

Mountain Lion Encounters

The mountain lion, commonly known as cougar, panther, or puma, exists only in the Western Hemisphere and is one of North America's biggest cats. An estimated 2,500 mountain lions currently live in Arizona. This number is based on density estimates by habitat type, not an actual count. 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.

A lion's natural life span is probably about 12 years in the wild and up to 25 years in captivity. Lion populations are known to be about 68 per cent female. Natural enemies include other large predators such as bears, lions, and wolves. Mountain lions also fall victim to accidents, disease, road hazards, and people.

Physical Appearance

Mountain lions are usually tawny to light cinnamon in color with black-tipped ears and tail. They vary in size and weight, with males being larger than females. Adult males may be more than eight feet in length and weigh an average of 150 pounds. Adult females may be up to seven feet long and weigh an average of 90 pounds. Lions are much larger than bobcats and have a long tail, which may measure one-third of their total length.

Tracks

Mountain lions have four toes with distinct lobes present at the base of the pad. Generally, claw marks are not visible since their claws are retractable. The mountain lion is generally a solitary animal. Adult males almost always travel alone. If tracks indicate two or more lions traveling together, it's probably a female with kittens.

Habitat

The mountain lion's habitat ranges from desert to subalpine mountains. Lions will generally be most abundant in areas with plentiful deer. Size of the home range depends on terrain and how much food is available. Boundaries of male home range are marked with piles of dirt and twigs, called scrapes, which signal to other lions that this area is occupied.

Hunting and Feeding Habits

Lions are most active from dusk to dawn, although they do travel and hunt in daylight. Lions prefer to eat deer, but they will also kill small mammals, livestock, and domestic animals such as pets.

Mountain lions prefer to kill their own prey. Like most cats, they take their prey by ambush rather than a long pursuit. After spotting prey, a lion stalks using available cover, then attacks with a rush, often from behind.

Lions usually kill with a powerful bite below the base of the skull, breaking the neck. They drag the carcass to a sheltered spot beneath a tree or overhang to feed on it. They cover the carcass with dirt and leaves and may return to feed on it over the course of a few days. Lions feeding on a kill can be dangerous to people. Lions that have been fed by people may become aggressive unexpectedly.

Mating and Breeding

Female lions generally reproduce when they are about 2-1/2 years old and have young at 12-24 month intervals. Courtship begins when a roaming female in heat makes frequent sounds and leaves a scent that attracts males. After locating the female, the male accompanies her for just a few days when mating occurs. Breeding can take place throughout the year, but most females give birth between April and July, following a 3-month gestation period. Mountain lions typically have between one and six kittens. The most common litter is two to three kittens. Kittens between zero and five months old will have a spotted coat. These spots may be retained for a longer period of time, but are generally faded.

Birth to Maturity

The female gives birth to her kittens usually in a secluded spot beneath an uprooted tree or rocky depression. Care of the kittens rests solely on the female. She defends them vigorously against male lions, which may kill them.

Newborn kittens are about 1 foot long and weight about a pound. They stir only to nurse until they are about 2 weeks old when their eyes open and they become alert and playful. Weaning occurs at about 2 months.

At 6 months, the kittens weight over 30 pounds and are becoming capable hunters. They remain with their mother for another year, improving their hunting skills.

What to Do if You Meet a Mountain Lion

No studies have been done to determine what to do if you meet a mountain lion. Based on observations by people who have come upon lions, some patterns of behavior and response are beginning to emerge. The following suggestions may be helpful, but remember: every situation is different with respect to the lion, the terrain, the people, and their activity.

- **When you hike or walk in mountain lion country**, go in groups and make plenty of noise to reduce your chances of surprising a lion. A sturdy walking stick is a good idea; it can be used to ward off a lion. Make sure children are close to you and within your sight at all times.
- **Do not approach a lion**, especially one that is feeding or with kittens. Most mountain lions will try to avoid a confrontation. Give them a way to escape.
- **Stay calm**. Talk calmly, yet firmly to it. Move slowly.

- **Stop or back away slowly**, if you can do it safely. Running may stimulate a lion's instinct to chase and attack. Face the lion and stand upright.
- **Do all you can do to appear larger**. Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you are wearing one. If you have small children with you, protect them by picking them up so they won't panic and run.
- **If the lion behaves aggressively**, throw stones, branches, or whatever you can get your hands on without crouching down or turning your back. Wave your arms slowly and speak firmly. What you want to do is convince the lion that you are not prey and that you may in fact be a danger to the lion.
- **Fight back if a lion attacks you**. Lions have been driven away by prey that fights back. People have fought back with rocks, sticks, caps or jackets, garden tools, and their bare hands successfully. Remain standing or try to get back up!

Summarized in April 2004 by Jean Husemann from a Colorado Division of Wildlife brochure and Green Valley News and Sun newspaper articles.