

BEST PRACTICES



Cougar (*Puma Concolor*)

Range: Northwestern Canada to Patagonia, South America

Cougars, also known as mountain lions or pumas, are the largest members of the cat family native to the Pacific Northwest. Approximately 2,500 cougars can be found in Washington State. Adult males weigh, on average, 140 pounds and can grow up to 8 feet long from nose to the tip of their tail. Their tail measures one third of their entire length! Cougars can vary in color from gray to reddish-brown. They have a white chest and muzzle with black markings on their ears, face and tip of their tail. Cougar kittens are black spotted until they are about 5 months old. Similar to domestic kittens, they first open their baby-blue eyes around two weeks. Their eyes will change in color to greenish-yellow around 16 months old. Cougars tend to live anywhere from 10-20 years in the wild and over 20 years in captivity.

Cougars use rock outcroppings, steep canyons and forest vegetation to remain hidden while hunting. Depending on prey availability, they can roam up to 15 miles a night while hunting. Home range covers approximately 50 - 150 square miles. Generally, cougars are shy, solitary animals and tend to live alone and are rarely observed. As habitat decreases and human population increases, the possibility of encountering a cougar may increase.

Cougars are most active from dusk to dawn. They typically prey on large ungulates such as deer, elk, moose, wild sheep and mountain goats. They also eat other smaller mammals such as rodents, raccoons and coyotes. After killing a large animal and eating its fill, a cougar will cover or cache the remains of its kill with debris and return days later to feed again.

Predators such as cougars play a key role in maintaining the overall health of an ecosystem and contribute to the biodiversity in a variety of habitats. Conservation biologists consider cougars to be a keystone species, meaning that if it were removed the ecosystem would dramatically change. One key aspect of the cougar's influence falls in its relationship to prey. Cougars help prevent overpopulation of herbivores such as elk and deer. Which in turn preserves the habitat (trees, shrubs, & grasses) from being over browsed.

In areas where large predators such as cougars, bears and wolves have been eradicated, diminished or driven out, researchers have found that large herbivores far exceed their historic levels. Without the presence of predators to balance population growth, herbivore numbers increase to the point where they cripple the regrowth of young trees thereby reducing biodiversity. As plant species disappear, it impacts species dependent upon them for food, nesting sites and other uses. In systems where large predators remain, they appear to have a major role in sustaining the diversity and productivity of native plant communities, which leads to maintaining healthy ecosystems.



Human activity has a detrimental impact on cougars and their environment. Habitat loss from deforestation, wildfires and increased development of historically natural areas all cause fragmentation of land, forcing cougars to expand their range for food and shelter, leading to human conflicts. Human occupation also includes livestock, and when located in or near historic wildlife habitat areas, cougar conflicts may result.

To learn how to reduce conflict with cougars, visit <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/species/puma-concolor#conflict>.

Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2020