

LIONS IN OUR MOUNTAINS?

The Mystery of Cougars in Maryland

by Glenn Therres

Do mountain lions roam the wilds of Maryland? This is an unsolved mystery.

Historically, mountain lions once inhabited the wilderness of our state. Also known as cougar, puma, or panther, these native big cats lived throughout Maryland when the first colonists arrived. As Maryland was settled, the forests were cleared and our mountain lions started to disappear. The early settlers shot the big cats because these predators killed deer and livestock. Cougars were feared and thus, persecuted. By the mid-1800s, the mountain lions had disappeared from all but the remote mountainous areas of western Maryland.

In the late 1800s, the last of Maryland's remnant population of cougars is thought to have disappeared. At that time, the white-tailed deer population (the principal prey species of this big cat) was reduced considerably by market hunters and homesteaders. Also, the extensive forests in western Maryland were logged for lumber and charcoal. The combination of these two factors, plus the continued persecution of this "vermin," made it nearly impossible for the species to survive. This same scenario was played out throughout the Appalachian Mountains and elsewhere in eastern North America.

The eastern cougar was declared an endangered species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in

1973. In the 1970s, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service tried to confirm the presence of eastern cougars in the Appalachian Mountains, but was not able to do so. The only remnant population in the eastern part of the continent is the endangered Florida panther.

Today, we still receive reports of mountain lions, cougars, and even black panthers in Maryland. All the other states in the east receive similar reports. Is there a remnant population of mountain lions in Maryland? That's a \$64,000 question.

Adult cougars are tawny in color with no spots. No black cougars have ever been documented from North America.

Cougars are the number one large predator in the western United States, occurring from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This western population is expanding eastward, with confirmations in Kansas, South Dakota, and Texas. The only known population of cougars east of the Mississippi River is in Florida, where less than 100 animals persist. There have been a dozen or so confirmations

of individual cougars in the east, but no known populations have been documented. Northern Delaware was the location of confirmed cougar sightings in 2002, but it is believed that those animals had escaped from captivity.

Do these predators persist?

The Cougar Network is an organization that tracks verifiable cougar sightings. They consider two types of confirmations. One type is when a cougar is captured or recovered dead, DNA evidence is found, or photographs are unquestionably that of a mountain lion. The second type of confirmation is when tracks or other physical evidence are verified by qualified

professionals.

In Maryland, we receive a dozen to two dozen reports a year from citizens who see, hear or find signs of cougars. Or so they think! Reports come from throughout the state, though most come from western Maryland or the suburbs



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Carnivorous Cats

Mountain lions are the largest member of the cat family in North America. An adult cougar can weigh 150 pounds. They stand 2½ feet tall and their bodies are 4 to 5 feet long with long tails adding another 2 to 3 feet to their length.

of Baltimore and Washington. All reports are logged into a database. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has received over 150 reports in the past seven years. Many sightings are a glimpse of an animal darting across the road or into the woods, most without the aid of binoculars or camera.

Here are a few examples of reports received:

- *Saw what appeared to be a large black cat. The animal was walking along the shoulder of the road. It was distinguishable from a dog by its long tail that curved up at the end. It also lacked a long snout that most canines possess.*
- *Saw a large cat the size of a German shepherd or larger dog walking down the*

trail. It was much too large to be any other type of normal cat and it was not a bobcat. It had a long tail and was yellowish/brown in color. The tip of the tail was very round and was white on the tip.

- *A large animal bounded across the road. It was about the size of a large dog, but had a gait of a cat. It moved very quickly and jumped over a roadside guard rail.*

Though it would seem fairly easy to identify a full-grown mountain lion, is it? It's hard to misidentify an adult bald eagle, but it happens all the time. We receive reports of bald eagles that turn out to be osprey, hawks, black-backed gulls, and even pigeons.

Disappearing Act

Evidence has also been provided, but none that is conclusive. Many times we receive photos of tracks or, on occasion, casts of tracks. Our technicians have also gone and looked at tracks thought to be that of mountain lions. Most turn out to be canine tracks, either of dogs or coyotes. Though canine tracks usually show their claw marks, and cat tracks usually do not show claw marks, there are exceptions. Proper identification requires attention to details.

On rare occasion, someone video tapes or gets a photo of a "cougar." I have seen five such videos in the past 15 years. In two, it was relatively easy to determine that the animal in question was not a cougar. However, one video taken by

The Bobcat Maryland's Documented 'Big' Cat

By Robert Colona

Although unconfirmed sightings of mountain lions and black panthers persist, the bobcat (*Felis rufus*) is the only resident 'big' cat with established populations in Maryland. Contrary to the somewhat mystical aura that tends to surround bobcats, they are relatively common throughout portions of Maryland and thrive in a variety of altered landscapes. However, they are extremely elusive and rarely glimpsed, even in areas with large populations or when they reside in close proximity to humans.

Bobcats range from Garrett County eastward to the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Non-verified sightings also occur occasionally on the Eastern Shore. The highest population densities are found in Garrett and Allegany Counties, followed by Washington and Frederick Counties.

Bobcats resemble domestic cats with a few notable exceptions. They are approximately twice as large, stockier built, have pointed black ear tufts and short tails with a distinct dark band near the tip. A great deal of pelage (fur) variation occurs in bobcats -- their overall coloration is brown ranging from grayish brown to yellowish and reddish brown with an interspersed of dark stripes and spots. Their undersides are typically white and contain random dark spots and their faces are fringed in a ruff of longer fur. These big cats can range from 29 to 39 inches in length and can weigh anywhere from 10 to over 40

pounds, with males usually one-third larger than females.

Breeding season extends from January through April, and gestation ranges from 50 to 70 days, with 62 or 63 being most common. Litters range from 1 to 6, with an average of 2 or 3 kittens. Bobcats do not make dens; instead they will utilize brush and woody debris piles, hollow logs, overturned trees, rock crevices and isolated human structures.

Bobcats occupy many habitat types; however a large component of dense vegetative cover and/or understory development is critical regardless of the location. In heavily forested areas, interspersed openings including swamps and bogs, clear-cuts, small farm fields, dirt roads, power lines, rocky slopes and other 'disturbed' sites that promote early successional growth are selected. In agricultural areas, they tend to choose timbered bottomland habitat containing early successional openings as mentioned above.

Bobcats are truly carnivorous, consuming very little vegetative material. They feed primarily on small mammals, birds, rabbits and squirrels. However, when the opportunity is presented they will eat larger animals including adult deer.

Historically bobcats were distributed statewide but during the post colonization period densities began to plummet. By the mid-1900s, populations had probably reached all-time lows, with remnant populations existing only in western Maryland. This prompted the



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Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to classify them as a state-listed "Species of Special Concern." During the past quarter century, occupied range and densities have increased markedly. Results from the annual Bowhunter Survey and the Hunter Mail survey have identified bobcat sightings in 14 of Maryland's 23 counties. Currently, bobcats have dual legal classification in Maryland. In addition to the Species of Special Concern designation, they are also defined as a Game Animal / Furbearer with a closed harvest season.

The future looks promising for this beautiful animal. Conservation measures adopted by DNR coupled with the adaptability of this resilient species have resulted in ever expanding populations. ❖

Robert Colona is the Furbearer Project Leader for DNR's Wildlife & Heritage Service.

a landowner in Garrett County cannot be ruled out completely. We concluded that the animal appeared to be a “big cat” though we could not confirm it to be a mountain lion. That video was later shown on Maryland Public Television and

than ideal and we were not able to positively identify the animal. Most recently, we received a digital video clip of an animal that might be a cougar or might be a deer. The image quality was too poor to positively identify the animal.

If mountain lions were extirpated from Maryland by the start of the 1900s, then what are people seeing? Recently, someone reported seeing a mountain lion at the site of a fresh deer kill. One of our technicians investigated. He found the dead deer covered by leaves, which is characteristic of a cat kill. He placed a trail camera at

the site and got great photos of a bobcat during the night.

Coyotes dashing across the road can be mistaken for mountain lions. They are tan in color with long tails. Fishers in western Maryland

can be misidentified as black panthers. Even large house cats can be mistaken for cougars in poor light or at a distance. Many of the reports turn out to be dogs or large house cats.

Could there be a mountain lion or two roaming the wilds of Maryland? Sure there could be. It is not hard to find mountain lions for sale on the internet, though it is illegal to possess one in Maryland. We have trapped alligators, caimans, and wallabies from the wild in Maryland, so it is not inconceivable that a former pet cougar could be out there.

In the case of mountain lions, it will be hard to distinguish between a former captive animal and true native cat. Before we tackle that question, one must be documented with conclusive evidence in Maryland. Keep your eyes open! ❖

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the interview that aired along with the footage of the big cat raised some doubt.

Another video from Garrett County showed a cat that appeared to be large walking along a hedgerow. Unfortunately, the lighting was less