

# Cougar Hysteria

## Addressing *Mountain Lion Mania* in the Midwest and the East



*Above: an actual cougar. Note the relative size of the body and tail, as well as the “masked” face.*

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Some time ago, a couple of us from the Missouri Mountain Lion Response Team were in the parking lot of a small community high school, waiting for folks to arrive for an evening public meeting where we were about to speak. Remarkably,

there was already a long line of pickup trucks and cars way down the rural road heading into town, and we weren't "on" for another 20 minutes. Five minutes before we were to open the meeting, more than 300 people were already sitting quietly in the gymnasium (in a northeast Missouri town of 150) in eager anticipation for the "debate" that was about to take place. One gentleman remarked that this was a bigger crowd than they

usually get for a Friday night high school basketball game – but they normally didn't come armed! We hadn't planned on a hot public debate, but they sure did, and two and a half hours later, we realized why.

The topic was "Mountain lions in Missouri – what we know," and it was designed as a platform for the Missouri Department of Conservation to relay factual information about the big cat that had been mostly missing



**Above: The real deal - a trail camera photograph of a cougar taken in Livingston County, Missouri, on December 7, 2006. Photograph by Joe Neis.**

**Right: A photo of a house cat in Milan, Missouri, believed to be that of a mountain lion by the photographer and neighbors. Photograph by Jesse Powell.**



confirmed cougar occurrences thrown in the mix (more than 100 confirmed with evidence in the last decade) that often warrant front-page headlines and always several “I told you so’s” down at the coffee shop.

This element of an occasional confirmed cougar isn’t a prerequisite, though, for *mountain lion mania* to exist, as Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Mississippi, and a growing number of other eastern states can attest. The rumors and first-person accounts of mountain lions and the “mystical” black panther sightings and their mysterious behaviors are just as powerful – and maybe more so – than photographs and news about the real thing. In the last year alone, we have witnessed television

from Missouri’s fauna for almost 100 years. After the 40-minute slide show and the “what you should know” business, we opened it up for questions and comments. More than an hour of stories and sometimes heated exchange was followed up by some “one-on-one” time, with emotions running high – ripe ground for grandstanding and some anti-government paranoia. This meeting was held in a small and aging rural community in a sea of agriculture (about 80% of the landscape), with a healthy white-tailed deer population and a growing bobcat population. This setting is typical of the areas where the phenomenon that we have dubbed *mountain lion mania* is rampant.

*Mountain lion mania* is at near-fever pitch in northern Missouri, all

across Iowa and in Arkansas, Ohio, Indiana, and southern Michigan, and it is growing in other areas of the country. It is marked by widespread fears about cougar attacks on children and livestock, fueled by hundreds of eye-witness testimonies about mountain lion and black panther occurrences. Its hallmark is that – despite detailed descriptions of the sightings that accurately match those of cougars – almost all of the evidence submitted as cougars turn out to be misidentification of other animals (more than 95%), primarily bobcats, dogs and their tracks, and a large and growing portion of common, everyday housecats (videos reveal that some of the black cat varieties even have white stocking feet and chest patches). Fueling the fire here in the western Midwest are the occasional

and newspaper news alerts, warning signs posted along public trails, public school and work-site closings, and city police warnings issued in several eastern states over nothing more than reported sightings backed up with videos and photographs of bobcats and housecats mistaken to be cougars and black panthers. It seems that deep down, somewhere in our psyche, many *want* these animals to exist so much that these kinds of events have become commonplace, even in our populated and heavily-modified environments. This phenomenon even exists in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries that don’t have native large cats. The term often used to describe these mysterious sightings of pumas or panthers is “Phantom Cats” or Alien Big Cats (ABCs).

In efforts to stem the tide of *panther paranoia*, both the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources have taken public programs to the people. The forums are widely advertised ahead of time so they are usually heavily attended – and at times emotionally charged – with citizens looking for assurances that the agencies aren't protecting, or even actively restoring a dangerous animal at their expense. Several years ago in Missouri, we formed the Mountain Lion Response Team: a group of trained biologists scattered strategically across the state. We have had additional training from specialists in cougar habitats from other states, and we are working proactively to respond to cougar issues. We have learned some things with this experience, and we recommend our approach to others.

### What is at Risk?

Like it or not, state fish and wildlife conservation agencies are involved in a public debate about big cats, and as a rule, are poorly prepared for it. Other than the small remnant population in southern Florida, cougars have been absent east of the Rockies for

nearly a century. Understandably, conservation department biologists from the Midwest and the eastern United States have little or no cougar training. Because of years of wild-goose chases resulting from sighting reports, many of us working for public agencies have developed a fairly cavalier attitude about cougar sightings, and are quick to dismiss them as erroneous. Thus, we discount the accompanying fears as being merely overreactions based on faulty information.

However valid these view points might be, we risk alienating the public with what is sometimes viewed as condescending treatment or public ridicule of the citizens who report cougar sightings, especially when their sightings aren't taken seriously. This is partly because of the fact that biologists need concrete evidence to confirm a cougar sighting, while people making the reports simply want to be believed. Those who

report cougar sightings often do not realize the difference between being able to verify reports and accepting reports without hard data. This can lead to resentment and distrust that spreads throughout a community.

As the debate unfolds, the credibility of conservation agencies is at risk, and with them, the credibility of wildlife biologists – innocent bystanders perhaps, who get labeled “inept” (or worse) when the public perceives us as being arrogant and uncaring. Obviously, losing credibility over cougars could affect our agencies' effectiveness in other arenas of conservation work. Unfortunately for us, the game is largely played out in local bars, coffee shops, restaurants, the local media, and Internet chat rooms (the modern-day “electronic taverns”). All of these are perpetual minefields for government workers. In news reports about an alleged incident, the absence of an official response from



*Sterling Heights, Michigan – In March 2005, two housecats residing in this heavily urbanized southern Michigan community created a media sensation. Local residents mistook them for cougars, specifically an adult female (tan and white animal on left) and its spotted kitten (black and white animal above). The city's Chief of Police held a televised press conference to address the hysteria surrounding the “cougars.” CNN later reported on the story, claiming video footage of the tan housecat was actually of a cougar. Above photograph courtesy Dr. Christine L. Marossy.*

your agency **is a response** – but not a very good one. Agency reputation can suffer mightily in a short time, and may take years to recover. Credibility is hard to earn, easy to lose, and once tarnished, can cost more time and money in the long run trying to fix than will ever be spent by working proactively.

As surprising as it may be in this era of increased dependency on government support for all facets of American life, our public conservation agencies suffer from a perceived lack of relevancy to much of our modern-day public. Our seeming irrelevancy on this issue is revealed in many of the popular media reports of cougar sightings and incidents across the country, whether the incidents are real or not. The issue sells well in local media because cougars and controversy grab attention. Therefore, the stories are often prominently featured on front pages or on the 6:00 news. However, rarely is the state conservation agency

a major part of the story as it unfolds, and if mentioned at all, it is near the end of the story and in passing, mostly to illustrate the government’s dismissal of the incident as being hyped and off base. Depending upon how this statement is couched or reported, it could serve to only deepen the resentment between the public and our agencies.

### **A Vacuum**

In the vacuum that is created because of our collective inattention (or absence in the news reports), individuals, other than recognized cougar experts, have at times become the popular source of information and the “go to” people. These “self-appointed cougar experts” at times provide misinformation and offer wild claims about the status of cougars, creating many public relations challenges. Some argue – quite convincingly to the masses – that small cougar populations have somehow survived in pockets

of habitat and have simply gone undetected for decades, and that the conservation agencies deny their existence. Regrettably, a surprisingly large number of citizens actually believe these wild charges, undermining their faith in and respect for the conservation agencies and their staff.

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, despite the fact that such evidence is frequently missing, a hungry news media too frequently reports unsubstantiated claims as being factual. Consequently, many people now believe rumors that small populations of cougars reside in places such as Indiana and Ohio, even in heavily populated and agricultural landscapes, and that black cougars or “panthers” do exist in these wild populations possibly because of “genetic bottlenecks” caused by isolation and low numbers. These groups point to the hundreds of eyewitness testimonies and several well-publicized videos they claim

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*Below: This bobcat was mistaken for a cougar in Missouri. Photograph courtesy Patricia Smith.*



as being cougars (they are actually housecats) as part of the “growing body of evidence” of their existence.

These and other claims of “evidence” have been disputed by reputable cougar biologists throughout the country. Unfortunately, they serve to heighten public hysteria and paranoia about cougars, and many accuse the natural resource agencies of being inept and uncaring, or involved in conspiracies ranging from “cover ups” of predator presence to “covert stocking programs” to control deer populations. These claims also help sell the news and stimulate additional controversy, and they willingly add fuel to the existing public distrust.

### **So what is the remedy?**

This presents a difficult challenge for biologists and agencies. How do you effectively gain public trust while

not necessarily agreeing that every sighting, track, photograph, or video is really a cougar? The more important question to the public isn't so much about what you know, but “how much do you care?” It is critical that accountability be restored in the minds of the public. Credibility and trust can be rebuilt and maintained, but it does take concerted effort and a plan.

First, raise this issue as one needing some attention within your agencies. Although many biologists and agencies are quick to dismiss the issue simply as an unpleasant distraction, we warn against ignoring it in hopes that it will simply go away.

It probably won't. In fact, it is likely to get worse as our human populations grow and continue to lose touch with the reality of the natural world. As odd as it may seem, the cougar issue is not the hottest in large cities (where we would think we would have lost touch with reality). Instead, it seems to be the hottest in small- to medium-sized cities and towns, and in rural America – sometimes right in amongst our most active outdoorsmen



*Above: Cougars do not have a melanistic phase; as cubs, they bear spots, and as adults their coat is light to dark tan. This picture, taken in Bollinger County, Missouri, in 2005, was thought to be of a “black panther.” It was taken 210 yards away from the subject. In actuality, this picture shows a common housecat. Again, perspective is key to examining the photograph. Notice how the surrounding grass illustrates the small size of the cat. Photograph courtesy Chasity Thele.*

and women.

Next, formulate a simple investigation/monitoring and communication plan within your agencies. This doesn't have to be extremely cumbersome and expensive, but it should have at minimum:

- A centralized record-keeping component to archive reports from the public;
- A mechanism for rapidly investigating those reports and incidents that have some evaluated evidence, and acting upon them as evidence warrants;
- A communications component that

includes a protocol for effectively dealing with the media and the public (with well-crafted messages that reassures the public that your agency is capable of handling this issue).

It is critical that our communications with the public about cougars be centrally focused on safety and that we do not dismiss citizens' concerns out-of-hand. In particular,

you should stress the fact that this issue is your responsibility, and that your agency is prepared to handle any related situation. It would be irresponsible if you didn't.

The source of the animals is often seen by biologists as the central debate following the true identity of the animal, but to those citizens most concerned about safety, the source of the animal isn't so important.

Emphasize that

should a cougar somehow find its way into a populated or inappropriate area, you are prepared and trained to protect people, pets, and livestock.

Setting the stage for this paranoia, of course, is the widespread and unreasonable belief that cougars reside in these large agricultural expanses or in heavily populated areas of the Midwest and the East. Most people assume that reported “sightings” of cougars equal the existence of a population of cougars. This part of the debate is often the stickiest – differing and competing claims as to the true status of cougar populations.



Seven cougar carcasses recovered in South Dakota during a three-month period (January to March, 2006), primarily road-kills. This population in the Black Hills numbers around 200 animals, yet road-kills and other human-induced mortalities produce several cougar carcasses every month. Photograph courtesy Jonathan Jenks, South Dakota State University.

Yet, it is extremely unlikely that undiscovered cougar populations exist. Throughout North America, even where small populations are known to exist, bona fide sightings are uncommon, but evidence of their existence, such as tracks, scat, scrapes, road-kills and train collisions, accidental captures, documented depredation cases, prey kills, photographs taken by trail cameras, cougar carcasses from poaching and other accidents, and photographs of cougars occasionally treed by hound hunters are easily obtained.

For example, in southern Florida and in South Dakota where small populations exist, biologists document several road-killed cougars every year. Cougar behavior is sufficiently stereotypic to suggest that local populations should not be immune to detection. In fact, the case can be made that all across the Midwest and the East, the system of roads and highways provide a continuous “cougar detection network” operating

24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Although this response has become somewhat of a cliché, we have to allow for the possibility that an occasional (rare event) captive cougar will become *at large* after escaping or being released. A female cougar recently escaped captivity in central Indiana after seven years in a pen and has yet to be captured. Captive cougars exist in surprisingly high numbers, even where they have been supposedly “banned.” We must also expect transient sub-adult male cougars to occasionally disperse into the central United States.

Also, be ever vigilant about scams; they do happen. We recommend that you actually go to each site where mountain lion photos have been reportedly taken to confirm that the photographs matches everything on the ground, and that the camera in question actually took the photograph – not “Photoshop.” The Internet is rampant with scams as well; some include photographs of hunter-killed

cougars and trail cameras that are legitimate but are from western states with concocted stories attached, many times with real people attributed. Be quick to put these to rest with the help of the media and your internal communication system.

### **Cougar Field Workshop Offered**

Clearly there is a need to increase our experience, skills, and knowledge in order to deal effectively with the public and maintain credibility. Featuring retired cougar biologist Harley Shaw, the Cougar Network has organized a Cougar Field Workshop designed to train biologists working in the Midwest and eastern United States to recognize cougar sign and to initiate a plan of action to help conservation agencies deal with communication and public service issues. The first Cougar Field Workshop is to be held March 19 to March 23, 2007, on Ted Turner’s spectacular Ladder Ranch in the heart of New Mexico’s cougar country. The event is co-sponsored

by the Missouri Department of Conservation, Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch, and the New Mexico Department of Game. Available slots are already filled for this one, but if demand is adequate, future workshops will be scheduled.

In Missouri, we formed the Mountain Lion Response Team to improve a calloused reputation that we had earned. We wanted to improve customer service and do a better job of training our own employees. Also, we desperately needed a coordinated media response to sightings and growing cougar paranoia. We also wanted to review and revise department policy statements so we could do a better job of speaking with one voice. We want to be the first source of information – the “go-to” people whenever mountain lions are mentioned. We try to adhere to a few useful tips – how to gain and maintain credibility – from the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning:

- Be the first, best, most complete, and most reliable source of information.
- Remember the problem – people are concerned for their safety, that cougars have been reported in populated areas. You are the right entity to address it. In fact, it would be irresponsible for you, with the mission you have, not to address it.
- Scientific facts, data, analysis, and conclusions have a rotten track record for persuasion, although you have to use them to some extent. Add to them your first-hand accounts and examples to spice up your message. Anecdotal



information is very powerful in persuading people.

That is why first-hand accounts of “cougar sightings” generate so much emotion, even if they are in reality just everyday housecats.

Don't surrender this highly effective tool to those distributing misinformation. Use it yourself to counteract misinformation. For example, cite specific examples where supposed cougar sightings or attacks on livestock were proven to be

- housecats, dogs, or other animals.
- Be open and candid with the public; do not hold information back unless it is absolutely necessary. The existence of confidential information in the hands of a public official – or even the appearance or suggestion of such – smacks of hidden agendas, cover-ups, lies, deception, etc., and creates a climate of mistrust and suspicion.
  - Show that you care, that you listen, and that you are open and willing to respond appropriately. Also, show that your approach is reasonable, sensible, and responsible.

*Below: Circulating the Internet, these photographs of a cougar on a patio deck have been attached to stories claiming the images came from New York or Pennsylvania. The photographs were actually taken in Lander, Wyoming, by Dr. Dave Rodgers. Wyoming is a western state with a population of several thousand cougars. Dr. Rodgers lives in a riparian corridor with a good cougar habitat and plenty of deer, so sightings are not surprising in the area.*

