TRANSCRIPT
INTERVIEWEE: **Billy Pat McKinney** (BPM)
INTERVIEWER: David Todd (DT)
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DT: My name is David Todd and I’m here for the Conservation History Association of Texas. We’re about five miles south of Marathon and have the opportunity to be visiting with Billy Pat McKinney, who is a Wildlife Technician for Texas Parks and Wildlife. He’s been noted for his work with mountain lions and desert big horn sheep. I would like to go over some of his experiences and insights that he has learned over the years from the perspective of April 5, year 2001. At this time I would like to thank you for taking the time to talk to us.
0:02:15 – 2158
BPM: Thank you. Glad to be here.
DT: I wanted to start with a general question we often ask people and that’s, if there is a friend or a family member or some other teacher that might have been responsible for introducing you to the outdoors and to working in the conservation field.
0:02:40 – 2158
BPM: I’d say I’d have to go back to one of my grandfathers was—both of them were quite outdoorsmen, but one of them enjoyed fooling with the kids more than the other one. So he instilled into us a great love for hunting and fishing, which gets you into the outdoors. And then I’d say, early in my life, I—I ran into some wildlife biologists in this line of work and—and they were very good about taking me along on a few excursions and—and fell in love with the work.
DT: Can you talk about some of the experiences you had with your grandfather or some of these wildlife biologists?
0:03:16 – 2158
BPM: Well, my grandfather was—would take us fishing as kids and camping down on the Rio Grande, which in—is nothing like today’s camping. It was a very—a very primitive thing, but it was a great time. You know, we’d just sleep on the sandbars and fish, and he would talk. And a lot of his talk was about wildlife, and fishing, and things that he had seen in his lifetime.
DT: Could you give me some examples of what you recall. Maybe some of his stories that he had told you?
0:03:48 – 2158
BPM: Well, when he came to this country and when he was raised in this country, there was a good bit more wildlife around. And then he saw it kind of go away in his lifetime. And, you know, and he talked about that a lot. And he didn’t like that, of course, a lot of the old people didn’t. Things change and—and it was one of those changes that they didn’t like was the wildlife being—being gone in a lot of areas.
DT: What were some of the animals, birds perhaps, that had disappeared over the years?

0:04:21 – 2158
BPM: I think in his time probably the antelope took the biggest hit probably in this area. The—a lot of the deer herds were—were beginning to build again in his time, but when he was a kid, they were noticeably gone. And the fishing and everything had changed a little bit for him. There was a lot more people moving in too. He didn't like that very much. But it was mostly, the old man talked and we listened. And it was a good experience for us.
DT: You also mentioned that some of the early wildlife biologists—I guess who worked with the Parks and Wildlife perhaps, were mentors to you. Can you explain what they passed onto you?
0:05:04 – 2158
BPM: Yes, I went to work for the Parks and Wildlife Department as a—as a summer help one year. And I was just a young guy fooling around not knowing what I wanted to do or anything else. But we got to working with wildlife. And it was just quite an experience for me that—to capture animals that we were doing. And it just it—fit into my lifestyle very well and—and it more or less made me think this is what I'd like to do.
DT: What were some of the animals that you were working with in the early days, I guess this was—would that have been the 70's?
0:05:38 – 2158
BPM: It would have been in the earl—it would have been in the 1969, 1970 period. The—the thing that really got me was the desert big horn sheep. It's quite an animal—it's a majestic animal. But the thing that really got me was the—the ram's fighting. When I saw that, well that was—I was pretty well hooked on—on the wildlife business then. It was just one of those things, when they run together it—it—it just sounded like two shotguns going off. And it—for a young guy it really grabbed me.
DT: Where did you first see the bighorn sheep?
0:06:14 – 2158
BPM: I saw the first ones on the Black Gap Wildlife Management area. They were being reintroduced there. And it was a—it was a young program, and there was a lot of people being involved in it. There was a lot of excitement around it. And it was a great—it was a great group of guys. They had a lot of fun, they worked hard, and they got a lot of things done. And I like that. That—that's—that's what impressed the me most about the people. The animal itself was—was impressive enough, but the people that—that formed that team were impressive to me.
DT: Maybe you can take us back a few years. What had happened to the desert bighorn sheep over the years that required reintroducing them?
0:06:52 – 2158
BPM: Well desert bighorn sheep are—are—are an animal that evolved in island situations and—and weren't exposed to a lot of diseases that were common in domestic sheep. And what happened is that when people started settling in this country, they brought domestic sheep with them. And the bighorn sheep contacted some of the diseases that they absolutely had no titer for and no resistance to. And it was very devastating to that—to the animal. Another thing they were over hunted, when—when mining operations came in, the railroads being built, this required a lot of—of meat to be supplied to these gangs and crews and it was common practice back in those days to—to go out in the mountains and hunt them. They—they had contract hunters that—commercial hunters that did this. And like all wildlife, very few species of wildlife can—can withstand commercial hunting. It's just—regulated hunting is one thing, but commercial hunting is—is very hard on wildlife species. And—and the bighorn sheep are already a very fragile animal to start with and they couldn't stand that kind of pressure, along with the disease

factor brought in by domestic livestock.
DT: How did they organize the reintroduction?
0:08:09 – 2158
BPM: Well it—it began way back in 1903 when they first started saying, well there's not going to be anymore—you can't kill another bighorn sheep. That was the law then. And then in 1941, I believe or 30—maybe it was '39, somewhere in—in the early—late 30's early 40's, they actually set aside a little land in the—in the Van Horn area for bighorn sheep. Because that's where the last few remaining sheep were. In fact, the last ones were seen in the 1950 and then they were totally gone. And it wasn't until the late 50's that they began thinking about restocking. That was the only option available because all the bighorn sheep were gone. So—so the—the program really began then. And we got our first load of sheep from Arizona and they went to the Black Gap.
DT: And is that a similar population as to what was here originally or is it slightly different sub-species?
0:09:02 – 2158
BPM: It's the same sub-species of sheep, which is the Mexicano species—sub-species of desert bighorn sheep. And Arizona had the same species—sub-species so it—it didn't mean anything there. And—and they came from very similar habitat to this. And so…
DT: And these were wild sheep, they weren't…
0:09:22 – 2158
BPM: They were wild sheep. They were—they were trapped out in Arizona in the Kofa Mountain Range and—and then brought out here.
DT: How would they capture them or trap them?
0:09:32 – 2158
BPM: They tried a lot of different things. You got to remember in the—in the 50's was the—the beginning or—or capturing animals was still—still being developed. Techniques were still being developed. And especially bighorn sheep. There hadn't been a lot of restocking in bighorn sheep and this was—this was some of the early—early stages of that. And they tried a lot of different things. They—they tried building traps around water holes. They tried driving these animals into various traps. They tried drive nets. They used steel leg hold traps. They built box traps. They did a lot of different things. None of them worked very well. But they—they were able to capture a few sheep and we were able to get some of them down here.
DT: And then they were brought to Van Horn?
0:10:21 – 2158
BPM: No they were brought to the Black Gap Wildlife area. We—we took them down there because—or the department took them down there because they had just recently purchased that land and they had a lot of it and it was ideal sheep habitat. And they decided that was the best area to—to begin their sheep program.
DT: What sort of habitat were you looking for?
0:10:42 – 2158
BPM: Desert, very dry type country fits—fits bighorns very well. Something under—under fifteen inches of rainfall a year. And the Black Gap maintains about an eight-inch annual rainfall. Steep slopes, bluffs, rock slides. All of this stuff for—is good cover for bighorn sheep.
DT: And you truck them in and try and do a release out of a cage?
0:11:09 – 2158
BPM: Actually those—those first ones were flown in in small aircraft. They had captured so few

that they were able to throw three or four in an airplane and fly them out here.
DT: And then would they leave them to acclimate in a controlled area or would they just release them into the wild?
0:11:24 – 2158
BPM: The first release efforts were inside an enclosure. The department built about a five hundred-acre enclosure and released these sheep inside that enclosure. In—in an effort—knowing that—that they could only get their hands on a limited number of sheep, then you have to give them complete protection to build up numbers where you can release out of that then. And that—that was the plan on it.
DT: Would they feed them while they were in this enclosure?
0:11:52 – 2158
BPM: No. that—in the early—in the early times, supplemental feedings was a—was a unheard of thing for wildlife and—and they were not supplemented. And in the beginning, it didn't matter. There was—there was way—there was a lot more habitat than there was sheep so it—it wasn't a problem.
DT: So they acclimated pretty well.
0:12:13 – 2158
BPM: No it was—there was not much—shouldn't have been much acclimation. Some of the plant species were a little different but the—by and large, the habitat was the same.
DT: I had understood that Parks and Wildlife had some private partners trying to fund and organize the release of these animals. Is that right?
0:12:33 – 2158
BPM: Yeah, that—that came into play in the late 70's, early 80's. An organization called The Texas Bighorn Sheep Society got—got involved in the sheep program. And the reason they got involved—they—they're mostly were made up of—originally were made up of sheep hunters. And they got involved because they—they saw that the state was under funded in the program. And that it was—actually the program was floundering; it was—it just wasn't going anywhere. And they began to—to put a lot of manpower in it, volunteer time, and a lot of money in it through—through contributions and—and—and a lot of different things. And they began also doing a lot of water development in areas where we were trying to put sheep together. And this partnership has—has proven to be a good recipe for success because we've really gone places since the TBS (Texas Bighorn Society) has—has partnered up with us. We've really gone places now.
DT: How did things change once they came on board? You mentioned they helped developed some tanks.
0:13:41 – 2158
BPM: Well we—we build what—what are called guzzlers. It's a rain encatchment device. All of these sheep areas are very, very dry, and lacking in natural water. So there's—these water guzzlers are—are built and they're—they can be slick rock water guzzlers, which is—just takes a natural rock area where water runs off and—and divert it into a—into a reservoir. Or it can be a manmade device that is an inverted roof that catches rainwater. And these things, to really benefit bighorn sheep, needed to be in the tops of these mountains and in very—the very rugged—most rugged areas that they ar—that they have. And to do that, you need helicopters, and they—they're very expensive. And so TBS stepped up to the plate and—and really put their money where they mouth was and—and went to work.
DT: So now in the Black Gap there are these water guzzlers?

0:14:35 – 2158
BPM: We—we had already developed quite a few on our own but we weren't able to get them up to the tops of the mountains where we'd really liked to have had them. But yes, now we have quite a few. They do—they do a water project every year. They normally build three to four of these water devices a year and it's not just—just Black Gap anymore. We do it in the Sierra Diablo Mountains. We do it in the Beech Mountains, in the Baylor Mountains, and in areas where we're trying to restock the bighorn sheep.
DT: Is the population expanding?
0:15:07 – 2158
BPM: The population is—is expanding right now, doing very well. We're—we're probably—we're probably in the best years that we've every seen right now. We—last year we released forty-five head that we raised ourselves. That's phenomenal in the sheep world. I—I—I dare say it might be the largest release that's ever been done. I'm not sure about that but it could be, for sure in Texas.
DT: These are captive bred?
0:15:34 – 2158
BPM: These—no. These—these are actually wild-bred sheep. That fly drove me crazy there. These wild—these are wild bred sheep and we're raising them now in—on another wildlife management area, Elephant Mountain—has done very, very well. And the problem with sheep is populations build up to a certain number and they normally have die offs. So the best thing to do is when a—when a population reaches a certain number, is to remove certain—certain numbers of those sheep and go to other areas with them. And that—that seems to be the best plan and the best deal and it's working very well for us right now.
DT: How do you go in and capture and remove these sheep?
0:16:16 – 2158
BPM: Well the—the capture business has come a long, long way since the 1950's. And nowadays the—the best thing that we're into right now is the net gun. And it's shot out of a helicopter. And you simply maneuver above a sheep and you shoot him with this net gun. And it just—it shoots a net out that's about a fifteen by fifteen. And it just wraps the—the animal up in it, and—and then you land the helicopter, jump out and load him and go. It's a very fast, very efficient means of capturing.
DT: Do you have to use a narcotic or anything?
0:16:50 – 2158
BPM: No. Not on bighorn sheep. No sir. They're a very easy animal to handle once you have them captured. They—they haul great. They—they—you can put them in a dark trailer and they'll just lay there and chew their cud. They're—they're—they're a very nice animal to work with. So usually we do not use any narcotics on—on bighorn sheep.
DT: What did you learn about the diets and habits of the bighorn sheep since you have been working with them in the last thirty years?
0:17:17 – 2158
BPM: Well I've not—I've not been specifically in the diet of bighorn sheep in—in my part of the—of the thing. But one thing I have noticed most about them is they eat a lot of—of cactus. They—they use their horn to knock the top off, and then eat the succulent insides out of it. And I've—I've noticed they eat a lot of that. They're—they're a browser. They eat a lot of roughage. A lot of stuff that—that you really don't think of as—as being wildlife feed, or wildlife food, is—is utilized by bighorn sheep. They're a very thrifty animal for the type country they live in.

They're—they're a desert animal and they do very well in the desert en—environment.
DT: How do they compete with the aoudad?
0:18:03 – 2158
BPM: They don't. An aoudad will out-compete a bighorn sheep. Aoudad's are exotics, and like—like most exotics that I'm aware of, they out-compete native—native animals. The aoudad was evolved in Africa, where you have a host of predators. And in very hard, hard country, in—in—in some of the borders around the Sierra Desert, is where they really thrive. So when they come to this country here, this is like stepping into heaven for them. They have very few predators compared to what they had in—in Africa. Also, they're an animal that—that reproduces very quickly. The bighorn sheep compared to the aoudad is—is a very slow reproducer. So they out-compete sheep—our native bighorn sheep and—and—and we don't like that. We try to do everything we can to keep from—from that happening.
DT: How do you manage the aoudad population?
0:19:01 – 2158
BPM: Well we have to remove them. That's—that's the only thing you can do with them. And most of the time we do that with helicopter.
DT: Do you kill them or take them to another area?
0:19:09 – 2158
BPM: They're destroyed right now. If, you know, if there was a place to go with them, I think that would be an option. But right now it—since there's so many of them in certain areas, economically and feasibly, destroying them is—is about your only option right now.
DT: Do you know the history of how they first got established here? Where they came from? When?
0:19:32 – 2158
BPM: Well they were—I—I don't know exactly when they were exactly established or the time period they were established, but they've been here quite awhile. And they were brought in by people that were looking for another—another animal to hunt, and not having to go through the seasons and things like that. They were looking for, you know, economically they were trying to squeeze a little more money out of their land.
DT: And speaking of hunting. Is there a hunting season on the bighorn sheep yet?
0:20:00 – 2158
BPM: Yes there—it's—but it's by permit only. And that—that's done by surveys. If a—if a number of—of very large ram, mature ram, are seen, then a—then a permit will be cut on—on a percentage of that. But it normally has to be an eight-year or older ram to be harvested.
DT: How do they know when a ram has reached that age?
0:20:22 – 2158
BPM: They have growth rings on their horns and so you—they're quite easi—they're quite visible. You can see them out of a helicopter. And then you put them in a class 1, 2, 3, and 4 or 5. Here in Texas, we use a class 5. And when we get a class 5 or—or a big class 4, then—then that's a harvestable animal.
DT: How do you manage the hunts?
0:20:46 – 2158
BPM: They're normally done—if we're doing them on state land, they're done with—we guide those hunts. They're guided hunts because again the permit was cut for a—a older, mature ram. So normally a biologist or a wildlife technician has to accompany that hunter and say yeah, that—that is a harvestable ram there when one is seen, to make sure that you're not shooting a

younger more productive ram. At eight years plus, that ram has about—about lost his status in the—in the scheme of things for reproduction. So you can lose that animal without a—without it significantly affecting your population.
DT: Could you describe a typical hunting trip?
0:21:30 – 2158
BPM: Well bighorn sheep are—are not a hard animal to hunt. What makes them hard is the rugged terrain that they live in. So—so normally it takes a person that is in fair physical condition and there's a lot of glassing involved with it. You—you normally try to get up in the country where you'll find bighorn sheep and then start using your binoculars and glassing and trying to locate those animals. So there can be a lot of walking involved in it, and a lot of climbing. And it's—that's what makes bighorn sheep very hard hunting.
DT: One of the other animals that you are noted for is your work with mountain lions. I was wondering if you could tell a little bit about your experience tracking, capturing, and removing them?
0:22:28 – 2158
BPM: Well I—I started out at a—at a really early age. Before I ever went to work for the department, my—my father had a ranch in this area. And part of our ranching operation was hair goats, angora goats. And—and angora goats and domestic sheep are—are an animal that can't stand much predator pressure. And so part of our business was to fight predators. And—and one of the largest predators was the mountain lion. He's—he's a very destructive animal on domestic goats and sheep. So it became our—part of our—par of our job was to keep these animals out of our herds of—of angora goats. And I—I got involved with that at a pretty early age.
DT: How would you track and locate them?
0:23:16 – 2158
BPM: Well it–tracking is a—you don't actually track the animal, you see the tracks and things and that—that tells you that—that the animal is in that area. And then—then you—you really need—you need to know the nature of the animal. You need to know that animal very well. And that gives—and then when you know an animal very well, you know how he travels and where he goes and what kind of areas he likes. And in that situation, then you can—then you—you know where to go to find his tracks and where to—where to go to try to capture that animal.
DT: Can you describe some of the habits of the typical mountain lion?
0:23:53 – 2158
BPM: A mountain lion is a—is a solitary animal, except during the times when they're—when they're breeding, which they only come together for about a week out of the year. They are nocturnal, mostly nighttime animals. They normally hunt by their sight, they have very good—very good sight, vision. And they're stalking animal. They stalk into very close to a deer or whatever their—their prey is. And—and then they're very fast for short distance and they get in very close and then they make a high-speed rush and they—and they take an animal down. And they normally kill by—by suffocation. They—they bite their animals right here in the—in the esophagus and collapse that, and—and suffocate their prey.
DT: How large is the mountain lion?
0:24:46 – 2158
BPM: Oh, a big male will weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. That'd be on the top end of them. They're, of course, there's a few go over into a hundred and eighty-pound range. But I'd say average male will weigh lion will weigh a hundred and thirty, hundred and thirty-five pounds. And the average female will weigh seventy to eighty pounds.

DT: How many of them do you think there are in the Big Bend and the Black Gap areas?
0:25:10 – 2158
BPM: I don’t have any idea. That—they’re a—they’re an animal that’s tremendously hard to survey. We know that we have very good populations in this country because we find their tracks and we—we keep records of the mortality. We keep records of sighting, which is kind of weak data. But we—we do know from—from all of these things that we have—we have a viable, stable population here. But we do not have any idea what our numbers are.
DT: Do you think they have been trending up or down. Or have they been staying pretty much stable?
0:25:44 – 2158
BPM: Well they’ve—they’ve been on the increase. I think right now we’ve probably leveled off. I don’t—I don’t—I think right now probably it’s—it’s just stable. Early—early periods when there were so many sheep and goats in this part of the world, well of course, they were on the decrease. In fact, they were almost killed out in the 1960’s because, like I said they’re an animal that just is not compatible with sheep and goats. So people, in order to—to—to keep their livelihood going had to protect their livestock and then they—they—they did—there was a tremendous amount of predator control done in those days—financed by the government. The government financed most of it. And the—the mountain lion almost went the way of the gray wolf. I mean, it was—it was close.
DT: What did they do for the control in the 60’s and 70’s?
0:26:30 – 2158
BPM: They had armies of trappers and hunters hired. I mean, that was—it was a segment of the government and—and they hired people to work. And there was a lot of people in those days that knew how to trap, lot of people that had dogs, hunted with dogs. And these people went to work for the government. It was a good—it was a good occupation. It furnished cash money in a—in a—in an area where that there was no any cash.
DT: Do you recall many of these trappers and hunters and those that had dogs.
What they were like. What they knew about the country?
0:27:05 – 2158
BPM: Yeah, my—my grandfather was a government—was a government lion hunter and I—I knew some of the old trappers around. There’s not many of them left anymore. That—that era has just about slipped by. But I—I got in on the last part of it, some of the old timers and—and they were—they were, by and large, good people. They believed very strongly in what they were doing. You—you can’t go out here and—and go up and down these mountains for no money and—to speak of, and—and stay away from your family for days at a time, and—and not be dedicated to what you’re doing. Now, in this day and time, there—they wouldn’t be politically correct, that’s for sure. But they really believed in what they were doing. They believed they were on a mission from God, and they were helping their country by removing these large predators. And they were very good at it and they did a very good job.
DT: Can you tell about some of the typical hunts that they might have to try and track down one of these lions?
0:28:01 – 2158
BPM: Well back in those days, there were so many sheep and goat ranching outfits that you knew where these animals were because it would be in those areas where they were losing sheep and goats to these animals. And—and, of course, they’d get a message to—to these professional hunters and trappers and—and notify them that they were—they were losing livestock. And—

and these guys would come running. And a lion is not a very hard animal to catch if he's close to a kill. It gives you a starting point. And it's—it's just like a detective working a murder. If—if the—if he has a fresh murder and there's lots of clues there, then it makes it very easy. And the same thing for mountain lions. They're a whole lot harder to hunt and capture whenever you don't have a kill or a starting point.

DT: How has the prey base changed since the sheep and goat operations have, I guess become scarce?
0:28:56 – 2158
BPM: Well the sheep and goat industry, you know, more or less, went its way. And it's no longer significant in this part of the world. And that's when—they—that was what was financing a lot of the heavy predator control in this country. And—and so the government ceased a lot of their efforts. Private industry ceased their predator control efforts. And it allowed an animal like the mountain lion to begin to—to rebuild again. And—and I guess what has really changed is—is we—we—we don't see the—the livestock damage that we saw in the 50's, 60's and 70's. We don't see that damage right now. It—it's more—it's more they're back to their natural prey, and their preferred natural prey, which is normally mule deer and white tailed deer.
DT: Did they kill mature adults or did they tend to kill the fawns?
0:29:51 – 2158
BPM: They'd take all classes. They'll take fawns, does, mature bucks. A mountain lion is very, very good at what he does. And he's—he's—he is the best deer hunter in the world. That's—that's what he does good. And he has—he's second to nobody in that—in that field.
DT: Have you witnessed one of their kills?
0:30:14 – 2158
BPM: I have seen many, many kills, but I have never seen a mountain lion actually kill one.
DT: What's sort of the typical sight you see when you come up on a…
0:30:25 – 2158
BPM: Well a—a mountain lion is a very clean animal, he's—compared to other predators. He's—he has kill sights, there's usually very little blood, it's—it's very clean. He normally, after he gets an animal down and suffocate it, then he drags it to an area that he feels comfortable in. And then he'll feed, and it's usually—usually in an area with brush or—or down in a ravine. And he'll, like I said, he'll feed, and then he'll cover that kill up. And—and he'll leave, but he won't go far. And he'll lay up in an area where he can watch his kill and then he'll come back periodically and—and—and—and feed on that thing. Uncover it. Uncover his—his kill, and then—and then cover it back up before he leaves again. Now that's a classic one. You know, that's—that's the normal thing. There's a few deviancies on that, but that's—that's—that tells you that it's a mountain lion kill when you see one of those.
DT: What part of a deer will he eat first?
0:31:21 – 2158
BPM: He normally starts on the shoulder and eats through the rib cage. They like that—they like a lot of bone; a mountain lion eats a lot of bone. And then they'll work—usually the hams are the last thing but they will completely pull the viscera out, just like a deer hunter would—would field dress a deer, they pull that out to one side, they don't eat that. And it's a very clean kill. Like I said, it looks just like a professional field-dressing job.
DT: If you have a female mountain lion, will she bring back portions of this kill to her kittens?
0:31:55 – 2158

BPM: If—if they're ever—if they're of a certain age, it's been documented that they'll take chunks of red meat to the—to the den. But not so much like—like the wolf is—is, you know, is more of a famous animal for that than the mountain lion. But what really happens is that the mountain lion kittens are totally dependent on their mother till they're about three or four months of age for the milk. And then she starts taking them to kill sites. She—she carries them. She'll carry—if she's got three, she'll carry one at a time to the kill site and leave them there while she makes another hunt. And they'll stay at the kill site; that'll become their home till she comes back and gets them again and takes them to another kill site.
DT: Have you ever seen a mountain lion kill that's a bighorn sheep?
0:32:43 – 2158
BPM: Oh yes. They—they are—that's the reason I know—I've been in the mountain lion business and the sheep business because both of them go hand to hand.
DT: Can you explain the relationship between the two sides of your work-the bighorn sheep work and the mountain lion work?
0:32:58 – 2158
BPM: I got started on mountain lions first. A mountain lion is—is a—is a very hard animal on desert bighorn sheep reintroduction efforts. It's a—it's a—it's a common ideal in the thought that bighorn sheep populations at one point in time will become so numerous that they can handle predation. But in a reintroduction effort where you're handling only a very small number of animals, if that number of animals existed out in the wild, naturally it would be called an endangered species. There was not enough of them to really—they have to be totally protected. In those cases, if a mountain lion gets into them, it becomes a failed project. Cause the anim—the mountain lion is such a highly efficient predator and, on the other hand, the desert bighorn sheep is pretty dumb about predators. There's two—two sides of the spectrum there, and they don't—they don't mix well. So whenev—to give—to give a reintroduction effort every chance in the world, many times you have to remove a number of mountain lions out of that area.
DT: Are you destroying them or are you taking them to other areas? What's the typical scenario?
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BPM: Normally right now, it's again like the aoudad, we're destroying the animal. The mountain lion is an animal that breeds very well in captivity. Zoos therefore do not want them. It's very difficult to find a place to go to with a mountain lion. Sure—you probably covered this on black bear, but they're a very difficult animal to find a home for. And we really don't have an area to take a mountain lion to to turn them out. If you turn a mountain lion out in an area that already has a resident mountain lion population, then you cause some things to happen there because they're very territorial in some ways. So it—it—it—it sounds like it would be a very simple thing to do, but it's a very complex and—and complicated issue, and it's a—it's a controversial issue. But right now, we are destroying those animals.
DT: I had understood that you are taking some of the mountain lions and removing them to Florida to breed with the panther there. Is that right?
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BPM: We have. We have. And a private contractor got some permits and did that.
DT: (inaudible)
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BPM: Well I don't understand everything about that—about that particular study. But it was—those—those animals were neutered and released to see how things would happen in Florida. They have a captive-breeding program going on there. So what they were actually just trying to

test was, is what kind of mortality rate they would have when they actually turned mountain lions loose. So it was a test on that. I—I—I'm not aware of it going any further than that right there. It wasn't terribly successful. It—they had a—they had a high mortality rate on those lions that they took from Texas and released in—in Florida, from what I understand.

DT: How do you feel about the predator control work with the mountain lion? It seems like the attitudes about it publicly have changed pretty rapidly since the 1970's or so. How do you feel about it personally?

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BPM: Well it—it is a controversial subject. If you go to a large metropolitan area, and you talk mountain lion control or predator control, you're probably the most unpopular person on the block. If you talk about it in a rural area, you're normally the hero. So it's—you're the hero or the goat, it doesn't—it doesn't matter. It's a controversial animal. And to work with this animal, you—you have to be—you have to develop a thick skin in one way and—and not let it go to your head in the other. One hand you got people that understand very, very little about wildlife in a metropolitan area. They live in the most sterile environment in the world—is a city. And it always amazes me that people in the city are crying let's save this, let's save that, while every day they pave in—pave under acres and acres of land. They don't know that. They don't understand that's happening

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because they're not aware of it. But there's more habitat destruction happening around a city than there is anywhere else. Yet, they control the votes. That's where the votes are. And like it or not, wildlife business is going from being a biological business to a political business. It's changing. Changing every day. And sometime in the future, we'll see the—the voters making the calls on animals, more so than biological data will do. And when that time comes, I'm sure we'll see predator control go—go the way of the dinosaur.

DT: What do you mean by things becoming more political? Have you seen instances of that in your career?

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BPM: Yes. We—we haven't seen it in Texas so much yet, because we're a private land state. But in areas like California, they put propositions before the voter on wildlife issues. And this—this has been disastrous to their game department out there. And it's a trend that started, and it's a trend that's going to continue.

DT: What sort of example could you give where this sort of politics have come to over-rule?

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BPM: Well, we're—we're talking about mountain lions. Proposition 117 in California was—was—happened in the 80's. And what it said was it was going to discontinue mountain lion hunting. That was fine. It was a—it was a game animal out there. Their take was somewhere around a hundred and seventy animals a year in California. Now, we progress with complete protection to a point that there are so many things happening in California that nearly two hundred are having to be destroyed every year on depredation permits. So there hasn't had—hasn't had anything happen to the death—the mortality rate on the mountain lion. The only thing that's changed is that they have bankrupt the game department by buying land for the mountain lion. And they've take—they've taken the—this—the biological decisions away from the biologists and the wildlife experts and put those decisions in the hands of the voters. And you put a billboard up on a major freeway showing an animal in a—in a very hard way of some kind, and you can sway thousands of votes. And it's just—the system becomes unbalanced there. And—

and—and this is a trend in the United States. It is slowly happening and then—and, you know, it's probably going to continue for some time.

DT: I have heard that there are debates about how predator control should be done. Some people say trapping is the most ethical thing, others feel dogs are better, shooting's better—what is your view? Is there a humane way to do this? Is it necessary for say protecting this experimental bighorn sheep population?

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BPM: I've been in the predator control business for a lot of years, and I do a lot of live capture. And I think I've been on all sides of the coin. I've done a lot of mountain lion research also. So I think I've stood on all the corners of this issue. It—it always breaks my heart to go see some of my trapper friends and everything, and they're screaming that—let's trap them, it doesn't hurt them. Well, put a trap on your foot, it hurts. I've put them on my hand. I test my equipment. It hurts like hell. I mean, there's no—there's no way to get around it, it hurts. It's a traumatic experience. You can't catch big rough animals with powder puffs, it doesn't happen. That's the way the world is. On the other

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hand, you've got people screaming that this needs to happen and that needs to happen in a—in a more humane way, yet they come up with nothing. They're just—and they're—and they don't put any money in anything. It's just all talk. Creates a lot of problems. But I do believe there needs to be better ways found to—and we—we do that all the time. All the time when I'm in—when I'm doing my work, I'm looking for some way to streamline it, for some way to make it more efficient, for some way to make it more humane especially in my live capture work. And—and we are going to—trappers and hunters and predator control people have got to have to get smarter, or they're going to—or they're going to disappear.

DT: Can you explain how you do a typical live capture?

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BPM: It—a typical one—well there's two or three methods that you go with that I—I use all of them. I use dogs a lot. I like trained lion dogs because very few other species of animals are impacted this way. And when a dog is trained just to catch mountain lions, that's what he does for a living. So, I like that system. But it requires a different situation for—for—for live capture. Live capture is a very hard thing to do compared to just trapping or shooting an animal or anything. Live capture takes you to another level. You have to be very professional to do live capture. So with hounds, you may catch a mountain lion, stop him in a big bluff or anything. Well you can't just tranquilize him there; he'll fall out and kill hisself. If the—if the—if the job is live capture, then that's

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what you've got to produce. You have to produce a live animal that's going to do well and continue on like he was before you captured him. So in those instances, a lot of rope work comes into play. A lot of knowing how to use certain dosages so that an animal doesn't go completely down to fall out. And you have to know how to work it. And also, after you get an animal on the ground, you have to keep the dogs from getting on him. So that's—that's one way. Another thing we use is the leg hold snare, which is a—a device that was developed for black bear, live capture of black bear, and then it was adapted to mountain lions. It's a very good piece of equipment. And it's a—it's a large diameter cable, 316th cable, with a—with a keeper lock on it. It's got a throwing device like a trap. You set it in trails or—or tight canyons. Well when you catch this animal, this is a—this is an easier capture because he's—he's pegged in one area. This end of

this cable is tied to something normally. And it has a swivel on it. So he's—he's in a very tight area. In—in—in those situations, a jab pole or a blowgun or something like this, you can deliver your—your tranquilizer with. And it's—it's more—it's lower impact than
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dogs on the animal itself. And then we use some live traps every once—occasionally also. They're not very effective on mountain lions, but we have used them. We've used them in the Big Bend National Park to—to do some capture work. And we've had fair success with it. And it's very similar to black bear caught in a barrel trapper or anything, it's just a—it's a simple thing to—to administer a little tranquilizer to him and then to work him up.
DT: Is anybody using, in Mexico perhaps, poison to trap with?
0:44:07 – 2158
BPM: Poison is not a very effective method on mountain lions. They are—they're an animal that likes and prefers to kill it's own prey. They're not—they're not as big as cav—a scavenger like coyotes and wolves were. And that's where poisoning is really effective on those type animals. They do kill a few that way. In some areas of Mexico it is a practice to—to—to use poisons. Again, we're seeing a—a pretty—a pretty big change in practices in Mexico. Mexico is starting to catch up, I'm not going to say to the United States because they're doing things their way but they are catching up in—like with the rest of the world on—on environmental awareness.

DT: I guess under current day trends it's, how many mountain lions do you think are killed per year in Texas? Any idea?
0:45:04 – 2158
BPM: Yeah it's—we keep a record on what we get, of course. That's—that's stuff that is reported to us. It's running somewhere around a hundred and forty a year. It fluctuates a little. I think we had a high of a hundred and ninety in the—in the mid 80's and—and a low of probably around a hundred. So it fluctuates, but it's been—it's been pretty—pretty straight with a hundred and forty for the last few years.
DT: And this is all in west Texas?
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BPM: No, South Texas. South Texas has a—has a pretty good mountain lion population. And—but probably the majority of the kills are from Trans Pecos area.
DT: Do you think there is a population in East Texas?
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BPM: Well we've had—we've had sighting reports, but there again sighting stuff is—is very weak data. We have had three moralities in counties in—in east Texas. However one of them had his—had its claws removed, so we know that that was probably a—a pet that was released. And it may be that a lot of those animals are released—have been released or escapees out of—out of different things. And—and if they—they may survive and form little pocket populations. And—and we—so we could have some—some mountain lions there, but it's not a very big population.
DT: I understand that mountain lions are currently not protected under the game statutes or the non-game endangered species statutes. I was wondering if you have any comments about that and what you think the best status for the animal would be?
0:46:43 – 2158
BPM: Well I think—I think there's a lot of pressure from without—external and internal, in Texas to—to make the mountain lion a game animal. And I—I have mixed feelings about it. I do not believe it'll be the end of the world for—for people that are in predator control business. It

hasn’t been in other states. I do believe it would be beneficial to mountain lions. Mountain lion populations will increase in some areas. It’s mostly a political issue really. I—I—I think that that’s the direction that we’re—that we’re going to, and I think it’s the direction we have to go too eventually.

DT: Why do you say that?

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BPM: Because of the pressures and—and too it’s an animal that—that I believe justifies game status. And I believe that if—if—if we don’t do something like game status, then the other—other alternative will be preservationist. And I—I do not believe in that. I believe strongly in wildlife management. And I believe that you have to—have to be flexible. So game status, I think, fits the—the overall picture in Texas better than—than anything that I’m aware of out there right now.

DT: Have you sat in on any of the, I think it’s the public comment meetings at Parks and Wildlife, when typically this comes up and it gets very contentious. I was wondering if you have witnessed any of this?

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BPM: I—I have attended a commission meeting, Parks and Wildlife Commission meeting. And there were members of—of special interests groups there. And they’re very vocal, and they’re very dedicated to their ideal. And…

DT: Can you explain what they say and what your counter is? It seems like one of those real flash points in conservation right now. There are people who feel very passionately on either side, and I was wondering if you could tell us where the fault line lies between the two camps?

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BPM: Well the fault line is the wildlife division of the Parks and Wildlife department. I don’t know why it is, but the less you know of an animal, the more you—the more you talk and become stirred up about them. I—I—I asked a special interest group, who I will not name, at one time, I said, you know, you’re obviously so stirred up about this animal, what do you know about him? And he said, I don’t know anything about him, but he’s great for membership. And that’s the attitude that a lot of them have. And then you have the other side that says, oh they’re killing all my deer and my—my livestock and they’re a dangerous animal, and—and that’s not true either. The—the truth is they are—are a high class predator. But they have a—they have a place. And they do—they do a lot of things good, and they do a lot of things bad, but they’re—they’re here. And we—you

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either got to learn to live with them or—or go the other route, you know, which is not a—which is not a solution anymore. So, I—I—I do get aggravated at special interests groups that don’t even bother to learn anything about the animal, before they do so much talking about them. They’re not hard to learn about. There’s—there’s stacks and stacks of books wrote on the subject and a lot of research has been done on this animal. And I would think it would behoove this people to at least read up on the subject a little. And then on the other side of the fence, I think some of these people need to become a little broader minded. They’re—they’re—they’re living in a—in a time that’s—that’s gone. Many of these people are still wanting to fight predators like they did when they had sheep and goats, and they’re—most of them are second and third generation removed from that time. And I think they need to broaden their mind a little bit too.

DT: Well speaking of some of the folks, who have raised sheep and goats, I think you and your wife as well, have had good success in cooperating with private landowners. Considering that

ninety-seven percent or so of Texas is privately owned, I imagine that is going to be an important talent to learn. Can you explain how you've maintained a good relationship with private owners?
0:50:56 – 2158
BPM: Well we've—we had a big foot in the door from being ranch people. That—that helps you. When you—that kind of person has a certain look about them. And believe me, a rancher can spot a guy from Washington DC or New York City in a heartbeat, and those people, they're nice to them but they're not going to get in the front gate as—to do things that concerns wildlife. So that's a big foot in the door when—when you know people and you—you're from that kind of people, it helps you a lot. And—and then there's a question of trust. You have to build on trust. You've got to be very careful not to
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make a bad move because you cannot out run that. If you—if you make a bad move sometime in your career and break that trust someplace, you'll never outrun it. You can't live that long. Country people are—are—are clannish and they talk amongst theirselves, and believe me, if they put the bad word out on you—you've got it. So you have to be very careful. And that—that again is not hard to do, it's common sense. You respect people's rights. I always treat a man's ranch, or a—or a person's ranch, like I would his house. I wouldn't go in his house without asking permission. I wouldn't remove anything without his permission. And it's the same way with his land. And—and that has always stood me in—in good with dealing with private landowners. Now we've got—the land ownership is changing somewhat. You know, there's a lot of people buying land now that are not agriculturally minded people. And these—this is a different breed of cat, these
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kind of people coming in. They're more business like. I think that—that things are changing in that direction and I think they're—they want more information. And they—they want more than to sit down and drink coffee with you. They—they demand information. They're business people and they want to get into wildlife just like a business. So that—that—that aspect is changing somewhat. And—and I guess what I'm trying to say is you have to remain flexible and light on your feet. I don't think the things that worked for us ten years ago are going to work in the future, except the trust thing. If you can keep trust with somebody, well it's—it goes a long ways towards anything.
DT: I guess everything changes and I'm wondering as you look into the future, what you think the major conservation challenges will be?
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BPM: Well I—I'm probably the last person to get on the bandwagon, but I—I do believe that habitat destruction, at this point in the game, and—and I've changed my mind many times over the years but I believe right now that the—that there's just getting to be too many people. And the—and the impact of people is a tremendous problem on wildlife populations. However, there's—there's—people like your park services and everything, is doing a very good job of managing people. I mean, maybe we're going to have to learn that management on a larger scale. And that bothers me that—that we're—it's just taken so much for people that—that it's very hard to put it all together. But it's—it's a—it's a big challenge, and-and I'm—I'm sure people will meet the challenge. It's—it's going to be—it's going to be the number one thing in the future.
DT: When you speak to your children or to younger generations coming up, what sort of advice can you give them about how to confront these challenges?

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BPM: Well as my old grandfather used to say, just—just leave it a little better for the next generation. And that's about as simple as you can put it, but it—it tells it all. Whatever you do when you hang it up, just leave it a little better for the next bunch of people because they're going to have to pick it up. They're going to have—they're going to have some of the same problems and they're going to have new problems. And it's going to be up to them to leave it for the next bunch that comes out. And—and I just—I—I always you feel like your life was special, I don't care who you are, you feel like you've done some things that's special. And I hope that remains. I hope that my son gets to—gets to enjoy hunting and fishing if that's what he wants to do, or bird watching, or photography or whatever he likes in the wildlife, I hope he gets to enjoy that because it's brought so much pleasure to me that I know that—being—him being out of the same bloodline as—as his mamma and his daddy, he's—he's bound to enjoy wildlife in some form or fashion. So I hope that opportunity's there. That—that would be a sad thing is if there was not an opportunity for that.
DT: One last question. We often ask people if they have a favorite spot that they like to visit that helps to keep their interest in this kind of work.
0:55:48 – 2158
BPM: Well I've seen a lot of rough country in—in my—in my line of work, working with bighorn sheep and mountain lions. There's an old saying that the world looks level to those animals and—and it does. And so I like the really wild and rough places. And it may get that the only way I can go see them is with a helicopter, but I—I want to do that. I like rough country; I like—I like to see those kinds of places. I don't particularly have one spot that I really like to go to, but I have a lot of places that I like to go to. And I like to see those—those places, and some of them are—are in Mexico, some are in the United States, some of them I haven't been there yet, but I'm going. And that—that, for me is—they're all the same; they're all—there's something about all those places are the same, that—that grabs me and that's they're wild. At the time I'm there, I feel like I'm the only guy in that whole part of the world. And I really just want to be in a place where the only tracks I see is the ones that I leave. And that's—that's the kind of places that I like.
DT: Thank you very much.
0:56:52 – 2158
BPM: Alright.
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End of Interview with Billy Pat McKinney