



Ron Wilson

**MOUNTAIN**  
*Lions*  
**IN NORTH DAKOTA**



*Puma concolor*

cougar puma

Yes, North Dakota has mountain lions. This may be a surprise to some people as much of the state is open prairie country where the big cats are scarce. The western part of the state, however, does have some suitable habitat and a small number of lions are calling North Dakota home.

You may live or recreate in mountain lion country. Mountain lions are secretive animals that are active mostly at night and generally prefer to avoid people. But, like any wild animal, lions can be dangerous. With a better understanding of mountain lions and their needs, we can share our state with these amazing animals.

## HISTORY IN NORTH DAKOTA

Mountain lions (*Puma concolor*), also commonly known as cougars, panthers, and pumas, historically occurred in western North Dakota. They were found in the badlands, Killdeer Mountains, and along the Missouri River in the late 1800s. At that time, lions and their prey weren't protected from indiscriminate killing. By the early 1900s mountain lions were extirpated, or gone from the state.

From that time until 1958, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department did not document any mountain lions in the state. From 1958, when a cougar was sighted near Killdeer, to 1991, Department biologists confirmed 11 reports.

In 1991, after a young female lion was shot in a barn near Golvea, the state legislature classified lions as a furbearer, with a closed season. From 1991-2003, the number of confirmed reports (26) more than doubled from the previous 33 years. Since the turn of the century, lion sightings, including family groups, continue to be reported in North Dakota. Most of the verified sightings occur in the badlands.

panther

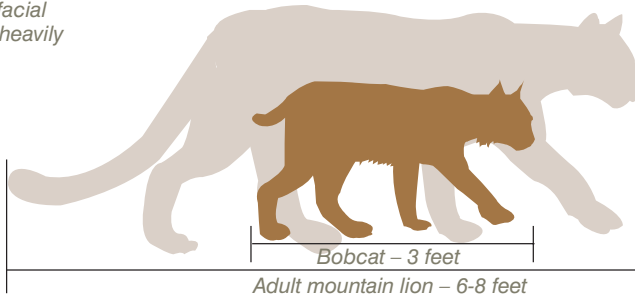


# WHAT DOES A MOUNTAIN LION LOOK LIKE?



*Kittens have dark facial markings and are heavily spotted.*

Mountain lions have a tawny-colored body with a lighter underbelly, a long black-tipped tail, and black-tipped ears. Adults measure 6-8 feet from the nose to the tip of the tail. Male lions usually weigh 120-180 pounds, and females weigh 80-110 pounds. Bobcats, in comparison, have a short tail and are much smaller, weighing 9-40 pounds.



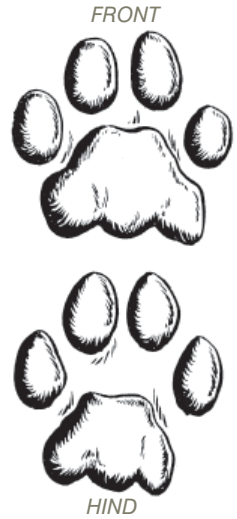
*The spotting on this subadult mountain lion has faded with age.*



*Adult males continue to grow into their fifth or sixth year and can weigh as much as 180 pounds or more.*

# MOUNTAIN LION TRACKS

Often, tracks left in snow or dirt are the only evidence that a mountain lion passed through an area. Mountain lion tracks are 3-5 inches wide, and generally are wider than they are long. Claws rarely show in the tracks, and the rear heel pad has three lobes, creating an M-shaped heel pad. Lion tracks often are confused with tracks of large dogs. Dog tracks differ from those of lions, as the claws almost always show in the tracks, dog tracks generally are longer than they are wide, and rear heel pads of dog tracks only have two lobes.



## MOUNTAIN LION TRACKS

*Note: Mountain lion tracks are wider than they are long.*



*Triple-lobed heel pad*



## DOG TRACKS

*Note: Dog tracks generally are longer than they are wide, and claws are clearly visible.*

*Double-lobed heel pad*



*Mountain lions have retractable claws that rarely show in a track.*

# HABITAT AND HUNTING BEHAVIOR

Mountain lion habitat is characterized by vast areas of rugged country with dense vegetation. Lions need vegetative and topographic cover like rock outcroppings, boulder piles and steep slopes to successfully ambush their prey. These landscape features also provide security while feeding, resting and caring for young.

Mountain lions feed mainly on deer and elk, but smaller prey like porcupines and rabbits can nourish lions between kills of larger prey, and can help young lions develop hunting skills.

Lions are ambush hunters. After they spot prey, they will sneak up behind the animal using available cover. Lions attack with a rush of speed and kill with a powerful bite below the base of the skull, breaking the neck of a victim. Lions often drag their kills to a concealed place to feed, and bury their kills with dirt, leaves or snow between feedings.





# *lion habitat*



Craig Bihrie



# *Top of the*

## **SOCIAL STATUS**

Generally, mountain lions are solitary animals. Adult males almost always travel alone and females are solitary when they are not raising young. If tracks indicate two or more lions traveling together, it's probably a female with young.

Adult male mountain lions actively defend their territories from intruding males, which often results in the death of one of the animals. Males mark territory boundaries with piles of dirt and twigs, called scrapes, signaling to other lions that the area is occupied. Adult males may also kill kittens if the mother is not actively defending them. Sometimes even females are killed by dominant males.

Individual lions have territories varying in size from 50 to more than 300 square miles. Females with young kittens use the smallest areas, and adult males have the largest territories. Home range size depends on terrain and how much food is available. In an established population, male home ranges include 3-5 breeding-aged female lions.



*food chain*



## BREEDING BEHAVIOR

Male mountain lions breed with more than one female and do not help care for the young. Breeding takes place throughout the year and females typically have litters about every other year. Females are not territorial, but will avoid other females.

Mountain lions can be born any time of year, and litter sizes of two or three are common. When young are around eight weeks old, the mother begins taking them to her kills to feed, and kittens are weaned around 8-12 weeks. Young remain with their mother until they are 13-18 months old. During this time, the mother teaches them how to hunt and kill prey.

Female lions tend to disperse only short distances from where they were born, sometimes they even stay in their mother's home range. They usually won't breed until they are in their third year. Young males, on the other hand, usually wander long distances as they seek to establish their own territories. It is these animals that are most visible to the public.

*Social Lies*



Dan Thompson

*Rock outcroppings provide suitable den sites for mountain lion kittens.*







## LIVING WITH MOUNTAIN LIONS

Generally, mountain lions avoid people. They prefer to live in remote and undeveloped country. However, a number of factors are bringing lions closer to people. In Western states, more people are moving into new housing developments built in or near high-quality lion habitat. Also, a greater number of people are seeking recreation – hiking, jogging, mountain biking, skiing, etc. – in lion country. Not only are humans moving into their territory, but lion populations also are expanding into formerly unoccupied habitats. For example, many areas now support higher densities of deer and other lion prey, than in the past. Also, in some states, lions were managed as a furbearer or big game species with a closed season for a period of time, enabling populations to re-establish. Currently, most states manage mountain lions for sustainable harvest by hunters. These factors all increase the potential for human-mountain lion interactions.

Although human-mountain lion interactions are rare, some precautions can be taken to help reduce or diffuse potential problems or dangerous situations.



*Living*

## If living or recreating in mountain lion country:

- **Do not feed wildlife, especially deer.** Lions will follow their prey to feeding sites. Avoid landscaping with plants that deer prefer to eat.
- **Keep pets under control.** Roaming pets are easy prey for lions. Bring pets in at night. If you leave your pet outside, keep it in a kennel with a secure top. Don't feed pets outside as this can attract raccoons and other animals that lions eat. Store all garbage securely.
- **Keep farm yard animals confined at night.** Close doors to all outbuildings since inquisitive lions may go inside for a look.
- **Supervise children when outdoors.** Make sure children are inside before dusk and not outside before dawn. Talk with children about lions and teach them what to do if they encounter one.
- **Walk in groups if you are hiking in mountain lion country.** Consider carrying a sturdy walking stick as it can be used to ward off a lion. Make sure children don't run ahead or lag behind.
- **Avoid jogging alone,** or at dawn or dusk, or night – the times of day when lions are most active.
- **If you have a large dog, hike or jog with it leashed by your side.**
- **If you find a lion kill, leave the area.** Lions bury their kills, and may remain close by.

## MOUNTAIN LION MANAGEMENT

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is responsible for managing the state's wildlife. Mountain lions are considered a furbearer, and taking or killing a lion outside a regulated hunting season is not allowed unless a human life is threatened, or if a lion is killing poultry, livestock or other domestic animals. The Department has a response plan to deal with any lions that may be a potential threat. Department biologists are interested in recording as much information as possible about mountain lions in the state.



*Biological information is collected from harvested animals.*

# *Lion*

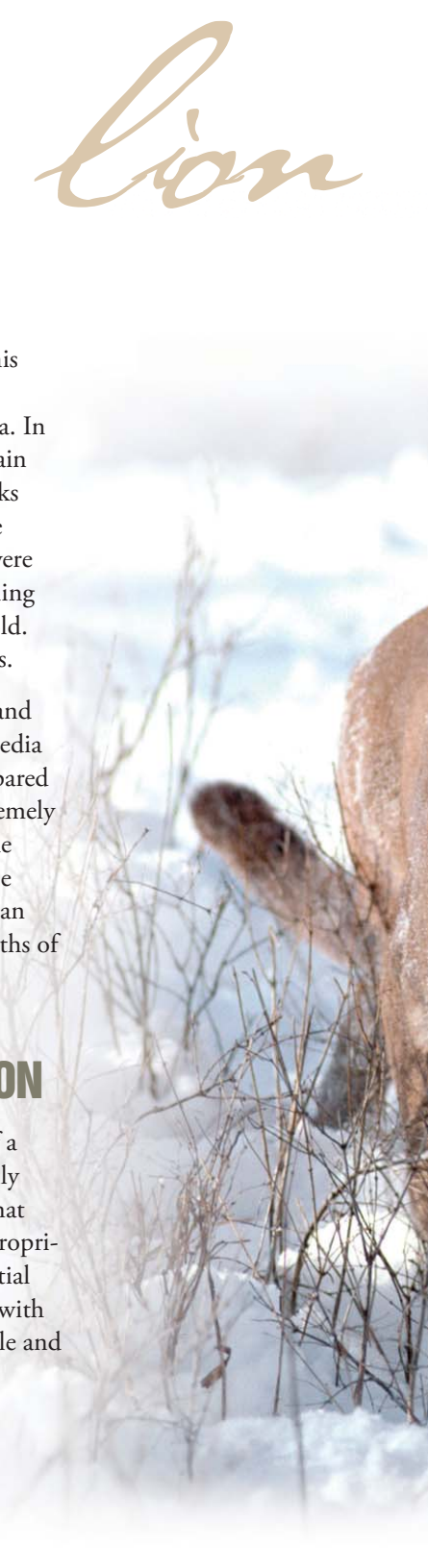
## **ATTACK STATISTICS**

Mountain lion attacks are rare. At the time this publication was printed in 2006, no attacks on people had ever been reported in North Dakota. In all of North America from 1890-2004, mountain lions attacked 80 people. Twenty of these attacks were fatal. Of the fatal attacks, 70 percent were children of less than 10 years old, 20 percent were adults of less than 20 years old, and the remaining 10 percent were adults of more than 20 years old. The majority of the attacks were by young lions.

Mountain lion attacks on people are terrible and sad events, which are reported widely by the media because they happen so infrequently. But compared to other risks, getting attacked by a lion is extremely low. For instance, each year, about 8,000 people are injured by venomous snakes and 15 of those die. Domestic dogs, on average, injure more than 300,000 people and are responsible for the deaths of 17 people annually.

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE A LION**

People rarely get more than a brief glimpse of a mountain lion in the wild because lions typically avoid people. However, in the unlikely event that you come upon a mountain lion, there are appropriate responses that might help reduce the potential danger. Remember, every situation is different with respect to the individual lion, the terrain, people and circumstances of the encounter.





# encounters



- **Do not approach a mountain lion.** While most lions will try to avoid confrontation and run away, a lion feeding on a kill, or a female with kittens, can be dangerous if approached by people.
- **Stay calm.** If you startle a mountain lion, or a lion approaches you, give it a way to escape. Talk to it calmly but firmly. Move slowly.
- **Do not run.** Try to back away slowly. Running may stimulate a lion's instinct to chase and attack. If possible, try to position yourself uphill of the lion.
- **Face the lion and stand upright.** Do not turn your back on the lion.
- **Do all you can to appear larger.** Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you're wearing one. If you have small children along, pick them up so they won't panic and run.
- **Convince the lion that you are not prey.** Throw stones, branches, or whatever you can get your hands on without crouching down or turning your back. Wave your arms slowly and speak firmly or shout aggressively. Periods of long noises seem to deter lions better than short intermittent noises. If you act like prey you will be treated like prey.
- **If a lion attacks, fight back.** Remain standing or try to get back up. People have successfully fought off lions with rocks, sticks, caps or jackets, and their bare hands.

## REPORT LION ENCOUNTERS

To report a sighting, an encounter or an attack, contact one of the offices on the back page. For after-hours emergencies, contact your local sheriff's department or state radio at 800-472-2121.



e-mail: [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov)

web: [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov)

#### **Game and Fish**

##### **Headquarters Office**

100 N. Bismarck Expy.  
Bismarck, ND 58501  
(701) 328-6300

##### **Devils Lake Office**

7928 45th St. NE  
Devils Lake, ND 58301  
(701) 662-3617

##### **Dickinson Office**

225 30th Ave. SW  
Dickinson, ND 58601  
(701) 227-7431

##### **Lonetree WMA**

##### **Headquarters**

1851 23rd Ave. NE  
Harvey, ND 58341  
(701) 324-2211

##### **Riverdale Office**

406 Dakota Ave.  
Riverdale, ND 58565  
(701) 654-7475

##### **Jamestown Office**

3320 E Lakeside Rd.  
Jamestown, ND 58402  
(701) 253-6480

##### **Williston Office**

13932 W. Front St.  
Williston, ND 58801  
(701) 774-4320

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