

Cougars and People

Cougar sightings and encounters are rare, however, as human populations increase in rural areas, cougars are increasingly coming into contact with domestic livestock, pets and people. Increased recreational activity in backcountry areas has also caused an increase in human encounters with cougars. It is important to note that a cougar will normally sense you and leave an area before you realize it is nearby, which is why human encounters with cougars are so rare. **Prevention is the most effective way to minimize cougar encounters.**

Hiking and Working in Cougar Country:

- If possible, never travel alone in the backcountry; keep your group together at all times.
- Keep children close at hand.
- Check with your local Alberta Parks or Sustainable Resource Development office about wildlife sightings before your trip.
- Be aware of your surroundings; learn to recognize signs of cougar activity such as tracks, scat and markings.
- Avoid areas where carcasses have been left; be aware that cougars often cover their kills with forest debris.
- Carry a walking stick and pepper spray (make sure you know how to properly use pepper spray).
- Make noise to alert cougars to your presence.
- It is best to leave your pet at home, however if you do travel with a pet, keep it on a leash at all times.
- If you come across cougar kittens, leave them alone and immediately leave the area; a mother cougar will aggressively defend her young.

Living in Cougar Country:

- Do not attract wildlife to your yard, especially major prey species such as deer.
- When children are out of doors, encourage them to play in supervised groups, away from dense vegetation; make sure they come inside before dusk; make sure children are accompanied by an adult on early morning trips to the school bus stop, especially if there have been cougar sightings in your area.
- Feed pets indoors; never leave pet food outside.
- At night, keep pets inside in a secure, covered kennel; roaming pets are easy prey for cougars and other predators.
- Walk your pets during the day, avoiding natural wildlife corridors along waterways and through wooded areas.
- Make sure that livestock feed is stored in sturdy sealed structures.

If You See a Cougar:

- Never approach a cougar; although they will normally avoid confrontation, they are unpredictable.
- Always leave room for a cougar to easily escape.
- Immediately pick up your children; children frighten easily and may run, triggering an attack.
- Don't turn your back on a cougar; face the cougar and slowly back away.
- Don't run or play dead; try to back away slowly (running, or any sudden movement, may trigger an attack).
- Stay calm; talk to the cougar in a strong, firm voice.
- Make yourself appear as large as possible by holding your arms or an object above your head.

If a Cougar is Aggressive:

- Try to appear as if you are the predator rather than the prey; actions such as shouting, waving a stick or throwing rocks may help prevent an attack.
- If a cougar does attack, fight back! People have survived by using their bare fists, sticks, fishing rods, rocks and other items to fend off a cougar attack.

Cougar Management

Cougars are hunted in many parts of Alberta; hunting seasons generally take place from December to February. Cougar hunting is carefully regulated through a strict quota system; the season is closed as soon as the designated number of cougars has been harvested. To protect breeding components of the cougar population, the quota for females is lower than the quota for males.

Like all wildlife species, cougars make our natural landscape richer and wilder. For humans and cougars to co-exist in rural residential areas and the backcountry, thoughtful and careful management of deer habitat and other wildlands is necessary. As well, public awareness and understanding through education and information programs are important elements in our efforts to maintain healthy cougar populations.

If you see a cougar or fresh signs of activity, leave the area immediately. If possible, contact an Alberta Parks or Sustainable Resource Development office to report the sighting.

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Living With COUGARS

This information provides a glimpse into the life of one of Alberta's most fascinating and reclusive wildlife species

Living With Cougars

The cougar, Canada's largest cat species, is an animal that for many people represents beauty, strength and wilderness spirit. The variety of names given to cougars in South, Central and North America (mountain lion, puma, panther, painter, catamount) is a testament to the diversity of habitats occupied by these beautiful and reclusive creatures. Biologists marvel at the adaptability of cougars – they are found in jungles, swamps, prairies, forests and mountain peaks throughout the Americas. Widely known for their extraordinary hunting ability and secretive nature, cougars are becoming an animal of increasing interest and concern as people move into areas traditionally inhabited by them.

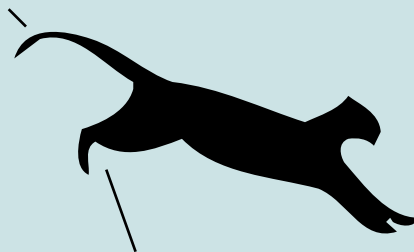
Cougars are at the top of the food chain, so the health of the cougar population is a good indicator of the overall health of an ecosystem. For top carnivores such as cougars and wolves to be successful, prey species populations must also be healthy. Alberta's cougar population, the majority of which resides in the southwest part of the province, is healthy and viable. There is now also an outlier population of cougars in the Cypress Hills in southeastern Alberta. Current estimates suggest that there are nearly four cougars per 100 square kilometres in some parts of southwestern Alberta.



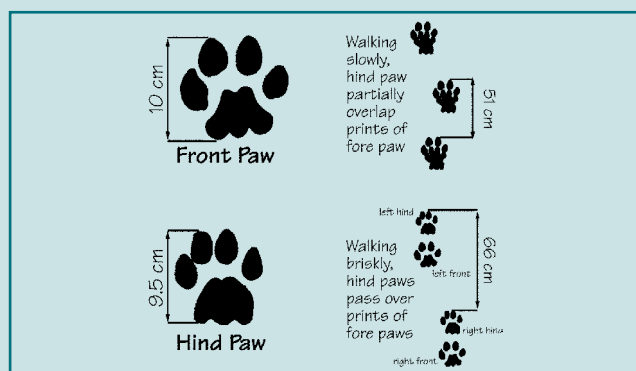
Cougar populations fluctuate depending on abundance of prey, competition with other predators and human influences. Unfortunately, as human development encroaches on cougar habitat, cougars must share more and more of their already shrinking range. Primary causes of cougar mortality in Alberta include attacks by other cougars; human hunting; occasional predation by bears and wolves; and injuries incurred while hunting. All predators, including cougars, can be seriously injured pursuing prey that often outweighs them by a substantial margin – a well-placed blow from antlers, horns or hooves can be fatal. As well, starvation sometimes occurs, especially in young cougars that lose their mothers prematurely, before they have learned to hunt effectively on their own.

Physical Attributes

- The species name, *Felis concolor*, literally means one colour; however, cougars can be several different shades of golden/yellowish brown, depending on where they live.
- Male cougars can reach weights of between 65 and 90 kilograms; females weigh between 40 and 60 kilograms.
- Because their hind legs are longer than their forelegs, cougars have great leaping power; their tails, which are very long (up to 150 centimetres), are used for balance.



- Cougars are relatively fast and can even outrun deer for short distances.
- Cougar tracks have classic feline attributes: they are asymmetrical; they have a curved ridge between heel and toe pads; heel pads are larger than toe pads; the front paw is always larger than the hind paw; and each toe has a retractable claw (for this reason, claws are never seen on cougar tracks).



- Their vision is well-adapted for hunting; cougars possess a total visual field of 287 degrees and are well-equipped to detect movement of prey; for night vision, cougars have an extra-large pupil to gather light and a special layer that reflects light back through the visual cells of the eye; this adaptation requires extra protection for the eye during daylight hours, so the pupils contract to a vertical slit or “cat’s eye” during the day.

Habits and Behaviour

- Cougars are crepuscular by nature (most active at sunrise and sunset), but they will hunt at any time of the day or night.
- Cougars locate their dens on ledges, in tree hollows on steep slopes, under fallen logs, and in between rocks; they keep their dens free of bones and other litter.
- Cougars have ranges up to 300 square kilometres; they may roam up to 80 kilometres in a single day.
- Cougars mark their territory along trails, under trees and on cliff edges and ridges by using mounds of scraped and scratched earth, pine needles and other forest litter soaked with urine and scat.
- Cougar scat is usually large and partially covered; it contains hair and bone fragments and looks similar to wolf scat, except that it has a tendency to segment; because cougars consume the internal organs of their kills, their scat can also be loose and runny.
- Cougars can mate any time of the year but normally mate between March and June; three months after mating, a litter of two to four kittens is born; kittens weight as little as 350 grams at birth and are born blind. Kittens are nursed for three months then introduced to meat; they stay with their mothers for up to two years.

Hunting

- Cougars are efficient predators. Although their primary food source is deer, as opportunists cougars will also hunt elk, moose, sheep, porcupine, beaver, hares, grouse and, occasionally, livestock.
- Cougars usually remove weaker prey individuals, but will also hunt healthy animals if the opportunity arises.
- People often mistakenly believe that cougars ambush their prey by leaping from trees, however, that is not the case - cougars normally hunt by slinking close to the ground in a stalking stance to within ten metres of their prey; once close enough, cougars typically pounce on their prey from the side, dig their claws into the shoulders, neck and flank, then bite the neck or throat with their scissor-like canines, severing the spinal cord.
- The kill is dragged to a densely sheltered area, where the cougar gorges on the meat; after feeding, kills are usually covered with leaves and other material.
- Cougar kills can be distinguished from those of wolves and coyotes both by method of attack and feeding characteristics; cougars prefer to start on liver, heart and lungs in the abdominal cavity, while wolves and coyotes feed on the tail end first.