

Mountain Lions in the Central Sierra

ROG 16-64 2/2020

California Habitat

Roughly half of California is populated by the mountain lion—also known as the cougar, puma or panther. Historically, this powerful predator lived in the central Sierra, where it hunted deer and other wildlife. The mountain lion has always been an important part of the ecosystem. It can adapt to different habitats and is able to thrive from the arid deserts to the humid coast range forests, from sea level up to 10,000 feet.

Historical Backdrop

Between 1907 and 1963, the mountain lion was considered a bountied predator - money was paid for each one killed. Its classification changed to “game mammal” in 1969, which allowed it to be hunted. In 1990, it was classified as a “specially protected species.”

Because we live, work and play in mountain lion country, one must always remember that these cats are wild and can be dangerous.

Physical Appearance

Tawny-colored with black-tipped ears and tail, the mountain lion is one of North America’s largest felines. Adult males can exceed eight feet in length from nose to tail and generally weigh between 130 and 150 pounds. Females can be seven feet in length and weigh between 65 and 90 pounds. Cubs have blackish-brown spots and dark rings around their tails. The markings fade as the lion matures.

Paw Print

Although the lion’s paw print resembles a dog’s, the main difference is the distinctive M-shape of the lion’s “pad” and the absence of toenail prints.



Behavior

These powerful cats prey upon deer, bighorn sheep and elk. They will prey on smaller animals when they are available. They usually hunt at night, preferring to ambush their prey, often from behind. Their chief weapon is a powerful bite to the base of the skull, breaking the neck. The lion will often disguise or hide its kill with leaves, dirt, snow or whatever is available. They return to feed on it over the course of the next few days.

Population

Since its protected status in 1990, mountain lion populations have grown rapidly. In 1920, the mountain lion population was approximately 600. Estimates put today’s population at between 4,000 and 6,000.

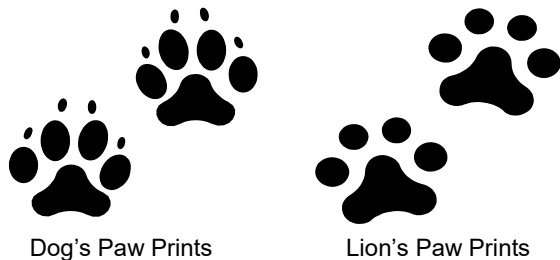
Home Range

The total area a lion may routinely roam is called a home range. Males often travel more than 100 square miles, while females cover 20 to 60 square miles. On the western slope of the Sierra, where the burgeoning population of lions makes competition for habitat intense, one can expect to find 10 adult lions occupying the same 100 square mile area.

Mortality

The life span of a mountain lion is generally about 12 years in the wild and double that for lions living in captivity. Natural enemies include bears, other lions and, during an earlier period in California, wolves. Lions also fall victim to accidents, disease, road hazards and people.

For more information, contact the California Department of Fish and Wildlife at www.wildlife.ca.gov



Dog's Paw Prints

Lion's Paw Prints



What are the chances of meeting a lion?

Mountain lions are elusive and usually try to avoid contact with humans. They live in areas with plentiful prey and adequate cover to afford protection and camouflage.

Subdivisions, fringes of urban areas and open spaces between areas of human concentration make a mountain lion encounter more likely. The number of mountain lion/human interactions continues to increase in direct proportion to the expansion of populated areas near wilderness areas and the number of people living in them.

Interactions are more likely due to other variables like an increase in prey populations, expanded ranging capability of mountain lions and more hikers, runners and bikers using trails in mountain lion habitat.



Despite this increase in interactions, the chance of being injured or killed by a mountain lion remains relatively low when compared to other natural hazards found in the outdoors. For example, the risk of being struck by lightning far outweighs the risk of being attacked by a mountain lion.

Living In Lion Country

If people and mountain lions are going to live near one another, there must be some common approaches taken to improve safety for both you and the mountain lion. Here are a few examples of measures one might take to prevent interaction with a mountain lion:

- **Don't feed wildlife.** By feeding deer, raccoons or other wildlife in your yard, you may attract mountain lions that prey on these animals.

- **Deer-proof your landscape.** Avoid using plants that deer prefer to eat. If your landscape attracts deer, mountain lions may well be close by.
- **Landscape for safety.** Remove dense, low-lying vegetation that could provide cover where mountain lions can hide. 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. Bring pets inside or keep them in a kennel with a secure top. Don't feed pets outside, since this can attract other mountain lion prey.
- **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.

Encountering a mountain lion

Research regarding mountain lion attacks is still a relatively new arena of study. The following suggestions are based on studies of mountain lion behavior and analysis of attacks by lions, tigers and leopards:

- **Do not hike alone.** Hike in groups and make sure children are supervised.
- **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.** Mountain lions usually will try to avoid a confrontation. Give them a way to escape or retreat and avoid cornering them.
- **Do not run from a lion.** Running will trigger instinctive behavior in lions, compelling them to chase what is running away from them. Instead, stand and face the animal, making eye contact. If you have small children with you, pick them up so that they don't panic and run. Although it may be awkward, pick the children up without bending over or turning away from the mountain lion.
- **Do not crouch down or bend over.** A human bending over or squatting probably looks a lot like four-legged prey to a lion. Avoid bending, squatting or crouching while in the presence of a mountain lion — you'll be glad you did!
- **Fight back if attacked.** Hikers have fought off mountain lions with rocks, sticks, caps, jackets, garden tools and, yes, bare hands. Since the mountain lion usually tries for a head or neck bite, remain standing and face the animal at all times.
- **Report the attack.** If you are involved in a face-to-face encounter with a lion, contact the nearest California Dept. of Fish and Wildlife office during business hours, or after hours, contact DFW through the sheriff's office.