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Mountain lion visits Agua Caliente

Neal Ross | Sonoma Valley Sun

After a more than two-hour stare-off, a young female mountain lion is groggy but fine after being anesthetized this afternoon behind a house on Calle de la Luna in Agua Caliente.

The dusty gold cat – four feet from nose to tail, and about 55 pounds – breathed softly as Stacey Martinelli, associate wildlife biologist with the California Department of Fish & Game, applied a stethoscope to her chest. Worn leather straps restrained the cat's paws, and she looked about with a dazed expression in her blue eyes as curious neighbors (and a couple of law officers) clicked photos with their cell phones.

“She isn't nearly as big on the ground as she looks in the tree,” someone said. Martinelli said the cat's fall was softened by the branches of the tree she'd been perched in, and she was none the worse for its experience.

“She appears healthy – good weight, good condition,” Martinelli said, as four deputies hefted the cat's temporary home – a large wooden crate – into the back of a mud-stained Fish & Game pickup truck. “We're going to evaluate whether we can release her in one of our nearby wildlife areas ... that's our number one option right now.”

Local resident John Fall said he first spotted the animal around 11:30 a.m. in a large redwood tree in his back yard. “I was watering in my vegetable garden ... when I turned around and saw a mountain lion standing there, observing my every move. I called animal control in Cotati,” he said, “but they were of no help. I called Fish & Game and they first thought it was a joke. They were like, ‘Oh no, you can't be serious. It's just a large house cat.’”

But they took Fall seriously enough to send three biologists, four sheriff's cruisers and a motorcycle patrol to secure the scene around 2 p.m. Two rifle-wielding officers ordered bystanders to stay indoors, though a handful of onlookers gathered here and there in the quiet street. Martinelli and colleague David Cassady entered the Fall house at 2:48 p.m. – one holding a tranquilizer gun, the other a snare-tipped pole.

Half an hour later, Sonoma Police Chief Bret Sackett emerged from the front door. “The cat's been tranquilized,” he said. “They shot him and got him.”

Martinelli said the department responds to a couple of mountain lion sightings a week. She said, “We caught one near Annadel State Park yesterday, but this is somewhat unusual that it's in a tree behind somebody's house.”

Cassady said the cat, estimated at two years old, was likely looking for a new territory. “The youngsters, they can't have the good spots because the oldsters have the good spots ... so they end up in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he said.

Added Martinelli, "They're just teenagers getting into trouble."