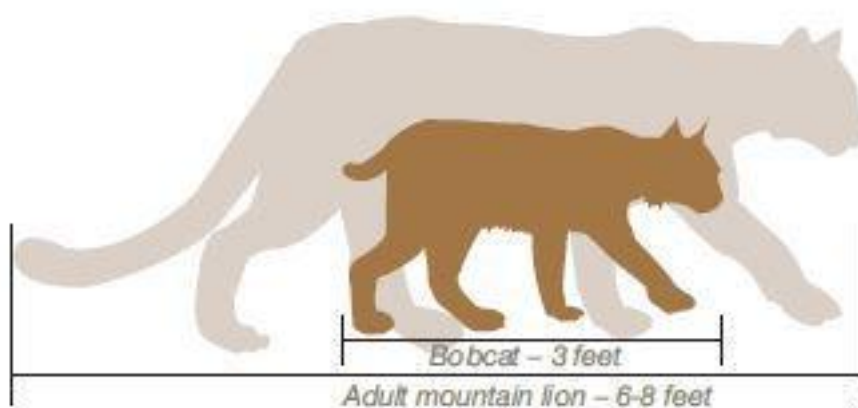


ANCRAM CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCIL

Cougar Sightings in New York

Chances are you might have heard or read about sightings of the cougar, *Puma concolor*, (also known as mountain lion, puma, panther and catamount) in our region. Yet, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC), such possible sightings are rarely followed up with physical evidence such as tracks, scat, hair, photos or videos. In most cases, the possible sighting has turned out to be a case of mistaken identity because people often mistake a bobcat, a large dog, a coyote, a fisher, or even feral or house cats for a cougar. When seen fleetingly or from a distance, these animals may resemble a cougar.

Here is a useful graphic that compares a bobcat and a cougar:



Graphic from brochure produced by North Dakota Fish and Game

The NYS DEC has not found definitive evidence of a native, self-sustaining population of cougars in New York State. Yet, there have been rare occasions of free-roaming cougars in New York when an illegally-kept or captive cougar has been accidentally or intentionally released. Also, migrating cougars may appear very rarely. In 2011, a lone, migrating cougar which travelled from the Midwest did roam through New York and Connecticut, only to be killed on a highway in Connecticut. Although cougar populations have been increasing in parts of western and midwestern United States, the Mississippi River often acts as a natural boundary for most of these animals. (“Mountain Lions in the Eastern U.S.” eMammal.)

It is interesting to note that although genuine sightings of cougars in New York are rare, cougar sign (scat, hair, tracks) is quite easy to find in areas in the western U.S. that are known to be occupied by cougars. Biologists at DEC consider a lack of cougar sign as a good indication that a wild, breeding population of cougars does not exist in New York. (Van Arsdale)

On the other hand, some local wildlife experts and trackers maintain that cougars—possible migrants from the western United States or possible descendants of escaped cougars whose genetic origins are linked to a South American cougar subspecies—have been sighted in our region. A study from 2000 documents cougar sightings in the East that have been followed up with physical cougar sign in New Brunswick, Vermont, Virginia, and Massachusetts and other eastern states and Canadian provinces. (Bogliano. 2000). However, another more recent study from the Cougar Rewilding Foundation (www.easterncougar.org) describes how recent legal hunting/shooting of cougars in the re-colonized cougar sites of the Black Hills and Nebraska has greatly limited a source of cougar migrants that might have led to increasing dispersal of cougars and an

increasing population of cougars in the eastern United States. (McGinnis). Clearly, information on cougars is evolving continually, and more research needs to be undertaken to determine the true status of cougars in the central and eastern United States.

The cougar is a magnificent animal, an apex predator that occupied the top rung of the food chain, kept herbivores such as deer in check, and helped to balance the ecosystem in New York. Although extirpated in New York in 1894, the cougar maintains its mythic quality. A return of the cougar would help right the ecological integrity of the Northeast.

Cougar facts from the NYS DEC:

Slightly smaller than jaguars, cougars are the second largest cats in North America, with adults weighing between 80 and 225 pounds (average is 140 pounds), and measuring between 5 and 9 feet in length (including the tail).

Cougars have long, slender bodies and small, broad, round heads. Ears are short, erect and rounded. The short fur is usually tawny, more tan in the summer months and grayer in winter. The muzzle, chin and underparts are creamy white. Black appears at the tip of their long tails and behind the ears. Young cougars have obvious dark spots on their flanks.



Adult Cougar Footprint-Between 3 and 3.5 inches wide

Here is information from DEC's website (<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6974.html>) on what to do if you believe that you have sighted a cougar in New York.

How to Report a Sighting

DEC staff will only investigate reports where physical evidence of tracks, scat, or hair exist; or when a captive animal has been reported to have escaped.

While DEC receives several reports of cougar sightings each year, it is mostly cases of mistaken identity of other animals. Cougars are commonly mistaken for wild bobcats, fishers and coyotes, as well as domestic housecats and dogs.

If you believe you have seen a cougar, check for tracks, scat or other signs that may have been left by the animal and take photographs of these signs. If possible, photograph the animal. When taking photographs of tracks, please include an object of known size, such as a quarter or ruler, next to the track. Placing a can or bucket over the tracks may help preserve them until they can be examined by DEC wildlife staff.

This website offers information on what to do if you should ever encounter a cougar:

<http://mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/wildlife-reporting/mountain-lion-reports/if-you-encounter-mountain-lion>

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