

STATUS OF SELECTED OTHER SPECIES IN IOWA – LARGE CARNIVORES

Mountain Lion/Cougar Status in Iowa 1995 - 2021

The mountain lion/cougar (or puma, panther, and various other names) is the largest of the three wildcats historically documented in Iowa. The lynx and the bobcat are the other two. The mountain lion/cougar probably occurred throughout most of the state originally, but nowhere in great numbers. The lynx has been extirpated and the bobcat is established in Iowa again after nearly being extirpated. The last historical record of a mountain lion/cougar in Iowa was one that was shot in 1867 in Appanoose County near the town of Cincinnati, Iowa.

Since the mid-1990's, the DNR has received several reports of large "cat" like sightings which led some to believe that a few "free ranging" mountain lions/cougars may again be occurring in some portions of the state. These "free ranging" mountain lions/cougars could be either escapees, or released animals, privately owned, (grandfathered in before July 1, 2007 legislation to curtail the ownership of certain "dangerous wild animals") or DNA testing has shown they are fully wild animals dispersing from the western states of South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming. Other states in the Midwest (Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois) have also reported increased sightings during the past 15 years however, the number of dispersing mountain lions/cougars fluctuates annually.

Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa

Figure 7.1 is a map showing mountain lion sightings reported to the DNR that were confirmed or highly probable confirmations (1995-2020). Tracks and/or sightings reported to us throughout the year are documented as confirmed, highly probable or unconfirmed after investigating the evidence. In 2017 two confirmed mountain lions were females. These were the first females documented for Iowa since the 1800s. Both were shot and killed, one by a gun deer hunter (Plymouth Co) and one by DNR staff (Iowa Co) due to human safety concerns. The Plymouth Co female was wearing a GPS neck collar from Nebraska GF&P. The Iowa Co female had DNA that matched cats in Wyoming. In 2018, the Iowa DNR had at least 2 confirmed mountain lion reports and 1 probable report, (Table 7.1). For 2019, there were 6 confirmed reports of mountain lions in Iowa. However, there were multiple unconfirmed reports especially in the Polk County area of Iowa. For 2020, there have been no confirmed reports. For 2021, there have been no confirmed reports either. Table 7.2 shows the number of confirmed mountain lions in Iowa by year. The following methods have been used to confirm the presence of mountain lions in Iowa to date: roadkills, shot and killed, verified photos, verified tracks, and sightings (Table 7.3).

It is important to note that an average of 2 to 4 sightings per week are reported to us in the Clear Lake office from locations all over the state. This does not count all of the reports other DNR staff receive in their regions throughout the state as well. Over 2,000 mountain lion sightings have been reported since 2010. However, strong evidence in the form of legitimate tracks, photos, video or other evidence is necessary before we can officially place them on our map as "confirmed".

It is very likely that we have the occasional mountain lion wandering through or staying in our state for a period of time, however we have not documented a self-sustaining breeding population of mountain lions in Iowa at this time. **THE IOWA DNR HAS NOT 'STOCKED' OR INTRODUCED MOUNTAIN LIONS INTO THE STATE, NOR IS THERE ANY CONSIDERATION OF DOING SO.**

With the methods of deer hunting that take place in Iowa, one would expect to get more reports of mountain lions during that time. Overall however, the 150,000+ deer hunters seldom report a sighting of a mountain lion during their hunting activities. We actually receive more reports of mountain lion sightings during the summer when wildlife cover is at its maximum than we do in the winter when it is at its minimum. It is an interesting trend and not exactly sure why.

DNA testing is used to determine the origin of mountain lions that are killed in Iowa whenever possible. The origins of the 6 dead mountain lions have been completed and results indicate that they are of North American origin, except one that was of unknown origin. Results from that testing have shown strong indications that it matched DNA common to cats from the Black Hills region of South Dakota and parts of Nebraska and recently, Wyoming. There are some indications the only legal source of captive mountain lions/cougars should be of South American origin, although more study is necessary before that theory can be substantiated or discounted.

Currently the mountain lion has no legal status in the Iowa Code, thus they are not given any sort of protection by Iowa Law. Although the DNR does not advocate the indiscriminate killing of mountain lions, the few mountain lions that do wander into Iowa are often shot. The DNR requested that the 2002 legislative session consider legislation to designate the mountain lion and the black bear as furbearers, thus allowing the DNR to properly manage these species, should their numbers increase. The DNR also requested that indiscriminate killing of these animals not be allowed unless they are about to cause damage or injury to property or persons. The legislation did not pass. Afterward, the Governor's office asked the DNR to not pursue mountain lion/cougar and black bear furbearer status in the Iowa Code in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Depredation: This past year, we had some cases of livestock damage/depredation but none were positively confirmed as mountain lion. In almost all cases, it was from dogs or self-inflicted injuries on fences or gates around the stock pens or pastures. We also had a few unconfirmed reports of deer kills by mountain lions. Whenever possible, DNR staff made an effort to examine the evidence left at the scene before trying to say for sure what the predator might have been. Most depredation cases in Iowa are from canines (dogs or coyotes). It is possible for a mountain lion to attack/ depredate livestock, however again, we did not have any documented cases in Iowa in 2020 where we could determine for sure whether a mountain lion caused livestock damage. However, mountain lion research in western states shows that white-tailed deer, mule deer, and other wild animals, especially mammals, are the preferred prey. Even so, predators are generally opportunists and if hungry they will take what is readily available.

In 2013 we had at least 3 reports (1 in Jasper, 1 in Allamakee, and 1 in Palo Alto County) from people who believe that they had seen mountain lion kittens. At this point DNR personnel have not documented kittens in Iowa.

In 2020, we didn't have any reports of mountain lion kittens. All mountain lions that have been killed in Iowa in recent years have all been reproductively immature 1 to 2 year old males, except for one mature male (4 yrs old), and two females shot in 2017. To date, we do not have a documented breeding population of mountain lions in Iowa. Credible mountain lion sightings and tracks are important to the Iowa DNR. Two excellent websites to help with mountain track identification are <http://www.bear-racker.com/cougar.html> and <http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/9152/cougar.html>. It is important to remember that all cat tracks are round in shape; with 4 toes and a heel pad that has 3 posterior lobes and a less than prominent M shape on the forepart of the heel pad (Figure 7.2). Adult mountain lion/cougar tracks are 4 inches or larger in diameter, whereas bobcat tracks are nearer to the 2 ½ to 3 inch range in diameter. All cats have retractable claws, thus the tracks they leave often show no claw marks except in unusual circumstances. When possible, good plaster casts or cell phone photos of suspected tracks will aid greatly in their identification. We will continue to monitor and map reliable sightings.

Safety Issues

The good news is that lions generally avoid humans. People are more apt to be killed by a dog or struck by lightning than attacked by a mountain lion/cougar.

Some safety do's and don'ts can be found at the Mountain Lion Foundation website, www.mountainlion.org. Also the Eastern Cougar Network is a source of Mountain lion/cougar information. Their website is mdowling@courgarnet.org.

Here are some suggestions on what to do in the remote chance you have a mountain lion/cougar encounter:

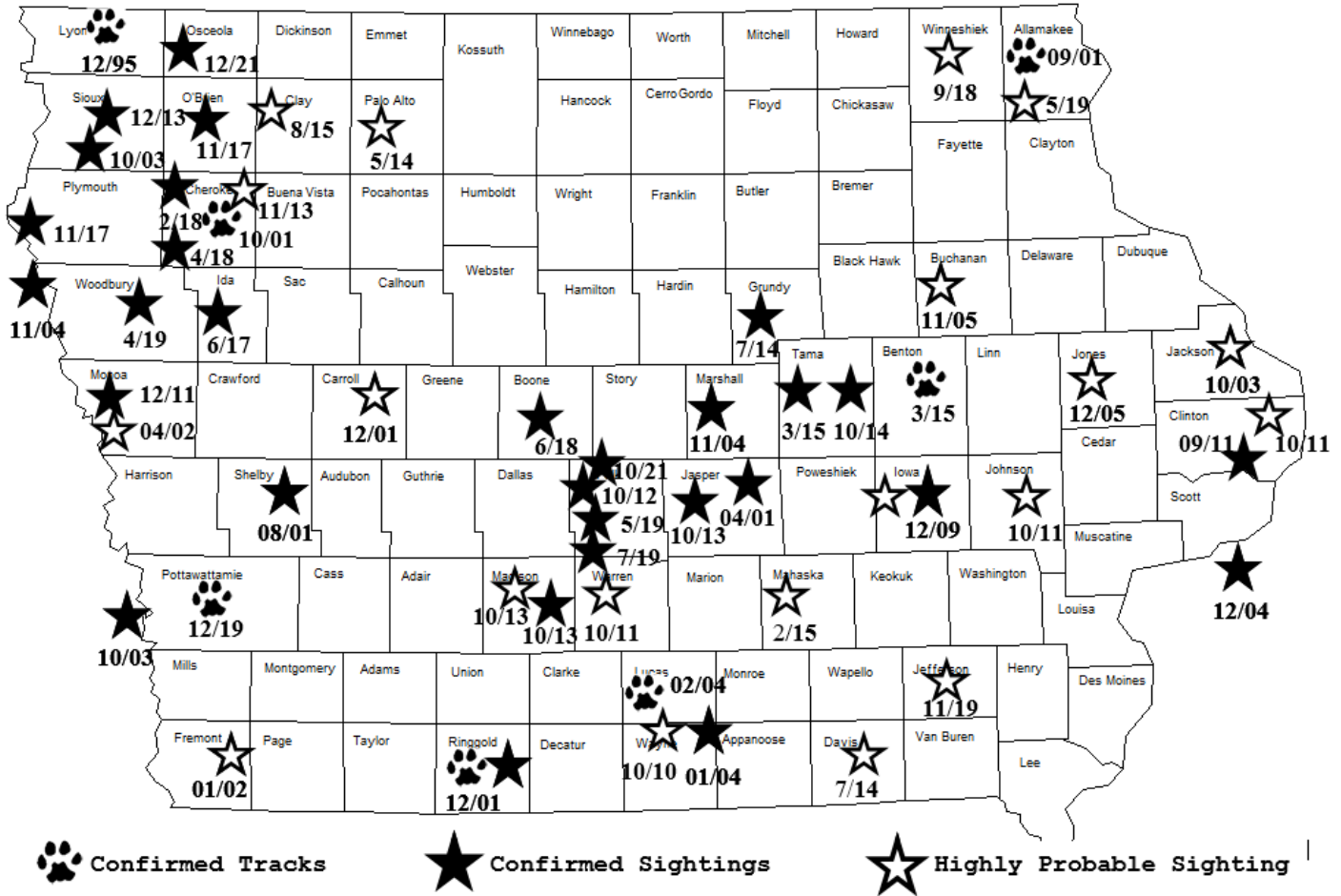
- (1) Spread your jacket, coat or shirt above you head attempt to look larger.
- (2) Hold your ground, wave, shout and don't run, as running stimulates the predator reflex (just like dogs) to pursue anything that runs away.
- (3) Maintain eye contact if you sight a lion. Lions prefer to attack from ambush and count on the element of surprise
- (4) If small children are present, or if there are several people in your group, gather everyone very close together.
Mountain lions are not predators of large groups.

In the past 110 years 65 - 75 people have been attacked by mountain lions/cougars, resulting in 63 injuries, 20 of which were fatal, and none have occurred in Iowa.

Since the first modern reports of mountain lion/cougars sightings began to increase significantly in 2001, Ron Andrews (previous Iowa DNR Furbearer Biologist, now retired 2011) gave well over 250 public informational meetings statewide regarding the status of mountain lions/cougars in Iowa and the Midwest. This was done to educate the public about Mountain Lions and help with their concerns. Information about mountain lions can be found on the Iowa DNR's website at: <http://www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/Iowas-Wildlife/Occasional-Wildlife-Visitors>.

Figures

Mountain Lion Reports 1995-2021



Numerous additional sightings have been reported, but are not mapped because of less than credible information. 10-22-2021

Figure 7.1 Confirmed locations of mountain lion reports in Iowa. Numerous additional sightings have been reported, but are not mapped if they were not confirmed.

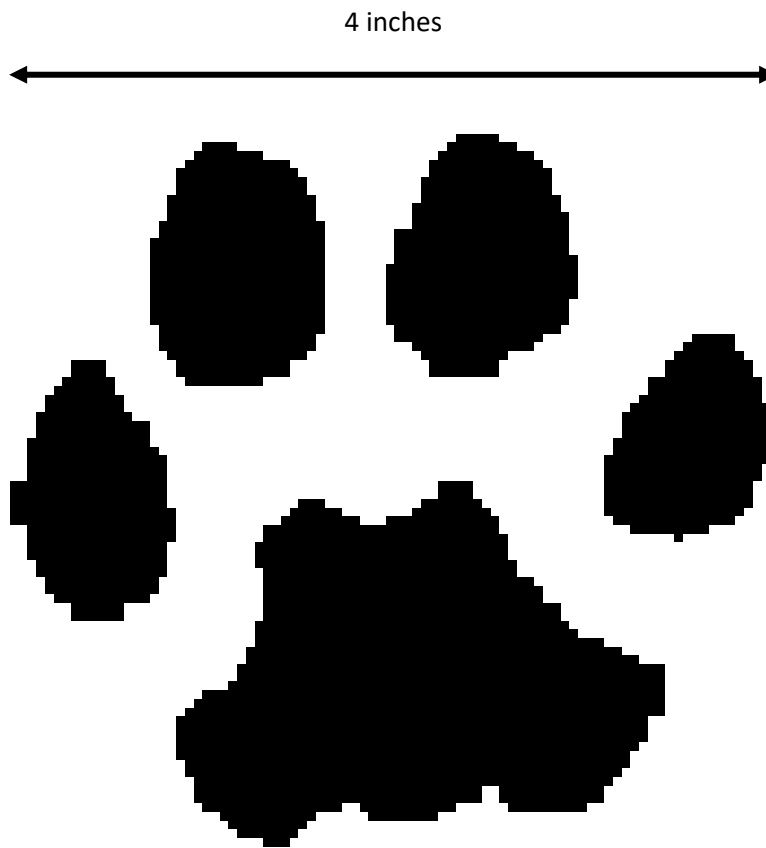


Figure 7.2 Typical Mountain Lion track

Tables

Table 7.1 Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa, 2001-2021

November	2004	Sighting	Woodbury
November	2004	Trail Camera Pictures	Marshall
December	2004	Sighting	Scott
December	2009	Shot	Iowa
September	2011	Trail Camera Pictures	Clinton
October	2012	Shot	Polk
October	2013	Trail Camera Pictures	Warren
December	2013	Shot	Sioux
July	2014	Tracks	Grundy
October	2014	Trail Camera Pictures	Tama
March	2015	Tracks	Benton
June	2017	Shot	Ida
August	2017	Trail Camera Pictures	Clay
August	2017	Trail Camera Pictures	Cherokee
December	2017	Shot	Plymouth
June	2018	Tracks	Boone
April	2018	Trail Camera Pictures	Cherokee
September	2018	Sighting	Winneshiek

April	2019	Vehicle Collision/no kill	Woodbury
May	2019	Videos/Sightings	Polk
July	2019	Sighting	Polk
May	2019	Sighting	Allamakee
November	2019	Sighting	Jefferson
December	2019	Tracks	Pottawatamie

Table 7.2 Confirmed and Probable Mountain Lions in Iowa by year, 2001-2021

1995	1
2001	5
2003	2
2004	5
2009	1
2011	1
2012	1
2013	2
2014	2
2015	1
2016	0
2017	4
2018	3
2019	6
2020	0
2021	2
Total	34

Table 7.3 Method of confirmation for Mountain Lions in Iowa, 1995-2021

Confirmation Method	No. of Mountain Lions
Sightings	8
Tracks	9
Pictures	10
Shot	5
Roadkills/Collision	3
Video(s)	1
Total	36