

Catch Up With Author John E. Becker

Learn more about the inspiration behind his book "**Wild Cats: Past and Present.**"

By Stacy N. Hackett

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John E. Becker was inspired to write "Wild Cats: Past & Present" because of a lifelong fascination with cats. 1. What was your inspiration behind the book?

The inspiration for writing "Wild Cats: Past & Present" came from a lifetime fascination with cats. When I was a kid, we had pet cats, and one of my most vivid memories was of the times I spent observing those cats, especially when they were kittens. I recall being entertained by the hour with their antics, which included an incessant curiosity. I also remember visiting the zoo in Cleveland, Ohio, where I grew up, and being awed by the wildlife I saw there. Even then, my favorites were the lions, tigers and leopards. I was struck by how much my cats at home acted like their huge cousins and how beautiful cats are – no matter what size they are.

When I began working at the Columbus Zoo, I always seemed to gravitate to the cheetahs and other wild cats. After I left the zoo, I worked in the field of wild cat conservation with the International Society for Endangered Cats (ISEC). I was one of the founders of that organization, and served as the executive director of ISEC for seven years. Being totally committed to helping prevent the extinction of wild cats around the world was a monumental challenge and a rewarding experience because I believe we were successful in focusing attention on the plight of all wild cats, especially the small wild cats.

2. What was the most difficult part of writing the book?

While I knew a great deal about our modern wild cats before I began writing this book, I knew little about their ancient ancestors. That led me to numerous libraries to locate information about the earliest predators on Earth and to trace their history through the centuries to our present-day wild cats. I also spent a lot of time talking with paleontologists and other experts, who shared their insights into the distant past and all the catlike animals that have roamed the Earth. As in all works of nonfiction, writing this book necessitated sifting through the scientific evidence in an effort to bring my readers the most widely accepted theories of how the lineage of wild cats developed.

3. What was the most rewarding part of writing the book?

The most rewarding part of writing the book was the sharing of information about many species of small wild cats that are little known, in grave danger of disappearing due to the activities of human beings. I also enjoyed including information about a number of conservation projects currently going on around the world to prevent the extinction of wild cats. For that reason, I believe it is the most comprehensive book about wild cats available to kids.

4. What type of feedback have you received so far?

The book has received several excellent reviews in publications such as Booklist, *Voyager* and *School Library Journal*. I have visited a number of schools giving presentations based on this book, and the feedback from teachers, librarians and students has been fantastic. I've been fortunate that all my books have received enthusiastic endorsements from schools and libraries, but the response to "Wild Cats Past & Present" has been overwhelming.

5. What is your writing process?

When I write nonfiction, I always read everything I can find by conducting exhaustive library research. I then find the top experts from around the world to interview. Many times, I accompany wildlife biologists as they study the animals in the wild, and visit zoos to gather insights into the characteristics and behaviors of those animals that only someone working closely with a given wildlife species would know. After writing a draft (or two or three or more), I submit it to the various individuals I have interviewed. Usually, they have suggestions for changes to make the material completely accurate. I do this again before writing the final draft, making sure it is written in kid-friendly language. The manuscript then goes to the publishing house for further editing, additions and changes. To most people, that may seem like a lot of work, but invariably, the final product is much better because of it.

6. Do you have any other books?

While a college professor at the University of Florida, I coauthored a college textbook, "Perceptual Motor Learning Theory and Practice," which deals with the way children learn. I also have written 24 books for children: "Mugambi's Journey" (a

picture book for young readers about cheetahs in Africa), the "Returning Wildlife" series (for upper-elementary children), and my "Seedling" books (for youngsters just learning to read).

7. Do you currently share your home with cats or other pets?

Unfortunately, I am allergic to most living things, so I do not have pets at home. As I mentioned earlier, I had all kinds of pets, including cats, when I was a kid. I also worked with wild cats at the Columbus Zoo, and many others that I took out for educational programs at colleges and schools when I was with the International Society for Endangered Cats.

8. Did your childhood pets influence your writing?

My childhood experiences with cats and other pets still influence my writing today. I will always be curious about animals, and hopefully, through my writing I will be able to play a role in preserving our amazing wild animals for future generations to enjoy.

Stacy N. Hackett shares her Southern California home with two Cornish Rex cats, Carson and Evita, and a playful orange tabby named Jackson.