America’s Lion ~ Biology & Behavior

**Names**

Although its scientific name is Puma concolor, the American lion is know by more names than any other animal in the world. Depending on the region and native language, common names include: mountain lion, cougar, panther, puma, painter, el leon, and catamount.

**Appearance**

The adult American lion is tan in color, with black tipped ears and tail. It weighs 80 to 180 pounds and stands two to three feet high at the shoulders, and can reach eight feet in length from nose to tip of the tail, with the tail measuring 1/3 of the length.

Mountain lion kittens or cubs have camouflaging spots and rings around their tails that fade as they mature. Lions may bear up to four kittens at a time which stay with their mother for 18 months then disperse to establish their own territories.

**Hunting Behavior**

Opportunistic hunters, mountain lions typically hunt alone from dusk to dawn, taking their prey (primarily deer) from behind. On average, a lion will kill a deer every ten to fourteen days. Lions also dine on raccoons, rodents, elk, feral hogs, and even porcupines. They may drag the meal to another area and cover it with dry leaves, grass or pine needles to protect the food from other animals and to reduce spoilage. A lion may return to feed at the site over a period of several days.

**Abilities**

Mountain lions can:
- bound up to 40 feet running
- leap 15 feet up a tree
- climb over a 12 foot fence
- walk many miles at 10 mph
- reach speeds of 50 mph in a sprint

**Safety Concerns**

Human encounters with mountain lions are rare and the risk of injury or death from an attack is infinitely small. You are more likely to drown in your bathtub, be killed by a pet dog, or hit by lighting. If lions had any natural urge to hunt people, there would be attacks every single day. Instead, they avoid us.

But if you live, work, or play in lion country, be alert. Avoid walking alone between dusk and dawn when lions are most active. Keep your children and pets close to you. Never approach or corner a lion (or any wild animal). If you do encounter a lion, STOP. DON’T RUN. Unlike advice for encountering bears, do not act timid or play dead in front of a lion.

Instead: Maintain eye contact. Stand tall. Look bigger by opening your coat or raising your arms. Slowly wave your arms and speak firmly. Throw items at the lion if necessary. Give the lion room and time to move on.

In the rare event of a lion attack, fight back. Most people succeed in driving the lion away.

Although still a fairly rare occurrence, domestic animals can be an easy meal for lions and other wild predators. Most pets and livestock do not have the skills to protect themselves and are dependent on people. The threat to domestic animals can easily be avoided by modifying husbandry behaviors. See Protecting Pets and Livestock at MountainLion.org for details.

Human policies (wildlife management decisions) can also affect our overall safety. States that allow mountain lion hunting are putting their citizens at risk. Killing off adult lions leaves behind the younger juveniles who are more likely to cause trouble and prey on livestock. Developing in lion habitat or blocking a wildlife corridor with a highway or a new housing tract can also increase the chances for an encounter or potentially dangerous confrontation.

**Trophy Game Status?**

Trophy hunters will tell you hunting is a necessary management tool and that it balances wildlife populations. FALSE! These lies are told over and over by people who simply want to kill an animal for fun. The truth is mountain lions are solitary and reproduce slowly. They maintain their own numbers, in low densities, and will never overrun the countryside. They do not need to be hunted by people.

California, for example, has the nation’s largest human population, coexisting with more mountain lions than any other state. Yet California has not had a lion hunting season since 1972. Attacks on people, pets, and livestock are all rare. And there are still plenty of deer to go around. In fact, because California’s lions are not heavily persecuted, they are able to teach their kittens how to hunt properly and avoid people. As a result, conflicts with lions have actually reduced compared to the states that hunt the cats for sport.

Plaintly put, making the mountain lion a trophy game animal is the wrong decision and there are other options. You can take a stand and demand that the lion is fully protected in Missouri!

**Compare Feline “M” to Canine “X” Shape**

Lions sense movement more accurately than they see detail. Seeing the world in pixilated mosaics, their wide angle and night vision are much greater than our own. A lion’s hearing is acutely sensitive, discerning ultrasonic sounds far beyond human range. Their ears move independently to better receive sound and locate the source.

**Home Range**

Mountain lions used to occupy the entire U.S. coast-to-coast, but today they are primarily found in the West with a small population in Florida. Lions prefer areas with dense undergrowth and cover, and will leave an area if they perceive a threat. Found in deserts to humid coast forests, arid hillsides, scrub and oak woodlands, lions can live from sea level to snow-covered mountain peaks.

Lions are solitary unless mating or parenting, and maintain territories that average 100 square miles in size. Mountain lions mark their territory by clawing trees and urinating on scratch piles of dry leaves, grass or pine needles. They will fight other lions, even to the death, to protect their territory. A female with kittens will mount to a new den site within her territory every few weeks to protect her kittens from predators and male lions. To learn more, visit: http://MountainLion.org/americanlionyoutube1.asp

**Identifying Tracks**

Lions have a distinctive “M” shaped pad with three toes on the rear of the heel (dogs only have two toes). Their claw marks do not show in the track. Walking, the cat’s hind foot steps in his fore track, creating overlapping patterns. Their toes slant—similar to human feet—indicating left or right foot. Dog tracks are more symmetrical, and the raised dirt in the middle forms an “X” shape.

**What’s Next?**

The mountain lion may slowly but surely be on its way to recolonizing Missouri. Whether or not it’s successful though, is up to you. The laws put in place today will determine if the American lion will once again roam our countryside wild and free, or remain extirpated with every transplant cat shot on sight.

Missourians have been given a second chance. Are you willing to accept a small risk and learn to coexist with wildlife? If so, this is the time to educate yourself and your friends about mountain lions. Squash the rumors and irrational fear. Speak with your local law makers to get the lion back on Missouri’s Endangered Species List. You have an opportunity to undo a century’s worth of environmental damage and restore Missouri’s natural ecosystem. Second chances don’t come around too often, don’t waste this one!
Mountain lions used to occupy the United States coast-to-coast, from Mexico to Canada. As early European settlers moved west, their actions influenced and shaped the region’s landscape and resident wildlife. Rhinoceros on the frontier often meant removing large predators like bears, wolves, and mountain lions. Mountain lions—known by more names than any other animal in the world (cougar, puma, panther, catamount, painter, el león, etc.)—were one of the most heavily impacted species. Lions were seen as a direct threat as well as competition, and they were eliminated from most states east of the Rockies by the early 1900’s. Missouri killed its last indigenous lion in 1927. Today, the species has been reduced to a fraction of its former range, and it is currently surviving in just over a dozen western states and a tiny population of the panther subspecies in southwest Florida. 

**History and Range in the U.S.**

*Although mountain lions were wiped out in Missouri, the species was eventually placed on the state’s endangered species list and protected (should any cats happen to turn up). From 1994 through 2005, there were five cases of confirmed mountain lion presence photographs, tracks, and DNA evidence) in Missouri, and three lions were killed by residents. Then in 2006, based on unfounded concerns* from cattle ranchers, the Missouri Department of Conservation Commission announced it was “...undesirable to have a breeding population of mountain lions in Missouri...therefore, the Department of Conservation will not encourage the species to reestablish itself in the state.” This decision removed the mountain lions from the state’s endangered species list and reclassified it as “extirpated,” meaning extinct (or no local breeding population) in a particular area.

* According to the MDC website, “Missouri annually ranks among the top states for the number of cattle raised, and the potential presence of mountain lions causes much concern among producers.” Yet, “There have been no reports of mountain lions attacking people in Missouri, and no evidence of attacks on livestock or pets.”

**Lion Status in Missouri**

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One legislator has even proposed relabeling it as an invasive species to actively exterminate any lion that enters the state. Because of the irrational fear of what could happen and misinformation about the species, the mountain lion is no longer protected in Missouri.

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