

LIVING

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Tracking a legend

Cougars were supposed to be extinct in Ontario, but an MNR scientist is now mapping their territory

In November 2005, I received the following email. "I am an avid hunter who spends many days in the bush, locally as well as in Northern Ontario. Two weeks ago, while coming down Stony Lake Road (County Road 6) just after dawn, I encountered the strangest sight. It made me feel like I was in the wrong country. About 200 yards ahead of my truck, I sighted a large animal crossing the road with a body the size of a large deer. However, it had short legs and a squat rear end. As I got closer, a second animal came from the bush, only this time I was right beside it. A huge cat came onto the shoulder of the road but turned back from my stopped vehicle as I was in its

way. It went behind the first available cover and sat and stared at me. I looked back in awe, thinking that I was in the wrong place to view such a magnificent sight so close to home."

This was not the first such sighting in the Peterborough area. Charles Fothergill, a businessman, politician and Ontario's



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first ornithologist, spoke of the cougar in his reports about Peterborough County in the early 1800s. He said, "...a most formidable animal, I have not known of more than three or four instances (sightings) within any our settlements during the past 15 years." A number of sightings were also documented in the 1980s, including an animal seen by a Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) biologist and a long-time trapper in Douro Township. On Thanksgiving morning of 2002, a very large, long-tailed feline was videotaped walking along the edge of a farm field near Rice Lake. The big cat paused, raised its tail, and sprayed the vegetation in behavior typical of a cat marking its territory. Then, just three weeks ago, two people in the Willowcreek Plaza area near Television Road reported seeing a cougar in the area behind Morello's Independent Grocer. MNR officials arrived but were unable to confirm the identity of the animal.

Since 2002, close to 1,000 sightings similar to these have been reported to the MNR and the Ontario Puma Foundation. What is more interesting, a large percentage of these sightings have come from the counties of Peterborough, Haliburton and Kawartha Lakes. However, only a relative handful has been confirmed by photos, track marks, or DNA taken from scat (droppings) or other body parts. In fact, there has not been a cougar killed or captured in Ontario since 1884. Still, the romance and mystery attached to this incredibly elusive carnivore captures our attention more than ever before as we try to understand the nature of the cougar population that almost certainly exists in this province. As cougar sightings continue to pour in from across Ontario, Dr.



Special to The Examiner

There have been many reported sightings of cougars in this area, some confirmed by photos, tracks or DNA evidence.

Rick Rosatte, a senior MNR research scientist here in Peterborough, is hoping that a research study he has undertaken will help determine how many cougars there are in the province and what their origin is. He is attempting to substantiate their presence with photographic evidence from trail cameras and physical evidence such as hair and scat samples. This will help determine if the animals are wild North American cougars, or rather South American cougars that were once people's pets. Maps are being created to represent areas of high cougar activity. Rosatte regularly interviews people who believe they've seen a cougar. When the sighting looks promising, he sets up trail cameras that are triggered by motion and heat. A frustrating part of the job, however, is that he gets many, many false alarms, especially following media reports of a cougar in the area.

Since the white-tailed deer is the cougar's main source of food, Rosatte believes that cougars are most likely to be in the vicinity of winter deer yards, something the sightings maps might eventually bear out. A deer yard is a confined area where large numbers of deer congregate during the winter months for food and shelter. One such area is the Peterborough Crown Game Reserve north of Stony Lake. With at least 500,000 deer in Ontario, there is certainly a sufficiently large prey base for cougars to survive here.

The cougar (*Puma concolor*), also known as the puma or mountain lion, is native to both North and South America. The eastern North American population, however, is thought to have been completely

wiped out by the 1940s, mostly as a result of hunting. Nevertheless, field evidence – scat, tracks, videos, sightings, and carcasses – over the past three decades suggests that cougars are once again present in their eastern North American range, from New Brunswick to Ontario and south to Arkansas. Within the next few years, Rosatte's research should provide a fairly accurate estimate of the size of the Ontario cougar population.

The origin of these eastern North American animals is still largely a mystery. As for the Ontario population, Rosatte believes there are six possible explanations. They could be animals that have escaped from captivity, or animals that have been raised in captivity and intentionally released into the wild. This is a distinct possibility since there are many documented cases to support this view. They could also be remnants of a native Ontario cougar population. Although unlikely, this might be possible because large expanses of wilderness still exist in northern Ontario. They may also be animals that have dispersed into Ontario from Michigan, Manitoba, Quebec, and New York. There is also the unlikely possibility that the sightings are of animals that are not cougars at all. Finally, some combination of the above could explain the sightings.

Recent molecular evidence suggests that six subspecies of cougar exist in the Americas, five from South America but only one for North America (*Puma concolor cougar*). Genetic studies on cougar samples such as hair and scat would therefore determine

whether Ontario's cougars originated in North or South America. Many of the cougars that are sold as pets originate in South America.

From its muscular saunter to its sharp, otherworldly growl, the cougar is an amazing animal. Ontario cougars may be brownish-gray, reddish-brown or even light beige. The animal's undersides are buff white, while the back of its rounded ears and the tip of its long tail are black. Males, from nose to tip of tail, can measure up to six and a half feet long and weigh as much as 200 pounds. Females are somewhat smaller. The cougar's sharp teeth allow it to rip off large chunks of meat, which it swallows whole. It may breed at any time of the year, but late winter or spring is most common.

Male cougars have a range as large as 1,000 square kilometres which, to give some perspective, is about one-seventh of all of Algonquin Park. This can make it difficult to relocate an animal after it has been sighted. The cougar could be dozens of kilometres away by the next day. Females may have a range of 65 to 500 square kilometres.

As for their tracks, cougars, like all cats and dogs, have four toes that show. The tracks measure about three inches long by 3.5 inches wide. A walking cougar has a stride of 20 inches to 32 inches, double that of a wolf. When there is a lot of snow, a cougar will show tail drag marks on either side of the tracks and, due to its weight, a cougar track will be deep.

Even though the exact nature of Ontario's cougar population is still unclear, the animal is listed as "endangered" by the MNR. Feder-

ally (Canadian Wildlife Service), they are listed as "data deficient" by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, since there are insufficient data to assign a status to the eastern population of cougars.

In 2002, the Ontario Puma Foundation (OPF) was established. One of its objectives is to support projects involving the recovery of the puma (cougar) and its habitat in Ontario. The foundation also serves to educate and inform people about Ontario's species at risk and, in particular, the cougar. If you should be lucky enough to see a cougar yourself, you can report the sighting by going to the OPF website and filling in the digital data form. The web address is www.ontariopuma.ca <<http://www.ontariopuma.ca>> You should also contact Rick Rosatte at rick.rosatte@ontario.ca <[mail-to:rick.rosatte@ontario.ca](mailto:rick.rosatte@ontario.ca)>

Cougars do not present a statistically significant risk to humans. In fact, there have only been two recent cougar encounters in the entire province, the latest in Whitefish Bay in November 2006. If, by chance, you should ever encounter an animal, the best advice is to make yourself appear as large as possible.

Like all top predators, cougars play a very important role in natural ecosystems. They maintain a check on their main food source, the white-tailed deer. In some areas of eastern North America, deer numbers have become so high that the animal is considered a pest. More than anything, however, the presence of cougars in Ontario simply satisfies a romantic yearning to know that despite man's insidious influence on the natural world, iconic wild creatures and wild places continue to exist.

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Visit his website and see past columns at www.drewmonkman.com.

Ontario Nature contest for young writers

Ontario Nature magazine is looking for essays from grade 7 and 8 pupils on how they are helping the environment.

The magazine's 2009 writing contest is open to grade 7 and 8 pupils only. Three winning entries chosen by a panel of judges will be published in ON Nature magazine. The winners will also get prizes courtesy of Mountain Equipment Co-op and be honoured at Ontario Nature's annual general meeting May 30 at the Bruce County Museum, Southampton.

For additional information go to

http://www.ontarionature.org/events/youth_writing_contest.html