

COUGARS

Both loved and feared throughout history, this quintessential American cat bears an important message about preserving the wild through protecting large carnivores.

Cat of Many Names

Cougars (*Felis concolor*) were once present throughout the Americas, boasting the most extensive distribution of any non-human land mammal in the Western Hemisphere, so it is fitting that this cat should have so many names. Throughout the American continents, the cougar is known as puma, panther, painter, mountain lion, catamount, king cat, or even the American lion. Secretive and solitary, the cougar is rarely seen by humans. Its distinctive call, however, can be heard for miles. Cougars feed on a variety of prey throughout their range, including birds, mice, capybara, pronghorn, and moose. In North America, large ungulates, primarily deer, form the bulk of their diet. Individual cougars, which can exceed 150 pounds, often vary in size based upon the type and availability of prey.

Historically, some 30 subspecies of cougar ranged throughout all the major habitat types in the Americas, from arid deserts to tropical and cold coniferous forests and from sea level up to 17,000 feet in the South American Andes. Their distribution stretched from the boreal forests of extreme northern Canada to the southern tip of South America in Chile. In North America, cougars are still present in significant numbers throughout most of the western United States and Canada. East of the Mississippi, however, cougars are generally presumed extinct—victims of historic overhunting, predator control campaigns, and habitat loss. Only one subspecies, the endangered Florida panther, still persists in low numbers in southwest Florida. The status of cougars in Mexico and Central and South America is not well known. Today, concerns about the long-term health of cougar populations are pertinent throughout North America, as



expanding human activities—including urban development, resource extraction, agriculture, and recreational uses—increasingly affect cougars and their habitat.

Demise of the Eastern Cougar

The eastern cougar subspecies (*Felis concolor cougar*) was once found in the eastern United States from the southern Appalachians to New Brunswick, Canada. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, cougar populations were systematically reduced through overhunting. Early settlers perceived cougars as a threat to the safety of people and their livestock, so they hunted and trapped them in large numbers. Overhunting of white-tailed deer might also have contributed to the eastern cougar's decline by reducing the cougar's primary prey and driving the cats to predate more on livestock in some areas. Habitat fragmentation due to deforestation and the construction of new railroads, highways, and cities sealed the fate of the subspecies. By the 1950s, the eastern cougar was presumed extinct.



Over the past 50 years, however, many unconfirmed cougar sightings have been reported throughout the eastern United States and Canada, and cougar presence has been verified in several instances. Cougar tracks and other signs have been verified in Vermont, Massachusetts, Ontario, and New Brunswick. In 1996, a cougar specialist confirmed a print found in West Virginia in 1996 as a cougar track. It is unclear whether the cats that have been reported in the East are the last remnants of a surviving cougar population or captive cats that have been released. To date, scientists have been unable to confirm the presence of a breeding population of wild cougars in the East.

The eastern cougar is presently protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) as endangered throughout its United States and Canadian range. It is also listed as endangered in the IUCN Red Book and protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) Appendix I. Private networks such as the Eastern Cougar Foundation and the Eastern Puma Research Network have been established to investigate the presence of the cougar in the East. Because it is officially presumed extinct, however, funds to research the possible presence of wild cougars throughout its historic range are scarce. Interest in trying to reestablish cougars in the East is quite controversial, although adequate habitat probably remains, especially in large, wild areas like the Appalachian mountains.

Cougars in the West

Until the mid-1900s, cougars in the West faced the same predator-control pressures that virtually extirpated cougars in the East. By the early 1900s, most states in the West had begun paying bounties for killing cougars. From 1907 to 1963, between 200 and 450 cougars were killed in California every year. By the 1960s, however, the public's perception of predators and cougars had changed somewhat, and most Western states chose to eliminate bounties and place limits on cougar hunting. The

Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia similarly established hunting restrictions. As the status of cougars changed from vermin to game species, populations increased. In some states, public support has resulted in yet stronger protections for cougars: California banned cougar sport hunting entirely in 1990, and Oregon and Washington banned cougar hunting with dogs in the 1990s.

Although cougar populations in the western United States and Canada have generally increased over the past 40 years, balancing their long-term conservation with a growing human population is still an issue. Sprawling suburbs and outdoor recreation activities increasingly bring people into cougar habitat, both degrading these areas and heightening the chances for cougar-human encounters, which can result in harm to humans or the eventual destruction of cougars. Many suburban activities, like watering lawns or leaving pet food outdoors, attract deer or cougars and ultimately habituate cougars to human presence, increasing the risk that these typically reclusive cats will come into contact with people. Furthermore, while cougars have managed to fare well on the outskirts of many metropolitan areas, sprawl-type development threatens to fragment and destroy the large expanses of habitat that cougars require to survive. New subdivisions and roads limit cougars' ability to disperse, threatening to isolate individual populations and perhaps lead to inbreeding or eventual extirpation. Roads can be a barrier to cougars, and vehicles kill many cougars each year, especially in areas like the rapidly developing counties of southern California.

Cougars in the West have fared much better than their eastern counterparts, due largely to vast public lands that have supported the cats and their prey. But as long as expanding human activities continue to encroach upon their remaining strongholds, the future of this magnificent cat will be uncertain. If cougars are to be preserved throughout the West over the long term, foresighted management of both their populations and their habitat will be necessary.