



Bill Banaszewski

LONG WAY FROM HOME

—wild western cougar travels through New York

By Jenna Kerwin

Shortly before 1 a.m. on June 11, 2011, a mist began to speckle Connecticut State Trooper Tamia Tucker’s windshield. The air was cool; the sky: dark. Except for a few other cars rushing by on the Wilbur Cross Parkway, it was quiet.

Trooper Tucker was on the shoulder of the road, standing at the scene of a single-car accident. Some aspects of this

scene were routine. A car, at night, hit and killed an animal. The young, female driver wasn’t hurt. But what neither the driver nor the officer could understand was how a cougar (*yes, a cougar*) came to be crossing Route 15 in Milford, Connecticut.

*Mountain lion, catamount, puma, panther...*To those living in the eastern



Connecticut State Police

half of the United States, cougars are the stuff of legend. The big cats once roamed the eastern U.S., but near the beginning of the twentieth century, cougars were extirpated from New York, as well as the rest of the northeastern and midwestern states. Except for a population that exists in a few protected areas in Florida, cougars are usually only found west of the Mississippi River, from southern Canada down through Latin America to Patagonia.

Many people, however, believe that maybe, just maybe, the elusive puma isn't really gone from the east. Reports of cougar sightings regularly pop up from the woods of Maine to as far down as the swamps of Louisiana. Often people mistake other animals like coyotes, dogs, bobcats and even housecats for cougars—especially from a distance. When so many people claim to see cougars, popular belief becomes that there must be a self-sustaining population of the wild cat somewhere in the area. Yet consistently there seems to be little actual evidence to back up these sightings.

As DEC Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) Louis Gerrain and DEC Biologist Kevin Hynes both explain, without definitive evidence, such as scat, blood, hair, tracks, or roadkills, there just isn't enough proof to say there are cougars in New York, or anywhere else in the northeast. In fact, the last confirmed mountain lion sighting in New York was a 7.5-pound kitten shot in Saratoga County in December of 1993. A hunter mistook the animal for a bobcat. However, even this wasn't a wild cougar. Lesions on the animal's footpads suggested captivity on a rough, concrete surface, and DNA analysis determined that it shared genes with a South American subspecies; all indicating that it was most likely an escaped or released captive.

Having responded to similar cases of mistaken identity, Paul Rego was certainly



surprised when he learned of a wild cougar killed in Milford. A wildlife biologist with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), Rego recalled, "That sort of thing takes a while to really sink in."

To learn about the animal's health and origins, a necropsy (animal autopsy) was performed on the Connecticut Cougar at DEEP's Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area in Burlington. Performed by Veterinary Pathologist Tabitha Viner from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the procedure revealed the

cougar was a two- to four-year-old, 140-pound male with an empty stomach. The animal showed none of the usual evidence of captivity: wear from a collar, being declawed, neutered, or having a microchip; instead, all signs pointed to the animal being wild.

But how could it be? Surely there wasn't a breeding population of cougars in the eastern United States, or was there? If there was, biologists would have seen scat, hair, tracks, roadkills, or obvious attacks on other animals; not to mention a trail cam would have picked up an image along

the way. So where did this solitary young male cougar come from?

As the story made headlines across the northeast, Kevin Hynes, ECO Gerrain and retired DEC Colonel Dave Eggleston took a collective breath. Just six months earlier, they and other DEC employees had been involved in an investigation of a cougar sighting in Lake George. In this case, it was actually Colonel Eggleston's wife that had spotted the large cat. It had been passing through their backyard while she washed dishes on the evening of December 16, 2010.

At that time, ECO Gerrain (a self-proclaimed cougar skeptic) was used to getting reports of cougar sightings in his Adirondack region. Most of these sightings turned out to be cases of mistaken identity; others just didn't have enough concrete evidence to make a specific identification. So when Eggleston called to report a cougar in his backyard, Gerrain was more than a little shocked. It was especially shocking because ECO Gerrain lived nearby!

When Colonel Eggleston and ECO Gerrain looked around the yard the next morning, they were astounded to find near-perfect cougar tracks in the compacted snow. ECO Gerrain remembers thinking, "It would be really nice to find a hair or something like that." Sure enough, as they followed the tracks, they discovered an area where the cat had bedded the previous night—only 75 yards from Eggleston's home.

The two took several photographs of the tracks and collected hairs from the area and sent them to Hynes in DEC's Wildlife Pathology Unit. The evidence was, by all accounts, the most definitive he had ever received. With the hairs under the microscope, Hynes could tell they were definitely from a cat but he could not definitively determine the species. So Hynes initially sent the hairs to the Arizona School of Natural



Resources for DNA analysis to determine species and later, after the cougar was hit in Connecticut, to the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station in Missoula, Montana where they were confirmed as being from a cougar.

Thinking back on this event, Hynes, Gerrain and Eggleston speculated: Was it possible this was the same cat hit by

the car six months later in Connecticut? The timing certainly seemed possible. But if the Lake George cougar wasn't an escaped captive, where did it live before it was seen in Lake George? And how could a mountain lion pass through New York virtually unseen except by Mrs. Eggleston?

Photo courtesy of Leu and Krystal Vang



Trail cam photo of cougar, Clark County, WI

Meanwhile, halfway across the U.S. in Wisconsin, Mammalian Ecologist Adrian Wydeven is familiar with cougar sightings. Though rare, cougars occasionally do make their way into Wisconsin from nearby South Dakota, two states west. So it wasn't surprising when Wydeven was called to investigate cougar tracks in several counties in January and February, 2010.

In Dunn County, a fawn was killed by a cougar in a farmer's cornfield in December 2009. Trail camera images captured the cat feeding on its kill. In total, via trail cam pictures, tracks and samples, Wydeven and others had tracked an unknown cougar's movements through several counties, including Saint Croix where the cougar got its moniker in Wisconsin: the Saint Croix Cougar. On February 15th, in Cable, the trail went cold as the cougar tracks mixed with a heavily trodden deer yard, but tracks picked up again on February 27th in the same location. Two trail cameras also captured images of what looked to be the same cat in Clark County in mid-January 2010. Hairs and scat collected from locations in Minnesota and Wisconsin were examined at the lab in Missoula.

DNA results from the lab linked the cougar to one that had been seen months earlier in Champlin, Minnesota by police on December 5, 2009. Further DNA tests revealed the Saint Croix Cougar hailed

from a population in the Black Hills of western South Dakota—an expansive area of mountainous terrain of grasslands, forests, canyons and lakes stretching 125 miles long and 65 miles wide across South Dakota and Wyoming. Cougars from the Black Hills have been known to travel into nearby states; since 2008, Wisconsin has had six individual male cougars visit the state.

When tissue samples from the Connecticut Cougar matched the same DNA structure of the Black Hills cougar population, things got interesting. The lab continued to compare the Connecticut Cougar's DNA with samples from scat, blood and hair collected at locations in Minnesota and Wisconsin where their cougar was tracked. The results? Samples exactly matched the cougar that passed through Lake George, and the one that was killed on the Wilbur Cross Parkway that early June morning. They were all the same animal.

This means that the cougar first spotted in Champlin, Minnesota, traveled a distance of more than 1,055 miles to Milford—a new straight-line record for observed cougar movement. Considering it originated from a cougar population in the Black Hills, this cougar likely traveled a distance of nearly 1,800 miles!

As the investigation continued, DNA analysis also confirmed that a scat sample collected in Greenwich, CT in early June belonged to a mountain lion, but the sample was too degraded to make an exact match with the dead cougar. Given the location and timing, however, it is certainly quite likely that these two incidents involved the same animal.

When Wydeven heard of the connection between the cat that had disappeared from Wisconsin earlier and the one killed in Connecticut some months later, he couldn't believe it. "I didn't in my wildest dreams think the cougar got all the way to Connecticut," he said. Indeed: few

imagined it could make that journey.

What could possess a perfectly healthy, 140-pound male cougar to travel more than a thousand miles?

Most likely it's as simple as biology. Young male cougars often travel long distances in search of mates, but they rarely travel more than a few hundred miles. This young male was probably doing just that. Interesting to note is that female cougars travel much shorter distances than do males.

So if the Connecticut Cougar traveled all the way from the Black Hills, does that mean it's possible cougars could return east? Well, maybe.

Most cougars rarely travel a fraction of the distance the Connecticut Cougar did. Paul Rego reiterated that most wandering cougars are males. Since you'd need both male and female cougars, Rego adds, "I believe it will be a long time for a breeding population to reach the Mississippi River, and even longer before cougars spread east from there." Adrian Wydeven agrees. As he put it, local cougar habitat would have to be saturated before female cougars would begin to travel very far.

The Connecticut Cougar's journey through the Midwest and Lake George has rekindled northeasterners' fascination with this almost mythical beast. Sightings of cougars in New York and New England will be reported as they have been for decades; biologists will continue to follow these leads and look for evidence. In the end, cougars will have the last word on their future in the east.

Jenna Kerwin is the staff writer for *Conservationist*.

Editor's note: To learn more about cougars in New York, see "Big Cat Tales" in the February 2008 issue of *Conservationist*.