI and



You may ask, "how The answer is simple, it takes an army of volunteers stepping up to the plate every week to assist with the many activities necessary to keep NWRI in operation. And if hands on animal care is not for you, there are several other opportunities/responsibilities that need your leadership. Roles and responsibilities of these positions just as a small sample follow.

that's right ... NWRI needs volunteers. The im- ing cannot be overstated ... it can be thought of mission and purpose beyond oneself. It is about the challenges, helping others. We could think standing on their tiptoes and stretching to reach that something is personal satisfaction. Volun- ers. Volunteers play a very important and useful certainly help our little furry friends.

can you effectively manage so many little lives?" takes an army of volunteers stepping up to the plate every week to assist with the many activities necessary to keep NWRI in operation. And if hands on animal care is not for you, there are several other opportunities/responsibilities that need your leadership. Roles and responsibilities of these positions just as a small sample follow.

"It is in giving that we receive." Saint Francis of Assisi

While we are always happy when we find additional care providers, today we too are in need of two Team Leaders, a Team Leader for our Bird team and a Team Leader for our Raccoon team. The responsibilities of a Team Leader include but are not limited to responding to calls from local agencies (humane societies, veterinarians, etc.) and the public at large (9AM—9PM, 365 days a year), intake from local agencies or public (including transportation if necessary), initial triage of animals including but not limited to assessment, caging, initial care or emergency vet care, paperwork, etc., daily care of animals in Team Leader's direct care, coordination, training, and follow up communications with Team Care Providers to which the animals are transferred, injections if necessary, ongoing communications with AOC Chair, attending monthly animal operations committee meetings, consulting, scheduling and documenting team releases (or other animal outcomes).

A **Corporate Secretary** for the organization who would attend Board Meetings, handle note taking, and note publication, weekly P.O. Box mail pick up and distribution, handle all outgoing correspondence for organization including 'thank you for your donation' letters, keep stationery and re-fill orders, and assist care provider teams with animal input into their data base.

A **Membership Director who** will (with the help of an assistant) handle the annual membership drive, keep membership list current including email addresses, mail out membership applications when requested, provide mailing labels for organization when they are needed, send out 'thank you letters' and membership cards to new members, and attend Board Meetings when called upon to report membership status.

And a **Newsletter Editor and Chief** ... activities to include the creation, editing, printing, folding, tabbing, labeling, stamping, sorting, and mailing of the NWRI newsletter (we have two volunteers to handle the next four editions.)

The term for all these important functions is two years but of course if there is great interest that term can be extended. If you are interested in these or any positions with NWRI, please phone us at 341-8619 or fill out and mail the form provided on page 6 and someone will contact you directly.

So PLEASE step up and be counted ... don't let another day go by ... make a difference ... **come and volunteer with NWRI TODAY!**

"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." Albert Schweitzer

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Meet Debbie Easterling ... a Wildlife Care Provider



Debbie Easterling is one of our most dedicated raccoon care providers. She has worked with NWRI for over

seven years, caring mainly for raccoons and squirrels. She joined in 1996, after finding two orphaned baby raccoons. She wasn't sure what to do with them, so she called the Henry Doorly Zoo and got NWRI's hotline number from the recorded message there.

Soon she found herself rehabilitating five or six raccoons and a litter of squirrels every summer... until this past summer. This past summer, Debbie, like so many of our raccoon volunteers, cared for more than her "fair share" of raccoons. She not only cared for the mother raccoon and her babies featured in this newsletter (see Mother of the Year article on Page 5), she also cared for twenty-one other raccoons at various stages of their rehabilitation. This is approximately one-fifth of the raccoons rehabilitated by NWRI this year.

Although she describes the sum-

mer of 2003 as "just a blur", she never seemed too stressed, and always maintained her love for raccoons. She believes this summer was her most memorable rehab experience to date, due to the sheer number of raccoons with which she interacted, and the variety of raccoons she saw. She not only fed and wilded orphaned babies, but she facilitated the care and release of several injured raccoons, as well the mother and her babies.

Debbie states that her love for raccoons is unavoidable due to the raccoons themselves. "Raccoons have so much personality. They're really a lot of fun (to care for.)" Despite the

"Raccoons have so much personality. They're really a lot of fun (to care for)."

amount of time it takes to feed

baby raccoons, and clean up their messes as they get older, Debbie maintains that she is always happy to have raccoons around. Like so many of us that work with the animals, she says that the most rewarding part of all of the work she does is releasing healthy animals back into their natural habitat.

NWRI and the raccoons of Nebraska are lucky to have Debbie working with us to provide compassion and hope for so many animals every year.

Thanks to Our Many Friends and Donors

NWRI is deeply grateful to the following individuals, foundations, and businesses for their contributions to our work in providing medical management and compassionate care for the injured, sick, and orphaned wildlife that come to our volunteers.

- Barnard & Margaret Fink Foundation
- Greg Kluck
- Annamaria Nagy M.D.
- Betsy Newman



Featured: Raccoon *Procyon lotor*

The common raccoon *Procyon lotor* is probably best known for its mischievous-looking face mask. The name *raccoon* is derived from the Algonquian Indian word *arakun*, meaning "he scratches with his hand." The specific epithet, *lotor*, refers to the raccoon's supposed habit of washing food with its front paws. This activity, however, is probably associated with the location and capture of aquatic prey such as crayfish. The behavior is no doubt innate, because captive raccoons have been observed attempting to "wash" their food in the absence of water.

Distribution

Six species of raccoons occur in North, Central, and South America as well as on some of the Caribbean Islands. However, *Procyon lotor* is found only in southern Canada, portions of the United States, and Central America.

The species inhabits all provinces of Canada except Newfoundland and is gradually expanding its range northward as land is cleared for agricultural purposes. They live in every state in the U.S., except for Alaska and Hawaii. During the 1930s the raccoon was successfully introduced into Germany and the Soviet Union. Today, its range has expanded to include Luxembourg, West Germany, the Netherlands, and France.

Movements and home ranges of raccoons vary greatly depending on habitat, population density, and food supply. The *home range* is the area used by an animal for food, water, and shelter in its normal, day-to-day movements. In rural agricultural areas (eastern North America), home ranges between .5 and 2.5 square miles are common, whereas in prairie habitat, areas as large as 31 square miles have been used by raccoons. At the other extreme, the area utilized by urban raccoons has been documented at less than .06 square miles. Generally, home ranges of individual raccoons overlap, and there is little evidence of territoriality, especially in urban areas.

As with home ranges, raccoon densities vary significantly depending on the type of habitat. Estimates of 5–30 rac-

coons per square mile are common in rural agricultural areas. In urban areas, exceptional numbers of raccoons as high as 300 per square mile have been recorded; however, densities as low as 3 per square mile may occur in prairie habitat.

Raccoons are able to live in a diversity of habitats. The only apparent requirements are a source of water, food, and a protected area for denning. The best habitats are hardwood swamps, floodplain forests, fresh- and saltwater marshes, and farmland, both cultivated and abandoned. On the prairies, raccoons are most abundant in woodlot and wetland areas. This highly adaptable animal is also very common in many cities of North America.

Description

Raccoons are usually a grizzled grey in color and have a conspicuous black face mask and a tail



marked with 5–10 alternating black and brown rings. Body coloration can vary from albino to melanistic (black) or brown. An annual molt of the fur begins in the spring and lasts about three months.

The head is broad with a pointed snout and short rounded ears (4–6 cm). The eyes are black. Total body and tail length for adults averages 80 cm; males are generally 25 % larger than females. Raccoons in northern latitudes tend to be heavier (13–18 lbs) than their southern counterparts (9 lbs). However, fall

weights for adults have reached 62 lbs in some areas. The life span of raccoons in the wild is estimated at 3–5 years; most populations are completely replaced over 7 years. However, longevity records of 12 and 16 years have been noted in captivity and in the wild, respectively.

Diet

Raccoons are omnivorous and will consume practically any food item, plant or animal. Corn, crayfish, fruits, and nuts are preferred, but there is a seasonal shift in diet depending on availability of food items. During the spring, animal matter, including invertebrates and insects, makes up the major portion of the diet. Crayfish are preferred, but muskrats, squirrels, rabbits, waterfowl eggs, and freshwater clams are also consumed. In the summer, plant material, including fruits and nuts, becomes more important. Wild cherries, gooseberries, elderberries, wild grapes, strawberries, and garden items such as potatoes and sweet corn are relished. As well, crayfish, frogs, small fish, turtles, beetle grubs, grasshoppers, earthworms, crickets, and snails are eaten during the summer.

The fall diet is extremely important for raccoons in northern latitudes because sufficient fat reserves must be accumulated to sustain the animals during winter denning. Corn is the mainstay of the fall diet in most areas where it is available; however, acorns, beechnuts, hazelnuts, and grapes are also consumed. The nests of insects, including hornets, bumblebees, termites, and ants are raided mainly for the larvae; the thick fur that is characteristic of the raccoon's fall and winter coat protects it from the stings of irate adult hornets or bees. Fat is built up over the entire body and even around the tail bone and may be 2.5 cm thick on the back. In fact, by late fall about half of the animal's total body weight may be fat. In northern areas the raccoon lives on its stored body fat during the winter, but it continues to forage year-round farther south where nuts and corn are plentiful. In suburban areas, raccoons often raid garbage bins or forage earthworms, beetles, and grubs

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Featured: Raccoon Continued from Page 3

on residential lawns. Raccoons can also be a menace to farmers because they may eat domestic fowl and eggs.

Life history

In northern latitudes (northern U.S., southern Canada), the annual life cycle of raccoons consists of a breeding period during late winter and early spring, a growth and fattening period during the summer and fall, and a winter denning period. In more southern latitudes, winter denning occurs only during periods of inclement weather.

The breeding season generally begins in late January or early February in the northern parts of the raccoon's range. Mating tends to take place in March in most areas. Birth of offspring peaks during May, although births have been recorded as early as March or as late as September. Year-round breeding has been reported for raccoons in southern areas.

Male raccoons are polygamous or will mate with several females in succession. Females, however, are monogamous, and will mate with only one male and will not tolerate other males after mating has occurred. Juvenile females often breed during their first year. Juvenile males, although capable, usually do not have the opportunity to mate until their second year because of competition from adult male raccoons. Litter sizes tend to be larger in the northern part of the range. Between three and seven young per litter are common in northern latitudes; however, litters of two or three young are usually the rule in southern areas. The gestation period averages 63 days.

Raccoons are born without teeth and with eyes closed, and they weigh approximately 75 g. The eyes open at 2 weeks of age, and the teeth erupt at about 19 days. By about 10 days of age the young are already sporting the familiar facial mask and color patterns typical of the species. The young remain in the maternity den for about eight weeks and then leave to forage with the female, although they are not fully weaned for almost two months. The adult male plays no role in raising the young.

The family group, which consists of the adult female and young, is quite sociable, foraging during the night and denning together during the day. The mother teaches her young to climb, hunt, and swim during their first summer. The family unit generally remains together until the adult female has her next litter, usually the following spring. Juvenile males often disperse from the adult females' home range, although juvenile females may remain within the vicinity of the mother's range.

In northern latitudes and during periods of inclement weather, raccoons den up for the winter. This allows conservation of energy (fat reserves) when food is not available. It is not hibernation, but a period of inactivity. The body temperature does not drop, and the animal's activity appears to be governed by the air temperature. Preferred denning sites include hollow trees, stumps, logs, caves, vacant groundhog or fox burrows, and buildings such as barns. In city areas, denning sites include residential chimneys, sewers, garages, attics, trees, and culverts. Adult males usually den solitarily, but the family unit often dens together during the first winter. Communal dens containing as many as 23 raccoons have been reported; however, 4 or 5 is the more common number. Although usually one den is used during the winter, several different dens are utilized for sanctuary during other seasons.

Limits to population

Humans are the major predator of the raccoon. They prize its fur and take between 2 and 4 million pelts annually in North America. As well, thousands of raccoons are killed by automobiles each year. Another major source of mortality is disease. Since 1983, several thousand raccoons have succumbed annually to rabies in the mid-Atlantic and southern United States. The disease is currently spreading north toward Canada. As well, thousands of raccoons die annually from canine distemper, particularly in eastern Canada and the United States. Parasites such as lice, fleas, and

ticks are often found on raccoons, but do not appear to be a significant source of mortality.

Other predators of raccoons include mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, foxes, dogs, wolves, Great Horned Owls, and fishers. However, they are only a minor source of mortality. Malnutrition and harsh winter weather play a greater role than they do in limiting raccoon populations, especially juvenile animals.

Although some records show that raccoons may be long-lived in the wild, many animals succumb during the first year of life to disease, starvation, wild predators, and trappers. In some areas annual mortality rates for raccoon populations have been estimated at 50-60%. Because the raccoon can be easily tamed when young, many people have had their lives enriched by a close association with this intelligent, inquisitive animal. Males, however, may become aggressive as they mature and usually end up being returned to the wild. The raccoon is one of the few creatures that appears capable of making the adjustment from family pet back to wild animal.

Relationship with People

Because the raccoon can be easily tamed when young, many people have tried to make pets of them. This is a dangerous practice due to the fact that not only is it illegal in most areas to keep a raccoon, but they can also carry parasites and diseases that are fatal to humans. All raccoons tend to become aggressive as they mature,

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and reports of severe bites and scratches from "pet" raccoons are reported every year in the United States. People often return raccoons to the wild once they realize they cannot control their pet. This often means death to the raccoon, as it was raised by people, it did not learn the hunting and foraging skills needed to survive in the wild.

For other people, the raccoon is a wily and persistent pest. Raccoons often cause significant damage to agricultural crops such as corn and lesser damage in orchards, vineyards, melon patches, and poultry yards. They are considered undesirable in areas being managed for waterfowl or upland game birds because they destroy nests and eat young. In urban areas, considerable damage to residential roofs, garages, gardens, and lawns has been blamed on raccoons. Often people feel the only solution is to remove the offending animals by trapping or hunting. Problem animals are often trapped live and moved to other localities. This practice, however, may contribute to disease transmission and often means death to the relocated raccoon. Recent studies have shown that relocated raccoons travel extensive distances in short periods of time and are thus an

ideal vehicle for transmitting contagious diseases such as rabies, distemper and parvo. Relocated raccoons also have a difficult time finding food and shelter and avoiding predators. Relocation is often a death sentence for over 90% of the raccoons that are moved.

Habitat improvement for raccoons should include the provision of denning sites such as hollow trees and logs and the planting of crops such as corn as a source of food; however, in city areas little habitat management is needed because the raccoon adapts readily to human-made structures for shelter or sanctuary. Raccoon populations are thriving in most areas, and the species appears secure from any population decline in the foreseeable future.

If you find an injured or orphaned animal, please call NWRI's hotline at 341-8619.

Mother of the Year by Laura Stastny

This year, NWRI rehabilitated over 120 raccoons. As any of our raccoon volunteers would tell you, they were all unique; however, one raccoon stands out strongly in the minds of the rehabilitators who handled her.

In May, the Nebraska Humane Society trapped a large female raccoon at a construction site. She had her three babies in the window well of a house that was under construction and was aggressively posturing at any person who would work in the area of her "den". After she was trapped, her babies were collected and given to NWRI for relocation. As rehabilitators, it would be extremely irresponsible for us to simply drop her and the babies off in a rural area, so preparations were made to hold her in Debbie Easterling's (Animal Care Provider) cage until she acclimated to her release site, and the babies were mobile and able to follow her to a new den. The minute we saw her, we knew we had an extraordinary raccoon.

This mother was large, probably 20 to 25 pounds and had a cataract entirely covering one eye. She also had extreme tooth wear, indicating that she was very old for a raccoon, as most only live three to five years in the wild. By our estimations, she was at least ten years old, living with a cataract, and still able to find enough food to stay healthy and produce enough milk to feed her babies. Her babies were approximately three weeks old at the time and were barely mobile. We were already swamped with orphans of this age and could barely find enough volunteers to feed them all. Because she had only three, we decided to add two orphans to

her brood. She accepted them immediately, pulling them close to her with her hands and encouraging them to nurse. There was never any question that she would take care of "her" foundlings.

Over the next several weeks, she thrived in the cage with her five youngsters, and even accepted two more babies the same age as hers, after all of the young had started to eat solid food. After the babies were over eight weeks of age, and the entire family group was ready to travel, the cage doors were opened and they were released. The mother led her babies into the woods. She returned to the cage every night for the next several weeks to allow her babies to partake of the food that was left there to assist them in their transition to the wild.

Other neighborhood raccoons that came nightly to feed fled the area whenever this female would approach with her babies. Debbie even commented that the other raccoons modified their behavior, coming earlier in the evening than was customary, to eat before the mother raccoon and her babies approached. This female had quickly become the dominant raccoon in the neighborhood, despite her disabilities, although we never observed any aggression by her towards the other raccoons.

She still returns on a regular basis, with her young, to eat at the feeding stations provided. She maintains her dominance and is thriving in her new home.

Annual Member's Meeting

While the turn out wasn't as large as we had hoped, NWRI's Annual Members' Meeting went off without a hitch on Saturday, October 11. The meeting was held in the Nebraska Humane Society's Auditorium from 11 AM to 1 PM.

Maggie Lehning, NWRI President, kicked off the session by giving special recognition to Trina Elia-Swanson (squirrel and opossum Team Leader and Animal Care Provider) for her ongoing dedication and communication with the public. Maggie also shared a story of the evening she and Laura Stastny (Team Leader) had spent with Jeff Corwin from Animal Planet—The Jeff Corwin Experience and got choked up relating a Corwin segment of walking down a long hallway to a vault-like door where behind it could be seen the last remaining individual of a honey creeper species... another bird that soon will be extinct. She went on to introduce the speakers for the event.

Dana Miller, a Nebraska Game and Parks Supervisor, is the Game and Parks liaison for NWRI. She spoke to the group about her organization, its regulations governing rehabilitation groups in the state, and her desire to get to know our group members a little better via home site visits and participating in future NWRI meetings.

Phyllis Futch, NWRI Animal Operations Committee Chairwoman, presented an overview of animal care during 2003, replete with stories and photographs. Some of the highlights of her presentation included: the rarest rehab visitor for the season, a neonate Franklin Ground Squirrel; a banner year in fox releases, beginning with a two-day-old newborn and ending with the release of 11 foxes near Turkey Creek; and the usual flood of bats, squirrels, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, woodchucks and various waterfowl. Remaining for release later this year are two bobcat kittens and a coyote. KMTV 3 plans to cover the bobcat releases in November or December.

The remaining time was spent with questions and answers and discussing the unique and fun responsibilities associated with the volunteer positions that are currently open. If you were unable to attend, we hope you have the opportunity to join us at a meeting some time in the near future.

**Yes, I want to volunteer
and help our animal friends!**

Name

Street Address

City

State

Zip

Telephone

I would be willing to help with:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> fund raising | <input type="checkbox"/> publicity/PR |
| <input type="checkbox"/> membership | <input type="checkbox"/> special projects |
| <input type="checkbox"/> programs | <input type="checkbox"/> education |
| <input type="checkbox"/> supplies | <input type="checkbox"/> cage building |
| <input type="checkbox"/> newsletter | <input type="checkbox"/> animal care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> other: | |

Please mail this form to:

**Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, Inc.
P.O. Box 24122
Omaha, NE 68124**

Fundraising Drive to Begin for 2004

It's that time of year again. Spring is right around the corner and that means lots of little babies will be coming through our doors. And year over year, our numbers have been increasing.

We'll be officially kicking off our fundraising drive this month. As you know, Nebraska Wildlife Rehab, Inc. relies upon a network of unpaid volunteers to rescue, rehabilitate and release the many little friends that visit us.

So please open your hearts. The organization relies on the generous support of the community and friends like you. Your contributions to the NWRI mission are fully tax deductible. You can even adopt a species with a gift designed to ensure the ability of NWRI to continue rescuing injured and orphaned wildlife.

Thank you for the help you have provided in the past and your continued support for this coming year.

Mountain Lion? Not the Kitty Next Door By Laura Stastny

Nebraska Wildlife Rehabilitation, Inc. frequently receives calls regarding mountain lion sightings or general questions from residents of Nebraska and Iowa. Although we are not licensed to handle these animals at this time, we are happy to provide basic education regarding this beautiful cat. At one time, the mountain lion, also known as puma or cougar, was one of the most widely-distributed mammals geographically in North America. Its range stretched from coast to coast in North America and from southern British Columbia in the north, all the way into South America. At this point in time, due to human encroachment and the depletion of habitat and its main food source, the white-tailed deer, the mountain lion is common only in the relatively unpopulated, mountain and desert regions of the western United States. The Florida panther, a subspecies of mountain lion, resides in excruciatingly small numbers in the state of Florida. This subspecies is considered highly endangered.

It used to be said that there are few to no wild mountain lions in the states of Iowa and Nebraska; however, the recent capture of a wild mountain lion within the Omaha city limits not only proved that theory false, it also sparked the fears and imaginations of many Omaha residents. In reality, many of the mountain lions in our states are captive bred and domesticated. If they are ranging free, it is because they have escaped from their enclosures or were released by some misguided individual who realized they could no longer control their "pet". Domestic mountain lions released into the wild have little chance of survival. This is due to the fact that they have inadequate hunting skills or their hunting tools have been taken away from them. Many mountain lions kept in captivity are declawed or have their canine teeth removed. If they do not starve to death, many released mountain lions become nuisance animals and are killed by humans.

In recent years, there have been a few confirmed and several more unconfirmed reports of what are assumed to be wholly wild mountain lions in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa. If it is indeed true that wild cats are inhabiting these areas in regular numbers, it is of the utmost importance that we understand their basic characteristics and behaviors so that we may coexist with them peacefully.

Mountain lions are solitary animals that range in size from about 3 ½ to 5 ½ feet in body length with a tail that can be 2 to 3 feet long. They weigh from 70 to 170 pounds when full grown depending on their gender and geographical location. They do not live or hunt in groups and in fact are generally only together to mate or when a female is caring for her young. A female will give birth to a litter of 1 to 5 cubs only once every two years. Her cubs will stay with her for 1 to 2 years. Mountain lions require a habitat that includes

dense vegetation and rocky crevices or caves for shelter. It would be highly unlikely for mountain lions to choose and remain in an area that was entirely agricultural and did not include these natural land features. Mountain lions are most active at dusk and dawn but are sometimes seen during the day.

Their main source of prey is the white-tailed deer. They will also hunt smaller mammals such as rodents, raccoon, skunks, porcupines and coyote, as well as birds and sometimes fish. Due to their relatively small stature, it is unlikely that they would pose a threat to adult cattle or horses, as mountain lions weigh approximately 1/5 of the weight of an adult horse. Mountain lions will avoid human interaction as much as possible and are unlikely to threaten smaller livestock when other sources of wild prey are abundant.

Male mountain lions are territorial and will mark their areas by scratching grooves into tree trunks and spraying urine. The territory of one male mountain lion may encompass the much smaller territories of several females.

Mountain lions are considered by some to be a potential threat to humans. It is important to note, however, that healthy mountain lions are extremely secretive and will avoid human interaction unless they are cornered and threatened or suddenly surprised by people. They can be dangerous if confronted, and there are documented cases of people in the United States being killed by mountain lions. This fact should not cause panic but should heighten awareness and respect of these cats. If you are in an area where mountain lions are known to reside, it is important to take basic precautions, just as you would if you were hiking in an area where there are bears. Avoid hiking alone and insure that young children and pets are within eyesight at all times. Make enough noise when hiking to insure that any mountain lions in the area will be aware of your presence. Never approach a mountain lion, especially if she is with her cubs or if it is feeding. Most mountain lions will avoid confrontation. Never block their means of escape. If a mountain lion does approach you, back away and do not run. Face the animal and act aggressively, throwing rocks or sticks.

It is unlikely in our area that we will see a burgeoning mountain lion population in our lifetimes. It is important to realize that if they have truly "moved back" into our area, it is certainly in small numbers, and we can coexist peacefully with them. They provide a valuable service in the control of deer populations, as well as the populations of other small mammals. Their presence, if it is truly here and of the wild, undomesticated variety, will help restore some balance to our ecosystem, which currently lacks large predatory mammals.

