

For more information on cougar safety:

- ▶ [WesternWildlife.org](http://WesternWildlife.org)
- ▶ [www.wdfw.wa.gov/living/cougars](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/living/cougars)

▶ If a particular cougar poses an immediate threat:

**Call 911**

▶ To file a non-emergency dangerous wildlife report, call:

**Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**

**877-933-9847 or Call 911**

### Washington Laws Prohibit Feeding Wildlife

Two Washington laws make it illegal to intentionally or otherwise leave food waste in places where it will attract large wild carnivores. The laws were designed to keep both people and wildlife safe. Violations are subject to monetary fines. (RCW 77.15.790; RCW 77.15.792)

For more copies of this cougar education guide, please contact **Western Wildlife Outreach** at [WesternWildlife.org](http://WesternWildlife.org). PO Box 147, Port Townsend, WA 98368



Western Wildlife Outreach promotes an accurate understanding of large carnivores and carnivore awareness through education and community outreach throughout the Pacific Northwest.



Project Coordinator: Lorna Smith, Western Wildlife Outreach

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# Discover Washington's COUGARS



Photo: © Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com



**Learn about cougar behavior, ecology, signs, and important safety tips.**

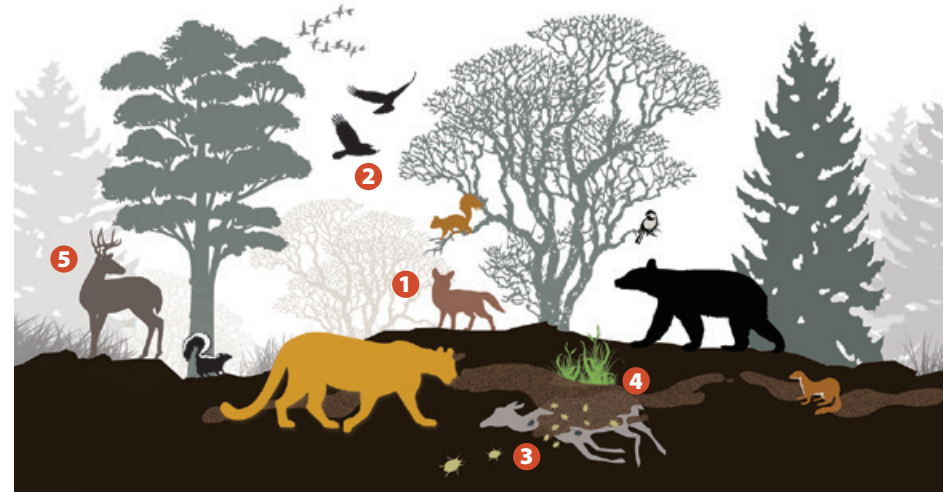



## Washington's Cougars

Cougars, also called mountain lions, panthers, or pumas, are the second largest members of the cat family in the western hemisphere (after the jaguar), and the fourth largest in the world. Long before humans arrived, this carnivore lived on the North American continent as well as right here in Washington State.

Cougars are shy, elusive, and rarely observed. But as Washington's human population grows, and more and more people are recreating outdoors, the chance of observing or encountering cougars may increase. To help you understand Washington's cougars, while living, working, and recreating in cougar country, this brochure explains the ecology and behavior of these animals, their signs, their role in the ecosystem, and how to avoid a negative interaction, keeping people, pets, and livestock safe.

### Ecological Benefits of Cougar Presence



Cougars provide food and habitat for a diversity of species, contributing to healthy ecosystems:

- 1 Carnivores such as bears, coyotes, foxes, and skunks eat once the cougar has its fill.**
- 2 Eagles, ravens, crows, jays, vultures, and other foraging birds are drawn to carcasses to feed.**
- 3 Beetles and other insects forage on the remains and even reproduce there, breaking down the carcass into soil nutrients.**
- 4 Soils are enriched which encourages vigorous growth of plants.**
- 5 Cougars keep their prey naturally wary and help keep populations healthy.**

Photos: Maurice Hornocker

## Most Frequently Asked Questions About Cougars

### 1. How many cougars live in Washington?

Cougars are solitary, and are difficult to track and study. However, WDFW has funded and partnered with local universities on 7 study areas over 15 years in Washington. Based on this research WDFW estimates the independent-aged (>18 months) cougar population size is 1,900 to 2,100 animals.

### 2. Do cougars travel alone or in groups?

Cougars are generally solitary in nature. Anytime more than 1 cougar is seen it is likely a family group or when males and females come together to breed for a short time. The average litter size is 2 and a female cares for her kittens until they are 15 to 24 months old, at which time they may be as large as or larger than their mother, giving the impression that they are not solitary.

### 3. Do cougars overpopulate?

No. Cougars self-regulate their populations, they are density-dependent meaning that the number of resident cougars on the landscape is limited by the amount of available space and prey. Male cougars are highly territorial, establishing and defending a home range free of other males so that they have exclusive access to reproductive females. A cougar's social structure translates into low population numbers of resident cougars, approximately 4 cougars per 100 square miles.

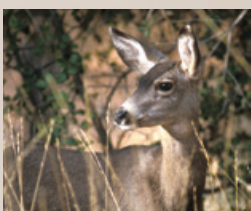
One of the highest mortality factors for cougars, other than human-caused mortality, is the killing of each other, especially males killing other males for territory, food, or a reproductive female. This is the primary reason they maintain a low population density.

### 4. Does a cougar sighting mean there are more in the area?

No. A cougar sighting does not necessarily mean that there are more cougars in an area. It might just be an animal passing through an area in search of an open territory. However, to avoid attracting cougars to human areas, do not feed deer and elk or allow them to bed nearby, as ungulates are the cougar's primary prey.

### 5. What do cougars eat?

Cougars' principal prey includes deer and elk, but they also catch prey as small as deer mice. Other prey includes coyotes, rabbits, rodents, raccoons, beaver, and infrequently, pets and livestock. Usually a cougar kills only one large animal at a time and kills one deer-sized prey every 7 to 12 days.



### 6. Do cougars reduce their prey populations?

Cougars can affect the behavior of prey populations and help to maintain elk and deer populations at healthy levels. As a species, they co-evolved with their prey over millennia. Cougars rarely cause substantial declines in prey populations. However, there are rare situations where cougars impact a prey population's growth rate, such as when prey numbers have already fallen to critically low levels. Other factors are more significant in deer and elk population declines, including habitat loss, changes in habitat quality, disease, weather, hunter harvest, road kills, and poaching.

### 7. Do cougars prey on livestock?

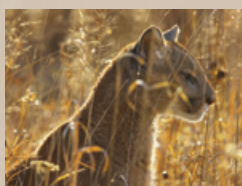
Cougars rarely attack domestic livestock. When they do, individual producers can suffer losses. Weather, disease, and birthing problems have a much greater effect on livestock than cougars. In Washington, domestic goats, sheep and fowl are the most vulnerable to predation. Changing animal husbandry practices may reduce livestock loss. Find out more about husbandry practices at: [wdfw.wa.gov](http://wdfw.wa.gov) and [westernwildlife.org](http://westernwildlife.org).

### 8. Will more hunting or removal of cougars increase safety?

Not necessarily. The death of a single cougar creates a territorial vacancy that several other cougars will attempt to occupy and hold. Research data shows that younger cougars will move into an area to occupy the vacancies. This can temporarily result in more cougars in that territory until the population re-establishes its social structure to limit the numbers as described in Question #3.

### 9. Do cougars pose a significant threat to public safety?

No. Cougar attacks on people are extremely rare. A person is one thousand times more likely to be struck by lightning than attacked by a cougar. Cougars, like any wildlife, can be dangerous; therefore people who live, work, or recreate in cougar habitat should take precautions to reduce their risk of an encounter. In Washington, there have been 2 human fatalities between 1924 and 2018. While it may seem that cougar encounters are increasing, we must realize that the human population in Washington has grown from 4.1 million in 1980 to 7.6 million in 2018. That, coupled with the growing popularity of outdoor recreation, especially high-speed sports like mountain biking and trail running, means more people are passing through cougar habitat, yet cougars are almost never seen.



## Cougar Signs

Cougars avoid people. You may never see a cougar in the wild, but cougar signs you might see include cache sites, tracks, scrapes, scratches, and scats.

### Scats

Cougars generally cover their scats, or droppings, with loose soil. Cougar scats (roughly the size of those of a large dog) are dense and segmented, blunt at both ends, and roughly one to one and one-half inches in diameter and four to six inches long. Scats may include hair, bones, and teeth from prey, and possibly grass, but usually no other vegetation. Cougars leave scats near scrapes, along trails, under overhangs, in caves, and near kills. Smaller cougars may deposit scats similar in size to those left by bobcats.



### Scrapes

Cougars make scrapes and scratches to attract a mate, or to avoid each other by marking territory. Male and female cougars make scrapes by using their hind feet to push up a mound of pine needles, leaves, dirt or other debris. Cougars place scrapes in conspicuous places along trails, at junctions in canyons, in caves, and along ridgelines. Occasionally cougars urinate or defecate on the scrape. Bobcats make similar, but smaller, scrapes.



### Scratches

Cougars make scratches on logs, trees, and on occasion, fence posts. On trees, long, deep, parallel scratches run vertically four to eight feet above the ground, rarely taking off much of the bark. All cats may scratch on occasion, but visible evidence is rare. Marks on trees are more likely made by bears.

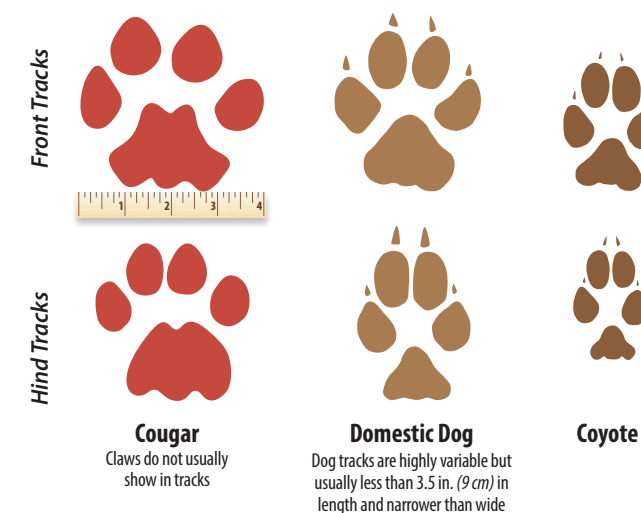


### Tracks

Cougar tracks show four toes on both the front and hind paws, and an M-shaped heel pad with two lobes at the top or leading edge, and three lobes at the base. Their retractable claws do not show in their prints except on slippery or difficult terrain where they need more traction. A cougar carries its heavy tail in a wide U-shape at a normal walk, and in snow, the lower portion of its tail can leave drag marks between each print.

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

**Note:** When observing tracks, recognize that additional factors may be needed to make conclusions about the gender and species of the animal making the track, i.e., an adult male cougar typically leaves an impression of 4 in. or greater.



### Cache Sites

After a cougar catches large prey, it drags the body to a cache site, or secluded area, where it will continue to feed over several days. You might see a drag mark near fresh kill sites. Cougars cover the remainder of their prey with leaves, pine needles, branches, or other debris to hide it from scavengers, and to prevent the carcass from spoiling. The cougar may stay close to the cache site and spend three to five days feeding. Never approach or linger near a dead or partially covered deer or elk.



**When in cougar country, always carry bear spray, and keep it accessible.**

**Learn more about cougars and cougar safety on the poster inside.**