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Ⓜ OBSERVATION: Cougars Wild at heart *Los Angeles*

A major new wildlife crossing will help wildcats navigate LA’s man-made structures.

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To the side of a muddy trail in Liberty Canyon, in a thicket of wild grasses, Jeff Sikich, a biologist with the US National Park Service, holds a directional antenna. He’s listening for a frequency that will pinpoint the location of any nearby cougars. To be clear, he’s not searching for a Mrs Robinson-esque partner à la *The Graduate*, but rather the small population of wildcats that live in the Santa Monica mountains. Sikich has been studying cougars – also known

as pumas and, colloquially, mountain lions – for decades. Today he is looking for a male dubbed P89.

“It was right here last night,” says Sikich, who knows this thanks to GPS tracking. One thing sticks out about P89’s patch: the presence of Route 101. The 10-lane freeway divides two wilderness-preservation areas. “That’s where it probably wanted to go,” says Sikich, motioning to the Simi Hills on the other side.

Los Angeles mountain lions live on these pockets of land with their territories hemmed in by freeways, estates and thoroughfares. When they do explore beyond those boundaries, they risk death or injury among the traffic. The National Park Service estimates that at least 26 cougars from the Santa Monicas have been killed by vehicles since 2002, a small-sounding but significant number, given that this mountain range is home to about 10 adult cougars at any one time.

“Most won’t attempt to cross the 101, not if they can help it,” says Sikich as he scuttles further up the hill, explaining that even when a lucky one does manage to cross the highway, it’s not always great news. Take the sad case of P22, a cougar that left the Santa Monicas some time in 2012, made it across the 101 and 405 freeways without a hitch and landed in LA’s Griffith Park. As the park’s sole lion resident, it has no competition for resources (a good thing) but sadly no partners either (a problem). P22 has since become a mascot for the urban-lion cause.

Though these apex predators can be dangerous to passing people, Angelenos have broadly embraced their native wildcats. “When I’m in the field, people ask me, ‘How’s P22, how’s P89?’” says Sikich. “They’re loved here – but if you see one, give it space,” he adds. It’s because of their popularity that there’s a groundswell of public support for LA’s most exciting urban-wildlife project: the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing.

The bridge, which broke ground in April, will be the largest wildlife crossing in the world, linking Liberty Canyon in the Santa Monicas to the Simi Hills on the other side, allowing lion populations to roam and expand their gene pool. “It’s taken 20 years of research but we know that this is the spot for it,” says Sikich. When the bridge is completed by 2025, it will be covered in native plants and resemble a small hill with a freeway tunnelling beneath it.

On our patrol we sadly don’t spot P89 – it’s probably snoozing in the shade somewhere on the hillside – but Sikich is continuing to monitor the antenna as we trudge back to the car. All of a sudden a tiny bird whizzes past. “What we’re doing is ecosystem renewal,” he says, nodding after the blur of feathers. “From lizards and lions to small songbirds that can’t fly far, everything here will benefit.” — Ⓜ

1. Biologist Jeff Sikich
2. Searching for cougars
3. Route 101
4. One of the elusive wildcats