Cougar

Puma concolor

November 2018

Field Notes

Note the long tail of the adult cougar. NPS

General Description

If you hike the Western wilderness, chances are you've unknowingly rubbed elbows with *Puma concolor*! Widespread throughout the West but secretive, cougars are rarely seen, save their ghosts in an occasional footprint.

The cougar is a member of the cat family (Felidae) and goes by many names: mountain lion, puma, catamount (for cat-of-the-mountain), panther, and painter. Its scientific name, *Puma*, a common name for cougar in South America, means "powerful" in the Peruvian Quechua language, and *concolor* is Latin for one color, referring to its uniformly tawny coat. Its only non-tawny parts are black facial markings and coloration on the back of its short, rounded ears; a white muzzle; and off-white underparts. Cougars lack the spots of their southern cousin, the jaguar. Adult male cougars are 25% larger than females, averaging 64 kg (140 lbs; range 40–100 kg in California) and standing 0.76 m (30 in) tall at the shoulder. Body length is 1–1.5 m (3–5 ft), not including the long tail. Lynx and bobcats are smaller and have short tails. Cougar tracks are about the size of a baseball and more rounded than dog tracks, lacking claw marks due to retractable claws. Lucky observers will glimpse the drag mark of a cougar's tail between tracks in snow. Cougar scat is typically 10–15 cm (4–6 in) long, segmented, about 2.5–4 cm (1–1.5 in) wide, and has at least one blunt end.

Distribution and Habitat

Cougars historically ranged coast to coast and from Canada south to southern Chile. Except for remnant populations, they no longer inhabit eastern North America. Cougars live in swamps, deserts, and forests from sea level to the alpine, wherever ungulates exist and dense vegetation or rocky alcoves provide cover.

Behavior and Feeding

Except for adult females with kittens, cougars are solitary animals. Males regularly patrol their large, 200–300 km^2 (100 mi^2) home range, leaving mounds of debris-covered urine and feces or claw marks in trees to warn off competitors. Cougar claw marks are long, deep, vertical scratches 1–2.5 m (4–8 ft) high on a tree, and additionally serve to attract females in heat. Male territories often overlap multiple (smaller) female territories, enabling multiple pairings in a season (polygyny).

Cougars are carnivores. They hunt by ambush, stalking and then springing at prey. Their powerful legs carry them up to 9 m (30 ft) in one bound. They can also leap up to 4–5 m (15 ft) vertically. Though active day or night, they are primarily crepuscular—hunting usually around dawn or dusk. While deer, elk, and other ungulates are their primary prey, cougars opportunistically hunt raccoons, beaver, birds, rabbits, coyotes, and other small to mid-sized mammals. Human fatalities are extremely rare, but cougars do occasionally prey on livestock and pets. Long canines and powerful jaws enable them to sever their prey's spinal cord or suffocate them with a lock on the throat. Clear evidence of cougar predation is their habit of covering partially eaten prey with sticks and leaves until they return to finish eating.

Cougars cannot roar, like their *Panthera* cousins (lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars), but they hiss, purr, growl, and make various other sounds, including an almost human-sounding wail uttered by females in heat.

Life Cycle

Female cougars begin breeding at age 2–3. After a brief 10-day bond with a male for mating, the female commences 13 to 14 weeks of gestation. She bears 2–3 kittens between April and September, though young may be born any time of year. Young remain with the mother for 1 to 2 years before dispersing—males roaming sometimes more than 1000 km (620 mi) in search of new territories. Cougars typically live 10–12 years, dying most frequently from human hunting and vehicle collisions, followed by territorial fights with other cougars and injury by large prey.

Conservation

Predator control efforts from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s decimated Western cougar populations and largely extirpated them from eastern North America. While bounties no longer haunt them, cougars are hunted as big game in Oregon, Washington, but not in California. Populations appear to be stable in the West and expanding back into eastern North America, enabling this top predator to resume its role in keeping ungulate populations—and thus ecosystems—in balance.

Where to See

All Klamath Network parks have cougars.

More Information

https://www.cougarfund.org/education/historical-timeline/

https://today.oregonstate.edu/archives/2006/oct/cougar-predation-important-wildland-ecosystems

https://wdfw.wa.gov/living/cougars.pdf