

Secrets of the Ghost Cat

1 x 60 High Definition Film, by Jake Willers and Gianna Savoie
Brief Proposal, August 16, 2010



High in the quiet Sierra Nevada wilderness, the pristine winter stillness is broken by the sound of snow crushing beneath the purposeful marching of boots, and the labored breathing of someone striving to get somewhere fast. We know before seeing her face that it's a woman, each of her strides mingled with danger and urgency. She is on the trail of a hunter, stalking a stalker. . . And then we hear the low, throaty snarl. Face-to-face with her target, the majestic mountain lion, she raises her rifle; there's one chance to get it right. With a deep breath she pulls the trigger and the animal growls wildly and falters. The sedative's effects are immediate. The woman is not a hunter, but a biologist and she must work fast to get what she needs. She doesn't know it yet, but this is a big cat with a big secret, one that hasn't been documented . . . until now.



In this one-hour film, biologist, Alyson Andreasen leads us deep into the spectacular Great Basin wilds to uncover the previously hidden truths in the life of a group of cats living in the most mountainous region of America. Rarely seen in the wild, the mountain lion has garnered the name, "Ghost Cat" for a reason; up to now we have had a limited view into their lives. But Alyson, an adept detective in her own right, is well-equipped with the technology, the talent, and the tenacity to conjure these phantoms. We'll accompany Ali and her filmmaker husband and field assistant, Jake Willers as they track and film these animals from alpine forests to high desert. As the daily dramas of the cats' lives unfold, we begin to peel away the myths that shroud this animal. Over the course of the hour, we come to care about the lions not merely as a species, but as individual characters, each with their own fascinating stories to share. And we make a shocking revelation along the way. . .

Alyson is not the usual suspect when it comes to catching mountain lions. Most of the burly, seasoned trackers with whom she comes into contact peer over her shoulder looking for the ‘man-in-charge.’ But her looks and femininity conceal her true nature. Having worked for many years with another of America’s large carnivores, the black bear, Alyson is no newcomer to this arena. It’s dangerous work – and very much hands-on. We find ourselves in the thick of the action right from the start, as we face with Ali the challenges of capturing and fitting 24 lions with GPS satellite collars.

As the information rolls in from the collars in real-time, we are able to tap into where each cat is at any given moment. The fact that we will always know the locations of two-dozen lions grants us exclusive access into this animal’s world as never before possible and increases our odds of capturing some unique footage. We will also make use of remote, thermal-imaging, infra-red, and critter cams which will not only illuminate some of the cats more secretive behavior, but also add to the mysterious nature of the film, itself.

Mountain lions are masters of the hunt. And when it comes to predation, the general belief has been that they prey mainly on ungulates like mule deer and bighorn sheep. But “Red,” the cat Alyson captured at the top of the film, is doing something different. As Ali hikes up to the location where Red has been feeding, she discovers an exposed ribcage, indicating that Red has acquired the taste for a different kind of prey – wild horse. Lions will occasionally take a horse to supplement their diet, but Red seems to have developed an appetite *only* for horse. Ali is intrigued, but casts his behavior as atypical. Still, he is one to keep an eye on . . .

Through CGI, we are treated to an illuminating natural history lesson where we explore the anatomy and locomotion of this perfect predator. Because they are the most exclusive of meat-eaters, almost every feature of this cat's body is related to the way it detects and catches its prey. Even the cat’s whiskers are specially adapted as tactile sensors; during prey capture they are extended like a net in front of the mouth so the cat can determine exactly where the prey is to accurately inflict the killing bite.

An adorable blue-eyed kitten scowls at the camera -- it’s hard to imaging her as a killing machine. Jake is holding her by the scruff of the neck as she hisses and bats at him in protest. Alyson is shoulder deep in a crevasse and emerges with another kitten, a little male. Meet Juniper and Rocky, eight-weeks-old and full of beans. Their mom, Verdi, stepped out to forage, so Ali and Jake seize the moment to collar and observe the kittens and set up a remote camera at the den. As the kits chase and wrestle each other, Ali takes notes and explains how their



play at this young age has a purpose – they are honing their skills for the day they strike out on their own. Soon enough, Ali picks up Verdi’s signal -- she’s returning to the den. Jake and Ali make a hasty retreat, but the remote camera captures the tenderness of the mother and child reunion. She licks their faces as she inspects them. She’s a good mom. We’ll follow her and the kits as their relationship develops and their personalities emerge.

Alyson knows well that life in the wild is unpredictable and her work comes with its heartbreaks as well as its joys. The odds that all her lions will make it through a field season are slim. Some will die. Despite their fearsome reputation, as we spend time with these animals, we come to understand just how vulnerable they are. They fall victim to illness as well as to hunters – both human and animal alike. Ali relays the story of “Lou,” a two-year-old disperser who was killed and eaten by another lion who was defending his territory. As Ali shares a photo of Lou and pulls up his map on the computer, we learn that Lou, in the course of a week, had traveled 120 miles over some of the toughest terrain in America, seeking a place to call home. Then his collar went into mortality mode. Ali’s eyes well up as she continues the story. Tearfully, she pieces together the scenario for us. Though she completely understands the circumstances that led to his death, the reality of it is tough to bear – even now. She has formed a bond with each cat that she has collared and she is invested in them all.

Big cats require big country. Having the greatest range of any wild land mammal in the Western Hemisphere, mountain lions have become embroiled in an all-out turf war, fueled by high emotion. Some hunters believe the cats are having an impact on the mule deer population and would rather see the lions eradicated than have to compete for their quarry. Others feel the cats provide a service, keeping ungulate populations in check, naturally. And when it comes to wild horse predation, the big cat's role is fraught with controversy. Voices from every camp magnify the complexity of these issues and add a profound sense of urgency to another aspect of Alyson’s work.

In addition to collecting data on prey species, Ali has developed a scientific model to tap into how the lions are using the landscape. Predicting how these cats move around the state will help government agencies, wildlife managers, and land-use planners in an effort to create wildlife corridors to minimize human-lion conflict and maintain linkages of critical habitat between lion populations.

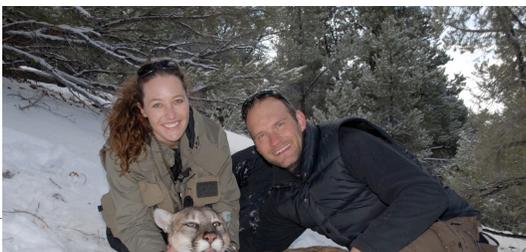
Alyson has been busy tracking the patterns of Verdi and her new family. And in doing so, she discovers something completely unexpected. Verdi has been spending an awful lot of time in horse country lately. Could it be that she, like Red, is specializing?

Further investigation confirms her suspicions – Verdi is going after horses as well. Confounded, Ali takes a closer look at her data. As new cats are collared and the data begins to pour in, she finds yet another cat is taking horses...then another. As it turns out, *half* of the lions she has collared to date are preying almost exclusively on wild horses -- and not just the ones in their immediate range. When Ali tracks two males 100 miles south to prime deer and bighorn sheep habitat, she discovers it isn't the sheep they are after – it's the horses. Specializing on any species to this extent has never been documented before, and wild horse predation on this scale is totally unheard of. It's time to set up some cameras.

Alyson and Jake pack their gear and head off to horse country. Joined by wildlife cinematographer, Joe Pontecorvo, they set up camp in the area where Verdi, now equipped with a critter cam, has been feeding. Her last meal was a little over a week ago and Ali knows she'll hunt again soon -- she still has Rocky and Juniper to feed. Hunting will take place under the cover of darkness, so any chance of getting a shot will require a team effort. Ali keeps tabs on Verdi's locations. With a thermal imaging scope, Jake keeps his eyes trained on the trees. Joe stands by with an infra-red camera. Ali hones in on Verdi's location, but she remains out of site. Video diaries capture the whispered excitement and nervousness of the crew as they stand constant vigil. After a series of sleepless nights and false alarms, the thermal imaging scope picks up a figure skulking in the brush in the distance. And it's a figure most feline. . .

Of course, we can't predict for certain that we will get a shot of the lion taking down a horse, but the effort that goes into trying only adds to the dramatic tension. If we succeed, it will be the first time it has ever documented. If we don't, it will serve to reinforce just how stealthy these predators truly are. One thing we know for certain is that by the next morning, a horse has been taken. And our cameras will capture a cat feeding on its prized kill.

The wild horse's place in the American West is an issue that has long ignited passions on both sides. Yet, both horse advocates and their opponents may have found an unlikely ally in the mountain lion. We'll hear from those who view the horses as a nuisance and welcome the lions' killer instinct, as well as wild horse advocates who see the lions as providing a natural alternative to the government-sponsored culling. Alyson's work may not settle the differences between the two sides, but her findings are challenging previously held perceptions and stimulating a fresh dialogue about wilderness and the striking the balance between predator and prey.



Though we may not know the true impact the lions are having on the horse population by the end of the film, Alyson's significant

discovery has kicked the door open to further exploration. Is this occurring in lion populations elsewhere? Is it something learned or inherent? Will Verdi's kits grow up to be specialists too? Through Ali's ground-breaking field-work, we will glean a brand new insight to the complexity of these mysterious predators.

At the heart of this film is the story of the mountain lion as the quintessential representative of all that is truly wild on this earth. Through the fervent mission of one small woman to champion one big cat, we come to understand the fates and fortunes inherent in nature and celebrate the infinite value of wilderness. Lucky for us, Alyson Andreasen is just getting started.

SECRETS OF THE GHOST CAT CREW

Jake Willers, Producer



Jake Willers is an international TV presenter, producer and cinematographer. He has traveled to over 30 countries and filmed in some of the most inhospitable places on earth. Having grown up on a wildlife park that he managed for many years, Jake gained a wealth of experience and a passion for the natural world, which he now injects into his filmmaking.

Jake has hosted 30 wildlife shows, which have enjoyed success in 147 countries over the past 10 years, working with channels including National Geographic Channel International, Nat Geo Wild, UK and Channel FIVE, UK.

In 2007 Jake moved to the US and formed NineCaribou Productions, a production company dedicated to expanding people's knowledge of wildlife and the world around us.

Gianna Savoie, Producer and Writer



Gianna Savoie is a New York-based Natural History writer, producer, and director with a passion for the environment that drives her to sink her teeth into some of the most critical conservation issues on the planet. Trained as a scientist, with a Master's degree in Environmental Biology, she pairs her love of science with the art of filmmaking to craft stories that not only inform, but resonate.

Her work has appeared on PBS, National Geographic, Discovery, and Animal Planet, among others. In addition to filmmaking, her stories and articles have appeared in print publications around the world and on the web.

Gianna spent nearly a decade working for the PBS series, NATURE, where she wrote and co-produced the award-winning film, "*Life in Death Valley*." Her most recent film, "*Wolverine: Chasing the Phantom*," which she made for NATURE and National Geographic Channel International has

recently been awarded “Best Film Made in Montana” by the International Wildlife Film Festival. It is scheduled to premiere on PBS in November, 2010.

Alyson Andreassen, Biologist and On-camera Talent



Alyson Andreassen is a PhD student at the University of Nevada, Reno in the program of Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Biology. The title of her dissertation research is Characterizing Mountain Lion Distribution, Abundance, and Interactions with Prey. She has captured 13 mountain lions and fitted them with GPS tracking collars since her study was initiated in January 2009.

Alyson has primarily self funded her research by securing over \$200,000 in funding for her project to date through grant writing to various funding organizations. She has also been successful in gaining the support of local and international wildlife organizations.

Previous to her PhD research, Alyson obtained a masters degree from the University of Colorado where she examined the redistribution and change in behavior of black bears frequenting urban areas of Colorado Springs. While volunteering with the Nevada Department of Wildlife, trapping urban nuisance bears, Alyson was featured in the documentaries *Rogue Raiders*, which aired on Nat Geo Wild, UK and *Animal Extractors* on The National Geographic Channel.

Joe Pontecorvo, Cinematographer



Joe Pontecorvo, is an award-winning producer and cinematographer. His fascination with the natural world and curiosity about other cultures has taken him around the globe - from Siberia to Africa, Thailand to Peru, Alaska to Borneo.

Joe’s recent work includes the creation of a four part documentary series, “*MEKONG Soul of a River*” for Animal Planet International and Discovery HD, a one-hour special, “*Kingdom of the Elephants*” for Animal Planet International, and three travel shows, *Rudy Maxa’s World* for PBS.

He is currently in production on a three-hour mini series for the PBS series, *NATURE* called, “*Bears of the Last Frontier.*”