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P-22 and His Race Against Time

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Photo taken by Steve Winter for cover of December 2013 National Geographic. Photo and caption taken from [Urban Carnivores](#).

As we drove down Crystal Springs Drive, the concrete jungle of Los Angeles quickly gave way to the green scenery of Griffith Park. Griffith Park is one of the largest urban parks in the United States. With over four thousand acres of land, both

locals and tourists can hike, bike, and enjoy some of Los Angeles' best-known features, including the Hollywood Sign, the Griffith Observatory, and the Greek Theatre.

This park holds other treasures, too, such as a surprising amount of biodiversity. Deer, raccoons, coyotes, vultures, and one solitary mountain lion are just some animals that call Griffith Park home. According to the [Hollywood Sign](#) website, “Researchers have documented about 200 species of birds in the park, about sixty of them year-round residents. Around 50 species of butterflies have been spotted, and 40 species of mammals, including the resident mountain lion, P-22. There are nineteen species of reptiles. But some of the most important residents happen to be the smallest: Harvester ants are a ‘keystone’ species in the park, as they not only collect and disperse seeds, but are the main food source for the increasingly rare Coast Horned Lizard.”

The park is named for Griffith J. Griffith, a mining expert born in Wales who purchased and then donated 3,015 acres to the City of Los Angeles in 1896. According to Juliet Rylah, a writer for *Thrillist*, Griffith “intended to have people recreate themselves through nature, education and entertainment.”

With help from the Department of Parks and Recreation and other non-profit organizations that support the park, Griffith's dream has stayed true. These organizations want to help create a better environment for the people, land, and animals we see today. Around six years ago, the mountain lion known as P-22, came as a new and unlikely star to the park marking him as the crucial indicator of the open space's ecological viability and importance.

Video of P-22 provided by Griffith Park Trail Cam. Posted on Youtube on May 3rd, 2015.

P-22, is currently residing in the Hollywood Hills near the Hollywood Sign and Griffith Observatory. Researchers were able to locate after he was spotted at night moving east on a camera that films wildlife in the park. Friends of Griffith Park researchers captured and placed a GPS tracking collar on P-22 with the help of the Griffith Park's Natural History Survey (GPNHS). He was weighed at 130 pounds and being five to six feet in length, a healthy size and weight. Since his initial appearance in the Santa Monica Mountain Range on February 12, 2012, P-22's presence has brought along an array of potential outcomes for not only his own survival, but also for the entire Griffith Park ecosystem.

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P-22 is in a race against the clock. Griffith Park is a relatively small, green space oasis in the heart of the Los Angeles expansive urban desert where despite his roughly eight mile territory, P-22 finds food, shelter, and a decent roaming space. He is currently the only recorded puma living in such a small territory. *The Santa Monica Observer* states that "The territory range of a mountain lion is 200 square miles, and males will fight to the death over territory. As a young male, P-22 had no choice but to leave his birthplace in the Santa Monica Mountains and strike out to find a territory of his own."

According to P-22 and Griffith Park expert, Miguel Ordeñana, P-22 is constantly seeking his next meals, which consists of 87 percent deer and 13 percent raccoons and coyotes. As he roams through the edges of the park, P-22 leaves paw scrapes on the ground, scratches on trees, and also urnites to show his presence. While the mountain lion is making his rounds surrounding the park, he calls out to any potential nearby mountain lions, letting them know that if they are male, they've entered his territory and, if the lion is female, that he is available. Since he is the only known lion in this small habitat, the chances of either call being heard are remote.

The big cat's diet consists of mainly deer and P-22 tracks their movements throughout the park. The difference in his mobility through the park can vary. He has no problem staying for extended periods near a herd of deer, but also has been reported to move from one side to the other in a matter of a couple hours. Despite his apex predator diet, and close proximity to the urban environment, he hasn't been reported to have killed or eaten any residential pets or animals. Before P-22 arrived, coyotes were at the top of the food chain, but once the big cat put his paw in the park, that all changed. He is now at the top of the ecological food chain, placing the coyotes second. It's not too bad for the coyotes (unless he catches one) because P-22 leaves plenty of prey scraps behind for animals lower in the food chain.





Photo of P-22's tracks taken by Martyn LeNoble on April 11th, 2018.

Even with all of Griffith Park's biodiversity, P-22 is regarded as the park's star, and not just because he lives next to famous movie and music stars, but because he most likely crossed both the 101 and 405 Freeways to get here. His unique identity is due to the fact that he is the only mountain lion to have successfully accomplished this perilous feat.

Genetic testing at the Robert Wayne Lab at UCLA has traced P-22 to the same 10–15 mountain lions inhabiting the Santa Monica Mountain range, including P-1 who is his father. The small number of lions in the Santa Monica Mountains and the population's isolation has led to speculation of inbreeding. The Santa Monicas are surrounded by freeways and the Pacific Ocean. Unless they traverse hostile urban environment and a network of freeways, as did P-22, there is essentially no way for these cats to disperse or for new genetic lines to enter.

Unless a female lion braves the urban areas and freeways between P-22 and her, he is a genetic dead end with no means of reproduction. Nonetheless,

hope springs eternal and P-22 roams the park looking for his next meal and a mate.

The closest female mountain lion to P-22 is in the Verdugo mountains which means that she is also surrounded by urban development. She would have to cross the I-5 or 134 freeways to make it to P-22. Mountain lion populations in the nearby Santa Susanna, Verdugo and San Gabriel Mountains are also unable to reach the Santa Monica Mountains lion population. P-22 is even more isolated, stuck in Griffith Park with freeways to the north, east, and west. Unless a female lion braves the urban areas and freeways between P-22 and her, he is a genetic dead end with no means of reproduction. Nonetheless, hope springs eternal and P-22 roams the park looking for his next meal and a mate.

P-22 isn't just unlucky in love. In 2014, when he was captured to replace his tracking collar, biologists discovered that he had eaten rat poison (anticoagulant rodenticides). Anticoagulant rodenticides cause mange, a parasite skin disease that has been reported to have infected bobcats in the Santa Monica Mountains. Researchers and trackers are keeping a close eye on him because of the scattered locations where the rat poison is placed.





Photo by Olivia Brown taken in Griffith Park on March 30th, 2018.

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There is a small sliver of hope in the series of tunnels that run under the I-405 freeway. Since the tunnels are so long and dark, the mountain lions that travel them usually get scared and backtrack back before they can get to the other side. In

order to fix this problem, biologists who are currently studying mountain lions in the Los Angeles area have suggested building a freeway overpass over Liberty Canyon Road. These biologists have chosen Liberty Canyon because it features open space on both sides of the 101.



Proposed overpass above the 101 freeway.

This proposal will help the cats disperse in order to spread genetic diversity, a biological imperative. Some estimates put the cost of the overpass at \$60 million. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “So far, the effort has raised \$3.6 million, including \$1 million from the Annenberg Foundation, \$250,000 from the Leonardo Dicaprio Foundation, \$100,000 from the Boeing Co., and \$175,000 from an 80-year-old couple in Kansas,” The National Wildlife Federation officials said.

There are some people who are not fond of the land-bridge proposal. Paul Scrivano, 51, of Agoura Hills, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the wildlife overpass is “a rotten idea.”

Scrivano says, “Spending a single dollar on a dirt bridge that benefits not a single taxpayer is dangerous. Giving money to help blood-thirsty predators instead of first responders and public health and safety is nuts.”

What Scrivano might not see is that P-22 and these many other animals desperately need Los Angeles’s help in order to survive and thrive. *A Sand County Almanac*, by Aldo Leopold, addresses the land ethic with the idea that both humans and the land must take care of each other. It is very important that all these animals living here, in Griffith Park, are given the chance to coexist within the urban lifestyle of Los Angeles. People like Miguel Ordeñana and Martyn LeNoble devote their entire lives to make sure that these animals and the knowledge of these animals will live on. Human kind is the main reason why P-22 and these other animals are facing these situations. We took over their land so it is only right for us to fix the things that we changed.

When the \$60 million goal is reached, this effort to save the species native to California will come into effect. The goal of living in an urban setting with native wildlife will be attained if Leopold’s theory of land ethic is applied. We can all benefit in a positive way if each member of the community is treated with respect.

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If you would like to donate to help build the overpass, please visit the website below:

<https://savelacougars.org/giving/>

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