

MOUNTAIN LIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

by John & Heidi Rao



The mountain lion, *Puma concolor*, is the most widely distributed predator in the Western Hemisphere. The range of this animal extends as far north as Alaska and Western Canada, throughout the United States, and every country in Central and South America. Whereas the ranges of most large predators are declining, the range of the mountain lion is increasing. The mountain lion is referred to by more names than any other animal in the world. These names encompass 18 South American names, 25 Native American names, and 40 English names. Some of these names are cougar, puma, panther, painter, catamount, and el leon.

The scientific name of the mountain lion, *Puma concolor*, means “cat of one color”. This cat is a tan or tawny color with black-tipped ears and white around its muzzle. Juveniles have black spots to help camouflage to its surroundings. Adult males can weigh over 150 lbs. and be over 8 feet long while the females, slightly smaller, can weigh up to 90 pounds and reach a length of over seven feet long. The mountain lion is a large, slender animal with a small head, relative to its size. Compared to other North American wild cats, the most distinguishing characteristic of mountain lions is its tail. The tail of this predator can be up to three feet long, about one-third of its body length.

Mountain lions have inhabited North America for at least 50,000 years. These animals are very adaptable, surviving in just about any geological area in the Western Hemisphere. Their ranges include desert areas, coastal plains, mountains, and dense woodlands. To be able to live in all environments, they must also tolerate the most extreme heat and extreme cold throughout their range. This predator is a solitary animal, most active at night because their prey is most active between dusk and dawn. Their primary food source is deer and other large mammals, although they are opportunistic and will prey on small mammals and birds. The life span of a mountain lion in the wild is about 12 years.

The mountain lions home range can be anywhere from 12 to 22 square miles. Females have smaller home ranges extending 8 to 16 miles. The sizes of their home ranges are often dependent upon the availability of prey. These home ranges can often overlap. When this occurs, smaller male and female mountain lions will give way to the larger male. Male mountain lions, if given the opportunity, will kill smaller males, females, and their young.

Female mountain lions are able to breed at 1 ½ to 2 years of age. There is no “breeding season” for mountain lions. When the female mountain lion is ready to mate, she will often vocalize in an attempt to attract a mate. This vocalization can alert the outdoor enthusiast to the presence of these predators. The majority of cubs are born in late winter or early spring, after a gestation period of 95 days, in which 1 to 5 cubs are born. The young mountain lions stay with their mother for about 1 to 1 ½ years even though the mother stops producing milk at about 10 weeks.

There are three behavioral classes of mountain lions that outdoorsmen need to be aware of when venturing into this large predator’s environment. These behavioral classes are immature mountain lions, transient mountain lions, and resident mountain lions. Understanding these behaviors can help reduce the chances of an unintentional encounter with one of these large predators.

Immature mountain lions depend on their mother for survival. They have not yet learned the skills necessary to survive on their own. These young animals are fiercely protected by their mother. As the young mountain lions start to venture away from their mother in an attempt to explore their surroundings, they are taken away from the safety and seclusion of their den, potentially into the path of a human. An unwary hiker coming across a litter of cubs could prove fatal to the outdoor enthusiast by a protective mother.

The transient mountain lion can be either a young lion that has been run off by its mother or an older mountain lion that has been displaced out of its territory. Transient mountain lions are the most unpredictable because they are “passing through” without

leaving many signs. During this time, the animal faces many hardships and stresses trying to survive. This period is fatal to many mountain lions due to injuries from fights with other mountain lions over territory or starvation, due to lack of hunting skills or lack of ability due to old age. Transient mountain lions are very dangerous to any person that crosses its path. Humans make for easy prey to a young or old predator. Often these encounters involve injured or starving animals.

Resident mountain lions have an established home range. Resident male lions know where their range overlaps with other mountain lions, both male and female, for territorial or breeding purposes. These animals routinely visit and hunt their entire home range. Resident mountain lions are the most predictable because they may leave many signs of their presence. The most common signs left by a mountain lions are tracks, scrapes, scat, and their kills. This is the animal that the outdoor enthusiast can take steps to avoid.