

# The Beast in the Garden vs. Redneck Kids

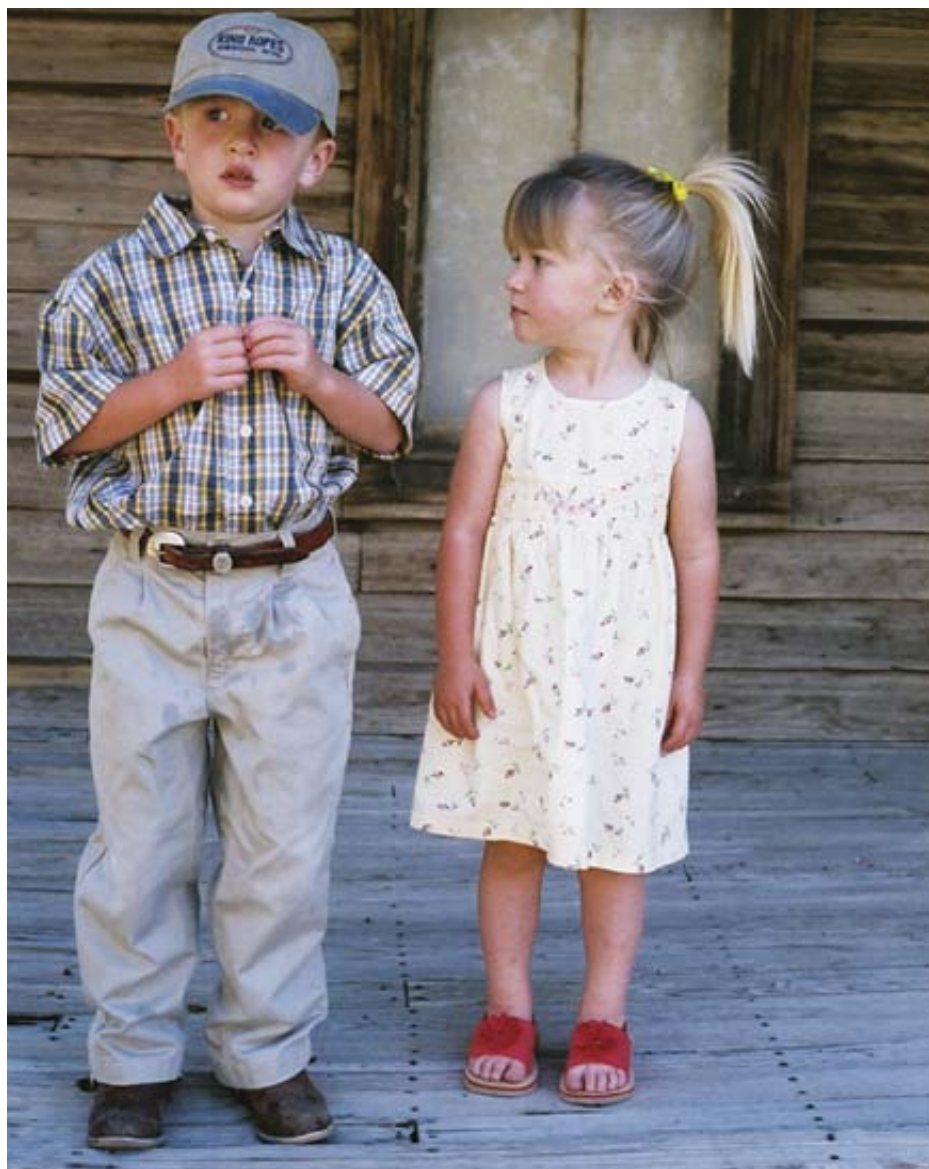
*We don't need more government "control,"  
we just need our freedom and responsibility back.*

*Words by Barney Nelson. Photos by Carla Spencer.*

I'm a white-haired grandma, but I'm not frail and I'm not scared. I've been reading the headlines about cougars killing young athletes and bike riders. I have read David Baron's bestseller, "The Beast in the Garden." I watched Arizona remove lions from Sabino Canyon and the developing story in Florida about swamp-dwelling unconquered Indian tribes who have become

so fearful that they are demanding removal of endangered Florida panthers from their ceremonial grounds. Part of their fear is that their inbred panthers now carry a few drops of invigorating blood from West Texas.

Well, I live in West Texas. Panthers—we call them mountain lions—aren't new to us. They are not and never have been endangered here. We've been living with them since



the dinosaurs roamed. I have never seen one, so I hunt their tracks in remote canyons of Big Bend National Park, hoping to jump one. The big cats are never hunted in the park and occasional human encounters have been reported. But I hike alone, camp alone, and picnic alone because men don't think I'm cute anymore and my female friends don't seem to want to hunt lion tracks. I don't carry a gun. But I wear my white hair in a ponytail and was raised a redneck kid, so maybe I'm a little perkier than California bikers, Colorado athletes, Arizona backpackers, and Indians. I'm scared to death of city traffic, but I have no fear of a mountain lion.

Am I crazy? Could be.

I know my chances of being injured or even killed in a car wreck are quite high and because my gas-guzzling SUV is reputedly top heavy, I have increased my risk. Some-



*Rocks and dirt and something to climb are the favorite toys of redneck kids like Riley and Jorey Spencer. Rattlesnakes? No problem. They're way more scared of us than we are of them. Besides, they ain't gonna be out in this hot sun, and we can always chunk a rock at 'em.*  
*OPPOSITE: Watch it, Buster. You call me "Maam" when I'm wearing a dress.*

times I even drive too fast in the rain on winding roads while talking on my cell phone, sipping coffee, and adjusting my white ponytail. Sometimes I drink stuff other than coffee and drive. About once a month, just in my little town, someone dies in a car wreck, sometimes four at a time. According to statistics, highway fatalities every September exceed those killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Although I certainly should be, I'm not afraid of my vehicle. In contrast, nobody has ever died of a lion attack in Texas, and if it began happening tomorrow, lions would never catch up with cars.

According to a recent report, our pet dogs annually kill 18 to 20 people and seriously

injure 200,000 more—just in the United States. I'm not afraid of dogs either, although I am careful. When I was a toddler, a neighbor's dog grabbed me by the back of the neck and tried to shake me dead. I ended up in the hospital and still carry the scars. When I approach a house with a sign that says "Beware of Dog," I am. But I occasionally shove my way into a pen full of big clamoring hunting hounds to feed them. Some dogs became members of my family. None of them ever hurt anybody, but I know they could have and would have under the right circumstances. I was always around to call them off. So if I see a loose dog while hiking I'll pick up a stick, but wouldn't if I saw a

mountain lion.

West Texas is also rattlesnake country and we have some big ol' bad ones, like the Mojave that kills horses quite regularly. I don't particularly like snakes, but I'm not paranoid. They don't stop me from hikes or picnics or sleeping on the ground, and if I just had to stick my hand under a shady bush in the middle of a hot day, I'd toss a rock in there first. Most of the places where I like to walk are a long way from a doctor or hospital or even antivenin, so I try hard not to step on a snake. If I can't see the ground, I flail the grass with a stick before I step there. If I must stumble around in the dark, I wear high-topped boots—or my sandals. I've even wondered



how it is possible to get snakebit. But 5,000 people evidently somehow figure it out every year, resulting in about 12 deaths. I've seen the scars from a few healed rattler bites and they're quite ugly. And I'll bet the bitee is also a little smarter, since I've never heard of anybody being bit twice, although I have heard of people struck by lightning twice. I hunt a hole during a lightning storm and don't actively hunt up rattlesnakes to look at, but I've been trying hard to see a mountain lion all my life.

Bees make me a little nervous and more so lately. The young lady who mows my yard once came running into my house surrounded by a cloud of stinging honeybees, yet I have another female friend who raises bees and loves their gentle personalities. Now that they seem to be crossing with African bees, I'm no longer convinced of their gentle nature. According to statistics over 40 people are killed by bees every year. I've never been stung

by a bee, but yellowjackets have zapped me 15 or 20 times, each time swelling a little worse. The next sting might be fatal for me, so I've quit swatting at them. I manage to stay calm in their presence and try hard not to do anything that might piss them off. Horses here have stepped on the wrong board and were literally covered in welts by bumblebees defending a nest.

I'm not a big fan of black widow spiders either, and although they seem to be lurking everywhere, only about three people die from their bites per year, so I try to ignore them too. We also have a brown recluse spider around here that is supposed to be even more deadly but, like mountain lions, I'm not sure I've ever

seen one. However, people claim that we are never farther than 10 feet from one at any time.

Anyway, if our brains worked logically

## **One redneck kid can reclaim and secure a yard in short order.**

and we listened to the statistics, we should be terrified of our vehicles and dogs and demand their removal from our neighborhoods. Obviously, the human brain does not work logically. What do spiders and snakes and the big cats symbolize that make people fear them so irrati onally?

I think it must be a control problem. People are being raised in environments where we believe our weather can be controlled by central heat and air. We think our security can be controlled by ever-increasing law enforce-

ment agencies; our health by insurance and technology; and our intelligence by standardized tests. So when an affluent American runs up against a situation that seems to be out of some government agency's control, they panic. The new people who are moving out into mountain lion territory imagine nature as they see it on TV or as described by nature writers: relaxing, benign and friendly, with music playing softly in the background.

So they build a dream home in the wilderness, intending to raise their children away from the dangerous city's sirens. They put out birdfeeders and deer blocks. Soon birds are chirping on their porch rail and shy deer entertain their dinner guests. Eventually, they wake up very early one morning (to the incessant chirping of those damn birds) with pack rats in the heating ducts, a family of raccoons in the chimney, bats and squirrels in the attic, snakes and skunks denning under the porch, a duck defecating in the turquoise swimming pool, a lizard in the kitchen, a centipede in the shower, bees and yellowjackets in the walls, bears dumping over the trash that "somebody" should come to pick up, and those damn birds have "repainted" the lawn furniture. Deer have destroyed their landscaping, and one is aggressively snorting and stomping at their child. Bugs and spiders and snakes are everywhere. They are afraid to let their children play outside, on the porch, or even inside their million-dollar house since it now smells like rat urine and musk and the lizard has disappeared under the dishwasher. Who is in charge here? Someone has got to *do* something!

Well, people, welcome to redneck country! We've always had beasts in our gardens. You talk about human encroachment into wildlife habitat as though you invented it. Instead of making fun of us, maybe you should humbly ask how on earth we raise children in these dangerous places.

Easy. Redneck kids are always armed.

I was seldom outside without a rock or BB gun in hand. One redneck kid can reclaim and secure a yard in short order. Got a mountain lion sleeping under the hedge? No problem. Ping! Deer eating the petunias? Ping. A duck in the swimming pool? Ping. In 10 minutes, the poor kid will be completely out of targets. No blood. Nothing dies. Territories just get moved around. Sometimes days pass before another target wanders into BB-gun range. Because of that wait, a BB gun also increases attention spans. A redneck kid can sit in one spot for hours without moving a muscle. Your kids' teachers will appreciate



Jorey Spencer, dang near 4, shows off both her redneck tan lines and her first bluegill found in a local pond. Fish are slimey? Cool!  
 OPPOSITE: Riley Spencer, now 5 going on 40, pauses while inspecting a yellowjacket nest.

that and maybe you can reduce their Ritalin dosages.

As we all know, with a little adult guidance, redneck kids can also be taught discrimination. If you like red and blue birds but not black ones, no problem. Ping. Soon the cowbirds and starlings will be bothering someone else. House cat stalking your quail? No problem. Ping. Dog digging in the rose bushes? Horses chewing the paint off the BMW? Ping. Ping. No problem. Certain things can even be declared off limits, like siblings and windows, but that takes discipline. So BB guns can also force parents to discipline their kids. Teachers will appreciate that too.

Don't like guns? Can't afford a BB gun? Make a slingshot. I'm a redneck mama. If I was trying to raise 12 kids in a trailer house full of rats and cockroaches, with hungry pit bulls and drug dealers sneaking around outside, you can bet I'd find something to make 13 slingshots out of. Take back the neighborhood. We need to stop turning responsibility and control over to the government or the police or pest control services. Why produce kids if you don't have a job for them?

## Slingshot-raised kids just walk around in the world differently.

Slingshot-raised kids just walk around in the world differently. They'll pick up a rock or a stick if they sense danger. Aggression can turn some individuals into bullies, but not normally, and usually only when combined with unusual abuse. Normal kids will just learn to stick up (pun intended) for themselves. Bullies like to pick on the weak and unarmed. Cowboys say that horses sense fear. I

think the same is true of all animals, humans included.

A mean rooster will only chase the kids who aren't roping it. Even mice seem to know who they can intimidate into screaming and jumping on a chair and who will calmly set a trap. The pesky fly that has been trying to crawl up my nose for half an hour will disappear as soon as I grab a flyswatter.

Sticking up for oneself is natural. I've watched some very tiny birds chase big ol' hawks and owls for miles, running them plumb out of the country. But courage can't be faked. Teach kids to fear dogs and dogs will victimize them. Dogs that are used to hanging around fearful kids will be more dangerous to my kids too. But sometimes

months will go by before a kid with a slingshot ever glimpses a dog. I know one part pit bull that only comes out of hiding for a drink of water when my three-year-old grandson is taking his afternoon nap. His parents live in prime mountain lion habitat, and I can already imagine his little sister banging through the screen door someday, her gimmie cap on backwards, and whispering, "Hey, Dad, Barky found a mountain lion and chased it up the apple tree. Where'd you hide my BB gun?"

Want to live in the garden? Then raise redneck kids. ■

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