State game officers kill three lions that made themselves at home in Keystone

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Life is more relaxed in Keystone these days, following the shooting of three mountain lions that had confronted dogs, strolled through yards and killed deer on city streets.

State Game, Fish & Parks Department officers killed an adult female lion and two 40-pound kittens in Keystone on the nights of May 5 and May 6 after a string of cat sightings in town over several weeks.

GF&P also killed a 2 1/2-year-old male lion at Angostura State Recreation Area near Hot Springs on May 6 because it was hanging out near a park recreational trail, watching hikers and bikers go by.

"The park ranger at Angostura observed that lion for 15 or 20 minutes, just sitting within about 20 yards of the trail watching people go by," said John Kanta, regional wildlife manager for the state Game, Fish and Parks Department in Rapid City. "Because that cat didn't leave and was exhibiting what we believed was bold behavior, we considered it a threat. It was just too close for comfort."

The lions in Keystone were causing widespread unease among locals. People in town had been talking about lion sightings and an occasional photograph of a lion for weeks. They were seen by the Ruby House Restaurant, the Big Thunder Gold Mine tourist attraction and in yards near homes on Highway 40, which winds through town.

"There were a lot of residents getting concerned about safety, especially with the tourists coming in," Big Thunder owner Sandi McLain said. "Everybody said it was too bad they had to be shot, but you've got to consider the safety of your children and the visitors."

McLain points out that it was GF&P that made the decision to remove the lions. And Kanta said it was one he and other officials delayed in hopes the female lion would take her kittens and leave town.

Keystone is a narrow community built mostly along creek bottoms squeezed between forested slopes and craggy mountains. It's perfect lion habitat, with deer and turkey in and near town for lions to hunt.

"It's not like they're walking around at the Rushmore Mall. Keystone is basically built along a road right through the middle of perfect lion habitat," Kanta said. "So we decided we would give that lion a chance to move her kittens out of there."

Instead, Kanta said, the lion kept "doing what lions do," but in situations where it became a
potential hazard to humans. And when the female on Sunday made another deer kill "right in the road near the post office and the Country Store on Highway 40," Kanta said it was "two strikes and you're out."

When a resident saw two lions with a spotlight behind his house, Kanta authorized a GF&P conservation officer to respond and kill the cats. The officer managed to shoot one of the lions.

On the evening of May 6 night a GF&P trapper who specializes in lion removals came in and set up behind the house where the lions were spotted the night before. He used an infrared night scope and a muzzle-blast suppressor to kill the cats with reduced sound.

Kanta said the female lion appeared healthy, as did her kittens. He said he wished she had moved them out of town.

"I certainly don't think that lion was in town looking to eat people. She was killing deer. That's what lions do," Kanta said. "But I don't want lions walking down sidewalks and killing deer out in the street."

The Angostura lion was in some ways more of a concern because it was so intently watching people as they passed nearby, Kanta said.

"We didn't see any reason that cat was sitting there. There was no kill nearby. It was just lying there watching people," Kanta said. "It wasn't exhibiting any fear of people or showing any signs of leaving the scene. It just stayed put. This was different. It was just too bold for our liking."

GF&P records show that 12 lions determined to be threats or problems have been "removed" so far this year. Eleven of those have been killed by GF&P.

There tend to be spurts of lion activity throughout the hills, when an area might have a string of lion reports and more than one might be removed, Kanta said.

"There's no explanation for it," he said. "They just come like this."