

California Mountain Lion



California Mountain Lion

Mountain lions are also known as pumas, cougars, or panthers. Seeing a mountain lion in the wild can be a thrilling and memorable experience, but sightings are rare due to the lion's shy and elusive nature. To provide reliable and scientifically sound information for all Californians, this brochure explains the ecology, behavior, ecosystem benefits, signs of the presence of mountain lions, and what to do in the event of an encounter. With a better understanding of their nature, people can safely coexist with mountain lions and help these animals remain an important part of California's landscape.

Important Mountain Lion Information

- ▶ **If a mountain lion has attacked a person, call 911.**
- ▶ **Report wildlife sightings or incidents** (including livestock losses) on the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) online Wildlife Incident Reporting system:
<http://apps.wildlife.ca.gov/wir>
- ▶ **Report a sick or injured mountain lion to CDFW:**
Northern California 24-hour dispatch: **916-358-1312**
Southern California 24-hour dispatch: **951-443-2944**

For more information contact CDFW during normal business hours at: **916-322-8911**. You will be routed to the CDFW regional office for your county.

If you find a kitten in good condition, please do not touch and do not disturb it. Promptly, but slowly, leave the area as there may be a mother nearby. If you find a kitten alone in poor condition or obvious distress, do not touch it and instead report it to your local CDFW Office.

For more information on mountain lion safety visit the CDFW website: wildlife.ca.gov/Keep-Me-Wild/Lion

California Laws Prohibit:

• Mountain Lion Hunting

It is illegal to take mountain lions in the state of California. It is also illegal to import mountain lion carcasses into California, even if it is legal to hunt them in other states. (CDFW Fish and Game Code 4800)

• Feeding Wildlife – Big Game

The feeding of big game animals is prohibited in California (CA Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 251.3). Feeding deer and other wildlife may attract mountain lions to your property. It also disrupts natural animal behavior patterns, putting animals at risk for vehicle strikes, injury from other wildlife and disease.



To request additional brochures email: wildfutures.us@gmail.com

Project Director: Sharon Negri, *Director – WildFutures*
Graphic Design: Linn DeNesti

© 2021 WildFutures • wildfutures.us

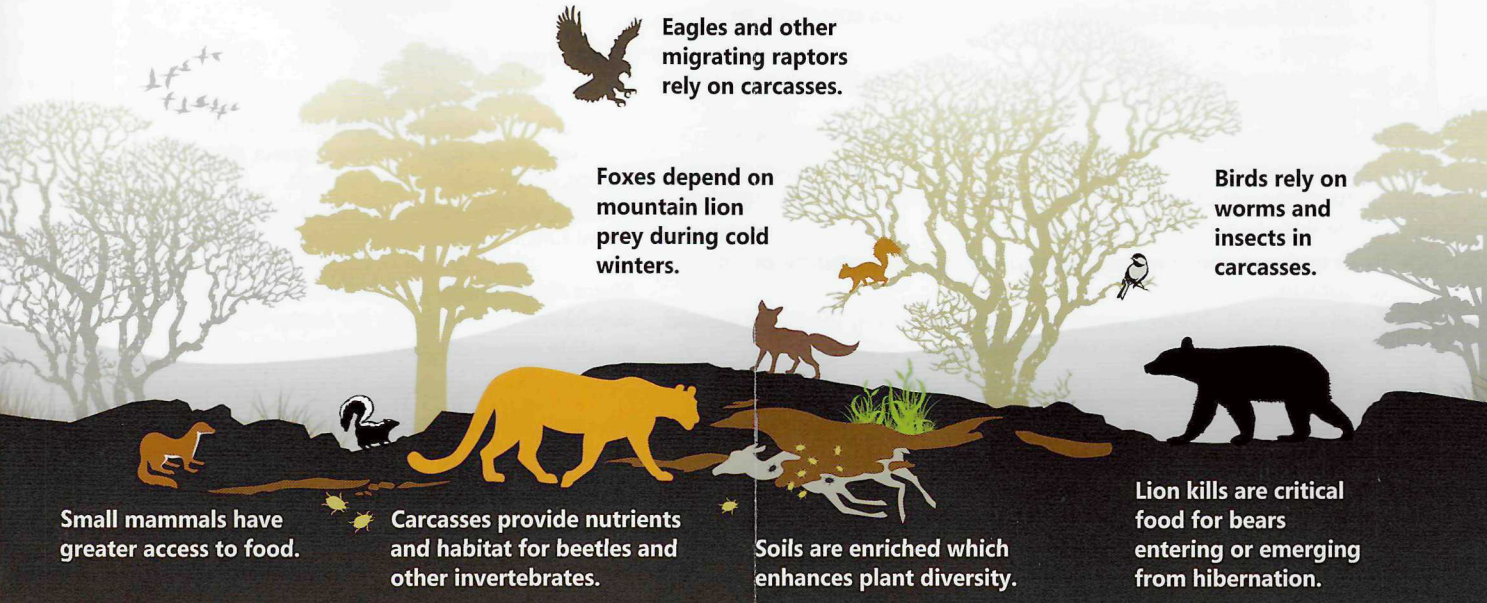
History and Legal Status

California's early settlers viewed the mountain lion as a threat to their livestock and livelihood. Lions were perceived as competitors for wild game, and few pioneers understood their ecological value. From 1907-1963 bounty hunting programs were implemented that resulted in the killing of thousands of mountain lions. The California legislature placed a moratorium on sport hunting of mountain lions in 1972, then in 1990 voters passed Proposition 117 which permanently banned the hunting of mountain lions and established them as a "specially protected mammal." In 2013, the law was amended and now requires non-lethal procedures to resolve potential conflicts unless the mountain lion has been designated an imminent threat to public safety. In 2020, the California Fish & Game Commission approved a petition to consider whether portions of the Southern California/Central Coast mountain lion populations should be listed as threatened or endangered under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). For an update and more information, visit: wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Mountain-Lion

Ecosystem Benefits

In most of California, mountain lions represent the only large carnivore and significant predator of ungulates. They prey primarily on deer and their kills provide an important food source to many species, including other mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. Nutrients from carcasses enrich soils and benefit many plants. Because of their unique role as a large predator, the mountain lion's presence enhances and strengthens the connections of ecological communities that would otherwise be lost if the species was absent from the landscape.

Mountain Lions Increase an Ecosystem's Health and Biodiversity



Learn about mountain lion ecology, behavior, signs, and safety tips.

Frequently Asked Questions About Mountain Lions

How many mountain lions live in California?



It is difficult to accurately assess statewide mountain lion populations. From year to year, mountain lion populations may increase, decrease, or remain stable. However, research is underway to estimate the size of the population and monitor trends in order to better understand the status of populations across the state.

Do mountain lions live in groups?

No. Mountain lions live alone, except when females are with kittens. Recent research shows they can be more social than was previously understood. Two mountain lions may be seen together, usually for the purpose of mating, but occasionally to share a meal. Kittens stay with their mother until they are 12 to 24 months old, and can appear to be as large as their mother, giving the impression of a group of adult mountain lions. After leaving their mother and striking out on their own, siblings can remain together for a period of time.

Do mountain lions overpopulate?

No. Mountain lions need sufficient habitat and prey to survive. In California, research has found there to be about 3.1 adult lions per 100 square miles. Males are highly territorial and may kill one another for territory, food, or a mate. Kittens stay with their mother for up to 2 years, in litters of just 2 or 3, so reproduction rates are low. Today, lion populations are also impacted by habitat loss and fragmentation, vehicle strikes, severe wildfires, rodenticides, disease, poaching, pollution, and lethal actions by authorized depredation permit.

Does a mountain lion sighting mean there are more in the area?

No. An increase in mountain lion sightings does not necessarily mean that the local population has increased. Nor is their presence around a neighborhood generally considered evidence of unusual behavior. Mountain lions can travel long distances, often 10 to 20 miles per day, and inhabit large geographic areas. Resident mountain lions may periodically wander or travel through a neighborhood as they patrol their home ranges, and young mountain lions from elsewhere may pass through in search of an open territory. If you see a mountain lion in your neighborhood it doesn't mean it is residing there.

What do mountain lions eat?



Mountain lions are *obligate carnivores*, meaning they only eat meat. In California, they specialize primarily on *ungulates*, mostly deer. Occasionally mountain lions will also eat elk, wild pigs, rabbits, raccoons, beavers, porcupines, rodents, bighorn sheep, coyotes, and other wildlife species.

Do mountain lions reduce their prey populations?

No. Mountain lions co-evolved with their prey over millennia, and there is no evidence that predation by mountain lions limits their primary prey populations. There are rare situations where mountain lions impact the growth of a prey population, particularly when prey numbers are already at critically low levels. However, the populations and availability of ungulate prey typically determines the abundance of mountain lions within a particular region. Other factors that influence deer and elk declines in California include hunting, habitat loss, drought, disease, vehicle strikes, and poaching.

Do mountain lions pose a threat to pets and livestock?

Yes, if left unprotected. However, weather, disease, dogs, and birthing complications cause most livestock losses. Domestic sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs, and chickens are far more vulnerable to mountain lion predation than are cattle and horses, and are more easily protected. Securing sheep, goats, alpacas, pigs, fowl and other small animals in predator proof enclosures from dusk to dawn will reduce the likelihood of a loss. If a mountain lion kills a pet or livestock, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife will help the owner take steps to protect their animals in order to deter the mountain lion from returning, before a lethal depredation permit may be issued.



Photo: © Arroyos & Foothills Conservancy

Will killing more mountain lions decrease conflicts with pets and livestock?

Generally, no. Killing an adult mountain lion disrupts the social structure of a local population, leaving a vacancy for younger, inexperienced lions looking to occupy an empty territory. Conflicts with people and livestock are more common with young male lions as they move into empty territories to survive. Thus, killing a mountain lion may result both in a temporary increase in the number of local mountain lions, as well as an increase in pet and livestock losses.

Do mountain lions pose a significant threat to public safety?

No. Mountain lion attacks on people are extremely rare. Mountain lions are timid and mostly avoid people. However, like any wildlife species, mountain lions can be unpredictable; therefore, people who live, work, or recreate in mountain lion habitat should take precautions to reduce their risk, and know what to do if they encounter a mountain lion.



Photo: © Steven Bobzien

Mountain Lion Signs

You may never see a mountain lion in the wild, but you can find and interpret the signs that a mountain lion leaves behind. Local conditions and the passage of time make accurate identification difficult even for expert trackers.

Tracks

Mountain lion tracks have 4 toes on both the front and hind paws with M-shaped heel pads that have 2 lobes at the top and 3 lobes at the base. Retractable claws do not show in the tracks of mountain lions except on slippery or difficult terrain where they need more traction or where they have sprinted after prey. A mountain lion carries its heavy tail in a wide U-shape at a normal walk, so the lower portion of its tail can leave drag marks behind in snow.



Photo: © Justin Dellinger

	Adult Males	Adult Females
Track Width	4–5 in. (9–13 cm)	< 3.5 in. (5–8 cm)
Heel Pad	> 2 in. (9–13 cm)	< 2 in. (4–6.5 cm)
Stride Length	> 40 in. (9–11.5 cm)	< 40 in. (4.5–7.5 cm)

Note: When observing tracks, recognize that considerable experience and additional indicators may be needed to make accurate conclusions about the species of the animal.

Front Tracks

Hind Tracks

Mountain Lion
Claws do not usually show in tracks

Domestic Dog
Dog tracks are highly variable but usually less than 3.5 in. (9 cm) in length and narrower than wide

Coyote

Scat

Mountain lions generally cover their scat (feces) with loose soil. Scat tends to be dense and segmented, blunt at both ends, 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter and 4 to 6 inches long (roughly the size of a scat left behind by a large dog). Scat may include hair, bones, and teeth from prey, and sometimes grass, but usually contain no fruit or other vegetation. Mountain lion scat can be found in caves and near kills and scrapes. Smaller mountain lion scat may be similar in size and shape to those left by bobcats.



Photo: © Jeff Sikich/NPS

Scrapes

Mountain lions make scrapes to communicate their presence, attract a mate, or define the edge of their territory. They make scrapes by using their hind feet to push up a mound of leaves, dirt, or other debris in conspicuous places, at junctions in canyons, and along trails and ridge lines. Occasionally mountain lions urinate or defecate on the scrape. Bobcats make similar, but smaller, scrapes.



Photo: Brian Kertson, WDFW

Cache Sites

Mountain lions typically drag large kills to a secluded location so they can return and continue to feed over several days. The location is known as a "cache site." You might see a drag mark near a fresh kill. Mountain lions often cover their kill with leaves, grasses, pine needles, or branches to hide it from scavengers and to prevent it from spoiling. Mountain lions may stay close to the cached kill site, so it is important not to approach or linger near a dead animal. If you come across a carcass in the middle of a trail or out in the open, it's very unlikely to be a mountain lion kill.



Photo: © Toni Ruth

Learn more about mountain lions and safety on the inside poster. ▶

