

# The Status of Mountain Lions in the Western United States and Iowa

## Historic Status in the Western U.S.

The mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), also known as the cougar, puma, or panther, occurred from coast to coast in pre-colonized North America. Like other large predators they were persecuted due to perceived threats of harm to livestock and humans with bountied hunting persisting into the early 1900s. Mountain lions were extirpated from much of the United States by the mid-1900s when the only intact population remained in the Rocky Mountains stretching from Canada to Mexico and a disjunct population in southern Florida. Legal protection as a big game species and regulated or closed harvest in many states has led to small increase and expansion of the population which is approximately 30,000 nationwide.



Mountain lion populations and confirmed sightings in Nebraska and surrounding states. NE Game & Parks Commission.

South Dakota and Nebraska have newly colonized populations that are the most eastern in the nation (excluding Florida). Mountain lions from Wyoming colonized the Black Hills of western South Dakota in the 1990s, which is considered the only viable habitat in the state, with a population estimate of 200-300. Mountain lions also spread from South Dakota to northwest Nebraska in the 1990s where there is a current population of 70 in the Pine Ridge region and smaller populations in the Niobrara River Valley and Wildcat Hills regions. Confirmed sightings are clustered around these populations and follow the Niobrara and Platte river drainages east to the Missouri River and Iowa border. The observations extending east are often young dispersing males known to travel long distances (several hundred miles!), but this is currently being evaluated with GPS-collared animals.

## Status in Iowa

The mountain lion occurred throughout the state at a low density and the last historical record was one shot in 1867 in Appanoose County near the town of Cincinnati, IA, after which they were considered extirpated. Starting in the mid-1990s the DNR has received several reports of large “cat” like sightings which some believe are “free ranging” mountain lions. These could be escaped/released privately owned pets or 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 sightings in the past 10 years.

## Confirmed Mountain Lions in Iowa

On average there have been 1-7 confirmed or highly probable mountain lion sightings annually since 1995. Various species are often misidentified as mountain lions so only sightings validated with tracks, photos, video, or other evidence are considered confirmed or highly probable sightings. Please consult identification documents and carefully consider your sighting.

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 at this time. The Iowa DNR

has not “stocked” or introduced mountain lions into the state nor is there any consideration of doing so. There are very few reports of mountain lions during deer hunting season when 150,000+ people are partaking in activities conducive for mountain lion sightings, which likely indicates the rarity of this species.

DNA tissue samples have shown that most mountain lions seen in Iowa are dispersing juveniles from Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Tooth age data and DNA have shown most mountain lions in Iowa are young (2-3 year old) males that are from the Black Hills of South Dakota or Nebraska. The oldest male mountain lion killed in Iowa (2013) was a 4 year old male that came from Nebraska. A few female mountain lions have been documented in Iowa in recent history, but they were killed.

Currently the mountain lion has no legal status in the Iowa Code, thus they are not given any 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 as a furbearer, thus allowing the DNR to properly manage this 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 furbearer status in the Iowa Code in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

### **The Future of Mountain Lions in Iowa**

It is doubtful that the mountain lion will ever have much of a presence in Iowa. The habitat is questionable and the tolerance or intolerance of humans will dictate if they ever get a foothold in the state. Some sort of legal status in the Iowa Code will be necessary.

Please report any mountain lion sightings that can be substantiated with strong evidence (video, photo, photo of track, or DNA material) to the local DNR personnel; contact information is found at [www.iowadnr.gov](http://www.iowadnr.gov). These sightings are critical for informed management!

Sources:

Nebraska Game & Parks, South Dakota Game, Fish, & Parks, The Mountain Lion Foundation