

WOLFE LAKE (WESTPORT) ASSOCIATION

Nature Around Us | COUGAR TALES



Article by Margie Manthey and photo by Raymond Barlow Published in the Westport Review Mirror, 2020



By the late 1800's, the cougar had been scoured from the Ontario landscape due to relentless human persecution. The last known living cougar was shot and killed near Creemore in 1884. Several decades later, claims of encounters with the “ghost cat” began to emerge, eventually igniting a debate over whether cougars were once again roaming Ontario’s forests. The possibility was widely ridiculed, and the MNRF seemed unwilling to acknowledge their presence despite accumulating evidence that suggested

otherwise. The issue was finally resolved in 2011 when Dr. Rick Rosatte, a Senior Research Scientist with the MNRF, presented the findings of a 4-year study. After collecting and analyzing physical evidence (hair and tissue samples, scat, tracks and photographs), Dr. Rosatte and his expert colleagues confirmed that cougars were, indeed, prowling the province once again.

Although their presence is acknowledged, the origins of Ontario’s cougars remain obscure. Today’s population may include escaped or illegally released captive animals; individuals that entered the province from other areas with free-ranging populations; remnant numbers of a native population; or a genetic mix of all of these possibilities. Cougars are listed as “data deficient,” meaning there are not enough examples to facilitate a grasp on their numbers. Likely spread very thin, a sustainable breeding population is suspect. This, coupled with their highly reclusive nature, may explain the indisputable scarcity of photographs and trail camera images [*note: accompanying photo is of a captive cougar*]. A young, dispersing male seeking territory and mates can account for sightings as far as 1,500 kilometres apart, creating a misconception that multiple animals exist when in reality there may only be a solitary wanderer.

Back in 2015, I spoke with the MNRF about cougars. At that time, there was no physical evidence collected from Rideau Lakes Township, but they documented a credible cougar sighting. Despite widespread rumours, the MNRF denied any efforts to reintroduce cougars to Ontario. I learned that cougars do not carry uneaten prey into trees as some hunters speculate; rather, it is cached on the ground and covered with leaves and twigs. The MNRF also confirmed that cougars are protected under the Endangered Species Act. In Ontario, it is illegal to kill, capture, buy, sell or trade a cougar (an exemption exists for cougars legally killed outside the province).

Over the past decade, there have been several alleged cougar sightings reported across eastern Ontario. The area between Carleton Place and Kanata appears to be an active corridor, with accounts of the animals crossing Highway 417. Other reports have come from Calabogie, Spencerville, Joyceville, Inverary, Lyndhurst, Merrickville, Maberly, and Perth... closer still, from Foley Mountain, Parish Road and Wolfe Lake. Claims include cougar sightings on rural properties, in barnyards, seeing large tracks and hearing cat-like screams. Most remain unverified. Sightings should be reported promptly to the MNRF to better enable verification; photographs are valuable.

Male cougars can grow up to 2 metres / 6-1/2 feet in length and weigh over 60 kilograms / 130 pounds. They are powerful predators, but shy and usually avoid people. Attacks on humans are *extremely* rare. You are far more likely to be struck by lightning or mauled by a neighbourhood dog. Nevertheless, should you encounter a cougar, maintain eye contact and stand tall; never crouch or run. Keep children and pets close to you. Raise your arms to appear larger, speak loudly and back away slowly. If the cougar acts aggressive, throw things at it. In the highly unlikely event of an attack, fight back hard.

Do you have a cougar tale to share? If so, please email me at manthey.margie@gmail.com.

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PHOTO CREDIT: Raymond Barlow