

America's Lion ~ Biology & Behavior

Names

Although its scientific name is *Puma concolor*, the American lion is known by more names than any other animal in the world. Depending on the region and native language, common names include: mountain lion, cougar, panther, puma, painter, el leon, and catamount.

Appearance

The adult American lion is tan in color, with black tipped ears and tail. It weighs 80 to 180 pounds and stands two to three feet high at the shoulders, and can reach eight feet in length from nose to tip of the tail, with the tail measuring 1/3 of the length.

Mountain lion kittens or cubs have camouflaging spots and rings around their tails that fade as they mature. Lions may bear up to four kittens at a time which stay with their mother for 18 months then disperse to establish their own territories.

Hunting Behavior

Opportunistic hunters, mountain lions typically hunt alone from dusk to dawn, taking their prey (primarily deer) from behind. On average, a lion will kill a deer every ten to fourteen days. They also dine on coyotes, raccoons, rodents, elk, feral hogs, and even porcupines. A lion may drag the meal to another area and cover it with dry leaves, grass or pine needles to protect the food from other animals and to reduce spoilage. A lion may return to feed at the site over a period of several days.

Abilities

Mountain Lions can:

- ◆ bound up to 40 feet running
- ◆ leap 15 feet up a tree
- ◆ climb over a 12 foot fence
- ◆ travel many miles at 10 mph
- ◆ reach speeds of 50 mph in a sprint



Why Protect the Lion?

Wildlife biologists know the lion is vital and invaluable. It is a keystone species playing an irreplaceable and complex role on the landscape. Top carnivores help maintain the plants and animals within their range. Mountain lions keep deer herds on the move, so that they do not overgraze in any particular area. This behavioral change results in less erosion along riverbanks and increases habitat for other species like songbirds. Ecosystems with lions are healthier, more sustainable, and contain a rich balance of nature.

Although many people believe the number of mountain lions in the U.S. is increasing, this is not the case. Habitat destruction and trophy hunters are killing more lions today than at any other time in our nation's history. If the species is to survive, or stand a chance at recolonizing the eastern two-thirds of our country, effective protection laws need to be put in place today.

Safety Concerns

Human encounters with mountain lions are rare and the risk of an attack is infinitely small. You are more likely to drown in your bathtub, be killed by a pet dog, or hit by lightning. If cougars had any natural urge to hunt people, there would be attacks every single day. Instead, they avoid us.

But if you live, work, or play in lion country, be alert. Avoid walking alone between dusk and dawn when lions are most active. Keep your children and pets close to you. Never approach or corner a lion (or any wild animal). If you do encounter a lion, **STOP. DO NOT RUN.** Unlike advice for encountering bears, do not act timid or play dead in front of a mountain lion.

Instead: Maintain eye contact. Stand tall. Look bigger by opening your coat or raising your arms. Slowly wave your arms and speak firmly. Throw items at the lion if necessary. Give the cat room and time to move on.

In the rare event of an attack, fight back. Most people succeed in driving the lion away.



Although still a fairly rare occurrence, domestic animals can be an easy meal for lions and other wild predators. Most pets and livestock do not have the skills to protect themselves and are dependent on people. The threat to domestic animals can easily be avoided by modifying husbandry behaviors. Simple tips for preventing conflicts with wildlife include:

- ◆ Bring your pets indoors, especially at night. A garage, barn, shed or other fully enclosed (roofed) structure also works well.
- ◆ Give Bambi the boot. Deer are a lion's preferred prey. Remove or securely fence your garden and any other tasty plants that may attract deer.
- ◆ Clear the brush—it's a cozy hiding place for lions and also a fire hazard.
- ◆ Secure garbage cans, pet food, fruit, and any meat-related products because they attract scavenging critters (raccoons, possums, skunks, etc.) which in turn attract lions.
- ◆ Large ranching operations should consider tall fencing, special breeds of livestock guard dogs, and timer or motion sensor alarms to frighten predators.
- ◆ Take extra precautions to protect sick, injured, bleeding, or newborn animals.

See *Protecting Pets and Livestock* at MountainLion.org for more details.

Human policies (wildlife management decisions) can also affect our overall safety. States that allow mountain lion hunting are putting their citizens at risk. Killing off adult lions leaves behind the younger juveniles who are more likely to cause trouble and prey on livestock. Developing in lion habitat or blocking a wildlife corridor with a highway or a new housing tract can also increase the chances for an encounter or potentially dangerous confrontation.

Trophy Game Status?

Trophy hunters will try to tell you hunting is a necessary management tool and that it balances wildlife populations. FALSE! These lies are told over and over by people who simply want to kill animals for fun. The truth is mountain lions are solitary creatures who reproduce slowly. They maintain their own numbers, in low densities, and will never overrun the countryside. They do not need to be hunted by people.

California, for example, has the nation's largest human population, coexisting peacefully with more mountain lions than any other state. Yet California has not had a lion hunting season since 1972. Attacks on people, pets, and livestock are all rare. And there are still plenty of deer to go around. In fact, because California's lions are not heavily persecuted, they are able to teach their kittens how to hunt properly and to avoid people. As a result, conflicts with humans have actually reduced compared to the states that hunt the cats for sport.

California and Florida (where panthers are federally endangered) remain the only two states with lions that do not hunt them for sport. However, habitat loss, poaching, and retribution for livestock losses are still putting our state's lions in danger. Learn how you can help, visit www.MountainLion.org



Lions sense movement more accurately than they see detail. Seeing the world in pixelated mosaics, their wide angle and night vision are much greater than our own. A lion's hearing is acutely sensitive, discerning ultrasonics far beyond human range. Their ears move independently to better receive sound and locate the source.

Home Range

Mountain lions used to occupy the entire U.S. coast-to-coast, but today they are primarily found in the West with a small endangered population in Florida. Lions prefer areas with dense undergrowth and cover, and will leave an area if they perceive a threat. Found in deserts, humid coast forests, arid hillsides, scrub and oak woodlands, lions can live from sea level to snow-covered mountain peaks.

Lions are solitary unless mating or parenting, and maintain territories that average 100 square miles in size. Mountain lions mark their territories by clawing trees and urinating on scratch piles of dry leaves, grass or pine needles. They will fight other lions, even to the death, to protect their territory. A female with kittens will move to a new den site within her territory every few weeks to protect her kittens from predators and male lions. To learn more, watch the Mountain Lion Foundation's educational videos at: <http://www.youtube.com/MtnLionFdn>

Identifying Tracks

Lions have a distinctive "M" shaped pad with three lobes on the rear of the heel (dogs only have two lobes). Their claw marks do not show in the track. Walking, the cat's hind foot steps in his fore track, creating overlapping patterns. Their toes slant—similar to human feet—indicating left or right foot. Dog tracks are more symmetrical, and the raised dirt in the middle forms an "X" shape.

