

CALIFORNIA MOUNTAIN LIONS

About half of California is prime mountain lion country. This fact is a surprise to many residents and visitors. These large, powerful predators have always lived here, preying on deer and other wildlife, and playing an important role in the ecosystem.

The status of the mountain lion in California evolved from that of "bountied predator" between 1907 and 1963, meaning monetary incentives were offered for every mountain lion killed, to "game mammal" in 1969 to "special protected mammal" in 1990. The change in legal status reflected growing public appreciation and concern for mountain lions.

You may live or play in mountain lion country. Like any wildlife, mountain lions can be dangerous. With a better understanding of mountain lions and their habitat, we can coexist with these magnificent animals.

SOME FACTS ABOUT MOUNTAIN LIONS

Physical Appearance: The mountain lion, also known as cougar, panther or puma, is tawny colored with black tipped ears and tail. Although smaller than the jaguar, it is one of North America's largest cats.

Adult males may be more than 8 feet long, from nose to end of tail, and generally weigh between 130 and 150 pounds. Adult females can be 7 feet long and weigh between 65 and 90 pounds. Mountain lions kittens, or cubs, are covered with blackish brown spots and have dark rings around their tails. The markings fade as they mature.

Behavior: Mountain lions are very powerful and normally prey upon large animal, such as deer, bighorn sheep and elk. However, they can survive preying on small animals as well. They usually hunt alone, at night. They prefer to ambush their prey, often from behind. They usually kill with a powerful bite below the base of the skull, breaking the neck. They often cover the carcass with dirt, leaves or snow and may come back to feed on it over the course of a few days.

Their generally secretive and solitary nature is what makes it possible for humans to live in mountain lion country without ever seeing a mountain lion.

Habitat: Mountain lions live in many different types of habitat in California, from deserts to humid coast range forest, and from sea level to 10,000-foot elevations. They generally will be most abundant in areas with plentiful deer.

Home Range: An adult male's home range often spans over 100 square miles. Females generally use smaller areas, about twenty to sixty square miles. Along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, where competition for habitat is intense, as many as ten adult lions occupy the same 100 square mile area.

Population: In California, mountain lion populations have grown. In 1920, a rough estimate put the mountain lion population at 600. Since then, more accurate estimates, based on field studies of mountain lions, revealed a population of more than 2,000 mountain lions in the 70's. Today's population estimate ranges between 4,000-6,000.

Mortality: A mountain lion's natural life span is probably about 12 years in the wild and up to 25 years in captivity. Natural enemies include other large predators such as bears, lions and, at one time in California, wolves. They also fall victim to accidents, disease, road hazards and people.

Prints: Dogs and lions prints at a glance look very much alike. But if you look close the obvious toenail prints for dogs, are absent for mountain lions. Also the lion track has a distinctive "M" shaped pad.

WHAT IF YOU LIVE IN LION COUNTRY?

Now that people and mountain lions occupy so much of the same geographical areas in California, encounters are expected to increase. If you live in mountain lion habitat, here's what you can do to reduce your chances of encountering a mountain lion near your home:

Don't Feed Wildlife: By feeding deer, raccoons or other wildlife in your yard, you will inadvertently attract mountain lions, which prey upon them.

Deer Proof Your Landscape: Avoid using plants that deer prefer to eat. If your landscaping attracts deer, mountain lions may be close by. The California Department of Fish and Game has a brochure entitled Gardening To Discourage Deer Damage, available at most Department offices.

Landscape For Safety: Remove dense and low lying vegetation that would provide good hiding places for mountain lions, especially around children play areas, make it difficult for mountain lions to approach your yard unseen.

Install Outdoor Lighting: Keep the perimeter of your house well lit at night, especially along walkways, to keep lions visible.

Keep Pets Secure: Roaming pets are easy prey for hungry mountain lions. Either bring pets inside or keep them in a kennel with a secure top. Don't feed pets outside; this can attract other mountain lion prey.

Keep Livestock Secure: Where practical, place livestock in enclosed sheds and barns at night, and be sure to secure all outbuildings

Keep Children Safe: Keep a close watch on children whenever they play outdoors. Make sure children are inside between dusk and dawn. Teach your children what to do if they encounter a lion

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU ENCOUNTER A LION?

The following suggestions are based on studies of mountain lion behavior and analysis of attacks by mountain lions, tigers and leopards.

Do Not Hike Alone: Go in groups, with adults supervising children

Keep Children Close To You: Observations of captured wild mountain lions reveal that the animals seem especially drawn to children. Keep children within your sight at all times.

Do Not Approach a Lion: Most mountain lions will try to avoid a confrontation. Give them a way to escape

Do Not Run From a Lion: Running may stimulate a mountain lions instinct to chase. Instead, stand and face the animal. Make eye contact. If you have small children with you, pick them up if possible so they don't panic and run. Although it may be awkward, pick them up without bending over or turning away from the mountain lion.

Do Not Crouch Down or Bend Over: Research has surmised that a human standing up is just not the right shape for a cat's prey. On the other hand, a person squatting or bending over looks a lot like a four-legged prey animal. If you're in mountain lion country, avoid squatting, crouching or bending over, even when picking up children.

Do All You Can To Appear Larger: Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you are wearing one. Again, pick up small children. Throw stones, branches, or whatever you can reach without crouching or turning your back. The idea is to convince the mountain lion that your not prey and that you may be a danger to it.

Fight Back if Attacked: A hiker in Southern California used a rock to fend off a mountain lion that was attacking his son. Others have fought back successfully with sticks, caps, jackets, garden tools and their bare hands. Since a mountain lion usually tries to bite the head or neck, try to remain standing and face the attacking animal.

REPORT ALL ENCOUNTERS OR ATTACKS: Contact the Department of Fish and Game or the local Sheriff's office.

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