

Status of the Cougar in Washington

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INTRODUCTION

The status of cougar (*Felis concolor*) in Washington State has elevated in response to both public sentiment and increased understanding by wildlife professionals. A bounty was placed on cougar in 1935. The bounty was removed with the reclassification as a predator in 1961 and cougar finally achieved game animal status in 1966. In 1987 the cougar became a trophy class game animal with the institution of controlled-permit only hunting seasons.

CURRENT STATUS

Distribution. Cougar occur throughout the state of Washington except in the dry, open steppe and shrub-steppe vegetative areas east of the Cascade Mountains. Present cougar populations are greatest in areas of considerable coniferous forests and available prey. Major prey species include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus hemionus*), whitetailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), blacktailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*), Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*), and Roosevelt elk (*Cervus elaphus roosevelti*). Concentrations of cougar occur in the Cascade Mountain Range, Okanogan Highlands, Olympic Peninsula, Blue Mountains, and the northeastern quarter of the state.

Current population levels. The most current estimate is 1500 animals statewide.

MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Regulations. There are two types of cougar hunting seasons in Washington State. Pursuit-only seasons are open from September 1-30 and November 23 to January 15 during the 1988/89 season. During these seasons no cougars may be killed. Cougars may only be killed during special cougar permit seasons and only by permit holders. The special permit season runs from November 23 to January 15, 1989. There are twelve cougar management units in Washington State (see figure 1 and table 1). Anyone with a valid Washington hunting license may submit one special permit application for cougar per year. A manual public drawing takes place in Olympia and the successful applicant must purchase a cougar tag by the first day of October. If payment is not received by the deadline, the applicant is no longer eligible for a cougar tag. A second drawing then takes place for the under-filled units. The new successful applicants must purchase

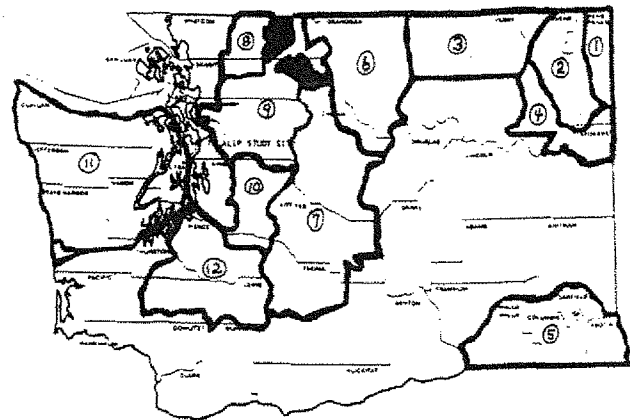


Fig. 1. Cougar management units in Washington.

Table 1. Cougar permit seasons.

Unit No.	87-88 Unit Name	No. Permits	Harvest		88-89 Unit Name	No. Permits
			M	F		
1	Pend Orielle	20	3	4	Pend Orielle	20
2	Colville	25	4	5	Colville	35
3	Republic	20	7	4	Republic	20
4	Spokane	5	0	1	Spokane	10
5	Blue Mountains	15	4	3	Blue Mountains	20
6	Okanogan	15	1	3	Okanogan	20
7	Wenatchee	20	2	3	Wenatchee	25
8	Nooksack	10	5	2	Nooksack	10
9	Skagit	10	2	0	Skagit	10
10	Rainier	10	2	0	Snoqualmie	8
11	Olympic	20	5	3	Olympic	25
12	No Unit	0	-	-	Rainier ¹	7
Totals		170				210

¹ Unit 12 was created in 1988 by splitting Unit 10 (Rainier) into a northern unit (Snoqualmie) and a southern unit (Rainier).

Table 2. Cougar management features and harvest 1980-89.

Year	Mgt. Footnote	Reported Kills	Est. Harvest	Est. Pop.
80/81	1	37	60	1500
81/82	1	95	130	-
82/83	1	72	90	-
83/84	1	66	80	-
84/85	1	101	120	-
85/86	1	122	120	-
86/87	1	137	160	-
87/88	2	60	60*	-
88/89	3	-	-	-
8 Year Av.		103		

1. Game animal status, but hound stamp required.
2. Hunting by permit only, hound stamp still required.
3. Ineligible for subsequent permit if questionnaire not returned.

*Note: Follow up reports were sent to permittees that failed to return a completed report. Harvest rates were based solely on the returned reports and were not expanded to account for unreturned questionnaires.

a cougar tag prior to hunting. Permit hunters may kill a cougar only within the cougar management unit for which they obtained a permit. All cougar permit holders are required to complete and return a cougar hunting questionnaire after the close of the season. Those failing to return the questionnaire become ineligible for the next year's permit drawing.

We are proposing an up-front fee to accompany the application just as is required for the application for mountain goat, mountain sheep, and moose permits. This would clean up the application process by weeding out those who are not serious about obtaining a permit. A second drawing for under-filled units would then no longer be necessary.

Surveys. A cougar hunting questionnaire is mailed to each person obtaining a cougar hunting permit. The completion and return of this report is mandatory, which generated a return rate of over 90% last year. This report supplies information regarding location and timing of harvest, catch per unit effort, location of hunting effort, hunting methods employed, guiding, the number of tracks seen, the number of cats treed, the number of kittens seen, and general snow conditions (Table 2).

Short term management plans. Distribute harvest through permit system. Some areas are easily over-harvested during good snow conditions. Some areas do not have recruitment from "cougar producing pools" in adjacent areas.

Long term management plans. The primary goal for cougar is to maintain statewide populations at the current level.

Laws

License requirements. A valid hunting license is required to hunt cougar (including pursuit seasons). A hound stamp is required if dogs are used. Cougar hunting where the animal is to be killed is by permit only.

Resident hunting license	\$ 12.00
Nonresident hunting license	125.00
Cougar transport tag (permit)	20.00
Nonresident transport tag	300.00
Hound stamp	10.00
Special permit application fee	2.00

The successful cougar hunter must present the pelt to a State Wildlife Agent or Department Office for sealing within 10 days of date of kill. It is unlawful to transport or cause the transport of an unprocessed native cat pelt taken in Washington out of Washington State without a Department seal attached.

Bag limit one (1) cougar during the hunting season provided that, it is unlawful to kill or possess spotted cougar kittens or an adult cougar accompanied by spotted kittens.

Interagency coordination

Cougar habitat protection occurs as a byproduct of cooperative efforts between the Department of Wildlife and major landowners. Interagency coordination is being handled through an agreement called "Timber, Fish, and Wildlife" (TFW). All public land management agencies and most private timber companies have representatives which cooperate to manage natural resources in a holistic manner that ultimately benefits wildlife.

Public concerns. Native cat hunting is under fire in Washington State.

Lack of adequate population survey and aging techniques has raised the question, "How do we know it is safe to hunt them?" Hound pursuit is the primary hunting method employed. Increased landowner/hound hunter conflict has been an area of concern in our growing state. High levels of poaching were identified prior to permit only seasons.

Depredation. Attacks by cougar on domestic animals are infrequent in Washington and consequently represent a minor management concern or political force when compared to other states. Because cougar concentrate in Washington's more heavily forested areas where deer and elk population levels are abundant, contact with livestock is at a minimum.

Habitat concerns. High road density and timber harvest are the major habitat concerns for the management of cougar.

RESEARCH

We are presently engaged in a small cougar study in the Cedar and Green River drainages just north of Mount Rainier National Park. The study involves the radio collaring and relocation of cougar. The purpose is to determine

home ranges, document their productivity, and monitor dispersal of the juveniles. This study has been going on since the early 1970's, but has become organized in its present form since the winter of 1986. The study area is located near high density human populations as well as protected watersheds. It is of relatively small scope which makes widespread application of the results difficult.

The study has raised some serious concerns about the level of poaching mortality on cougar populations with 44% of the cougars collared since the early 1970's being killed illegally.

Field work for the Washington State Native Cat Study has been completed by Dave Brittell. He has not, however, written the final native cat biological bulletin.

ECONOMIC VALUES

Hunting fees. Last year the timber company Champion International began charging a land use fee for those wishing to enter their lands to hunt, fish, camp, or pick mushrooms. Washington State may soon see more private landowners charging land use fees as an auxiliary source of income. There are no charges to hunt on public property in the state of Washington. Indian tribes manage non-Indian access to reservation property according to their individual tribal regulations. Most reservations are small or have no cougar. Those that are large and do allow non-Indian access are not charging land use fees at this time.

Guiding. Costs range from a dinner and gas for the trip to \$1500.00. Washington State does not license or promote guiding.

Non-consumptive uses. Urban dwellers, in particular, request presentations on cougar in Washington and write letters expressing concern over their management. These same people have no desire to actually go in search of cougar either with dogs or on foot. Just knowing the animal exists and are doing well seems to satisfy many people. Non-consumptive viewing opportunity is extremely limited due to the nature of native cats. Many hikers and hunters, not directly in pursuit of cougar, do gain some level of satisfaction by making track sightings. By definition pursuit-only seasons qualify as a non-consumptive activity, however, the use of trained dogs and proper licensing are required. Hunters armed with cameras often are involved in treeing forays. As human populations increase in Washington the levels of both consumptive and non-consumptive uses of the wildlife resource rise.

LITERATURE CITED

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