

Cougar

Felis concolor



Photo credit: Keay Wildlife Images

Cougar's scientific name *Felis concolor*, means the cat of one colour. They are large cats found throughout the western hemisphere from northern BC to Patagonia in southern Argentina and Chile. Because of their wide-ranging distribution, cougars have many names including mountain lion, puma, deer tiger, catamount, Indian devil, Mexican lion, and ghost of the Rockies, among others.

Characteristics

Male cougars can grow up to 2.7 metres (9 feet) and can weigh over 90 kgs (200 lbs). Females are slightly smaller, weighing around 56 kgs (125 lbs). In BC, their fur colour ranges from red-brown to grey-brown with a white underside.

Habitat

Cougars can be found in a variety of habitats ranging from mountainous areas, through forests to low land swamps. An individual cougar can mark a territory as large as 100 square miles. A male will share its territory with that of several females; however, he will not overlap with another male.

A cougar's habitat may change depending on the season since they follow the migratory patterns of their prey.

Behaviour

Cougars are solitary and elusive animals and only come together to mate. Male cougars are polygamous and therefore will mate with several females. When a female is ready to mate, the male will pick up on the scent of her urine. The courtship period usually lasts about three days, and they can mate up to 40 times in one day. Females act as the sole



caregiver to their young and can give birth to a litter as large as six kittens; however, litter sizes usually range from one to four. The gestation period is 96 days and kittens stay with their mothers for about one and a half years.

Cougars are known for their adept predatory abilities and can kill prey as large as moose or elk. Their staple food is mostly black-tailed deer, but they also hunt a variety of other animals such as small rodents, birds, mountain sheep, raccoon, porcupine and beaver. They kill by stalking and then pouncing on the neck and shoulders of their prey and delivering one fatal bite to the neck. Cougars always hunt alone and they never eat carrion. They will feed from the same carcass several times, and will usually bury their kill with dirt and brush.

Threats

Cougars can compete with other predators throughout their vast range such as bears, wolves and even jaguar in the tropics. However far and away their greatest threat comes from human activity. Habitat destruction, hunting their prey as well as cougars themselves, take their toll on cougar numbers. In addition, because they are a top predator and humans often fear them and misunderstand their behaviour, they are often shot in retaliation. Cougars very rarely attack humans but will if they are starving or protecting their young. Unfortunately, with human population growth comes increased threat to other species' habitat; so as more human beings encroach on cougars' territory, the threat of attack will increase.

Other Interesting Facts

--- Cougars are among the most athletic animals in Canada and have similar skills and abilities as African leopards. They are able to jump 10 metres (33 feet) and run at speeds of 60 km/hr (nearly 40 mph).

--- Cougars are among one of only two species capable to successfully attacking and killing a porcupine (the other is the fisher).

---Cougar's night vision, like all cats is superb. A specialized tissue layer called the tapetum lucidum allows for exceptional vision even in low light.

Bibliography

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