

Living With Mountain Lions

MOUNTAIN LION FACTS

Mountain lions (*Felis concolor*), also called cougars, pumas, panthers, and catamounts, are large cats, ranging from 7 to 8 feet in length (including the tail) and weighing 150 to 300 pounds. Their body coloration varies from tan to gray as adults and is spotted when young. They have clear yellow eyes, a pink nose, and well-muscled, strong legs. The feet (four toed in back and five toed in front) have strong, hooked claws that retract into their paws.

Young are born in a den, in litters ranging from one to six, averaging two to three.

Mountain lions range from sea level to 10,000 feet. Typical habitat is steep, rocky canyon country, or mountainous terrain. They are primarily nocturnal, secretive, and rarely seen.

Mountain lions have been hunted almost to extinction in the eastern U.S. The Florida panther is an endangered species.

Mountain lions are carnivorous. They prey on most other animals in their habitat, including pronghorn, hares, badgers, porcupines, skunks, coyotes, deer, bighorn sheep, fish, and rodents. Male territories range from 15 to 30 square miles, and females range from 5 to 20 square miles, depending on the number of young they are providing for. They may hunt in a radius of 30 to 50 miles. A mountain lion's territory sometimes is not one large area but rather several separate ones connected by pathways. Mountain lions mark their territory and pathways with visible spots of feces and urine. Territorial pathways may overlap, but if the animals meet, one will always defer to the other rather than risk injury by fighting.

With few exceptions, mountain lions are solitary hunters and spend most of their lives alone. They have specialized teeth for killing and eating prey and, like many members of the cat family, enlarged and rough taste buds on their tongues to aid in scraping meat from bones. Individuals develop a preference for one type of prey (one may prefer hares, another deer), which limits competition with each other. They hunt by stalking, getting to within a few yards of their prey before lunging in for the kill. They have great speed for short distances and can leap 20 to 23 feet from a standstill.

Mountain lions have color vision and highly developed mental faculties to aid their acute senses in the hunt. In dim light, most cats see up to six times better than humans. They are generally quiet, although their vocalizations include growls, hisses, and roars, as well as high-pitched screams. Mountain lions in the wild live approximately 10 years.

The mountain lion's chief enemy is humans, with whom they compete for food and territory. Once roaming over all of North America, the mountain lion, like the wolf, has been persecuted by those who believe all the myths about the damage they have caused people and livestock. Mountain lions climb well and take to trees if pursued. Most are shot out of trees by hunters after being chased by their dogs.

When their wild food source is limited, they may prey on livestock, and their natural instinct is to kill many animals when the panic behavior of the prey provokes them. Mountain lions hardly ever harm humans, although they will attack in self-defense or to protect their cubs. Because they are territorial,

they will defend their established ranges, particularly at courtship time. When they do attack, they kill, which has given them a reputation for savagery.

Mountain lions have greatly diminished in number because they have been bounty hunted (for sport, for their pelts, or to protect livestock), and because they have lost habitat large enough to support them. They are an important predator at the top of the food chain, focusing on deer and elk and thereby helping to keep these populations healthy and habitat from being overgrazed. But the more specialized a species, the less adaptable it is to change, and the cougar has proven relatively unable to adapt to habitat loss and competition with humans for large ungulate prey. Mountain lions are now a protected species throughout the United States.

The mountain lion is secretive, and the sight of one is rare. Only by accident will you spot a mountain lion unless you are with an expert guide. If you have the good fortune to see one, it will likely flee the minute it sees or smells you. Do not attempt to approach a mountain lion.

Tips

If you have reason to believe a mountain lion has attacked livestock or a pet (for example, if you see pawprints around the carcass), call Pacific Wildlife Care.

1. Do not allow pets to run free -- for their own protection and for the protection of the wild animals on which they might prey.
2. Never leave pet food outside.
3. Restrict use of birdseed to discourage the rodents that visit the feeder.
4. Trim and clear near ground level any shrubbery that provides cover for mountain lions or prey.
5. Use fencing to help deter mountain lions. Augment your existing fencing with outwardly inverted fencing, hot wire, etc.
6. Actively discourage visitations by making loud noises.
7. Keep chickens, rabbits, livestock in well protected areas at night. Strong gauge wiring is a necessity in protecting animals.
8. Battery operated flashing lights, tape recorded human noises, scattered moth balls and ammonia-soaked rags strategically placed may deter mountain lions from entering your yard.

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