

Eastern cougar

Questions and answers about the five-year review

March 2011

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed a review of all available information about the eastern cougar, which has been on the endangered species list since 1973. The review concludes that the eastern cougar is extinct. Although cougars are seen occasionally in the East, no evidence exists that they are the subspecies known as eastern cougars.

1. What was the historical range of the eastern cougar?

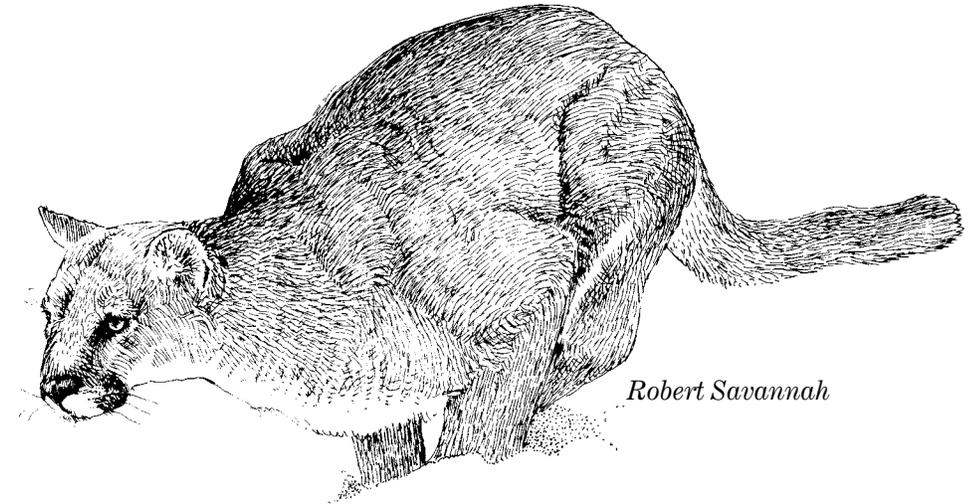
The eastern cougar range extended from Maine south to Georgia, west into eastern Missouri and eastern Illinois, and north to Michigan and Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick, Canada.

2. Why did eastern cougar populations become extinct?

European immigrants killed cougars to protect themselves and their livestock. Many states offered a bounty to encourage the killing of cougars. The white-tailed deer, the primary prey of the cougar, was nearly extinct in eastern North America by the late 1800s. The last records of eastern cougars are believed to be in Maine (1938) and New Brunswick (1932).

3. Why did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiate a review of the eastern cougar, and what is its purpose?

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Service to conduct a review of each protected species every 5 years to ensure the accuracy of its classification. The review is based on the best scientific and commercial data available at the time of the review. At the conclusion of a review, the Service can affirm that the species is correctly classified, recommend reclassification of a species (endangered to threatened; threatened to endangered), or recommend removal of the species from the endangered species list. Any



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change in classification must undergo a formal rulemaking process, including the opportunity for public comment.

4. Can the public comment on the five-year status review for the eastern cougar?

There is no formal public comment period on the 5-year status review; but, the Service will accept and consider information electronic mailed to Mark_McCollough@fws.gov. Decisions are made on the best available scientific and commercial information.

5. When was the status of the eastern cougar last reviewed?

The Service has not prepared a formal status review of the eastern cougar since its recovery plan was published in 1982. The Service prioritized its limited resources to protect at-risk species with known populations.

6. Why did the Service write a recovery plan for the eastern cougar in 1982 when biologists believed the subspecies was extinct?

Although no breeding population of eastern cougar was known in 1982,

Service biologists at that time believed it was possible that the eastern cougar still survived in a few remote areas of its historical range.

7. What would the Service consider proof of the existence of an eastern cougar population?

Even small populations of cougars, such as those in Florida and North and South Dakota, leave substantial physical evidence (tracks, photographs, scat, hair, genetic samples, road mortalities, cougars shot or caught in traps).

Service biologists assembled 108 records dating from 1900 to 2010 with a high level of confirmation that the described animals were cougars. After careful examination, the biologists concluded all reported cougars were animals that escaped or were released from captivity or that dispersed from the western United States.

There is no evidence that a breeding population of cougars occurs in the eastern United States or eastern Canada other than those in Florida (Florida panther).

8. What would the Service consider a viable population of eastern cougars?

The Service's recovery plan for the eastern cougar calls for at least three self-sustaining populations in the United States, each with a minimum of 50 breeding adults.

9. Why are cougars occurring with increasing frequency in the Midwest?

Cougar populations in most western states have been increasing in recent decades. These are a different subspecies than the extinct eastern cougar. Cougars have reoccupied their historic breeding range in North and South Dakota and possibly elsewhere. While individual animals dispersing from western populations have been documented in a number of Midwest states, some of these animals could be released or escaped pets. Although young males may sometimes disperse hundreds of miles, female cougars normally do not move far from where they are born. Thus, cougars are slow to colonize new areas and establish breeding populations.

The Cougar Network <<http://www.cougarnet.org>> documents cougar confirmations, many of them east of established cougar populations. According to The Cougar Network, cougars of wild origin have been confirmed from Minnesota and Wisconsin south to Louisiana.

10. Will the range of cougars continue to expand into eastern North America?

Cougars once had the greatest distribution of any land mammal in North and South America. They are adaptable and can live in grasslands, forest, desert, mountainous regions and swamps. They require large contiguous areas with adequate large prey to meet their social, reproductive and energy needs.

There are likely many places in eastern North America with adequate habitat to support populations of cougars. It is unknown at this time whether cougars will continue to expand their range eastward. Given human densities in eastern North America, the return of a top-level predator such as the cougar will depend on public awareness and acceptance.

11. Will the Service consider reintroducing other cougar subspecies to the eastern states?

No. The Service does not have the authority under the ESA to replace the extinct eastern cougar subspecies by introducing another cougar subspecies.

12. Can private individuals or organizations reintroduce cougars to the eastern states?

If the eastern cougar is removed from the federal endangered species list, the introduction of cougars to the eastern states would fall under the jurisdiction of the states.

13. What are the differences among the puma, panther, mountain lion, catamount, cougar and painter?

These are different names for cougars. The different names are interchangeable and do not describe separate subspecies.

14. Has genetic analysis shown significant differences among the approximately 15 subspecies of cougar in North America?

Recent genetic analysis has raised doubts about the validity of so many subspecies. But, a complete subspecies analysis, including consideration of morphology, unique ecological settings and habitats, and geographic distinctiveness between populations, has not been conducted.

15. Is it legal to have a cougar as a pet? How many cougars are kept as pets?

States have the authority to regulate possession, protection and hunting of species not protected by federal law. Some people estimate that more than 1,000 cougars are held in private captivity in the eastern United States. The Service's review accounted for only 110 to 135 captive cougars in 15 of the 21 states surveyed, although it is likely that many additional cougars are kept as pets without authorization.

16. Do cougars pose a threat to humans and pets?

Like any wild carnivore, cougars can attack and kill other animals and humans. Big cats are usually secretive and usually avoid inhabited areas. However, cougars raised in captivity and released to the wild may be poor

hunters and/or unafraid of humans. They may behave differently from wild cougars. We recommend caution and notifying state and local wildlife officials when a cougar is observed.

17. What is the next step now that the five-year review is completed?

Service biologists will prepare a proposal to remove the eastern cougar from the endangered species list. The proposal will be published in the Federal Register, and the public will be invited to provide substantive scientific information about eastern cougars. Following review of the comments, the Service will make a final determination, and that determination will be published in the Federal Register. The timing of these actions will depend on funding and staffing availability.

18. If the eastern cougar is removed from the endangered species list, will it be legal to hunt or kill cougars found in the historical range of the eastern cougar?

State laws govern hunting and killing animals not protected by federal law. Contact your state wildlife agency to find out what laws apply in your state.

19. How many species have been removed from the endangered species list since the 1973 ESA was passed?

Of the species for which the Service has the lead, 38 plants and animals found in the United States have been removed from the list. Of these, 13 recovered; nine animals were removed from the list due to extinction (although some were believed to be extinct when they were placed on the list); and 16 were removed for reasons such as the discovery of new information.

20. Where can I find more information about the eastern cougar?

For more information about the eastern cougar, see <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/ecougar>.

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