

## The Pleasures of Solitude

*Carving out time for solo pursuits isn't easy. But it's more rewarding – and necessary – than you might think.*

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*By Ann Japenga*

I HAVE TO ADMIT I WAS FEELING A LITTLE COCKY THAT DAY TWO SUMMERS AGO as I strolled down the pine-scented Round Valley Trail. After all, most of the world was at work on this sunny afternoon while I was enjoying perks of the self-employed-a midweek day off and an uncrowded mountain.

What's more, I was indulging in one of my favorite activities, a solo ramble in the mountains above my home in Palm Springs. With no chatty companions to distract me, I could allow my thoughts free range.

As I neared the end of my hike, I was thinking about the big slice of pie I'd dig into at the cafe at the end of the trail and the phone calls I'd return after the tram ride down the mountain. But my reverie was interrupted by a shattering scream.

The alarm came from my right, where a granite outcropping blocked my view. I hurried past the obstruction to see if someone was hurt.

Glancing up a bouldered slope, I saw not a person but a deer, immobilized, not even an ear twitching. Then a round face came into focus just above the deer's back, and a pair of almond eyes locked on mine. I was staring full into the face of a mountain lion. A lion in mid-attack. A lion within two leaps of me. (The horrifying screech had been an attack call meant to paralyze the prey with terror; my approach had apparently foiled the initial pounce.)

I took one step back so my body was partially shielded by the rock, then froze. I'd read enough about mountain lions to know I shouldn't turn my back and run. The cats often attack from behind, severing the victim's spinal cord with incisors designed for that purpose.

More remembered advice: Since mountain lions are most attracted to solitary prey, you should never hike alone.

My smugness vanished. I'd occasionally pondered the wisdom of hiking by myself, but I'd never fretted about it. Trekking solo in the mountains gave me such a rush that I frequently turned down invitations to go with a group.

But now what I most desperately craved-indeed, the very thing that could ensure my survival-was company. Frozen there beside that rock, I promised whatever entity hears such bargaining that if I lived, I'd never hike alone again. I'd been foolish, foolish, foolish. How dare I think I could safely go solo?

After what seemed like hours but was really about 20 minutes, I heard voices up the trail, and then two backpackers arrived. I whispered to alert them, and we huddled for a moment, weighing how to proceed. They unsheathed hunting knives, and I armed myself with rocks. Bunched together for safety, we inched down the trail.

When we were at a safe distance, I stole one look back. At some point the cougar had retreated into the brush, but the doe was still riveted in place. I regretted having to abandon her. After all, now I knew exactly how it feels to wait on the whim of a predator, all alone.

In the days that followed, my world got a lot smaller. I felt edgy and skittish, afraid to stray from company. It was as if the big cat really had snipped my spinal cord and robbed me of my independence. Suddenly I had earned membership in a club I'd never wanted to join: women who are afraid to do things by themselves.

Nearly every woman I know has drawn clear limits for herself in this regard. One normally self-assured pal won't drive alone after dark from one edge of L.A. to the other. Another friend dreads flying by herself. Some women won't eat out or go to a movie on their own. I know a 53-year-old mother of two who backpacks solo but won't visit a big city alone. And few of my friends would consider taking a vacation by themselves.

Some of their fears, of course, stem from real dangers. The specter of assault by a shadowy stranger is a big reason women hesitate to consider escaping alone.

But anxiety over going solo works on other levels, too. After all, we live in a society that puts a premium on relationships. Much of what we actually fear about doing things alone is the mere appearance of being by ourselves. Regardless of how content we may feel, we don't want others to notice that we are, in essence, dateless. And once we start worrying about how others see us, the next step is to wonder if we are indeed strange for setting out unaccompanied.

Then there's the fear of introspection. Many women would rather stand off ten mountain lions than spend an unstructured and unattended Sunday at home. With no one to distract us, we may find ourselves wrestling with inner demons, facing up to emotional issues we'd rather push aside.

But spending time alone is essential to a healthy psyche, says Ester Buchholz, a psychology professor at New York University and author of *The Call of Solitude*. It doesn't matter whether we prefer an afternoon at the library or a weekend in the wilderness; any solo interlude is a valuable opportunity for renewal.

"The need for solitude exists in all people to varying degrees," Buchholz says. "It's equal to the need to interact." The pursuit of seclusion begins in the earliest days of life. Studies have shown that babies routinely turn away from caretakers not because they want to sleep but because they need to disengage. If a mother or father persists in trying to interact with a baby who wants solitude, the baby will fuss and cry.

Children, too, seek time alone, withdrawing from siblings and friends into secret nooks, tree houses, and cubbyholes under the stairs. There, buffered from the outside world, is where the impulse to paint or write may first reveal itself.

Buchholz's findings resonated with me. Throughout my life, going off alone for a while has served to clear my head. Free of the world's clamor and the opinions of others, I find it easier to know what I think. Also, I've come to find myself pretty good company. I'm not afraid of the person I'd be if I had no distractions because I've met her many times.

When I hike alone, I make contact with a more elemental existence. With nothing to say, there is more to feel. While wandering through a palm oasis one day, I blinked as a monarch butterfly batted about my head. Pretty soon dozens, then hundreds, of the migrating creatures were dancing along the trail with me in a multicolored sun-flecked swarm. Another time I came around a bend to see a monk in golden robes sitting on a tree stump, meditating. We chatted awhile, and he entranced me with tales of living alone in caves in Thailand. For the rest of my hike I imagined it was me roaming the jungle, cobras and tigers my only companions.

In the weeks following my scare, I talked with lots of people about my predicament-seeking permission, I suppose, to renege on my "I'll never hike alone" vow. But no one gave me the encouragement I was after. A local wildlife biologist warned that the last two mountain lion victims in California were lone women hikers. My friend Joyce, an adventurous globe-trotter, told me she draws the line at solo hiking. "It's just dumb," she said, adding that maybe-now that I'd learned my lesson-I'd be more eager to go along with her and her friends on their group hikes.

After talking with more wildlife specialists, though, I discovered that cougar attacks are extremely rare. The experts even told me that I was unlikely ever to see a cougar again and that my odds of being killed by one were far lower than the chances I'd be offed by lightning or a bee sting. While solitary hiking might increase the likelihood of a problem, the baseline risk is so small that the danger remains infinitesimal.

As for human predators, criminologists don't keep statistics on the odds of being attacked alone versus in a group. Of course, common sense dictates that loitering alone in, say, an urban parking structure late at night isn't a good idea. But the overall chances of being attacked by a stranger-the classic going-solo fear-aren't great. In 80 percent of homicides, the victim knows the killer.

We exaggerate the risk of harm from strangers, says Gavin de Becker, a security consultant to government officials and celebrities, and author of *The Gift of Fear*. Similarly, we obsess on exotic risks ranging from flesh-eating viruses to cougars. This is counterproductive, since it dulls intuition. And intuition is our best defense against danger.

If what I was feeling about hiking alone was fear and not just anxiety, I'd know it, de Becker says. True fear-the kind that overtook me when I saw the mountain lion-concentrates the attention and helps us survive. Unmistakable in its intensity, it shows up only in response to a genuine threat.

So, several months after the Round Valley incident, I again rode the tram up the mountain. This time I brought a hiking stick (for jousting with predators), a can of grizzly bear-strength pepper spray, and a family of five. My friends were embarking on a week long backpacking trip; they would be my training wheels for the first leg of my hike.

Chatting and feeling at ease, I hiked in two miles with the group. Then it was time to return to the tram on my own. I'd been dreading this moment. As I waved at the five lumpy backpacks disappearing around a bend, I expected to be bowled over with panic. Maybe I'd even run to catch my friends.

Instead the world seemed perfectly peaceful. Birds sang; my heartbeat was steady. I took a step in the direction of home and concentrated on de Becker's advice: Stop anticipating disaster at every turn. You've taken your precautions; now trust that your intuition will alert you if you need to be concerned.

A few more steps and I began to feel like my old self. Now that I was alone, the silver spider webs floating on the breeze came into sharper focus; the whoosh of ravens' wings overhead became audible. After hiking awhile I was surprised to notice that I had let down my guard so much that the drone of bees was making me drowsy. Those big white sun-warmed boulders started to look less like lion lairs and more like primo perches for a nap.

As I headed down the trail, it became clear to me that the struggle to push past my fear had been worthwhile. Before I met a cougar, going solo was just something I did. From now on, it's something I won't do without.