



Eastern Cougar

Felis concolor

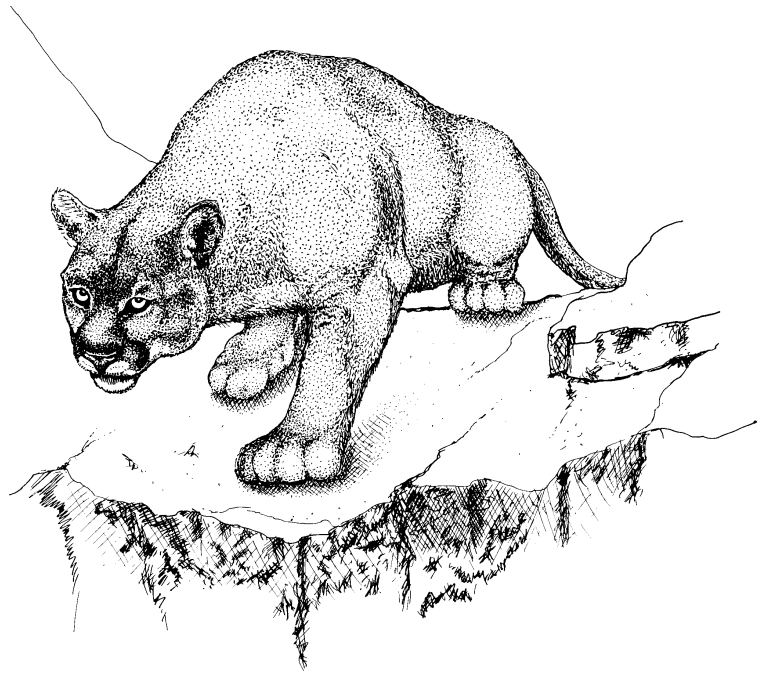
Few large animals have generated more lore throughout North Carolina than the cougar. Cougars were once common here and they have left a legacy of place names throughout the state—indeed, the entire Southeast. Many ridges, creeks, swamps and mountains were long ago named for panthers or the colloquial term “painters,” both common names in this part of the country for the cougar.

All cougars are members of the small cat family and are among the largest predatory animals of North America. Among New World cats, the various subspecies of cougars are second in size only to the jaguar of South America.

History and Status

Originally there were 11 subspecies of cougars native to North America, but only two of them—the Eastern cougar and Florida cougar—were found east of the Mississippi River. Today, only a handful of Florida cougars still survive in the Everglades, and most biologists believe the native Eastern cougar (*Felis concolor*) has actually been extinct for many years.

Sightings of cougars are still being reported occasionally in parts of the East, including North Carolina, and some of those sightings have been verified. Yet all cougar sightings made in recent years from the Deep South have most likely involved western subspecies that have escaped or been secretly released in the East. Even so, the Eastern cougar is



still protected as an endangered species just in case some might have survived.

Early records of North Carolina mammals indicate that the Eastern cougar’s populations declined throughout the 18th century as a result of hunting, loss of habitat and the parallel decline of its major prey species, especially white-tailed deer. After about 1900, the Eastern cougar was thought to have been extirpated throughout North Carolina, although these secretive animals may have clung to survival in isolated wilderness areas in the mountains, and particularly in large eastern swamps.

Description

Although classified as a member of the small cat family because of its skull and eye structure, the cougar is quite a large animal, the largest of all other species in its genus. The cougar’s coloration varies depending on where it lives and the time of season, but most often it ranges from tawny to grayish brown on its back and flanks, with a white chest, belly and throat. Dusky patches border the upper lip and the back of the

ears while the tip of its tail is black. The cubs are buff-colored with spots that eventually fade.

The cougar is known to be an excellent hunter in all weather conditions and it is an expert swimmer and good climber. It has speed and agility and is a stealthy stalker that hunts by sight and smell. It prefers wild quarry such as deer; however, cougars have been known to eat anything from slugs to horses.

Habitat and Habits

The cougar can survive in a variety of climates and habitats, and is at home in mountains, forests, desert scrub, swamps and jungles. Cougars usually hunt on the ground, and depending on where they live and when their prey is active, they may hunt either day or night. When capturing their prey, the cougar stalks, rushes, pounces and then inflicts a bite on the nape of its



Range Map:

No documented sightings.

**WILD
Facts**

prey's neck. After feeding, the cougar may cover the remains and return later to finish the rest.

The male cougar is generally a loner until mating, at which time he pairs with the female for two weeks. Prior to mating, males are very aggressive and may even kill competing males. Although these animals are known to be very secretive and quiet, they may let out an eerie scream during the mating period.

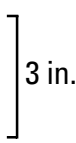
Range and Distribution

Cougars are also known to cover 20 to 25 miles in one night, marking their territories with piles of feces and urine. Despite declining numbers in many regions, surviving subspecies of cougars are still distributed more widely north and south than any New World mammal, ranging from southern Canada to the southern tip of South America. At one time, they also ranged from coast to coast in North America, but by the 1900s they had largely disappeared east of the Mississippi, leaving only the small confirmed population of Florida panthers in the Everglades.

People Interactions

Cougars are so secretive that even in parts of the American West where they are still quite common, many people live their entire lives without seeing one. Likewise, danger to humans has been largely exaggerated, and although there have been attacks on people, they are quite rare. A cougar is highly unlikely to attack unless it is cornered or a female cat perceives that there is a threat to her young.

As with most wildlife, the greatest threat to cougars is loss of habitat though human activities. Where cougar populations are stable and sport hunting is permitted under carefully controlled regulations, most biologists feel that this activity has little impact.



References

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Credits

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COUGAR

Classification

Class: Mammalia
 Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 6-8 ft., including a long, curving tail.
 Height: male 27 in.; female 24 in.
 Weight: male 150 lbs.; females 100 lbs.

Food

Deer, elk, porcupines, mice, game birds, fish, slugs, grasshoppers, martens, skunks, raccoons, foxes and other small mammals.

Breeding

Cougars become sexually mature at 2 or 3 years old, and usually mate in August or spring. Males may mate with several females. On average, females will bear a litter once every 2-3 years.

Young

Called kittens. Cougars weigh 8-16 ozs. when born in litters of 1-6 kittens after a gestation period of 96 days. Their eyes remain closed for 14 days, and they are usually weaned after 4 or 5 weeks. Kittens will stay with their mother for up to 2 years.

Life Expectancy

Average 12 years