

Life of the Cougar

Physical Characteristics

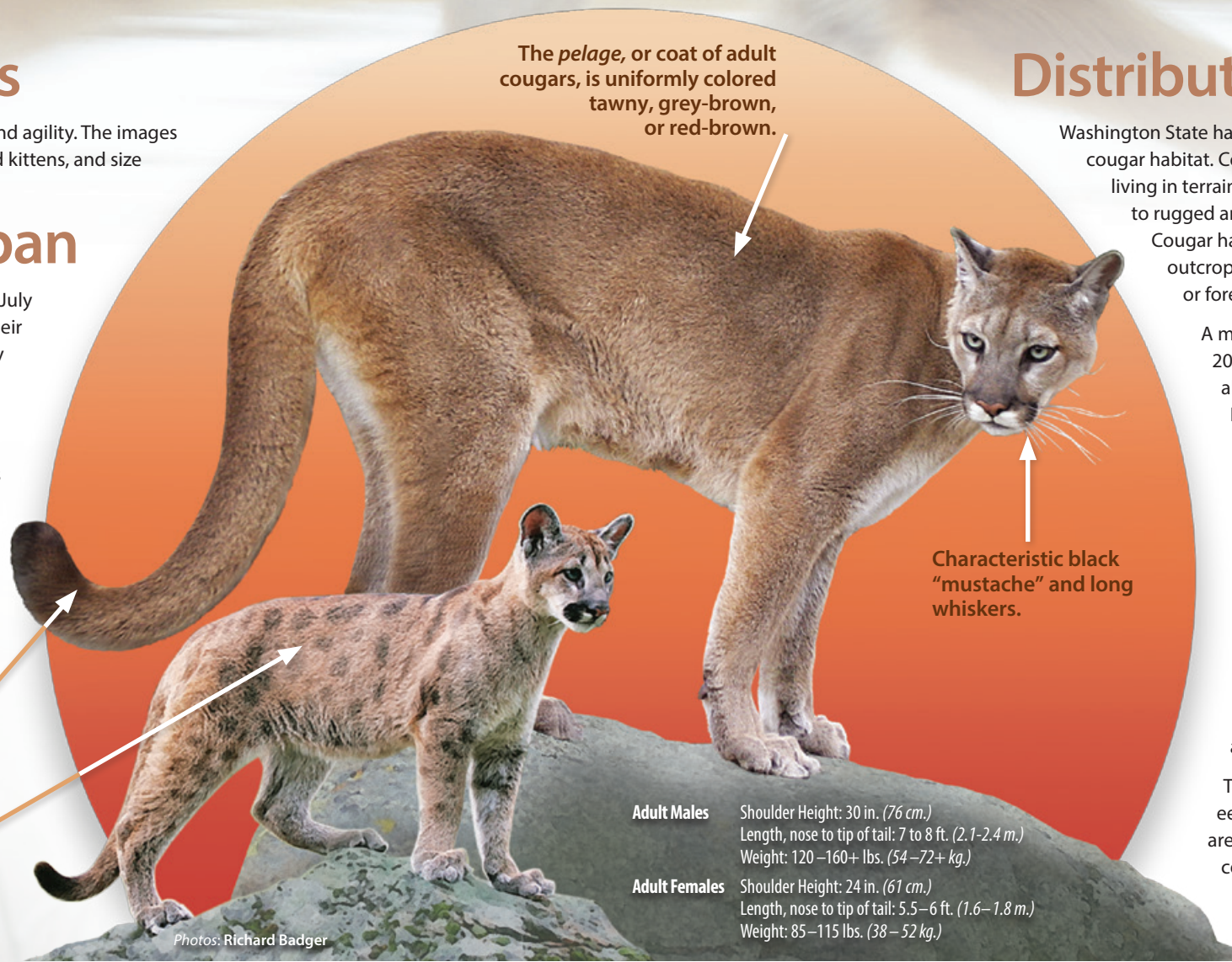
Cougars are graceful and majestic animals known for their strength and agility. The images and chart to the right show color and physical attributes of adults and kittens, and size differences between adult male and female cougars.

Reproduction & Life Span

Cougars may breed at any time of year although most births occur in July and August, after about three months' gestation. Females can have their first litter at two and one-half to three years of age, and breed roughly every two years. Breeding pairs spend only a short time together, and males play no role in the rearing of young.

A mother cougar leaves kittens for brief periods when she hunts for food, but as the kittens grow, she takes them with her as she ventures out further across her home range.

In the wild, adult male cougars typically live for 10 to 12 years while females live somewhat longer. Hunting of cougars is the main cause of death for adult cougars. Other causes of death include males fighting other males for territory, collisions with motor vehicles, poaching, injuries sustained while hunting, disease, and old age.



The pelage, or coat of adult cougars, is uniformly colored tawny, grey-brown, or red-brown.

Distribution & Range

Washington State has about 35,000 square miles of cougar habitat. Cougars are highly adaptable, living in terrain ranging from forested lowlands to rugged and remote mountainous areas. Cougar habitat includes steep canyons, rock outcroppings and boulders, dense brush, or forests.



Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife map: Cougar habitat is shown in green with major roads and urban areas in orange.

A male cougar's home range averages 100 to 200 square miles and typically encompasses all or part of 2 to 4 females' home ranges.

In Washington, female cougar ranges are usually 30 to 70 square miles in size. There can be some overlap between male ranges, and also among female ranges, but usually there are fewer than 4 cougars per 100 square miles of suitable habitat.

Communication

Cougars communicate through visual, olfactory (scent), postural signals, and vocalizations such as low guttural growls, spitting, snarls, and hissing. Cougar mothers growl or hiss when their kittens are threatened. Nursing cubs emit high-pitched, birdlike chirps and mews. Cougars also purr when together. Older cubs and adults emit whistles. Other sounds include an "ouch" call, and a yowl.

The most spectacular sound is that of a cougar caterwaul, which is an eerie sound that can resemble the cry of a human. Caterwaul sounds are made by females during mating season, especially when males are competing for the same receptive female.

Thick, long, black-tipped tail.

The tail measures about one-third of the cougar's body length and serves to counter-balance the cougar's movements as it pursues prey and travels across the landscape.

The coats of kittens have blackish-brown spots.

Spots begin to fade to dapples at about 12 to 14 weeks, and disappear completely in about 18 months.

Adult Males Shoulder Height: 30 in. (76 cm.)
Length, nose to tip of tail: 7 to 8 ft. (2.1-2.4 m.)
Weight: 120-160+ lbs. (54-72+ kg.)

Adult Females Shoulder Height: 24 in. (61 cm.)
Length, nose to tip of tail: 5.5-6 ft. (1.6-1.8 m.)
Weight: 85-115 lbs. (38-52 kg.)

Photos: Richard Badger

The First Year



Photo: © Daniel J. Cox/NaturalExposures.com

Gestation to Birth
Gestation is 92 days with 1 to 4 kittens possible, but the average is 2. The are spotted and weigh just over a pound.



Photo: Becky M. Pierce

2 weeks old
Eyes and ears open. Mother leaves for short periods of time to hunt.



Photo: Richard Badger

6 to 8 weeks old
As kittens grow, they accompany their mother on hunts.



Photo: Ken Logan

4 to 12 months
Spots on fur turn to dapples, which continue to fade. Juveniles disperse at 16 months to establish their own territories.



Adult female front track (approximately actual size: 3.5" wide)

Cougar Safety Tips

Take these precautions while living or recreating in cougar country.

Carry bear spray whenever you recreate outdoors, know how to use it, and keep it readily available. Never store bear spray in a backpack.

The sighting of a cougar does not mean that the cougar will become a threat to human safety. Cougar attacks on humans are extremely rare. Cougars are secretive and shy, and usually avoid contact with people, although they may hunt and cache deer in areas inhabited by humans.

Be a good steward at home and in the wild to help keep humans as well as cougars safe.

For more information, visit: WesternWildlife.org



| Home, Pet, and Livestock Safety | | Safety When Recreating | | If You Encounter a Cougar |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Home Safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Landscape around your home for safety. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid landscaping with plants that are palatable to deer. Deer can attract cougars to your yard. • Prune shrubs and trees around the base to keep cougars from using them as hiding spots. • Install lighting to illuminate walkways at night. ▶ Seal off open spaces under buildings and porches to prevent use as shelter. ▶ Do not make food, water, or shelter available at ANY time. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cougars use natural areas to move through populated areas into more remote habitat. If food, water, and shelter are not available cougars generally move on more quickly. ▶ Keep garbage cans tightly sealed and compost secured. ▶ Don't feed deer or other wildlife which can attract cougars. ▶ Supervise small children outdoors especially during the hours around dawn and dusk when cougars are most active. | <p>Pet Safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Keep dogs and cats indoors, especially after dusk and before dawn, to prevent them from becoming prey for cougars and other carnivores. ▶ 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. ▶ If you must keep pets outside, consider installing a cougar-resistant fence or covered enclosure. <p>Livestock Safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Whenever possible, confine livestock and other domestic animals in secured and covered enclosures or barns, especially goats, llamas, sheep, chickens and other fowl. ▶ Consider using a livestock guard animal to protect animals out to pasture. Many ranchers and livestock owners use special breeds of dogs that are well suited for protecting livestock. ▶ Install an electric fence around areas where livestock or domestic animals are kept. | <p>Hiking & Camping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The best defense is to be aware of your surroundings and look and sound human! The human voice is a great deterrent. ▶ Hike in small groups and keep children close to the group. ▶ Make enough noise to avoid surprising wildlife, especially at bends in the trail. Whistles work well. ▶ Avoid approaching dead animals, especially deer or elk; they could be cougar prey left for a later meal. ▶ Keep your camp clean and store food and garbage in double plastic bags away from sleeping areas. | <p>Mountain Biking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Riding with a with a partner or in a small group is always recommended as a safety measure against getting injured, getting lost, or avoiding conflicts with wildlife, including cougars. ▶ Use a bell or make noise as you go along the trail. ▶ Have bear spray handy in a holster or bike holder made for the product. ▶ Avoid being in low-light conditions <p>Running</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Avoid running in cougar country alone, particularly at dawn, dusk, or after dark. ▶ Avoid running with headphones or ear buds that can block out sounds around you. ▶ Make noise as you go along trails. ▶ Always stay aware of your surroundings. ▶ Have bear spray handy in a holster or harness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Cougar kittens can look similar to domestic cats. Always give a cougar or cougar kittens a very wide berth. ▶ Never approach the cougar or offer it food. ▶ Stay together in one group. ▶ Face the cougar. Talk to it firmly and hold your ground. Always leave the animal an escape route. ▶ Move slowly. Running or rapid movements may trigger an attack. ▶ Try to appear larger than the cougar. If wearing a jacket, hold it open to further increase your apparent size. If you are in a group, stand shoulder-to-shoulder to appear intimidating. ▶ If the cougar does not leave the area, be more assertive. If it shows signs of aggression (crouches with ears back, teeth bared, hissing, tail twitching, and hind feet pumping in preparation to jump), shout, wave your arms and throw anything you have available (water bottle, book, backpack) at the animal. Use bear spray at this point! ▶ If the cougar attacks, fight back. Be aggressive and stay on your feet. Spraying bear spray (EPA approved) in the cougar's face is also effective, even if the spray ends up on you and the cougar. Remember: keep bear spray accessible and review directions on its use. |

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