



## Mountain Lion

*Felis concolor* may be the “cat of one color”, but it is believed to be listed in dictionaries under more names than any other animal in the world: cougar, puma, catamount, panther, painter...

Mountain lions are plain-colored—pale brown to tawny; white chin, upper lip, chest, & belly; black or dark brown on sides of muzzle & backs of ears; brown/black on tip of tail. The average male and average female weigh between 110-180 and 80-130 pounds respectively. From nose to tip of the tail, the average male measures 6-8 feet, and the average female measures 5-7 feet. Mountain lions’ heads are small in proportion to their bodies.

Historically, these cats once had the largest range of all land mammals in the Western Hemisphere. Currently in North America, they occupy some areas in the 12 western states and British Columbia & Alberta, Canada. A small population also resides in southern Florida. They are very adaptable and may live in mountains, forests, swamps, or deserts. The two most important habitat elements are 1) finding cover for protection & for stalking; and 2) living near a large prey base (e.g., good deer habitat). Dens usually consist of boulder piles, rock overhangs, or dense thickets. Their primary purpose is to provide protection from predators, rain, and sun.

They are primarily solitary animals. Territories may be anywhere between 8-500 square miles. Male territories do not overlap, but a female’s territory may be located within a male’s and overlap with other females’ territories. A male and female will come together during the breeding season and may remain together for 3 days to 2 weeks.

Mountain lions are ambush predators. Prey is usually killed from a bite to the back of the neck. Excellent vision, including great depth perception and precise distance judging, enables both daytime & nighttime hunting. Hearing is also important for hunting, and most cats are great at using this sense to detect prey. Their favorite prey is mule deer or white-tailed deer, depending upon location. They will also eat porcupine, beaver, small rodents, rabbits & hares, raccoon, birds, wild hog, livestock, and grass (which may serve medicinal purposes).

Mountain lions have many different calls including screams, hisses, growls, and whistles. Mothers and their young seem to communicate through licking, rubbing, & vocalizations. They are the largest cat that purrs. “Scrapes”—piles of material, such as dirt—are kicked up with the hind feet and are used by males to mark their

territories, another form of communication.

Sexual maturity is usually reached around 2 years of age. Both males and females appear to be polygamous. Breeding occurs throughout the year, but most cubs are born during summer. The gestation period lasts between 82-98 days. A female typically gives birth every other year.

Litters may contain between 1-6 cubs; the average is 2-3. Eyes and ears are open and cubs are able to walk after 2 weeks. They are weaned after 2-3 months. At four months old, eye color begins to change from light blue to golden brown. After about 6 months, cubs begin to lose the spots from their coats. The mother is the only parent who cares for the cubs and tends to stay with them for 1½ to 2 years after their birth.

The young are the most vulnerable to predation by coyotes, golden eagles, and sometimes other mountain lions. Humans are also dangerous mountain lion predators. In captivity, mountain lions may live up to 21 years old. But in the wild, where conditions are much harsher, they tend to live only about half as long—a 10-year-old is considered an old cat.

Human persecution and decreases in prey populations, such as white-tailed deer, have been the primary cause of the decline or extirpation of the mountain lion throughout much of its original habitat. Loss & fragmentation of habitat and collisions with vehicles are some other threats the mountain lion faces. Although full protection is given in 24 states and provinces, the hunting of mountain lions is still legal in many states.