

# Consider The Great Cats

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the practice keeps the Zoo much cleaner and healthier for everyone. Cages and areas are disinfected and cleaned daily.

## Fearful Symmetry

When William Blake wrote the Songs of Experience, in awe of the tiger, he said: "Did He who made the Lamb make thee?" But the tiger, walking, walking on his silent pads, brooding upon some gloomy thought of his own, does not roar the answers to Blake's questions:

"What immortal hand  
or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful  
symmetry?"

I find myself as much in awe, standing in the Auckland Zoo in 1943, as Blake was in England 150 years ago. But here he is, sharp bright colours of white and tan and black, and gloomy golden eyes that stare at you with that intense but unseeing stare of a Russian ballet dancer. *Felis tigris*—not a friendly puss.



Can the leopard . . . ?

At the moment the leopards—*Felis pardus*, so well-named—are the most popular creatures in the Zoo, for Monsieur and Madame are the jealous parents of three beautiful spotty children. Not that Monsieur has yet been permitted to visit the nursery. (Some fathers don't bother to eat their children; others do, if they are given the chance.) So he pads up and down, up and down beside his neighbour's cage. And thereby hangs a tale. When this very Monsieur, now trying to look like a dignified papa, was a bounding cub he was too familiar with his neighbour the jaguar, and that very wily fellow waited his chance and grabbed the long and graceful tail of young leopard through the bars and, whoof-crunch! bit the morsel off at the five-inch mark. So there walks Leopard Paterfamilias, with his haunches rolling-rolling and his stump of a tail wagging instead of gracefully moving through long eel-like gyrations behind him.

## Leopards Can't, But Lions Do

Suddenly, as I watched, the female sprang up a cleft in the rocks and stood with her sides heaving and her muzzle raised outside the nursery door. For two hours, morning and afternoon, she is shut out so that she may have fresh air and exercise and so that her cubs may be admired in safety by the visitors. On the lawn at the back of the cages, out of sight of the mother, the three sprawling cubs are in a chicken coop. They are rather like overgrown tabby kittens with spots of black on pale grey. When they are full grown the pattern will have become black and tan and white, with the black and white honey-combed on the tan. The leopard, as the proverb has always led us to believe, cannot change his spots; but you may be surprised to hear that lions are born with spots which they lose at about two months.

Already at the age of one month these kitten-like cubs have claws showing and jaws opening to cry "Yeow-ow" with a snarl on the upper lips. They close their eyes and raise their heads and perpetually yowl and fumble over and over each other. They sleep in a bunch, intertwined like the coat of arms of the Isle of Man.

I believe I have heard that some Hollywood actresses have pumas as pets. And the keeper told me that they are really quite harmless. They love climbing trees and spend most of their time in the artificial ones rigged up in their pit. They have faces as mild and wide and big-eyed as the friendliest and most spoilt pussy on the hearth, and are a soft fawn colour all over—hence their name, *Felis concolor*. They are meat eaters, and in their natural state hunt birds, mice, rats and, as the keeper said, anything that moves fast.

## The Rats Grow Cunning

In all the pits at the Zoo rats thrive and grow very cunning. The Jaguar, *Felis onca*, may be quick enough to catch his neighbour's tail, but he can't get under-

neath the rocks, and the chase becomes unequal, with all the advantages on the rat's side.

"Does anything ever escape?" I asked.

"Only a leopard a long time ago," the keeper said. Well, that would cause excitement in the neighbourhood! And so it did. People rang up from every district in Auckland saying the leopard had been seen in their street. Imaginations leapt high that night. But the poor leopard had made straight up the hill to a tannery and jumped into a curing pit, drawn by the smell of the hides and meat, where acid was used; he had been badly burned and had rushed for the water at the bottom of the hill where he was drowned.

## Just a Simple Meal

On one of the notice boards describing a member of the great cat tribe the following statement is made: "His food consists mainly of monkeys, deer, and tapirs, as well as birds, turtles and fish." I take it that this is just his simple every-day food, nothing elaborate or festive; now, I think, if a beast the size of the jaguar eats so much (though, come to think of it, there's nothing to prove he eats it all at once), how much will a beast the size of the elephant eat? So I asked. And I was most surprised. I'll explain why when I examine this lady with the surprising appetite. So I left the great cats and as I saw the sun shining on the beautiful jaguar I thought of Joyce's lines:

"On his wise shoulders shining down through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins," not written for him, but very suitable for him, and the lion, and the tiger, and the leopard, the royalty of the jungle.



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