

https://roanoke.com/news/virginia/tennessee-cougar-sightings-pose-questions-for-virginia/article_aff1a4ec-ab02-555d-9b18-a0379510b59a.html

Tennessee cougar sightings pose questions for Virginia

Tonia Moxley

Jan 1, 2017



Mountain lions are on the move. A female Florida panther has crossed from south of the Caloosahatchee River to the north for the first time since 1973, signaling a possible recovery of the endangered animals. For the first time in a century, officials in Tennessee have confirmed the presence of wild cougar, including a female with DNA links to a South Dakota population.

Courtesy of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Tonia Moxley

BLACKSBURG — One of the biggest cats in North America sniffs the air, mouth open and fangs showing. She's not supposed to be there, but she is.

The widely reported video of a female cougar caught on a game camera last year in Tennessee is one of nine confirmed mountain lion sightings in that state since September 2015. Those sightings and DNA matching of a hair sample are the first confirmed traces of cougar in the east, outside of Florida, in the past century.

Eastern biologists have long had the unenviable task of debunking fake photos, incidents of mistaken identity and overheated hopes in states like Virginia, where mountain lions were driven to extinction by the 1880s.

Some experts believe the Tennessee sightings could herald the eventual return of the mountain lion to its old habitats. What does this mean for Virginia? In the short term, probably not a lot.

People are also reading...

- 1 **West Virginia man shot by police Tuesday in Montgomery County**
- 2 **Some grumble, some patient as Atlantic Union Bank absorbs American National**
- 3 **Tests of Mountain Valley Pipeline point to more potential problems**
- 4 **CASEY: Rocky Mount man gave up dentistry for a dump truck**

Like many wildlife biologists, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries furbearer project leader Mike Fies has followed the news in Tennessee. He points out that the sightings have been in the extreme western part of that state.

“The confirmed observations are still quite a ways from us,” Fies said. “That being said, I think it’s entirely possible that some day they may reach Virginia in their slow eastward expansion.”

It’s not a sure thing, however. While male and even female cougars can range hundreds, even thousands of miles, breeding populations don’t necessarily follow.

In 2011, a male cougar that is thought to have walked more than 2,000 miles from its native western range to Connecticut was killed on a highway. But as far as experts can tell, there is no sign of a breeding population in the northeast.

Virginia Tech wildlife professor Michael Cherry studies interactions between critically endangered Florida panthers and white-tailed deer. He said population expansion of mountain lions can take decades or longer because females prefer to raise their young near where they themselves were born — what scientists call the animals’ natal range.

At least one female cougar has been confirmed in Tennessee. That’s a more likely sign of expansion than roving males, but still doesn’t mean a viable population has, or will, establish itself there. The gold standard, Cherry said, would be confirming a female with kittens. Even that wouldn’t guarantee a breeding population in the state, but it would show potential, he added.

There so far has been no reported evidence of a reproducing female in Tennessee. Before 2015, according to that state’s wildlife agency, the last confirmed mountain lion sighting was in the early 1900s. No cougar sightings have been confirmed in Virginia since 1882, when the last known animal was killed in Washington County, Fies said.

An ongoing search and debate

That doesn’t mean there haven’t been numerous rumors and reports. One Tech biologist thinks cougar have been stalking Tennessee and Virginia for decades.

Donald Linzey has taught mammology and herpetology at Tech for the past five years, and before that for 24 years at Wytheville Community College. He has authored scholarly books on mammals, and he has long pursued reports of the eastern cougar in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Virginia.

Linzey said he investigates several reports annually. For each one, he questions the witnesses about what they saw, their knowledge of wildlife and what time of day or night they spotted the creature. He examines any photos or video they might have, meets them at the site of the report and looks for corroborating evidence.

Linzey said he has debunked more than half the reports he's received. He keeps track of ones he deems reliable using color-coded map pins. Since about 1970, he said he's placed about 50 pins in his Smokies map, and there are about 140 in his Virginia map. Many of the Virginia pins predate him, however. Linzey said before he started Old Dominion cougar investigations, another man was doing the job.

"I don't know how diligent he was," Linzey said of his predecessor. But Linzey said he assumes the reports from that time are reliable.

Today DGIF is the official agency in charge of Virginia cougar investigations, and whenever a report with some supporting evidence comes in, Fies said a state biologist looks into it. None has been confirmed. In all the time Linzey has been tracking cougar, he's not been able to prove a sighting, either.

"It's very difficult to confirm most of them," Linzey said. But there have been so many reports over so long a time, he said doesn't think they can all be wrong.

Other biologists, such as Cherry and Fies, say that if cougar were living in Virginia, it wouldn't be hard to confirm their presence.

"Where they exist out west and in Florida, they don't exist like ghosts in the wilderness," said Fies. "They get hit on the roads. They get detected by people and photographs taken. It just doesn't make sense at all that we could have this ghost population existing in Virginia for all this time."

Even small populations are easily spotted. Fewer than 200 native Florida panthers exist in the wild, but dozens have been killed by vehicles, Cherry said. In 2015, 26 panthers were killed on the roads, according to Cherry. About 30 have died this year.

Panthers on the move too?

Puma concolor, also known as ghost cat, catamount, puma, painter, panther, mountain lion and cougar, is the second largest cat in North America behind the jaguar. Biologists believe one jaguar still exists in the U.S. "El Jefe" has been spotted in southern Arizona. Jaguar can weigh up to 250 pounds and grow to 8 feet long.

Cougar can weigh up to about 140 pounds and grow up to 8 feet long, including the tail. Their diet can consist of a variety of mammals, but their preferred food in the U.S. is deer, which the cat can kill with a single bite to the neck. An average adult cougar eats about one deer a week, but females raising kittens can harvest more.

Once the most widely distributed land mammal in the Western Hemisphere, cougars have been eliminated from about two-thirds of their original range, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Only western cougars and Florida panthers still live in large enough numbers to maintain breeding populations.

In the East, “cougars historically ranged from Michigan, southern Ontario, eastern Canada and Maine south to South Carolina and west across Tennessee. At one time, they lived in every Eastern state in a variety of habitats including coastal marshes, mountains and forests,” according to the wildlife service.

The large cats were eradicated to protect livestock. Officially declared extinct, the eastern mountain lion remains on the federal endangered species list. In both Virginia and Tennessee, they are protected from hunting and trapping.

It’s not just western cougars that are on the move. Florida panthers may be trekking north.

Last month, that state’s Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission announced that game camera pictures and cougar tracks confirmed that a female had crossed from south of the Caloosahatchee River to the north for the first time since 1973. It could signal an eventual recovery of that endangered population, according to the commission.

Virginia will continue to investigate reports of cougar in the commonwealth, despite long odds of reestablishment.

“I don’t think it’s going to be any time real soon, but we never say never,” Fies said. “It could happen at any time, theoretically.”

Eastern states don’t have to wait for natural expansion, though.

“We could stock females where we want them,” Cherry said. The question is: Is there a political will to do that?

Fies said he doubts there would be much support for a stocking program in Virginia. People already fear run-ins with black bear and coyote, some of which have been fed by people and lost their fear of humans. Livestock producers also would likely oppose cougar stocking.

Tennessee has taken an official stand on the issue.

The state “has never, nor has it any plans to stock or otherwise physically encourage the establishment of a cougar population,” according to its wildlife agency website.

For more information on cougar in the U.S., visit <https://goo.gl/r2cftB>. For more information on the Tennessee sightings, visit <https://goo.gl/7xw8Hs>.

Puma concolor

Known as ghost cat, catamount, puma, painter, panther, mountain lion and cougar, it is the second largest cat in North America, behind the jaguar. The eastern cougar has been declared extinct, but recent western migrants have been confirmed as far east as Tennessee.

Description: Long, heavily muscled bodies with very long tails and broad, round heads with erect, rounded ears. They are typically tawny in color. Adult cats average from six feet (females) to eight feet (males) long, including their tails. Males weigh up to 140 pounds and females weigh up to 105 pounds. In the wild, they live an average of eight years.

Food habits: Cougars' primary prey is deer, but they also hunt smaller mammals. Cougars stalk and ambush prey. One cougar consumes a deer every week to 10 days, or more frequently if a female is feeding cubs.

Habitat: At one time, cougar lived in every eastern state in a variety of habitats including coastal marshes, mountains and forests. Cougars have no natural enemies except humans. Males may occupy a range of more than 25 square miles and females between 5 and 20 square miles. Both sexes defend their territories.

Reproduction: Cougars begin breeding at two or three years old and breed once every two or three years. Females initiate courtship and produce a litter of two to three kittens after a three month gestation. Females spend 18 to 24 months raising cubs to maturity.

Extinction: European settlers perceived the cougar as a danger to livestock and humans and as a competitor for wild game. With bounties set by states, the eastern cougar was hunted and trapped relentlessly until extirpated throughout most of the east by the late 1800s.

SOURCE: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

By Tonia Moxley
