



Female Mountain Lion in Verdugos Mountains with LA City lights in background
Image Credit: National Park Service

Birds (and Mountain Lions) Are Changing Cities

By Tim Beatley

As a life-long lover of birds, I will say today that they have certainly saved me many times. Their calls and chirps, remarkable antics, and aerial beauty never fail to produce an uplift in me on any day, when I am sad or otherwise. They provide remarkable interest and color to our human lives, and I think I am not alone in my extreme admiration and fanhood. In exchange, we mindlessly build glass boxes with windows that kill and cut down trees that serve as home and habitat.

Recently, my book *The Bird-Friendly City* has been translated into Korean, with a wonderful new and quite striking cover (on

opposite page), along with a lot of words and characters that I am unable to decipher between the pages. It took a visiting Korean student here at UVA to provide a translation of the title, which they had changed unbeknownst to me. The Korean title, she told me, is “Birds Changing Cities.”

How brilliant, and how true indeed.

Luckily, there is work underway in cities around the country and the world to make sure buildings and cities are safer for birds. The Korean translator of my book, Kyungmin Kim, offers in an article in this issue

of the Biophilic Cities Journal one hopeful account of the remarkable changes underway in his country, and the growing awareness of and care for birds. I will have to ask him about the title translation and how he came up with that wonderful formulation.

Birds do change cities, all cities, and the people who live in them, by their magical presence. They also save cities as well. My colleagues in Pittsburgh recently reminded me of the story of how that city’s largest new park—Hays Woods—came to be. A former industrial site, it is now a large block of forested

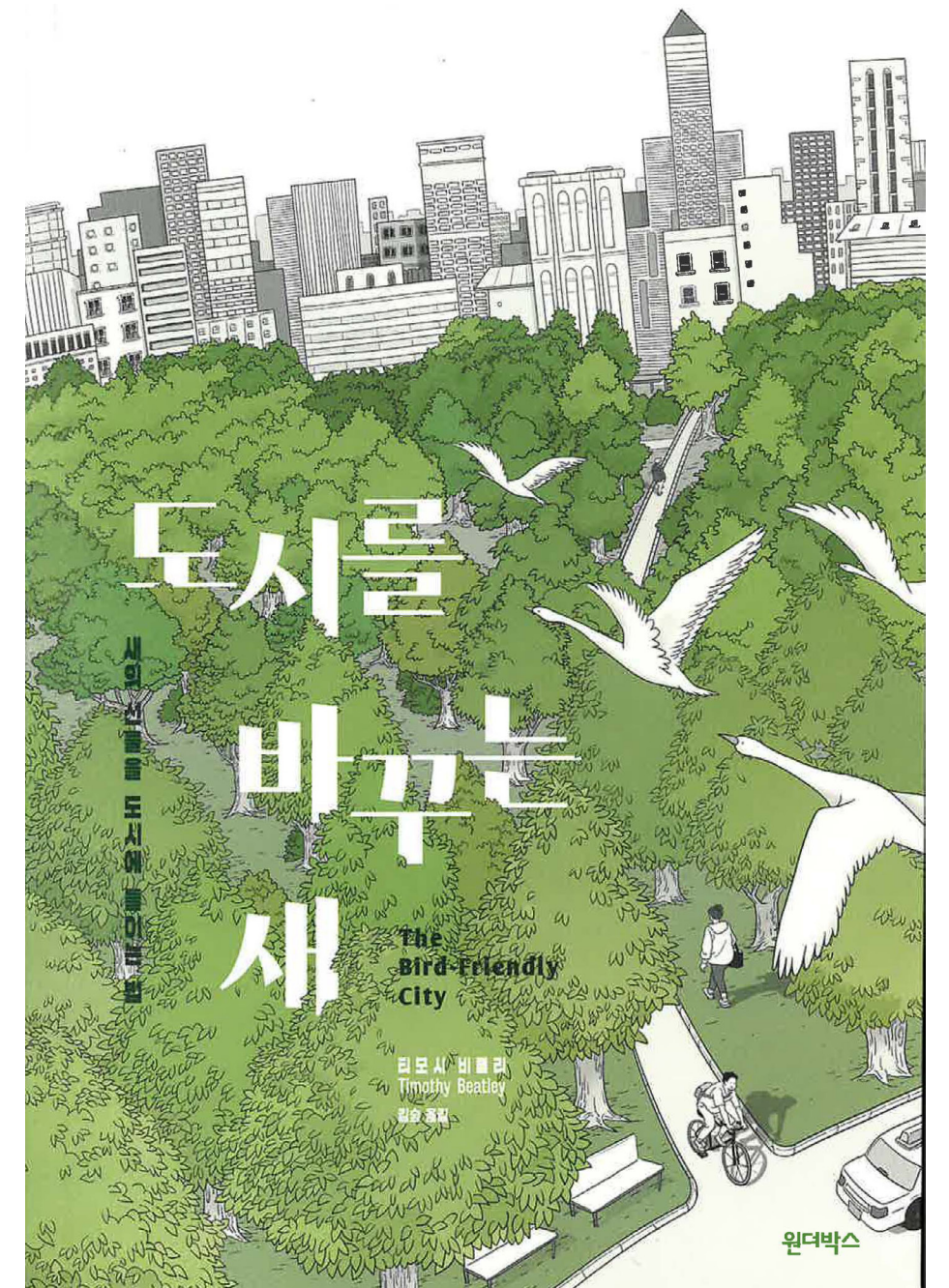
land with extensive frontage along the Monongahela River. It was not until a pair of bald eagles began nesting there almost a decade ago and flocks of birdwatchers began showing up to see and watch them, that the idea of setting this land aside as a park began to gain traction. The developer had explored many alternatives, including developing it as a racetrack and casino, before eventually selling it to the city. This story is, I think, suggestive of the political power birders and bird organizations might be able to exert in cities on behalf of nature.

The last few months witnessed the sad death of P-22, perhaps the world’s most famous mountain lion who famously walked the Hollywood Hills and became a symbol for coexistence of humans and non-humans; as well as the wildness that our cities, even when highly developed and urbanized, can exude. I have been especially impressed and heartened by the outpouring of grief and sadness for this lion, and the depth of emotional connection and care it reflects. Few animals get an obituary in the New York Times, or a sell-out crowd at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles, commemorating and celebrating his remarkable life. At one point, the crowd engaged in a sing-along to the song “The Lion Sleeps Tonight.” The images from this event tell much of the story, especially the lion-ears worn (but not exclusively) by the younger members of the audience. Attendees are seen to be sad in these images but also joyful and celebratory.

Rep. Adam Schiff, who counted P-22 as a constituent, has observed in the past how the city became united in their “shared affection for our neighborhood mountain lion ...” No small feat in these times of acrimony and division. P-22 had many friends and lots of admirers. And some, like Beth Pratt, Regional Executive Director of the National Wildlife Federation, stood up to strongly advocate

for changes that would make the city more hospitable and safer for wildlife. I like that she described herself, in the New York Times obituary, as P-22’s “friend and spokeswoman.” The many nonhumans that we share our cities with need supporters, advocates and, yes, spokeswomen and spokesmen.

P-22, arguably, has helped shape a new collective image of what



a city is and can be, and more generally (for the world) what we might imagine urban life will be like in the future. The now famous image of P-22 with the Hollywood sign in the background is helping to change our collective perception of what a city is. Maybe it will be as profound a perceptual shift as the impact that a generation of gleaming skyscrapers (think Empire State and Chrysler buildings) had on New York City, and many other cities in the 1930s. Such a radical update to our urban imagery would be welcome indeed. We can envision a new notion of living in multispecies environments as a part of, rather than separate from, the larger biological community

of life (to paraphrase Aldo Leopold). This is not the first time when humans have mourned and commemorated the passing of another species or where close affection for a nonhuman resident has shaped our collective sense of urban home. One thinks of the loss of Granny or J2, the matriarch of the J-Pod of the southern resident population of orcas living in the waters of the Pacific Northwest. There were at least some local obituaries, and at least one official celebration of her passing. Or there is the example of Barry, the barred owl, that drew so many to Central Park to see him in his usual tree. Like P-22, these

examples show that there is a need to redouble our efforts to not only pay attention to the presence of urban wildlife, but to also admire, watch, and enjoy them, as well as take meaningful steps to make cities safer places for them.

P-22 was hit by car, an ever-present danger in American cities certainly, but he also likely suffered from ingesting rodenticides. Evidence suggests that Barry also suffered from poisoning. So, there is much to be done in genuinely working towards the design of truly biologically inclusive cities. On this point, we are excited to welcome the City of Los Angeles into the Biophilic Cities Network



Rendering from LA Wildlife Ordinance Pilot Study
Credit: Katherine Superfisky Urban Ecology Studio,
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

and for our new colleagues there to share the many remarkable things underway in the city to support ethical coexistence. This includes the adoption of an innovative wildlife ordinance (which has so far passed a vote of the city's planning commission, but not without some opposition from property owners), and the building of the world's largest wildlife passage (the [Wallis Annenberg Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing](#)) that, when completed in 2026, will allow mountain lions and other species to safely cross the ten lanes of Highway 101.

P-22 and (hopefully) the many mountain lions to follow in his

paw-tracks will (continue to) change that city for the better and other cities as well. LA will now forever be understood as a place where a glimpse of wildness and majesty could be had; a moment of awe and wonder and delight, and a sense of optimism about the world, might be in the offing. Like the birds that are so special to me, P-22 may in no small way have saved the city.

