

## MOUNTAIN LION/COUGAR STATUS IN IOWA

1995 – 2013

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 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 they are fully wild animals dispersing from western and southwestern states. Southeast South Dakota, eastern Nebraska, northeast Kansas, Missouri, as well as Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois, have reported increased mountain lion/cougar sightings during the past 10 years.

### Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa

Figure 1 is a map showing mountain lion sightings reported to the DNR that were confirmed or highly probable confirmations (1995 – 2013). Tracks and/or sightings reported to us throughout the year are documented as confirmed or unconfirmed after investigating the evidence. This past year

(2013), the Iowa DNR confirmed two mountain lion reports (Table 1). One mountain lion was captured on game cameras multiple times in Warren County, while the second mountain lion was shot in early December in Sioux County. Table 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 camera pictures, and sightings (Table 3).

It is important to note that an average of 2 to 4 sightings per week is 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 origin of the 4 dead mountain lions have been completed and results indicate that they are of North American 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. 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.

These reports came from the following counties: Humboldt, Clay, Palo Alto, Kossuth, Emmet, and Bremer. Another report came from Cerro Gordo County of a horse being killed, but a direct report didn't come in time to examine the site or the animal, so that case is unknown for sure what caused it. 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 cases in Iowa in 2013 where we could determine for sure whether a mountain lion caused livestock damage. However, mountain lion researchers believe that white-tailed 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. We have had at least 3 reports (1 in Jasper, 1 in Allamakee, and 1 in Palo Alto County) from people who believe that they have seen mountain lion cubs. A few additional reports of mountain lion cubs have been reported this past year. At this point most DNR personnel are skeptical of those reports because of a lack of evidence when the area was investigated. All mountain lions that have been killed in Iowa in recent years have all been reproductively immature 1 to 2 year old males. 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 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 show no claw marks except in unusual circumstances. When possible, good plaster casts of suspected tracks will aid greatly in their identification. We will continue to monitor and map reliable sightings, but because there are still many mountain lion/cougar sightings that are reported with poor quality photos or video and so few tracks found, they are difficult to substantiate.

#### **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](http://www.mountainlion.org).

Also the Eastern Cougar Network is a source of Mountain lion/cougar information. Their website is [mdowling@courgarnet.org](mailto: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 your 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 66 people have been attacked by mountain lions/cougars, resulting in 61 injuries, 19 of which were fatal, and none occurred in Iowa. In 2010, the DNR published a 4 fold brochure on the Status of Mountain Lions/Cougars in Iowa for the State Fair. The brochure is available on the Iowa DNR website and we send it out whenever needed to interested individuals or the media. This brochure is updated annually.

Since the first modern reports of mountain lion/cougar 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. More mountain lion information is being put on the dnr's website and outreach efforts continue. It's important to the Iowa DNR to work with the public on this topic.

**Table 1. Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa (1995 – 2013).**

2001	Roadkill (Captive Release)	Jasper
2001	Roadkill	Shelby
2001	Tracks	Allamakee
2001	Tracks	Cherokee
2001	Sighting/Tracks	Ringgold
2003	Sighting	Pottawattamie
2003	Shot	Sioux
2004	Shot	Wayne
2004	Tracks	Lucas
2004	Sighting	Woodbury
2004	Trail Camera Pictures	Marshall
2004	Sighting	Scott
2009	Shot	Iowa
2011	Trail Camera Pictures	Clinton
2012	Shot	Polk
2013	Trail Camera Pictures	Warren
2013	Shot	Sioux

**Table 2. Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa by year (1995 – 2013).**

1995	1
2001	5
2003	2
2004	5
2009	1
2011	1
2012	1
2013	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

**Table 3. Method of confirmation for Mountain Lions in Iowa (1995 – 2012).**

<b>Confirmation Method</b>	<b>No. of Mountain Lions</b>
Sightings	4
Tracks	4
Pictures	3
Shot	5
Roadkills	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

Figure 2. Typical Mountain Lion track.

