Life of the Mountain Lion

Appearance
Mountain lions are graceful and majestic animals known for their strength and agility. The image on the right shows the size and physical attributes of adults and kittens, and the chart below compares the size differences between adult males and females. Their scientific name, *Puma concolor*, means cat of one color, yet adult mountain lions are usually tawny or tan, or slightly reddish in color with black-tipped ears and tail. Their coat pattern varies with age.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Adult Males</th>
<th>Adult Females</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shoulder Height</td>
<td>30 in. (76 cm)</td>
<td>24 in. (61 cm)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length*</td>
<td>7-8 ft (2.1-2.4 m)</td>
<td>5.5-6 ft (1.6-1.8 m)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>120-180+ lbs, (54-77+ kg)</td>
<td>85-115 lbs, (38-52 kg)</td>
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*Length is measured from nose to tip of tail.

Reproduction
Mountain lions mate with many other lions during a breeding period. Breeding pairs may spend an average of 2 to 3 days together. Mountain lions are unusual among carnivores because they give birth at any time of year. While adult males play no role in the rearing of kittens, they may feed on a carcass with the female and her offspring.

Females can have their first litter at 2½ to 3 years of age, and breed every 2 years thereafter. The gestation period is 3 months. Females move their nursing kittens frequently to new den sites for protection and to improve access to prey. The social bond is critical to the kittens' well-being. If the mother dies before the kittens reach 6 months of age, they have little to no chance of surviving.

Communication
Mountain lions communicate through visual, scent, and posturing signals, and through vocalizations such as low guttural growls, chirping, whistling, spitting, yawning, snarling, and hissing. Nursing kittens emit high-pitched, birdlike chirps and mews. Older kittens may also chirp to communicate with siblings or their mother. Mountain lions purr when together, but they cannot roar.

The most spectacular sound a mountain lion can make is a caterwaul, an eerie sound resembling a human cry or scream. Females caterwaul during mating season, especially when males are competing for the same receptive female.

Distribution & Range
Mountain lions have the largest geographic range of any native land mammal in the Western Hemisphere. They occur from British Columbia in Canada, the Western United States, and throughout Central and South America to the southern tip of Chile.

California has more lion habitat than any other state, and more than half of the state is prime mountain lion habitat. They can be found wherever deer are present including forests, wetlands, riparian areas, and deserts. They can also be found in terrain ranging from grassy valleys and rolling oak woodlands to rugged mountains.

A male mountain lion's territory averages 100 to 200 square miles and typically encompasses all or part of the home ranges of multiple females. In California, male mountain lion ranges are usually 30 to 70 square miles in size. Depending on the location, there are typically fewer than 2 mountain lions per 100 square miles of suitable habitat.

The First Year

- 92-day Gestation to Birth
  - 1 to 4 kittens are born, fully furred, spotted, and weighing just over a pound at birth.
- 2 Weeks Old
  - Eyes and ears open. Mother leaves for short periods of time to hunt.
- 6 to 8 Weeks Old
  - Kittens grow. As kittens grow, they accompany their mother on hunts.
- 6 to 12 Months
  - Kittens become more independent. Spots continue to fade. They disperse at about 16 months to establish their own territories.

Mountain Lion Safety Tips

Consider these recommended precautions while living or recreating in mountain lion country:

**Home Safety**
- Don’t feed deer, other wildlife, or feral cats which can attract mountain lions.
- Landscape around your home for safety.
  - Prune shrubs and trees around the base to keep mountain lions from using them as hiding spots.
  - Do not landscape with plants that are desirable to deer. Deer can attract mountain lions to your yard.
  - Install lighting to illuminate walkways at night. Lighting at night will not deter a lion, but it will allow you to see your surroundings.
  - Install tall-deer proof fencing to prevent deer from entering your property.
- Seal off open spaces under buildings and porches to keep mountain lions and other wildlife from using as shelter.
- Do not keep food, water, or shelter available near your home.
  - Mountain lions have access to areas that may be populated areas into more remote habitat. If food, water, and shelter are available, mountain lions generally avoid areas.
  - Keep garbage cans tightly sealed and compost secured.
  - Supervise small children outdoors especially during the hours around dawn and dusk when mountain lions are most active.

**Pet Safety**
- Keep dogs and cats indoors, especially after dusk and before dawn, to prevent them from becoming prey for mountain lions and other wild animals.
- Keep pet food inside, especially after dusk and before dawn, to prevent them from becoming prey for mountain lions and other wild animals.
- Keep pet food indoors. If you feed animals outside, gather up the food and water bowls and clean up spilled food so as not to attract wild animals.
- Install a fully secure, roofed kennel if you must keep pets outside.

**Landscape Safety**
- Confine livestock such as sheep, goats, llamas, pigs, chickens, and other fowl in completely secured and covered enclosures, particularly at night.
- Use specially treated livestock guard animals if you have a large herd in a relatively remote area.
- Install an electric fence around areas where livestock or domestic animals are kept.

**Livestock Safety**
- Whenever possible, follow the advice of your neighbors to follow these simple precautions. Prevention is far better than a possible mountain lion confrontation.

**If You Encounter a Mountain Lion**
- Do not run. Running or rapid movements may trigger an attack.
- Never approach the mountain lion or offer it food.
- Pick up small children and place them on your shoulders.
- Face the mountain lion. Talk to it firmly and hold your ground while slowly backing away.
- If you encounter a mountain lion, keep your hands up and back with your feet behind you.
- Try to appear larger than the mountain lion. Get above it (e.g., step up onto a rock or stump). If the mountain lion is not a threat, it may step back and lower its head.
- Always leave the animal an escape route. If it means stepping aside so the mountain lion can continue its path, do not expect the mountain lion to turn and walk away.

**When in mountain lion country, consider carrying bear spray, keep it accessible, and know how to use it.**

Home, Pet, and Livestock Safety

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<td>If You Encounter a Mountain Lion</td>
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**Safety When Recreating**
- Hike with a partner or in a small group, and wear a helmet.
- Use a bell or make noise as you go along the trail.
- Avoid running alone in mountain lion country. But especially not at dawn, dusk, or after dark.
- Avoid running with headphones or ear buds that can block out sounds around you.
- Make noise as you go along trails.

**Mountain Biking**
- Ride with a partner or in a small group, and wear a helmet.
- Use a bell or make noise as you go along the trail.
- Avoid running alone in mountain lion country. But especially not at dawn, dusk, or after dark.
- Avoid running with headphones or ear buds that can block out sounds around you.
- Make noise as you go along trails.

**Mountain Lion Safety Tips**

Consider these recommended precautions while living or recreating in mountain lion country:
Important Mountain Lion Information

- If a mountain lion has attacked a person, call 911.
- Report wildlife sightings or incidents (including livestock losses) in the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) online Wildlife Incident Reporting System: http://apps.wildlife.ca.gov/wir
- Report a sick or injured mountain lion to CDFW: Northern California 24-hour dispatch: 916-358-1312 Southern California 24-hour dispatch: 951-443-2944

For more information contact CDFW during normal business hours at 916-322-8913. You will be routed to the CDFW regional office for your county.

If you find a kitten in good condition, please do not touch and do not disturb it. If you find a kitten alone in poor condition or obvious distress, do not touch and instead report to your local CDFW Office.

For more information on mountain lion safety visit the CDFW website: wildlife.ca.gov/Keep-Me-Wild/Lion

California Laws Prohibit:
- Mountain Lion Hunting
- Feeding Wildlife – Big Game

The feeding of big game animals is prohibited in California (CA Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 235.3). Feeding deer and other wildlife may attract mountain lions to your property. It also disrupts natural animal behavior patterns, putting persons at risk for vehicle strikes, injury from other wildlife and disease.

Mountain Lion Laws

- California Lion hunting
- Feeding Wildlife – Big Game
- California Wild Plant and Wildlife Code: 4400

Learn about mountain lion ecology, behavior, signs, and safety tips.

Frequently Asked Questions About Mountain Lions

How many mountain lions live in California?

It is difficult to accurately assess statewide mountain lion populations. From year to year, mountain lion populations may fluctuate, increase, or remain stable. However, research is underway to estimate populations and monitor their trends in order to try and answer this question.

Do mountain lions live alone or in groups?

Mountain lions have long been considered to be solitary, but recent research shows they can be quite social. Two mountain lions may be seen together usually for the purpose of mating or hunting. Kittens stay with their mother until they are 13 to 24 months old, and may appear to be as large as their mother, giving the impression of a group of adult mountain lions. Mountain lion mothers have been known to adopt orphaned kittens, and occasionally share meals with other mountain lions. Skins can remain together for a period of time after leaving their mother and stilling out on their own.

Do mountain lions overpopulate?

No. Mountain lions need sufficient habitat and prey to survive. There are usually 4 to 6 mountain lions per 100 square miles. Mountain lions are highly territorial and may kill one another for territory, food, or a mate. Kittens stay with their mother for up to 2 years. In litters of 2 to 3, reproduction rates are low. Mountain lion populations are also reduced by habitat loss, fire, drought, poisons, pollution, road kills, disease, poaching, and predation permissions.

Does a mountain lion sighting mean there are more in the area?

No. An increase in mountain lion sightings does not necessarily mean that the local population has increased. For a population to increase in a neighborhood generally considered evidence of unsual behavior. Mountain lions can travel long distances, often 10 to 20 miles per day and inhabit large geographic areas. Local mountain lions may periodically wander or travel throughout a neighborhood as they patrol their home range. Small mountain lions from elsewhere may pass through in search of an open territory. If you see a mountain lion in your neighborhood it doesn’t mean it is nesting there.

What do mountain lions eat?

Mountain lions are obligate carnivores, meaning they only eat meat. In California, they specialize primarily on ungulates, mostly deer. Occasionally mountain lions will eat elk, wild pigs, rabbits, raccoons, bears, porcupines, rodents, big horn sheep, coyotes, and many other wildlife species.

Do mountain lions reduce their prey populations?

Mountain lions co-exist with their prey over millennia, and there is no evidence that predation by mountain lions limits prey populations. There are rare situations where mountain lions impact the growth of a prey population, particularly when prey numbers are already at critically low levels. However, the populations and availability of ungulate prey typically determines the abundance of mountain lions within a particular region. Other factors that more likely contribute to deer and elk declines in California include habitat loss, weather, road kills and hunting.

Do mountain lions prey on pets and livestock?

Raccoon, weasels, raccoons, coyotes, and birthing complications cause most livestock losses. Domestic sheep, goats, and chickens are the most vulnerable to mountain lion predation than are cattle and horses, and are more easily protected. Securing livestock, removing livestock, and installing predator proof enclosures from duds to duds will reduce livestock losses.

Will killing more mountain lions decrease conflicts with pets and livestock?

Generally, no. The death of a single mountain lion creates a vacant territory that other mountain lions will try to occupy. Killing adult mountain lions disrupts the social structure of a local population, creating a younger population with a higher percentage of males. Conflicts with people and livestock are more common with young male lions as they move into empty home ranges to service. Thus, killing a mountain lion may result in a temporary increase in the number of local mountain lions, as well as an increase in livestock losses.

Do mountain lions pose a significant threat to public safety?

No. Mountain lion attacks on people are extremely rare. Mountain lions tend to avoid people whenever they can. However, people who live, work, or recreate in mountain lion habitat should take precautions to reduce their risk and know what to do if they encounter a mountain lion.

History and Legal Status

California settlers viewed the mountain lion as a threat to their livestock and livelihood. Lions were perceived as competitors for wild game and few pioneers understood their ecological value. From 1907-1963 bounty hunting programs were implemented and resulted in the killing of thousands of mountain lions. California voters passed Proposition 117 in 1990, which banned the hunting of mountain lions and established them as a "specially protected mammal." Today, a lion may still be killed by law enforcement or by any member of the public if it is threatening or attacking a person. If a mountain lion harms pets or livestock, the property owner may request a depredation permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to take action to reduce possible future conflicts. For more information, visit wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Mountain-Lion

Ecosystem Benefits

Mountain lions inhabit much of California. They prey primarily on deer and their kills provide an important food source to many species, including other mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. Nutrients from carcasses enrich soils and benefit many other species. By controlling prey, the connections within and between diverse ecological communities are enhanced and strengthened when mountain lions are present.

Mountain Lions Increase an Ecosystem’s Health and Biodiversity

- Eagles and other migrating raptores rely on carcasses.
- Foxes depend on mountain lion prey during cold winters.
- Birds rely on worms and insects in carcasses.
- Lions kill thousands of deer and other herbivores out of emerging hibernation.

Scats

Mountain lions generally cover their scats (feces) with loose soil. Scats tend to be dense and segmented, blunt at both ends, and 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter and 4 to 6 inches long (roughly the size of those left behind by a large dog). Scats may include hair, bones, and teeth from prey, and sometimes grass, but usually contain no fruit or other vegetation. Mountain lions leave their scats along trails, under overhangs, in caves, and near kills and scarpes. Small mountain lion scats may be similar in size and shape to those left by bobcats.

Scrapes

Mountain lions make scrapes to communicate their presence, attract a mate, avoid other lions, or define the edge of their territory. They make scrapes by using their hind feet to push up a mound of leaves, dirt, or other debris in conspicuous places, at junctions in canyons, and along trails and ridge lines. Occasionally mountain lions urinate or defecate on the scrape. Bobcats make similar, but smaller, scrapes.

Cache Sites

Mountain lions typically drag large kills to a secluded site so they can return and continue to feed over several days. This is known as a cache. You might see a drag mark near a fresh kill. Mountain lions often cover the prey with leaves, grasses, pine needles, or branches to hide it from scavengers and to prevent it from spoiling. Mountain lions may stay close to the cache site, so it is important not to approach or linger near a dead animal. If you come across a carcass in the middle of a trail or out in the open, it’s very unlikely to be a mountain lion kill.

Learn more about mountain lions and safety on the inside poster.