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BIG Cat Tales

By Scott Van Arsdale

Investigating cougar sightings in New York

The caller said he could see the cougar--it was lying down at the edge of his lawn by the woods. I immediately began the half-hour drive to the site, but by the time I arrived, the animal was gone.

Once the most widespread of land mammals in the New World, cougars roamed the continent from Patagonia in South America to the 48 continental United States to southern Canada. However, all that changed with land settlement. Settlers considered predators such as cougars competitors, and shot them

whenever possible. Some areas had lucrative bounties for dead cougars. By the mid-1800s, these cats were very rare in New York. The state's last known wild cougar was killed in 1894. A few years later, the cougar was gone from the entire eastern United States, except for a small remnant population in Florida.



Hard evidence supporting a breeding cougar population in New York is lacking, according to DEC biologists.

The phone call about the “back-yard cougar” was one of several cougar sighting reports DEC received in August 1995 from a small area near Oneonta. I was hoping to find irrefutable evidence of exactly what animal was leading to these reports. To me, the most intriguing point was the clustered nature of the sightings. It led me to question DEC’s standard response of “mistaken identity.” Perhaps we were being too hasty in dismissing such reports. I decided to personally visit sites where there was a good chance of finding physical evidence proving whether the animal seen was, in fact, a cougar.

I also decided to start a regional log of cougar sighting reports. A year later, my log contained 44 reports of cougar sightings in east-central New York. Although wildlife staff visited many of the locations where cougars had been reported, we couldn’t find any physical evidence (hair, tracks

or scat) proving the presence of a single wild cougar. So how can an animal officially considered “extirpated” in New York State generate so many sighting reports? And if people aren’t seeing cougars, what are they seeing?

Maybe they really had spotted a cougar.

I decided to start a regional log of cougar sighting reports.

While looking for physical proof of cougars in the region, we have found that people often mistake other animals for cougars. Dogs, coyotes, bobcats, and a surprising number of house cats have all been the subject of reported cougar sightings. This isn’t unusual. When seen fleetingly or from a distance, these animals may appear to look like a cougar. In December 2006 we received a call from a man in Greene County. He and his family saw what he was sure was a cougar in their yard several times, and he had managed to take a

few photographs of the animal at a distance. I asked the man to e-mail the photographs to me. The cat depicted in the photo was similar in color to a cougar, but to a trained eye was almost certainly a house cat. To be sure of my assessment, I

visited the site of the incident and placed a life-sized cardboard cutout of a cougar on the spot where the cat was photographed. Then I took several pictures from where the original photographer was standing. The new photographs clearly showed the cat was much too small to be a cougar and was indeed a house cat. We also measured objects that were near the cat in the photographs, which further proved that the animal was not a cougar.

Wildlife agencies in other states corroborate our experience: even in

areas with known cougar populations, it is common for people to mistake other animals for cougars. Upon closer inspection of evidence such as tracks, scat, photos or videos, we can sometimes tell exactly what kind of animal had been in an area when the sighting was reported. Unfortunately, most reported cougar sightings lack good physical evidence, making it impossible to positively identify the animal. This can cause hard feelings, as many people are convinced they have seen a cougar and feel frustrated that wildlife officials don't believe them. A few individuals question wildlife officials' credibility, suggesting that they are covering up a wildlife reintroduction or "stocking" program, which may discourage others from reporting sightings. With so many clear cases of mis-

taken identity, it would be irresponsible for biologists to consider a sighting without physical evidence as proof of existence. Although a sighting is a key component of determining presence or absence, physical evidence verifying the identification is also critical.

While we have not found definitive evidence of cougars in east-central New York, a DEC wildlife biologist investigated a deer carcass in the Adirondacks in 1993, and concluded it was probably killed by a cougar. In 1997, DNA testing confirmed that scat found in Massachusetts was from a cougar. Similarly, DNA testing confirmed the presence of cougar hair in four instances in the Province of Quebec and two in New Brunswick.

Assuming these incidents of free-roaming cougars are true, does

this mean there is a wild breeding population of these big cats in northeastern North America? Not necessarily. It's more likely that these animals were accidental escapees or illegally released individuals that managed to survive for a time in the wild. Under strict guidelines spelled out in permits issued by DEC, people can possess live cougars for scientific, educational or exhibition purposes. However, it is illegal for cougars to be kept as pets. Despite this deterrent, a number of individuals illegally bring these cats into New York from other states. While cute and manageable as kittens, adults weigh more than 120 pounds and are expensive to keep, consuming large amounts of fresh meat. These captive cats can be unpredictable, posing a danger to their owners. It's not hard to imagine



Bill Banzaszewski

Cougars are efficient predators. They are excellent at stalking and running down prey such as white-tailed deer.

someone who illegally possesses such a dangerous animal to try to solve their problem by releasing the cat. Nor is it difficult to imagine such a strong animal escaping confinement.

In 1993, a hunter shot a juvenile cougar in Saratoga County, mistaking the animal for a bobcat. The animal's poor condition and other factors led DEC Wildlife Pathologist Ward Stone to conclude the young cougar was a recently escaped or released captive. DNA testing conducted on tissues from the animal supported the findings. The tests showed the cougar was closely related to cougars from South America, a source of some of the captive cougars in the U.S.

There have been other cases of free-roaming cougars in New York with captive origins. In fact, information I received a few years after beginning my log indicated that just before the sightings occurred in Oneonta, a cougar had indeed escaped from captivity in the area. Escapes don't eliminate the possibility of a wild cougar population, but it is likely that any real cougars sighted at large in

New York are previously captive animals.

Some people suggest that cougars were never extirpated from the northeast, but that a small remnant population survived in a remote area such as the Adirondacks and has spread to other areas. On the surface that may seem plausible, but scientific study doesn't support it. In 1981, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Dr. Rainer Brocke released the findings of a study (requested by DEC) to determine if the Adirondacks were suitable for the reintroduction of cougars. In that study, Dr. Brocke examined the possibility of cougar populations existing outside the known locations in the western U.S. and in Florida. Dr. Brocke noted that although genuine sightings of cougars are rare, cougar sign was quite easy to find in areas known to be occupied by cougars. Since cougar sign is not generally observed in New York, Dr. Brocke stated that this was a good indication a population does not exist.



Cougar facts:

Cougars are also called mountain lions, pumas, panthers and catamounts.

Slightly smaller than jaguars, cougars are the second largest cats in North America, with adults weighing between 80-225 pounds (average is 140 pounds), and measuring between 5-9 feet in length (including the tail).

Cougars have long, slender bodies and small, broad, round heads. Ears are short, erect and rounded. The short fur is usually tawny, more tan in the summer months and grayer in winter. The muzzle, chin and underparts are creamy white. Black appears at the tip of the tail and behind the ears. Young cougars have obvious dark spots on their flanks.

Cougars are solitary, territorial hunters. They feed on large and small mammals, and prefer deer. An adult cougar will kill about one deer per week.

A cougar's average life span is eight to ten years. ***Adult cougars have no natural enemies except man.***



These beautiful, majestic creatures remind us of our loving house cats, however, New York State reminds us that it is illegal to keep a cougar as a pet.

Since cougar sign is **not generally observed in New York State**, Dr. Brocke stated that this was a good indication that a population does not exist.

Furthermore, after comparing the Adirondacks with known cougar habitat, he concluded that a cougar reintroduction attempt would likely fail in the Adirondacks because the state's relatively high road density and human population would lead to human-induced mortality rates greater than such a cougar population could support.

Cougars have expansive home ranges. They travel great distances, and in so doing, cross and re-cross roads. Road-kills are not uncommon in cougar range, even in areas with far fewer roads and less traffic than the most remote areas of the northeast. If a cougar population existed in New York, the high road density and heavy traffic (relative to the western U.S.) would almost certainly result in road-kills. Yet road-killed cougars are unheard of in New York.

Additionally, when cougars travel, they leave tracks—lots of them. The tracks are relatively easy to spot, and in cougar country, biologists use track surveys to estimate cougar population levels. A lack of tracks means a lack of cougars. To date, no one has been able to find cougar tracks in New York.

Another clue to cougar presence is livestock predation. Out west, offending cougars are killed by ranchers, farmers or government officials. And while there are rumors of cougar attacks on livestock in New York, none have been substantiated and no carcasses of problem cougars have turned up.

While most wildlife professionals agree that it is highly unlikely a sustaining cougar population exists in New York or neighboring states, western cougar populations are spreading eastward. A few individual cats have shown up in states along the Mississippi River. Could they eventually populate New York where there are large areas of forest and plenty of deer? Maybe. But to be successful in New York, cougars would have to overcome the same factor that led to their initial demise—human-induced mortality, including the “new” threat of being hit by cars. For now, we'll continue to examine the physical evidence associated with reported cougar sightings with an open mind, one case at a time.

For more information on the eastern cougar, search “cougar” on DEC's website www.dec.ny.gov, or visit: www.fws.gov/northeast/ECougar or www.easterncougarnet.org.

Scott Van Arsdale specializes in bald eagle work in DEC's Stamford office, and is routinely called to investigate reports of cougar sightings.



An illustration of a cougar track shown at approximate life size.