

Questions and Answers

Delisting the eastern cougar, January 2018

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is removing the eastern cougar (puma), *Puma concolor cougar*, from the endangered species list due to extinction, effective February 22, 2018. The delisting follows a review of the status of the subspecies under the Endangered Species Act and a 2015 proposal to delist. Although pumas are seen occasionally in the East, they are pumas originating from populations outside the historical range of the eastern cougar: either Florida panthers, animals dispersing from the West, or animals of captive origin.

1. What was the historical range of the eastern cougar subspecies? The eastern cougar's 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? Many people believed it was necessary to kill cougars to protect themselves and their livestock. Many states offered a bounty to encourage the killing of cougars. Additionally, loss of habitat for the cougar's primary prey, the white-tailed deer, nearly drove that species to extinction in eastern North America by the late 1800s. The last records of eastern cougars are from Maine (1938) and New Brunswick (1932).

3. Why are so many cougars allegedly seen in eastern North America? State and federal biologists annually receive hundreds of reports of cougars. Follow-up investigations have indicated that more than 90 percent are typically misidentified species of wildlife, such as bobcats, fishers, bears, deer, house cats and dogs. However, sometimes these reports are valid reports of pumas. These cats are not eastern cougars, but are individuals originated from populations outside the historical range of the eastern cougar: either Florida panthers, animals dispersing from the West, or animals that have been released or escaped from captivity. We recommend caution and notifying state and local wildlife officials when a cougar is observed.

4. How did the Service determine the eastern cougar is extinct? The Service completed a formal review of the eastern cougar in 2011, examining the best available scientific information. The agency sent a questionnaire to all state fish and wildlife agencies within the range and contacted provinces in Canada, and no states or provinces provided evidence of the existence of an eastern cougar population. The Service also created an eastern cougar web page to solicit public input. The agency could find no evidence that a population of cougars survived in historical range of the eastern cougar.

Service biologists assembled and reviewed more than 100 reports dating to 1900 that had high certainty of being cougars in eastern North America (outside of Florida's Florida panther population). The reports described cougars that were captive and had escaped or been released to the wild, and wild cougars from western U.S. populations that had migrated eastward to the Midwest, South and at least in one instance the East. Finding no evidence of the existence of an eastern cougar population, the agency concluded that the eastern cougar is extinct and began developing a proposal to remove it from the federal endangered species list.

5. Why did the Service list the cougar and write a recovery plan for the subspecies when biologists believed the subspecies was extinct? Reports of eastern cougars were scant from the late 1800s to the 1950s, but then began increasing along with press coverage and assertions by biologists and other writers that there was sufficient evidence to believe that the subspecies still existed. These assertions and sighting reports were accepted without verification, and coincided with a growing number of cougars in the North American pet trade. This led to the 1973 listing of the eastern cougar, despite a lack of empirical evidence showing that populations existed at that time.

In the 1982 recovery plan, Service biologists believed it was possible that the eastern cougar still survived in a few remote areas of its historical range. The Service's recovery plan for the eastern cougar called for at least three self-sustaining populations in the U.S, each with a minimum of 50 breeding adults.

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

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

Cougar populations in most western states have been expanding in recent decades, and individual animals dispersing from western populations have been documented in a number of Midwest states. Also, some documented cougars in the Midwest 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](#) 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. Evidence of wild cougars dispersing farther east is extremely rare. A solitary young male cougar traveled about 2,000 miles from South Dakota through Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York, and was killed on a Connecticut highway in 2011. A cougar of unknown origin was killed in Kentucky in December 2014. Confirmed sightings of cougars have occurred in Tennessee, including a female with genetics similar to cougars from the South Dakota population.

8. Will the range of cougars continue to expand into eastern North America? Cougars 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 whether western cougars will continue to expand their range eastward.

9. What are the implications (if any) to the status of the Florida panther? None. The Florida panther will continue to be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

10. Will the Service consider reintroducing pumas from other populations to the former range of the eastern cougar? The introduction of cougars to these eastern states falls under the jurisdiction of the states.

11. Can private individuals or organizations reintroduce cougars to the eastern states within the historical range of the eastern cougar? The introduction of cougars to these eastern states falls under the jurisdiction of the states.

12. Has genetic analysis shown significant differences among the approximately 15 subspecies of puma in North America? Recent genetic analysis has raised doubts about the validity of the 15 described subspecies in North America. However, a complete taxonomic analysis, including consideration of morphology, ecology and behavior, in addition to genetics, has not been conducted. While many scientists believe that genetic studies indicate there is a single subspecies of cougar in North America, the Service believes that a complete taxonomic analysis is necessary before adopting a change in taxonomy. Regardless of whether the agency adopts a single North American subspecies taxonomy, a breeding puma population to protect as a subspecies or distinct population segment does not exist in the historical range described for the eastern cougar.

13. 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 U.S. The Service's 2011 review accounted for 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.

14. Now that the eastern cougar has been removed from the endangered species list, will it be legal to hunt or kill pumas found in the historical range of the eastern cougar? Florida panthers are protected by federal law. 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.

15. Could anything "discovered" during the Service's current five-year review of Florida panthers have any impact on this decision to delist eastern cougars? No.