

Mountain lion ‘sightings’ on refuge still unsubstantiated

by Ted Bailey

In the summer of 2001, two seasonal staff members on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge were together driving down Swanson River Road. Suddenly, on the road ahead of them appeared an unusual animal. After crossing the road, it paused in the vegetation at the edge of the road long enough for them to get a good look at the animal, which they described as a large, long, brown cat with a long tail. They claimed it definitely was not a wolf, coyote, or lynx.

Was this merely a mistaken identity of a common animal from persons unfamiliar with Alaska wildlife? Then what about similar reports from longtime residents?

A number of years ago a 30-plus-year peninsula resident—someone familiar with bears, wolves, coyotes and lynx—also reported seeing a large, long, brown, cat-like animal with a long tail crossing Skilak Loop Road. And from his house, another longtime peninsula resident, also familiar with the area’s wildlife, watched an unusual-looking animal at the far side of an open field for more than 10 minutes through a spotting scope. The description he gave was of a large, long, cat-like animal with short ears that periodically switched its long tail back and forth.

In yet another incident, a man reported that his dog rushed up to his house obviously frightened, barking and looking behind. At the edge of the forest nearby the man reported seeing crouched a large, brown, cat-like animal with a long tail, which then got up, turned broadside, and walked away.

What are these people seeing?

These are several of the best reports to which I personally listened during my years as supervisory biologist at the refuge. I have heard of other reports, but did not interview the observers.

The people I talked with had several characteristics in common. First, they were not seeking publicity or fame, did not want their names mentioned for fear of ridicule, and they appeared to me to be telling the truth.

Second, they usually said, “You’re not going to believe this, but I know what I saw,” and they were convinced that they had seen an animal out of the ordinary.

Third, with the exception of the two seasonal refuge staff members who were not Alaska residents, but were competent observers, most observers were residents of the peninsula familiar with area wildlife. One said it was a “mountain lion,” another said it “looked like a mountain lion,” and yet another person said “it was a very large, long, brown cat, definitely not a lynx.”

What are these people seeing? Is it possible that mountain lions could naturally reach the Kenai Peninsula?

Mountain lions are slowly expanding their range northward in Canada. Not too many years ago, the northern limit of the mountain lion was in British Columbia and Alberta. However, an updated distribution map now shows the mountain lion in a small area of the southern Yukon, and there is a verified record of a mountain lion in the Kluane Lake area.

There are even occasional reports of mountain lions in the southern part of the Northwest Territory.

On November 25, 1989, the first confirmed mountain lion in Alaska was shot in southeastern Alaska four miles from Wrangell. A second mountain lion was found dead in a snare on southern Kupreanof Island in Southeast in late December 1998. In 1999, the Juneau Empire newspaper reported that two Alaska Department of Fish and Game employees had seen a mountain lion at close range in 1992 in broad daylight on a road near Yakutat.

Mountain lions—usually subadults—are certainly capable of dispersing over long distances. A Canadian research biologist said he had seen their tracks crossing glaciers and icefields in mountains in Canada and had occasionally known radio-collared mountain lions to disperse to unknown areas.

Another possibility is that someone could have accidentally, or intentionally, released a captive or “pet” mountain lion on the peninsula.

Could a mountain lion survive on the Kenai Peninsula? Mountain lions in southeastern Alaska could probably prey on deer, but they can also prey on moose, the most abundant wild ungulate on the peninsula.

Ian Ross, a Canadian biologist who conducted re-

search on mountain lions in Alberta, is one of the few researchers who have studied mountain lions in habitat occupied by moose as well as by elk, white-tailed and mule deer and bighorn sheep. In 1996, Ross reported in the journal *Alces* that in the winters in his Alberta study area, moose were important prey of mountain lions.

Fourteen percent of 312 kills of mountain lions that he examined were moose. All of the moose killed by mountain lions were young moose less than 20 months old—calves and yearlings—and more than a third were in very poor physical condition, based on the fat content in their bone marrow. No adult moose were killed by mountain lions, but the lions scavenged from the carcasses of four already dead adult moose.

Both male and female mountain lions, and subadults, killed young moose despite the fact that many young moose appeared to be accompanied by their protective mothers when they were preyed upon. The defensive behavior of the cow moose was not enough to thwart the attacks.

Ross found that moose contributed 30 percent of the biomass consumed by mountain lions in winter.

But because of the poor condition of the moose killed by mountain lions, he concluded that mountain lion predation on moose appeared to be “compensatory,” meaning that the chances were high that the moose that were killed by the mountain lions would have died anyhow.

Finally, the climate on the peninsula would not appear to be a limiting factor for mountain lions. Mountain lions inhabit areas as cold or colder and areas with greater snow depths than we normally have on the western Kenai Peninsula.

So, do we have a mountain lion on the peninsula?

Do we have a breeding population of mountain lions on the peninsula? Scientists remain skeptical until they are confronted with hard, preferably physical, evidence from a trusted observer. This could be a good clear, close, authentic photograph, casts or photographs of tracks in the snow or mud, scats (feces) or hair confirmed by DNA analysis to be from a mountain lion, or the most conclusive evidence—a carcass.

I became familiar with mountain lion tracks in the snow, having observed them in previous studies in Idaho and Montana. I have seen hundreds of tracks of lynx on the refuge over the years, but have never observed what I thought was a mountain lion track.

During most years of the 1990s, we captured many lynx for research purposes on the refuge with trained dogs. These same dogs were previously trained to trail and tree mountain lions for research purposes in the state of Washington, but we never encountered a trail of a mountain lion on the refuge while using the dogs.

So what do I think? I do not believe that there is a breeding population of mountain lions on the peninsula—there have never been reports of females with kittens—but I also find it difficult to just outright dismiss the periodic descriptive observations of some apparently sincere peninsula residents. Therefore, I would not be terribly surprised some day if someone provides the hard evidence, in whatever form, that may confirm that a mountain lion is—or was—present on the peninsula.

Ted Bailey is a retired refuge wildlife biologist who has worked on the Kenai Peninsula for more than 25 years. He maintains a keen interest in the peninsula's wildlife and natural history. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.