

Life of the Mountain Lion

Appearance

Mountain lions are graceful and majestic animals known for their strength and agility. The image to the right shows the color and physical attributes of adults and kittens, and the chart below compares the size between adult males and females. Their scientific name, *Puma concolor*, means cat of one color, yet adult mountain lions are usually tawny, or tan or slightly reddish in color, with black-tipped ears and tail. Their coat pattern varies with age.

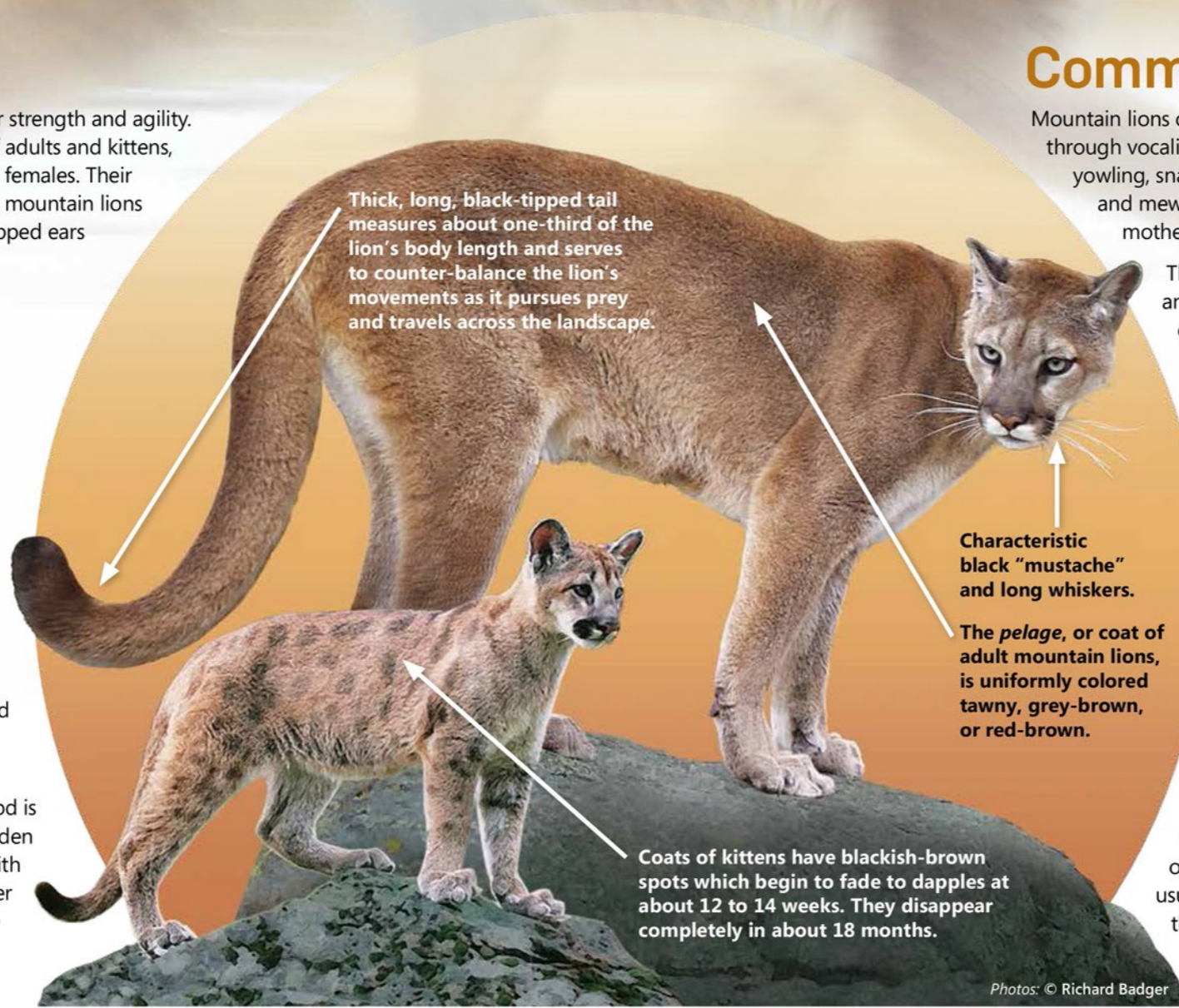
	Adult Males	Adult Females
Shoulder Height	30 in. (76 cm)	24 in. (61 cm)
Length*	7-8 ft. (2.1-2.4 m)	5.5-6 ft. (1.6-1.8 m)
Weight	120-160+ lbs. (54-72+ kg)	85-115 lbs. (38-52 kg)

*Length is measured from nose to tip of tail.

Reproduction

Mountain lions will often mate with multiple individuals when they are reproductively active, which for adult males is all of the time. Breeding pairs may spend an average of 2 to 3 days together. Mountain lions are unusual among carnivores because they breed and give birth at any time of year. While adult males play no role in the rearing of kittens, they have been documented feeding on a carcass with a female and their offspring.

Females can have their first litter at 2 1/2 to 3 years of age, and they generally breed every 2 years thereafter. The gestation period is 3 months. Females move their nursing kittens frequently to new den sites for protection and to improve access to prey. Interactions with their mother are critical to the kittens' development. If the mother dies before her kittens reach 6 months of age, her offspring have little to no chance of survival.



Communication

Mountain lions communicate through visual, scent, and posturing signals, and through vocalizations such as low guttural growls, chirping, whistling, spitting, yowling, snarling, and hissing. Nursing kittens emit high-pitched, birdlike chirps and meows. Older kittens may also chirp to communicate with siblings or their mother. Mountain lions purr when together, but they cannot roar.

The most spectacular sound a mountain lion can make is a caterwaul, an eerie sound resembling a human cry or scream. Females caterwaul during mating season, especially when males are competing for the same receptive female.

Distribution & Range

Mountain lions have the largest geographic range of any native land mammal in the Western Hemisphere. They occur from British Columbia in Canada, through the Western United States, and down throughout Central and South America to the southern tip of Chile.

Roughly, 40 percent of California is considered to be suitable mountain lion habitat. Mountain lions can be found wherever deer are present including forests, wetlands, riparian areas, and deserts. They can also be found in terrain ranging from grassy valleys and rolling oak woodlands to rugged mountains, and sometimes at the edge of developed areas.

A male mountain lion's territory averages 100 to 200 square miles and typically encompasses all or part of the home ranges of multiple females. In California, female mountain lion ranges are usually 30 to 70 square miles in size. Depending on the location, there are about 3.1 adult mountain lions per 100 square miles of suitable habitat.

The First Year



92-day Gestation to Birth
1 to 4 kittens are born, eyes closed, fully furred, spotted, and weighing just over a pound.



2 Weeks Old
Eyes and ears open. Mother leaves for short periods of time to hunt.



6 to 8 Weeks Old
As kittens grow, they accompany their mother on hunts.



6 to 12 Months
Juveniles become more independent. Spots continue to fade. They disperse between 12 to 24 months to establish their own territories.

▶ **Seeing a mountain lion does not mean it is a threat.**
Attacks on humans are extremely rare. When in mountain habitat, **know the steps to enhance your safety and that of your family, friends, and pets.**
(See the Tips below.)

Mountain Lion Safety Tips

Consider these recommended precautions while living or recreating in mountain lion country:

Home, Pet, and Livestock Safety

Home Safety

- ▶ **Don't feed deer, other wildlife, or feral cats** which can attract mountain lions.
- ▶ **Landscape around your home for safety.**
 - Prune shrubs and trees around the base to keep mountain lions from using them as hiding spots.
 - Do not landscape with plants that are desirable to deer. Deer can attract mountain lions to your yard.
 - Install wildlife-friendly lighting to illuminate walkways at night. Lighting alone will not deter a lion, but it will allow you to see your surroundings.
 - Install tall deer-proof fencing to prevent deer from entering your property.
- ▶ **Seal off open spaces under buildings and porches** to keep mountain lions and other wildlife from using them as shelter.
- ▶ **Do not make food, water, or shelter available near your home.**
 - Mountain lions use vegetated areas to move through populated areas into more remote habitat. If food, water, and shelter are not available, mountain lions generally move on quickly.
- ▶ **Keep garbage and compost secured indoors or in wildlife-proof receptacles.**
- ▶ **Supervise small children outdoors especially during the hours around dawn and dusk when mountain lions are most active.**

Pet Safety

- ▶ **Keep dogs and cats indoors**, especially after dusk and before dawn, to prevent them from becoming prey for mountain lions, coyotes, and other wild animals.
- ▶ **Keep pet food indoors.** If you feed animals outside, gather up the food and water bowls and clean up spilled food so as not to attract wild animals.
- ▶ **Install a fully secure, roofed kennel** if you must keep pets outside.

Livestock Safety

- ▶ **Confine livestock and domestic animals in secure and covered enclosures or barns, especially at night** for sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs, chickens, and other animals.
- ▶ **Use specially trained livestock guard animals.**

Share these simple precautions with your neighbors. Prevention is far better than a possible mountain lion confrontation.

Safety When Recreating

Hiking & Camping

- ▶ **Hike in pairs or groups.**
- ▶ **Keep small children close**, preferably within a few feet alongside you.
- ▶ **Keep your pet close and on a leash.**
- ▶ **Make enough noise to avoid surprising wildlife**, especially at bends in the trail. Whistles work well.
- ▶ **Do not approach dead animals**, especially deer or elk; they could be mountain lion prey left for a later meal.
- ▶ **Keep your camp clean** and store food and garbage in wildlife-proof containers away from sleeping areas.

Mountain Biking

- ▶ **Ride with a partner** or in a small group, and wear a helmet.
- ▶ **Use a bell or make noise** as you go along the trail.

Running

- ▶ **Avoid running alone in mountain lion country**, especially at dawn, dusk, or after dark.
- ▶ **Avoid running with headphones or ear buds while talking on the phone or listening to music** that can block out sounds around you.
- ▶ **Always stay aware of your surroundings.**

If You Encounter a Mountain Lion

- ▶ **Do not run.** Running or rapid movements may be perceived as fleeing prey and can trigger an attack.
- ▶ **Never approach the mountain lion or offer it food.**
- ▶ **Pick up small children and place them on your shoulders**, but do so without bending over or turning your back on the mountain lion.
- ▶ **Face the mountain lion.** Talk to it firmly and slowly back away. Mountain lions will often watch you intently yet they will remain still until you are out of view.
- ▶ **Always leave the animal an escape route**, even if it means stepping aside so the mountain lion can move past you. Do not expect the mountain lion to turn and walk or run away.
- ▶ **Try to appear larger than the mountain lion.** Get above it (e.g., step up onto a rock or stump). If wearing a jacket, hold it open to increase your apparent size. If you are in a group, stand shoulder-to-shoulder to appear intimidating.
- ▶ **If the mountain lion does not leave, be more assertive.** If it crouches and lays back its ears, bares its teeth, hissing, tail twitching, and hind feet pumping in preparation to jump, then it is time to shout, wave your arms and throw anything you have available directly at the lion (water bottle, book, backpack, rocks).
- ▶ **If the mountain lion attacks, fight back.** Be aggressive and stay on your feet. Spraying bear spray (EPA approved) in the mountain lion's face can be effective. Attack victims have fought back successfully with rocks, sticks, garden tools, even an ink pen, or bare hands. If knocked down, protect your head and neck.
- ▶ **Always give a mountain lion or mountain lion kittens plenty of room and leave the area as soon as possible.** Mountain lion kittens can look similar to bobcats or domestic cats.

When in mountain lion country, consider carrying bear spray, keep it accessible, and know how to use it.

Be a good steward at home and in the wild. By taking steps to safely coexist with these remarkable animals, you can help to ensure they remain an important part of California's natural landscape.



Important Mountain Lion Information

- ▶ **If a mountain lion has attacked a person, call 911.**
- ▶ **Report wildlife sightings or incidents** (including livestock losses) on the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) online Wildlife Incident Reporting system: <http://apps.wildlife.ca.gov/wir>
- ▶ **Report a sick or injured mountain lion to CDFW:** Northern California 24-hour dispatch: **916-358-1312** Southern California 24-hour dispatch: **951-443-2944**

For more information contact CDFW during normal business hours at: **916-322-8911**. You will be routed to the CDFW regional office for your county.

If you find a kitten in good condition, please do not touch and do not disturb it. Promptly, but slowly, leave the area as there may be a mother nearby. If you find a kitten alone in poor condition or obvious distress, do not touch it and instead report it to your local CDFW Office.

For more information on mountain lion safety visit the CDFW website: wildlife.ca.gov/Keep-Me-Wild/Lion

California Laws Prohibit:

• Mountain Lion Hunting

It is illegal to take mountain lions in the state of California. It is also illegal to import mountain lion carcasses into California, even if it is legal to hunt them in other states. (CDFW Fish and Game Code 4800)

• Feeding Wildlife – Big Game

The feeding of big game animals is prohibited in California (CA Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 251.3). Feeding deer and other wildlife may attract mountain lions to your property. It also disrupts natural animal behavior patterns, putting animals at risk for vehicle strikes, injury from other wildlife and disease.



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California Mountain Lion



Photo: © Mark Elbroch

Learn about mountain lion ecology, behavior, signs, and safety tips.

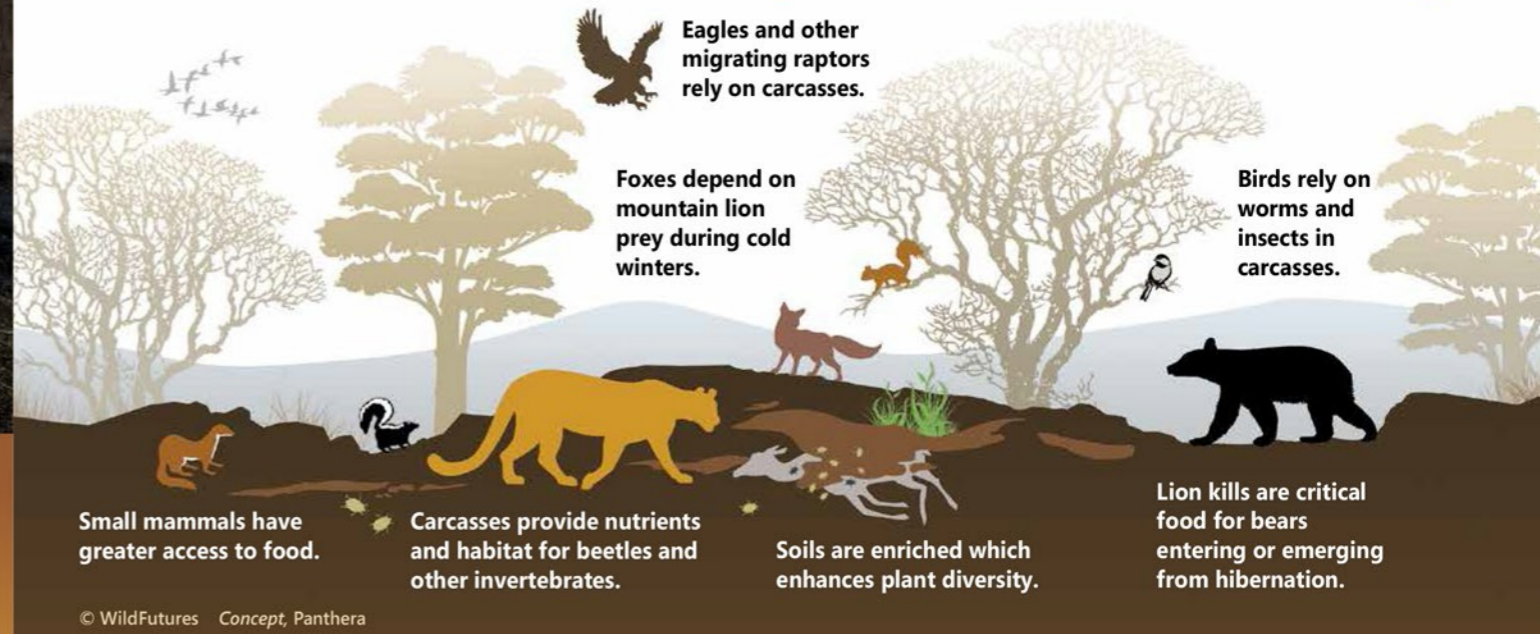


Photo: © Transition Habitat Conservancy

California Mountain Lion

Mountain lions are also known as pumas, cougars, or panthers. Seeing a mountain lion in the wild can be a thrilling and memorable experience, but sightings are rare due to the lion's shy and elusive nature. To provide reliable and scientifically sound information for all Californians, this brochure explains the ecology, behavior, ecosystem benefits, signs of the presence of mountain lions, and what to do in the event of an encounter. With a better understanding of their nature, people can safely coexist with mountain lions and help these animals remain an important part of California's landscape.

Mountain Lions Increase an Ecosystem's Health and Biodiversity



Frequently Asked Questions About Mountain Lions

How many mountain lions live in California?



It is difficult to accurately assess statewide mountain lion populations. From year to year, mountain lion populations may increase, decrease, or remain stable. However, research is underway to estimate the size of the population and monitor trends in order to better understand the status of populations across the state.

Do mountain lions live in groups?

No. Mountain lions live alone, except when females are with kittens. Recent research shows they can be more social than was previously understood. Two mountain lions may be seen together, usually for the purpose of mating, but occasionally to share a meal. Kittens stay with their mother until they are 12 to 24 months old, and can appear to be as large as their mother, giving the impression of a group of adult mountain lions. After leaving their mother and striking out on their own, siblings can remain together for a period of time.

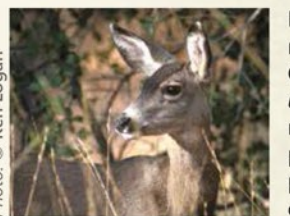
Do mountain lions overpopulate?

No. Mountain lions need sufficient habitat and prey to survive. In California, research has found there to be about 3.1 adult lions per 100 square miles. Males are highly territorial and may kill one another for territory, food, or a mate. Kittens stay with their mother for up to 2 years, in litters of just 2 or 3, so reproduction rates are low. Today, lion populations are also impacted by habitat loss and fragmentation, vehicle strikes, severe wildfires, rodenticides, disease, poaching, pollution, and lethal actions by authorized depredation permit.

Does a mountain lion sighting mean there are more in the area?

No. An increase in mountain lion sightings does not necessarily mean that the local population has increased. Nor is their presence around a neighborhood generally considered evidence of unusual behavior. Mountain lions can travel long distances, often 10 to 20 miles per day, and inhabit large geographic areas. Resident mountain lions may periodically wander or travel through a neighborhood as they patrol their home ranges, and young mountain lions from elsewhere may pass through in search of an open territory. If you see a mountain lion in your neighborhood it doesn't mean it is residing there.

What do mountain lions eat?



Mountain lions are *obligate carnivores*, meaning they only eat meat. In California, they specialize primarily on *ungulates*, mostly deer. Occasionally mountain lions will also eat elk, wild pigs, rabbits, raccoons, beavers, porcupines, rodents, bighorn sheep, coyotes, and other wildlife species.

Do mountain lions reduce their prey populations?

No. Mountain lions co-evolved with their prey over millennia, and there is no evidence that predation by mountain lions limits their primary prey populations. There are rare situations where mountain lions impact the growth of a prey population, particularly when prey numbers are already at critically low levels. However, the populations and availability of ungulate prey typically determines the abundance of mountain lions within a particular region. Other factors that influence deer and elk declines in California include hunting, habitat loss, drought, disease, vehicle strikes, and poaching.

Do mountain lions pose a threat to pets and livestock?

Yes, if left unprotected. However, weather, disease, dogs, and birthing complications cause most livestock losses. Domestic sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs, and chickens are far more vulnerable to mountain lion predation than are cattle and horses, and are more easily protected. Securing sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs, fowl and other small animals in predator proof enclosures from dusk to dawn will reduce the likelihood of a loss. If a mountain lion kills a pet or livestock, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife will help the owner take steps to protect their animals in order to deter the mountain lion from returning, before a lethal depredation permit may be issued.

Will killing more mountain lions decrease conflicts with pets and livestock?

Generally, no. Killing an adult mountain lion disrupts the social structure of a local population, leaving a vacancy for younger, inexperienced lions looking to occupy an empty territory. Conflicts with people and livestock are more common with young male lions as they move into empty territories to survive. Thus, killing a mountain lion may result both in a temporary increase in the number of local mountain lions, as well as an increase in pet and livestock losses.

Do mountain lions pose a significant threat to public safety?

No. Mountain lion attacks on people are extremely rare. Mountain lions are timid and mostly avoid people. However, like any wildlife species, mountain lions can be unpredictable; therefore, people who live, work, or recreate in mountain lion habitat should take precautions to reduce their risk, and know what to do if they encounter a mountain lion.



Photo: © Arroyos & Foothills Conservancy



Photo: © Steven Bobzien

Mountain Lion Signs

You may never see a mountain lion in the wild, but you can find and interpret the signs that a mountain lion leaves behind. Local conditions and the passage of time make accurate identification difficult even for expert trackers.

Tracks

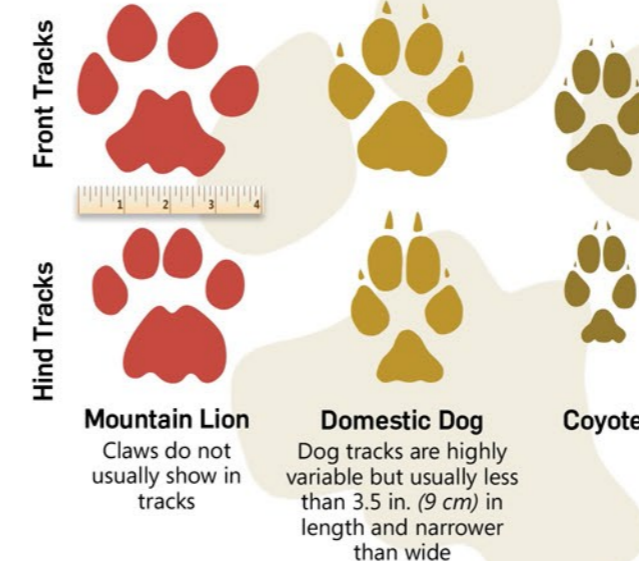
Mountain lion tracks have 4 toes on both the front and hind paws with M-shaped heel pads that have 2 lobes at the top and 3 lobes at the base. Retractable claws do not show in the tracks of mountain lions except on slippery or difficult terrain where they need more traction or where they have sprinted after prey. A mountain lion carries its heavy tail in a wide U-shape at a normal walk, so the lower portion of its tail can leave drag marks behind in snow.



Photo: © Justin Dellinger

	Adult Males	Adult Females
Track Width	4–5 in. (9–13 cm)	< 3.5 in. (5–8 cm)
Heel Pad	> 2 in. (9–13 cm)	< 2 in. (4–6.5 cm)
Stride Length	> 40 in. (9–11.5 cm)	< 40 in. (4.5–7.5 cm)

Note: When observing tracks, recognize that considerable experience and additional indicators may be needed to make accurate conclusions about the species of the animal.



History and Legal Status

California's early settlers viewed the mountain lion as a threat to their livestock and livelihood. Lions were perceived as competitors for wild game, and few pioneers understood their ecological value. From 1907-1963 bounty hunting programs were implemented that resulted in the killing of thousands of mountain lions. The California legislature placed a moratorium on sport hunting of mountain lions in 1972, then in 1990 voters passed Proposition 117 which permanently banned the hunting of mountain lions and established them as a "specially protected mammal." In 2013, the law was amended and now requires non-lethal procedures to resolve potential conflicts unless the mountain lion has been designated an imminent threat to public safety. In 2020, the California Fish & Game Commission approved a petition to consider whether portions of the Southern California/Central Coast mountain lion populations should be listed as threatened or endangered under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). For an update and more information, visit: wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Mountain-Lion

Ecosystem Benefits

In most of California, mountain lions represent the only large carnivore and significant predator of ungulates. They prey primarily on deer and their kills provide an important food source to many species, including other mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. Nutrients from carcasses enrich soils and benefit many plants. Because of their unique role as a large predator, the mountain lion's presence enhances and strengthens the connections of ecological communities that would otherwise be lost if the species was absent from the landscape.

Scat

Mountain lions generally cover their scat (feces) with loose soil. Scat tends to be dense and segmented, blunt at both ends, 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter and 4 to 6 inches long (roughly the size of a scat left behind by a large dog). Scat may include hair, bones, and teeth from prey, and sometimes grass, but usually contain no fruit or other vegetation. Mountain lion scat can be found in caves and near kills and scrapes. Smaller mountain lion scat may be similar in size and shape to those left by bobcats.



Photo: © Jeff Slikich/NPS

Scrapes

Mountain lions make scrapes to communicate their presence, attract a mate, or define the edge of their territory. They make scrapes by using their hind feet to push up a mound of leaves, dirt, or other debris in conspicuous places, at junctions in canyons, and along trails and ridge lines. Occasionally mountain lions urinate or defecate on the scrape. Bobcats make similar, but smaller, scrapes.



Photo: © Brian Kertson, WDFW

Cache Sites

Mountain lions typically drag large kills to a secluded location so they can return and continue to feed over several days. The location is known as a "cache site." You might see a drag mark near a fresh kill. Mountain lions often cover their kill with leaves, grasses, pine needles, or branches to hide it from scavengers and to prevent it from spoiling. Mountain lions may stay close to the cached kill site, so it is important not to approach or linger near a dead animal. If you come across a carcass in the middle of a trail or out in the open, it's very unlikely to be a mountain lion kill.



Photo: © Toni Ruth

Learn more about mountain lions and safety on the inside poster. ▶