



# Wildlife Notes

## Cougar (*Puma concolor*)

### Identification

Cougars are known by many names, including puma, mountain lion and panther. Although the scientific name, *Puma concolor*, means 'cat of one color,' the dominant tan or light-cinnamon color of the cougar is contrasted by its white chest and underside. Black appears on the muzzle, backs of the ears and the tip of the tail.

Size and weight of cougars vary. Adult males are larger—often measuring up to eight feet in length and weighing 150–200 pounds. Adult females usually measure up to seven feet in length and average 90–110 pounds.

Cougars are easily distinguished from bobcats (except when kittens). Cougars are much larger than bobcats, and have long tails that measure approximately one-third of the overall body length.

Unless one knows where to look and for what, cougars are very difficult to spot. The more likely means to determine if a cougar is in the area is by signs. Tracks in new snow or soft ground are the most common sign, followed by scat (feces). Cougar scat is segmented, cylindrical and tapered at one or both ends. Usually 5 inches long by 1-1/2 inches in diameter, scat is often covered with hair on the surface which prevents sharp bones from scratching the intestines.



*Cougar paw. Photo by Martin Frentzel. Prints are usually 3–4 inches long with no claws showing (retractable).*

### Natural Habitat

Second only to the jaguar in size, the cougar has the largest range of any large predator in the Western Hemisphere—from the Yukon in Canada to the Andes in Argentina—and is adaptable to almost all terrain and climates.

In New Mexico cougars are found wherever abundant prey, rough terrain and adequate vegetation exist. Usually more active where humans are not present, cougars sometimes live in close proximity, but will avoid contact as much as possible.

More active at night, cougars are most active during dawn and dusk which is termed crepuscular activity.

### Diet

An excellent stalk-and-ambush predator, cougars eat a wide variety of prey, including birds, rodents, reptiles and insects—but large ungulates, such as deer, elk and bighorn sheep, are the preferred diet.

Large prey are often killed with a single bite that breaks the neck, crushes the windpipe or penetrates the skull. After feeding on a kill, the remains of the carcass are cached (hidden) for later feeding which may be repeated multiple times until all edible remains have been consumed. When adequate food sources are unavailable in the wild due to stresses such as drought, cougars may prey on livestock or domestic pets.

### Breeding

Breeding once every two years, females become fertile between 1½–2½ years of age. Although cougars are solitary, the territories of males and females often overlap—allowing the male to detect when a female is fertile.

Mating occurs over a 14-day period, during which the male and female hunt and sleep together. After this courtship, the female will depart to give birth in a den, carefully hidden between rocks or in a cave.



*Photo by Dan Williams.*

Litter sizes average three kittens. Blind at birth, kitten cubs have spotted coats until six months old. At six weeks cubs begin to eat meat provided by the mother, and by nine months cubs begin to hunt for themselves. Young cougars usually remain with the mother until mature at two years, when they separate to establish a new territory.



Cougar nursing kittens. Photo by Don McCarter.

## Hunting

Cougars may be hunted in New Mexico only on designated management zones, where harvest quotas have been established to ensure healthy and sustainable populations. A valid license and Cougar Identification Course certification are required.

For hunting rules and information, visit online: [www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us) or toll-free: 1-888-248-6866.

## Conservation

Seeing a female cougar alone does not mean she is without dependent kittens.

- 75% of adult females may have dependent young—since approximately 50% give birth each year, while another 25% have dependent kittens from the previous year.
- 4% of orphaned kittens under six months of age survive, compared to 66% of kittens under six months with the care of the mother.
- 71% of orphaned kittens over six months of age survive, compared to 95% of kittens over six months with the care of the mother.

**New Mexico Department of Game and Fish**  
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**Cougar Emergency**  
**(505) 827-9376**  
 Anywhere in New Mexico

# Be Cougar Smart

## To prevent conflicts

Enjoy the outdoors together. Solitary individuals and children are more vulnerable.

Hold young children by the hand or have them walk between two adults.

Avoid activity at dawn or dusk. This is when cougars hunt more often.

Carry a deterrent, such as a walking stick or pepper spray.

Leash pets. Free-running pets can trigger a cougar's hunt response.

Stay away from kitten cubs.

## If you have a cougar encounter

Stop. Remain calm. Do not run.

Face the cougar, but do not make eye contact.

Stand tall and appear large — open your jacket or lift a backpack or bike overhead.

Back away slowly. Never run from a cougar.

If a cougar approaches, throw rocks and speak loudly.

It's unlikely, but if a cougar attacks, fight back aggressively.

**Be Cougar Smart** logo, **Conservation Game Zone** logo, **Wildlife Restoration** logo

[www.wildlife.state.nm.us](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us)

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*Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations*