

BACKCOUNTRY HORSEMEN OF CALIFORNIA

ARE YOU

A Mountain Lion LUNCH?

A COMMON SENSE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING MOUNTAIN LIONS

Pumas are like a light breeze:

When one is present, you know it;

You can feel it, but you don't see it. John Seidensticker, 1991

The mountain lion, also known as puma, panther or cougar, is the largest carnivore (meat eater) of California. The generally secretive and solitary nature of lions makes it possible for humans to live in mountain lion country without ever seeing a mountain lion. The chance of being attacked is quite low compared to many other natural hazards. Attacks to humans are rare. A dozen people have been killed in the U.S. since 1890—though over half have occurred in the last fifteen years, indicating they are on the rise.

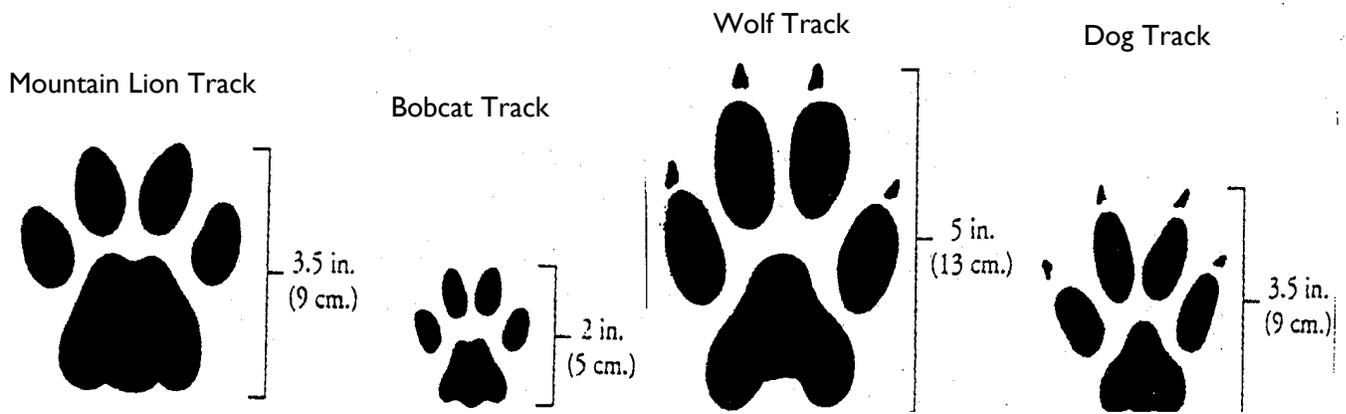
Generally, mountain lions are calm, quiet and elusive. They are usually found in areas that have adequate cover for ambushing and plentiful prey. These conditions exist in mountain subdivisions, urban fringes and open spaces, from deserts to coastal areas and to 10,000 foot elevations in the mountains. About half of California is prime mountain lion country!

The coloration of these lions is usually a tawny-yellowish but may also be a gray-brown to red-brown with black tipped ears and tail. The kittens, or cubs, are covered with blackish-brown spots and have dark rings around their tails. Adult males may be more than eight feet long from nose to end of tail and an average weight between 130 and 150 pounds. Adult females can be seven feet long and average between 65 and 90 pounds.

Think how quick, athletic and strong these animals are! They must be in excellent physical condition to survive. Lions are very powerful and normally prey upon large animals, such as deer, bighorn sheep and elk. However, they will prey on smaller animals as well, such as coyotes, skunks, raccoons and opossum. Domestic animals are also acceptable to their pallet, such as sheep, goats, cattle, horses, llamas, dogs, cats, ducks, and chickens. Mountain lions have excellent night vision and depth perception, prefer to stalk and ambush their prey, often from behind. The usual attack is with a powerful bite below the base of the skull, breaking the neck, or by suffocation. The carcass is often covered with dirt, leaves or snow and the lion comes back to feed on it over a course of a few days.

A lion's home range will often span over 100 square miles with many adults occupying the same area. Lion populations appear to be regulated not by social interactions but by the density of their principal prey. Competition for habitat is intense, especially in the western Sierra-Nevada where as many as 10 adult lions per 100 square miles has been recorded. The lion population has grown from an estimate of 600 in 1920 to a better field study of 2,000 in 1970. The 1990's show a population estimate ranging from 4,000 to 6,000.

Despite differences in opinions about mountain lions there is a common desire for proper scientific management of this magnificent animal. We must consider the regional diversity of the animals habitat, prey availability and human populations. Conflicts between mountain lions and humans vary regionally for different reasons. Minimizing your risk of becoming a mountain lion lunch is the main objective.



Mountain Lion Essentials To Remember

The following are some helpful hints to remember while visiting the forests and parks or maybe your own backyard.

You Must Be Alert

Remember Wild Animals Can Be Dangerous

Each Situation is Different

Hiking Alone Can Be Dangerous. Statistics show that nearly all recorded attacks in California involved lone trail runners and children.

Keep Children Close To You. Mountain lions seem especially drawn to children. Keep children within your sight at all times.

Avoid Confrontations. Most lions will try to avoid you approaching them. Give them a way to escape. Never corner a wild animal.

If You Smell A Dead Carcass, be extremely alert and get out of the area. Animals will protect their food supply.

Please Do Not Crouch or Bend Over. A person squatting or bending over looks a lot like a four-legged prey animal. If you must bend over, get quickly back to an up-right position.

Please Do Not Run. Running stimulates the lion's instinct to chase. Stand still and face the animal. Maintain constant eye contact. If you have children with you, pick them up if possible so they do not panic and run.

Try To Look Big. Raise your arms and speak firmly in a loud voice. Throw rocks or branches without crouching or turning your back.

Fight Back If Attacked. Protect your head and neck area. Remain standing and face the animal.

We hope this information gives you a better understanding of how the California Mountain Lion thinks and appreciate the animal's abilities.



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