



Wild Lands Advocate 11(4): 8 - 9, August 2003

Wildlife Conservation Loses Ardent Defender

Ian Ross

Son, brother, uncle, friend.

Wildlife biologist.

Born December 16, 1958 in Goderich, Ontario.

Died June 29, 2003, age 44, near Nanyuki, Kenya in a light aircraft accident while radio tracking lions for the Laikipia Predator Project.

Born in southern Ontario, Ian was a true outdoorsman from the beginning, running a trapline even during high school. He graduated from the University of Guelph with an honours degree in wildlife biology in 1982. He began his field career working on a variety of wildlife species including snapping turtles and black bears. He headed west looking for new challenges, driving his pickup truck, packed with all of his possessions, out to Alberta.

A short stint working as a beekeeper near Hythe in northwestern Alberta was followed by a job as a wildlife biologist with a small Calgary consulting firm. Here he had his first experiences with grizzly bears, studying the effects of industrial development on the great bear southwest of Grande Prairie. It was the beginning of an illustrious 20-year career conducting research on large mammals, principally large carnivores in western Canada.

He began work on the Sheep River Cougar Project with Orval Pall and Martin Jalkotzy in the early eighties. Many happy days in the field were spent snow tracking cougars for hundreds of kilometres up and down the foothills of Kananaskis Country. His joy working on the cougar project was prophetically cut short when his mentor, Orval Pall, died in a plane crash while radio tracking bighorns in the Rockies in June 1986.

However, the die was cast. Ian and Martin continued the Sheep River Project through 1994. The 14-year project became the most intensive study of cougars in Canada and one of the longest running research projects on *Puma concolor* in North America. The work also allowed him to participate in the drafting of a new management plan for cougars in Alberta as well as the draft conservation strategy for large carnivores in Canada, a project initiated by WWF Canada.

The cougar attracted much attention and Ian used that attention to foster a thoughtful and effective wildlife conservation message to all those who came out to his many public speaking engagements. His work on the cougar project received national recognition on CBC's Morningside with Peter Gzowski. Arthur Black of CBC's Basic Black radio program followed along with Ian and Martin while they radio-collared a cougar. Several dubbed it some of the best radio they had ever heard.

Ian was also a very, very good writer. He was the senior author of nine papers in peer-reviewed journals in addition to many other technical reports. He regularly served as a reviewer for peer-reviewed journals as well. In addition, he wrote popular articles on cougars; one was published in the internationally known magazine, *Natural History*.

After the cougar project wrapped up, Ian and his colleague Martin continued to work together conducting environmental impact studies in western and northern Canada. He continued to have a tremendous positive impact on both the projects and the people with whom he worked. Of particular note, he recently rewrote the grizzly bear status report for COSEWIC, meticulously documenting current information on the bear in Canada. He also worked tirelessly with our professional organization, The Wildlife Society-Alberta





Chapter, dealing with wildlife conservation issues. He served as president of the Chapter in 1997.

Ian also continued to capture wildlife for other research projects, something that he did better than most any other biologist, and in doing so he assisted many graduate students with their research. Over his career, he captured more than 100 cougars, 100 grizzly bears, and 800 bighorn sheep, along with countless black bears, moose, and mountain goats. He conducted his capture work using an exacting professional approach while at the same time retaining an empathy for the wildlife he was pursuing. He cared for each individual and did his utmost to conduct captures in a humane manner. Last year his capture work was on a Discovery Channel program that showcased grizzly bears.

However, the environmental assessment process, endlessly mitigating and judging the significance of cumulative effects, was frustrating to him. That work bound him to a desk and away from the fieldwork and research that he truly loved. Ian jumped at the chance to participate in the Liakipia Predator Project, a study of large African carnivores in central Kenya designed to find ways to allow for the coexistence of hyenas, lions, leopards and people in the agricultural matrix that exists outside national parks in most of southern Africa.

Ian understood that if these predators were to survive in the long run they had to be able to exist outside of the national parks. His time was largely volunteered. Money was never really an issue for Ian. He was much more concerned with the conservation of wildlife and their habitats.

His conservation ethic permeated all of his life. He did not consume needlessly. He rode his bike in Calgary and used public transit. He took the bus to Edmonton to visit his brother when taking his truck would have been much easier. He had a garden and recycled. And he encouraged all of us to do the same. His email contact list included all three levels of government. These weren't professional contacts, but those who continually needed reminding that what they were doing didn't make sense and that there were better ways of doing things.

Ian spent his recreational time in wild places as much as possible. He and his wife of 20 years, Sheri, loved to hike the foothills of the Rockies west of Calgary, as well as more far-flung locales. The U.S. desert southwest, the Canadian Arctic, Mexico and Africa were all places he returned to. He loved to hunt elk, deer and moose for his own table, and more recently he enjoyed learning to fly-fish both in mountain lakes and in the Gulf of Mexico. At the same time he vigorously opposed the senseless trophy killing of wolves, bears and cougars.

At one time a bit of a loner, Ian had grown to become a committed and emotional friend and family man. He always remembered everyone's birthdays. Ian's dry sense of humour was famous. We will never forget his recent letters from Kenya describing the goat stew (scavenged from a lion kill) or the haircut performed by his mechanic.

"Last night I got a haircut. First time since I left Calgary, almost 4 months ago. Only those who remember 'The Mod Squad,' or Michael Jackson when he was still black, can appreciate what I looked like. My hair was the widest part of my body, and my hat just sort of perched on top of it like a bird dropping. Joe cut my hair. Joe is the mechanic here at the Centre. He's a good mechanic."

Having no children of his own, Ian was a hero to his young nieces, nephews and children of friends who thought that his was the most important and exciting job of all. What uncle could match Ian when he produced the perfect fossilized tyrannosaurus tooth found on one of his Alberta expeditions?

Two days before his death he was on top of the world, having collared his first leopard. Many family members and friends were planning to visit him and he was busy organizing their upcoming visits to the research station in August. On the evening he died, Ian was tracking a radio-collared lion from a light





aircraft. Searchers located its wreckage the next morning. As he wished, he was cremated and his ashes dispersed in Kananaskis Country, where he had spent so much time with his cougars. Ian Ross died at the peak of his career, doing what he loved.

More than 200 people attended a memorial service for Ian held on July 27, 2003 in Millarville. It was a measure of Ian that people came from such long distances to share their memories, laughter and tears.

As we all struggle with Ian's death, some comfort might be found in the sentiment that no one who is remembered really ever dies. Our memories of Ian as an exceptionally competent biologist, an ardent conservationist and a man of humanity, humility and a wicked sense of humour will endure. – Lorne Fitch, friend and colleague

AWA is deeply saddened by the loss of our friend and colleague, Ian Ross. Ian will be remembered as a gentle man, who took great pleasure in sharing his experiences and knowledge. He helped many to see cougars as a peaceful adversary. Ian requested that AWA receive memorial bequests in his name and we are sincerely appreciative.

