



Risk of a Cougar Attack is Low

Cougars typically avoid people. Nationwide, between 1890 and 2008, 18 fatalities and fewer than 100 nonfatalities occurred from cougar attacks. In New Mexico, two people have been killed by cougars since 1890. The risk of a fatal attack is tiny—a 1 in 1.2 billion chance per year. The common sense precautions offered here can help prevent negative encounters with cougars.

Cougar Interactions

If you encounter a cougar, give the animal a chance to move away. In most human-cougar meetings, the cougar will retreat. If approached by a cougar, watch the cougar (focus on his feet), yell, show your teeth, move backwards slowly, throw rocks or sticks (do not bend down or crouch), and raise your arms overhead to appear large. If you are wearing a jacket, raise the corners over your head to appear even larger. Do not turn your back, and never run away. If attacked, be aggressive, fight back, and do not give up. Use cameras, binoculars, walking sticks, or whatever is at hand to defend yourself.



WildEarth Guardians & Animal Protection of New Mexico

For more information or to report sightings
or encounters, contact:

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New Mexico Cares about Cougars



Cougar Natural History

About Cougars

Cougars (*Puma concolor*), also known as pumas and mountain lions, are the second largest cat in North America, behind jaguars. Males weigh between 110 and 180 pounds and are 6 to 8 feet long from nose to tip of tail, while females weigh between 80 to 130 pounds and stretch from 5 to 7 feet. Cougars' tails are about one-third of their body length, unlike bobcats or lynx, which have short tails. Usually active at dawn and dusk, cougars occur in low densities because their mobile food supply—usually deer—are patchily distributed across arid landscapes. Cougars stalk and ambush their quarry. They are obligate carnivores, meaning that they require meat to survive. Cougars cache carcasses (with tree litter, grass, or snow) so that scavengers (e.g., coyotes or magpies) cannot easily detect a free meal.

Cougars maintain territories called home ranges. If the occupant of a home range is removed or killed, the vacancy will likely attract a young, dispersing cougar. Although females' home ranges may overlap, males' do not. The size of a home range is dependent upon food density, landscape features, and the seasons. On average, a male's territory is 100 square miles, a female's, 30. Males generally do not tolerate other cats. Strife between cougars, usually because of territorial conflicts, contributes to mortalities.



Richard Badger



Important Ecosystem Actors

Large carnivores in ecosystems contribute to the richness and complexity of animal life and indirectly to ecosystem function itself. Cougars adapt prey populations to the environment. In one recent study where cougars were absent, biologists argue that a desert riparian ecosystem collapsed because of overgrazing by deer. As a result, the numbers of plants and animals in that ecosystem declined. In an adjacent area, where cougars were present, the stream was in better health, and the numbers of plant and animal species were far greater.

Females and Kittens

Females become sexually mature at about 24 months. On average, they give birth to three kittens every other year. Most females produce kittens in the summer and fall months when food is plentiful, although they can have their kittens year round. As their sole provider, the females teach their kittens survival skills for up to two years. Independent from their mothers between 10 and 24 months, sub-adult cougars attempt to stake out their own home ranges. While searching for a territory, young cougars often sustain mortalities or come into conflicts with humans or pets.

Common Sense Tips in Cougar Country

- In an emergency (such as a cougar threatening human safety or pets), call 911 or New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, 505-476-8000.
- Cougars usually avoid people. To prevent conflicts, trail runners, hikers, and mountain bikers should run/ride with others. Solitary individuals, especially young people, are the most vulnerable. While hiking, hold young children by the hand or have them walk between two adults. Adults should also supervise children's outside play.
- Avoid outside activity at dawn or dusk, the time when most cougars are most mobile because their primary prey, deer, are about.
- Carry a deterrent. A walking stick or pepper spray can be helpful.
- Leash or confine pets. Unleashed and running pets may trigger a hunting response from cougars or other predators. At night, secure pets either indoors or in kennels with secure tops. Domestic cats should always be kept indoors.
- Eliminate hiding places and build barriers. Cougars ambush their prey, so removing dense vegetation or large rocks around your home reduces the chance of attack. Fence children's play areas.
- Do not attract deer or other prey species to your home. Cougars follow their prey. To avoid attracting prey species into your yard, plant native foliage. Deer-proof fences 6 to 8 feet high will deter deer and cougars.
- Install lighting in areas where people and pets move at dark.

