

Mountain Lion Mania

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In recent years (months-weeks) mountain lion sightings have become numerous in eastern Nebraska and Western Iowa. Mountain lions are now showing up in backyards and residential areas, using areas immediately adjacent to urban residential centers. Although these areas do not appear to be good habitat for lions, the fact that they use them is important.

Obviously, humans have invaded the lion's space in many areas. However, it appears that lions are also expanding the range into new areas. How else can we explain mountain lions showing up in areas developed many years ago, where lions have never been seen before?

Since they compete for food and space some lions are forced to move, ending up in marginal areas where there is potential to come in contact with people and livestock. There may be a potential for damage to livestock, where human populations have not greatly increased and data suggest lions are expanding their range. Our best available information suggests lions are more numerous and widespread today than they were twenty-five years ago. Their main food source in this region is our growing whitetail deer population. They will also eat other animals such as coyote, porcupine, beaver, mice, rabbits, raccoons, birds, and grasshoppers. Cougars stalk their prey or pounce from overhanging trees and rocks. When cats attack, they pounce and break the neck of their prey. The prey is either eaten or hidden to eat at a later time. Mountain lions will travel up to twenty-five miles in one night when hunting.

Although we do not have new data on lion populations in Iowa, we hope to identify the factors most closely associated with trends in mountain lion movement. By doing so, we can focus our efforts on management options which best meet our goals for maintaining lions in the future and minimizing human conflict.

Mountain lions are generally secretive, solitary, and elusive. As such, most people never see this animal in the wild. Due to their solitary and elusive nature, mountain lions are one of the most difficult mammals to study. The only time that mountain lions will be found together is during breeding season (approximately two weeks) and when females have cubs. Cubs may remain with the female up to two years. Male and female mountain lions may be found within the same territory, but two male territories never overlap. An adult male's home range can be as great as one hundred square miles. Females generally use smaller areas of about twenty to sixty square miles.

Mountain lions were once common to Iowa. When settlers arrived they destroyed the habitat the cats needed to survive. They need isolated, undisturbed, game-rich areas to be successful. Settlers also began killing the mountain lions because they were afraid that cougars would prey on their livestock and children. Eventually, mountain lions became extinct in Iowa.

Mountain lions are the largest predatory cat in the United States. They can exceed eight feet in length and weigh up to 225 pounds (the male killed by Harlan was approximately 130 pounds and eight feet long). Females tend to be smaller than males. They have an excellent jumping

ability, up to eighteen feet straight up and over twenty feet in a standing broad jump. Cougars can run up to thirty-five miles per hour. They can swim, but prefer not to unless necessary. They are also very good climbers.

Mountain lion attacks on humans are rare. There have only been four fatal attacks on humans in the last century and those have occurred in California and Colorado in remote wilderness areas. That is not many when you consider number dying on highways or even by human action. Mountain lions usually hunt at dawn and dusk, when deer are most active. Lions are territorial and solitary, but they are also smart and adaptable. The best rule of thumb is to assume lions are around whenever you have large deer populations.

The Shelby County Conservation Department has received reports of additional mountain lion sightings since the accidental killing at the end of August. People have found tracks and scat from mountain lions. Area residents should not fear mountain lions if they are around. They tend to avoid people unless they are cornered, threatened, or suddenly surprised. There is a greater likelihood of a person being struck by lightning than being attacked by a mountain lion. There are many ways that people can avoid an attack. Never hike alone. If you hike with children, keep them close to you. Do not try to approach a mountain lion. They will try to avoid confrontation, so leave them an escape route. If you encounter a mountain lion, never run from it. This may stimulate the mountain lion's instinct to chase. Face the animal. Do not crouch or bend over. If you crouch or bend over, you look more like the prey of a mountain lion. Pick up any children that you have with you without turning your back to the animal or bending over. Make yourself look as large as possible. Throw stones, branches, or whatever else you can reach without turning or bending over. Speak to the animal in a loud, firm voice so it knows that you are not its prey. If an attack still occurs, fight back. Dogs will not protect you from mountain lions. They may scare them away, but mountain lions may see them as easy prey, especially if they are restrained by a leash or chain.

We can live very near lions for many years and never see them, hear them, or know they are near. In the face of increasing sightings, we need to become aware there are possible dangers and responsibilities of living in the lion's territory, so we can evaluate our safety. We can take sensible precautions: do not leave food out, keep pets in or locked up at night. Put livestock in a barn if possible and light the property. Farm dogs may also be a good deterrent. Mountain lions are here to stay and we must learn to adapt as well.

Currently, the state is in the process of passing legislation to protect mountain lions found in Iowa. People do have the right to protect themselves, families, and properties from mountain lions but we ask that you do not shoot these animals unless you are shooting it with a camera.

The Shelby County Conservation Department has been allowed to keep the mountain lion that was killed by a motorist on the edge of Harlan because it is not a game animal. Currently, the animal is at Tony's Taxidermy in Storm Lake. The mounting process will take approximately two to three months. The cat is in very good shape considering the cause of the death. The cougar had a few missing claws and a cut on one of its front leg. Both of these injuries are easily repairable. Biologist from the DNR have taken the cougars carcass to determine what kinds of animals the mountain lion has been eating. When the mounting process is complete the

mountain lion will make its home at Nishna Bend Recreation Area's Nature Center. An open house will be held when the Conservation Department gets the mountain lion back. The cost of mounting the cat will be covered by donations. We will not be using any tax money to cover the costs.