U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Eastern cougar

Felis concolor couguar

Ghost cat. Catamount. Puma. Painter. Panther. Mountain lion. Cougar. The many names given the nation's largest cat convey the mystery surrounding this solitary hunter. But the variety of names also demonstrates the cougar's original distribution across the North American continent and from southern Canada to the tip of South America.

Once the most widely distributed land mammal in the Western Hemisphere, cougars have been eliminated in most of their native habitat. Only western cougars still live in large enough numbers to maintain breeding populations, and they live on wild lands in the western United States and Canada. Observations of western cougars provide biologists with information for the cats that once lived east of the Mississippi.

Although generally presumed extinct in the wild, eastern cougars remain protected by the Endangered Species Act. Eastern cougars historically ranged from Michigan, southern Ontario, eastern Canada and Maine south to South Carolina and west across Tennessee. At one time, they lived in every Eastern state in a variety of habitats including coastal marshes, mountains and forests.

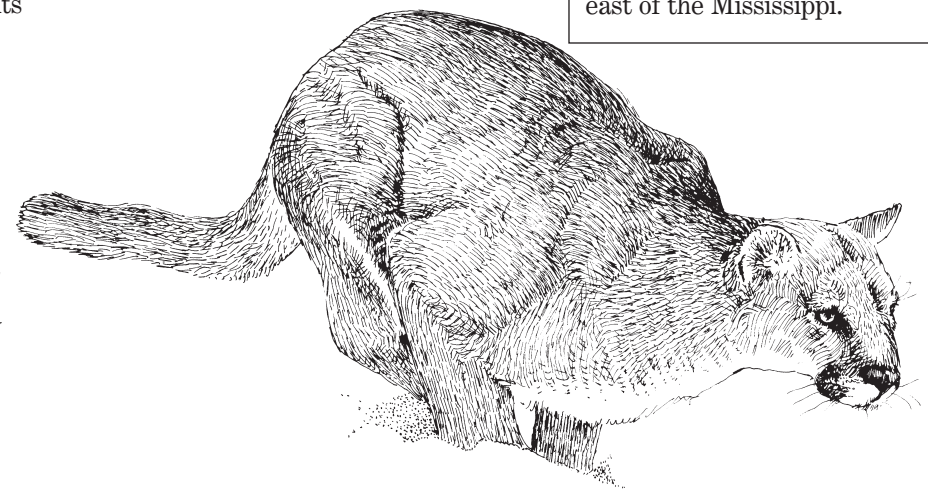
The cougar's Latin name gives a clue to its appearance; “concolor” means with one color, and adult cougars' fur is a uniform red-brown or gray-brown. Cougars have long, slender bodies with very long tails and broad, round heads with erect, rounded ears. Adult cats average from 6 feet (females) to 8 feet (males) long, including their tail. Males, at around 140 pounds, are larger than females at about 105 pounds. Cougars can swim, climb trees and leap horizontally and vertically equally well. Eastern cougars' primary prey was white-tailed deer, but they also hunted eastern elk (now extinct) and porcupines and other smaller mammals.

Cougars usually do not chase down their prey, but stalk and ambush; a cougar may leap as far as 20 feet onto a deer's back and can kill an animal with one bite to the neck. One cougar consumes a deer every week to 10 days, or more frequently if a female is feeding cubs. Cougars have no natural enemies, only humans.

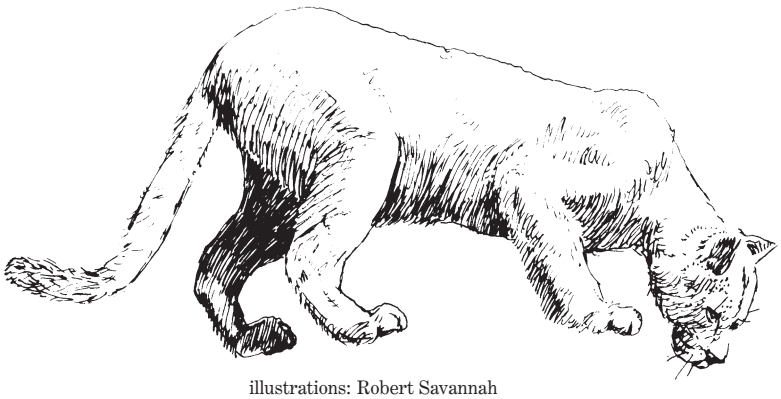
Cougars are mostly lone animals, except for mothers raising cubs and the time a pair spends together while mating. Males may occupy a range of more than 25 square miles and females between 5 and 20 square miles. Both females and males defend home territories. Cougars begin breeding at two or three years old and breed once every two or three years. Females initiate courtship, and produce a litter of two to three kittens after a three-month gestation. The kittens reach 10 pounds at eight weeks, and may weigh 30 to 45 pounds at six months. Females spend 18 to 24 months raising cubs to maturity. Cougars live an average of eight years.

Early settlers perceived the cougar as a danger to livestock and humans and a competitor for wild game. With bounties set by states, the eastern cougar was hunted and trapped relentlessly until they were extirpated throughout most of their range. Cougars were gone from much of the East by the late 1800s. At the same time, much of their habitat was eliminated through deforestation, which, along with hunting, also reduced the population and range of white-tailed deer. Although the forests and the deer have returned in the East in recent decades, conflicting land uses, fragmented habitat, roads, diseases and parasites from domestic animals, and expanding human populations will likely prevent cougars from returning to most of their former range. Habitat able to support small populations may still occur in some of the larger undeveloped tracts of forest in the East.

Cougars in the Western Hemisphere were originally classified into 32 subspecies. Recent genetic research instead identifies six groups, five of which are in Central or South America. Some, but not all, cougar biologists believe that this information suggests that all North American cougars are one subspecies. However, a complete taxonomic evaluation including morphology, ecology and biogeography has not been completed. An isolated population, like the Florida panther, can develop some genetic differences through past genetic bottlenecks and inbreeding within a small population. The Florida panther is the only breeding population of cougar east of the Mississippi.



While confirmed cougars sightings have occurred recently in the wild in the East, there is currently no physical evidence documenting the continued existence of a population of wild eastern cougars. The cougars examined in the Northeast in the past 70 years are likely released or escaped captives. Some cats had a South American genetic profile. Some may be animals that dispersed into the region from western populations. Confirmed cougar sightings have increased in the Midwest and Great Lakes states in recent years. Some believe that a small residual population of wild cougars persisted in the Canadian Maritime Provinces where there has also been recent confirmed evidence of cougars.



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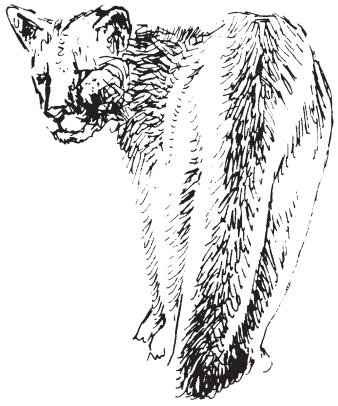
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