

DOW Insider

YOU MAY BE ATTRACTING MOUNTAIN LIONS TO YOUR PROPERTY WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING IT

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. - Colorado's abundant wildlife is often cited by residents as one of the things they like best about living here. During the mid and late 20th century, Colorado's growth brought people in closer contact with deer, elk and other wildlife species, to the delight of a new generation of wildlife watchers.

But one of these wild animals is the mountain lion, a powerful predator that while secretive by nature, has become increasingly visible in recent years. And as some Coloradans have discovered, when mountain lions follow deer and other wildlife prey, it brings them into to people's neighborhoods.

Although most people will never see a mountain lion in their lifetime, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) says the number of reports of mountain lion sightings has been gradually increasing.

"Attacks on people are rare," said Jerry Apker, a carnivore specialist with the Colorado Division of Wildlife. "But attacks on dogs and cats are becoming more common." DOW policy is very clear when it comes to lions that pose a threat to human safety. They must be destroyed.

While a spate of lion sighting in some Front Range neighborhoods have generated headlines recently, DOW officials stress that these big cats can be found almost anywhere in the state where a suitable population of deer exists.

In the past year, the DOW destroyed or moved mountain lions from Durango, Canon City, Grand Junction, Colorado Springs, Boulder, suburban Denver, and various other communities throughout the state.

In one case in the spring of 2008, a mountain lion was found hiding in a barn in eastern El Paso County about 50 miles east of the foothills. DOW officers tranquilized the cat and moved it back to the mountains. In another 2008 incident, a man walking along a rural road near New Castle was forced to shoot a lion that threatened the man and his wife. Several weeks after the first New Castle incident, a second lion in the area was killed by DOW officers after the lion killed a horse.

In July 2008, the DOW killed two lions in Durango. Both were young females that wouldn't leave people's yards in town. Their behavior was on the aggressive side so the DOW decided that killing the lions for safety reasons was the prudent choice. In Cortez, a lion jumped from a tree toward a young man on a riding lawnmower. The lion missed. The DOW used dogs to tree that cat, and it was destroyed.

"Roughly 65 percent of Colorado is classified as good mountain lion habitat," said Apker. "The only place mountain lions cannot live for an extended period of time is where there is no prey."

There are a variety of reasons for increased mountain lion sighting. One is that more humans live and recreate where mountain lions and their primary prey, mule deer, exist. Other explanations could be related to changes in lion distribution and movement patterns, increasing populations, or the simple fact that people are more apt to report sightings.

The vast majority of sightings happen very quickly and end when the lion runs away. But wildlife managers are concerned that more and more reports are coming from populated areas where mountain lions are finding plentiful food supplies.

DON'T FEED THE DEER

According to Apker, feeding deer and other wildlife draws prey animals into residential areas - which means mountain lions are likely to follow. "Sometimes people become a little too anxious to see wildlife and attempt to bring animals closer by putting out food," he said.

It is illegal to feed deer in Colorado, but sometimes people do it anyway because they are unaware of the problems it causes. "Deer are more than capable of finding plenty of natural food to eat on their own," Apker explained. "Feeding deer congregates them in back yards and puts everyone in the neighborhood at risk because deer are one of the main food sources for mountain lions. Mountain lions usually avoid people, but even with human activity nearby, mountain lions are more likely to stay in an area where deer congregate."

When a lion kills a large animal like a deer, they consume part of the meat and conceal the rest by covering it with dirt or leaves. They return again later to eat more. As long as the meat does not spoil, the lion will remain in the vicinity until it is consumed. That might be up to a week during the winter.

If you find a partially eaten carcass on your property, call your local DOW office and they will safely remove the carcass. This will prompt the lion to leave the area. In some cases, DOW officers use "negative conditioning" techniques to haze cats away from populated areas. One method is shooting the lion with bean bags or rubber buckshot. It sends a strong message to reinforce the cat's natural instinct to avoid people.

One of the tools the DOW uses to manage cougar populations is controlled hunting. Licensed hunters legally kill about 350 mountain lions a year. Another 40 or so are killed each year by car accidents, or by state or federal wildlife officers responding to calls of lions taking pets or killing livestock.

PROTECTING PETS

Like most predators, mountain lions are opportunistic. In addition to deer, mountain lions also eat raccoons, fox, rabbits, and other mammals. They do not differentiate between domestic pets and livestock that also make easy prey.

Pets that are allowed to roam free are in danger of being killed by lions, but also by coyotes or foxes. Pet owners with outside dogs are encouraged to install tops on kennels to prevent

predators from jumping in.

Although it is a common belief that cougars are only found in the back country, mountain lions have been known to visit nearly every part of Colorado from time to time, including occasional sightings on the eastern plains.

"I talk to a lot of people who ask me why the Division of Wildlife doesn't move all of the lions away from the where people live," said Apker. "Lions are destroyed if wildlife managers determine the cat is a threat to public safety, but it is impractical to try to move every mountain lion because as long as there is food to eat it is only a matter of time before another mountain lion will move in to fill the vacated territory."

Male mountain lions are territorial. Some individuals live in small territories where prey is plentiful. Other lions are constantly on the move in territories that cover hundreds of miles.

The fate of moved lions is poorly understood. There is reason to believe that some mountain lions die after they are moved. They could be killed by other lions where they are released, may return, or die trying. Colorado researchers are currently studying lion movements to learn more about the effectiveness of relocating them.

Mountain lions hunt day or night, but are most active during hours of darkness. Males will travel as much as 25 miles a night in search of food.

Lions are generally solitary. Offspring can be born during any time of the year and will stay with their mother for approximately one year before heading off on their own.

TIPS FOR PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN MOUNTAIN LION COUNTRY:

DON'T FEED WILDLIFE: By feeding deer, raccoons or other wildlife in your yard, you may inadvertently attract mountain lions, which prey upon them.

LANDSCAPE FOR SAFETY: Remove dense and/or low-lying vegetation that provides good hiding places for mountain lions, especially around children's play areas. Make it difficult for mountain lions to approach a yard unseen.

INSTALL OUTDOOR LIGHTING: Keep the house perimeter well lit at night - especially along walkways - to keep any approaching mountain lions visible.

KEEP PETS SECURE: Roaming pets are easy prey for hungry mountain lions. Outside kennels should have a secure top. Do not leave pet food outside; this can attract foxes, raccoons, rodents, and other mountain lion prey.

KEEP LIVESTOCK SECURE: Where practical, place livestock in enclosed sheds and barns at night, and be sure to secure all outbuildings.

KEEP CHILDREN SAFE: Keep a close watch on children whenever they play outdoors. Talk with children about mountain lions and teach them what to do if they encounter one.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ENCOUNTER A MOUNTAIN LION:

DO NOT APPROACH A LION: Most mountain lions try to avoid people. Human encounters are generally brief. Give them a way to escape. Mountain lions become aggressive if they feel they are cornered.

DO NOT RUN FROM A LION: Running may stimulate a mountain lion's instinct to chase. Instead, stand and face the animal. Make eye contact. If there are small children, pick them up if possible so they don't panic and run. Although it may be awkward, pick them up without

bending over or turning away from the mountain lion.

STAND TALL AND APPEAR LARGE: Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you are wearing one. Again, pick up small children. Throw stones, branches, or whatever you can reach without crouching or turning your back. Wave your arms slowly and speak firmly in a loud voice. The idea is to convince the mountain lion that you are not prey and that you may be a danger to it.

FIGHT BACK IF ATTACKED: Many potential victims have fought back successfully with rocks, sticks, binoculars, garden tools and their bare hands. Since a mountain lion usually tries to bite the head or neck, try to remain standing and face the attacking animal.

DO NOT HIKE ALONE: Go in groups, with adults supervising children.

KEEP CHILDREN CLOSE TO YOU: Observations of captive mountain lions reveal that they seem especially drawn to children because they are lower to the ground. Keep children within your sight at all times.

To learn more about mountain lions, contact your nearest DOW office or www.colorado.gov/wildlife.

For more information about Division of Wildlife go to: <http://wildlife.state.co.us>.