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Mountain lions on Fort Hood

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Mountain lions are powerful cats that should not be mistaken as ‘big kitty cats’. They are wild animals that can be dangerous.

“Mountain lions, like other cats, have a short snubby face and long tail,” said Charles Pekins, DPW’s Wildlife Biologist. “Their excellent sense of smell helps them to locate their prey and capture it.”

The mountain lion’s lean and muscular features help the mountain lion to fight its prey and use pressure from its jaws to subdue prey.



“Unlike our spine, their spine has actual muscles that connect vertebrae,” Pekins said. “Their muscle structure provides them great flexibility and nimbleness to tumble around in chasing their prey, and to perform certain hunting tactics such as crouching and sitting for long periods of time.”

Mountain lions come out at dusk and hunt all night for their primary prey, white-tailed deer.

They solely rely on their keen senses of hearing, smell, and eyesight to find their prey.

“You may have seen an animal at night and your headlights reflect eyeshine back,” Pekins said. “A mountain lion’s retina takes incoming light and reflects it back through its eyes so it has 6 times better night vision than humans, to see its prey.”

“They hunt at night to avoid competition with other predators,” said Pekins. “It is unnatural for a mountain lion to come out during the day unless something is wrong with it such as illness or an injury, or it has been disturbed.”

In areas such as Colorado and California, the situation is different. Some mountain lions in these areas have become habituated to humans.

“For example there are problems in Boulder, Colorado because people, in their efforts to beautify the city, have established fruit orchards and pretty gardens, and enjoy watching the deer that hang out in their yards,” Pekins said.

“That’s where the problem begins,” Pekins said. “The deer are not so wary anymore because they are around people so much.”

“Well, mountain lions eat deer,” Pekins said. “So you have a mountain lion that comes into someone’s yard and eats a few deer, but then it sees a dog and decides to eat it because it is easier to catch. That’s where the lion’s problem with humans begins.”

Along with deer, mountain lions also eat other small animals.

Typically adult males will feed once every 5 days and an adult female with cubs will feed every two to three days, Pekins said.

“They will need to eat 13-18 pounds of meat in a sitting,” Pekins said. “Their teeth act like a pair of steak knives so when they chew their meat, it allows them to rapidly take huge slices and swallow it.”

“Mountain lions are generally shy and secretive animals that will go away if they see a human,” said Pekins, “unless you walk upon one that (has) freshly killed prey and you don’t immediately leave or if you come up on a mom and her kittens and if she feels threatened.”

Mountain lions do live on Fort Hood, but most likely you will never see one, because they will hear you coming and leave. However, if you do encounter a mountain lion and it doesn’t walk away, here is what you should do:

- Immediately freeze. Do not turn around and run from it. Otherwise you may trigger a prey response and it might attack.
- Stare it in the eyes and wave yours arms to make you look big.
- If you have a stick, a camera bag, a tripod, or a backpack, start swinging it, make noise, and make yourself look like you’re going to do the mountain lion harm.
- Never bend or crouch down if you confront a mountain lion because that might be interpreted as a submissive gesture and it might attack.
- If you have a rock, a stick, or something else nearby that you can get without crouching down throw it at the mountain lion.
- If you encounter a mountain lion with your child near you, pick the child up or put the child behind you.
- Back up slowly if you can but do not run.

Some additional tips you should follow if you are camping at BLORA or other site is not to leave your pets or any food out at night and keep your children nearby.

“Since 1890, there have been 22 people...killed by mountain lions in the United States and Canada,” Pekins said. “However, there have never been any attacks or negative interactions with mountain lions on Fort Hood.”

“Statistically your chances of getting attacked by a mountain lion are very slim,” said Karen Cotton, Outreach Coordinator for the Mountain Lion Foundation. “Since 1890, there have been

22 (mountain lion-caused) fatalities, but during that same time period there have been 15,000 fatalities from lightning, 4,000 fatalities from bees, and 10,000 fatalities from deer.”

“The things we are most afraid of, like getting attacked by a shark or a mountain lion, are least likely to happen to us,” Cotton said.

Under Fort Hood regulation mountain lions are protected on Fort Hood.

“They are a species you cannot legally hunt on Fort Hood,” said John Cornelius, DPW’s Chief of Natural Resources.

Fort Hood’s objective is to manage ecological sustainability. Mountain lions play an important role of keeping a balance in our natural environment, Cornelius said.

“Fort hood is one of the few places in Central Texas and really across the country where white tailed deer populations are actually in balance with the habitat,” said Cornelius. “If you were to go far away from Fort Hood in any direction, where the large predators are actively destroyed, you will find vastly overpopulated deer populations that are damaging their environment.”

“We are trying to maintain the big picture and keep the whole environment as natural a situation as we possibly can, and mountain lions are an important part of that,” said Cornelius. “People need to understand they are not big kitty cats, but wild animals that can be dangerous.”

“The key point is that mountain lions are very wary of humans and under normal circumstances they want absolutely nothing to do with us,” Pekins said.