

# Missouri Mountain Lions: Rumors and Reality

by Dave Hamilton, Biologist  
Missouri Department of Conservation

If a person considers only the number of reported mountain lion sightings in Missouri, he might conclude that the state has a thriving population of the big cats. However, looking at investigation results reveals a picture of overexcitement and mistaken identity.

Following the first confirmed mountain lion sightings in the early 1990s, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) formed a Mountain Lion Response Team (MLRT) to handle such reports as quickly and accurately as possible.

The MLRT is composed of wildlife experts, a law enforcement officer, and wildlife damage control biologists that are always ready to look at a photograph, examine a footprint or view a video. Also, they help to provide information and training to MDC employees and to provide better service to the public. All agency employees have been instructed to take every mountain lion report seriously and forward information to the MLRT for immediate action. The response has been almost overwhelming.

Although mountain lions were once common in Missouri and elsewhere in the Midwest, they were eradicated during the 19th Century due to over-hunting, human settlement and development, and persecution. The last surviving wild



mountain lions from these populations was killed in Missouri in 1927; the last one in Iowa was killed in 1867, in about 1860 in Illinois, 1890 in Nebraska, 1904 in Kansas, and 1908 in Wisconsin. Populations of mountain lions survived in remote mountainous terrain in western states, but no verifiable evidence exists to suggest that they survived anywhere in the Midwest, perhaps outside of the Black Hills of South Dakota.

But now they seem to be rebounding. There is increasing evidence that mountain lion populations may be in the process of reclaiming former habitats in the Midwest, among a sizable human population that is uninformed about these predators. Mountain lion populations in western states are at near-record levels, and as the habitats fill up, new animals born each year have to travel further to locate suitable living space. This may

explain part of the increase in reports in Missouri and neighboring states, but it isn't the whole story.

Adding to the mania surrounding this issue, mountain lions are often confused with other animals. False sightings are rampant. Since the first confirmed incident of a mountain lion in Missouri in 1994, we have investigated literally hundreds of calls that turn out to be

other animals. Last year alone, we recorded 152 reports of mountain lion sightings, but none turned out to be confirmed mountain lions based on evidence at the locations. Many times, no evidence is available, and the incident is recorded only as a sighting. Occasionally, tracks, scat, a carcass of a prey animal, hair from a barbed-wire fence, photographs, or video tapes are obtained from the witnesses. Out of the hundreds, only eight were confirmed mountain lions (none since August 2003).

Dogs and dog tracks are the number one and number two cases of misidentification. Unusually large dog tracks often stimulate a call about a big cat. Sightings of other animals are often confused with mountain lions, including bobcats, coyotes, foxes, and even ordinary house cats.

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One case involved young downy turkey vultures huddled in the back of a dark cavern. They hissed loudly when the intruder came too close, but the follow-up investigation revealed the culprits, ruining an otherwise convincing story.

Part of the increase in false sightings in northern Missouri stems from the recent population explosion of bobcats. Bobcat populations have rapidly increased there, and many people had never seen them until recently. To the casual observer, bobcats can be confused with mountain lions. Their tracks look similar except for size, and bobcats can kill adult-sized deer, hiding the carcass under a pile of leaves or grass, similar to that of the mountain lion. Recent deer carcasses have been discovered by landowners, and the analysis has revealed bobcat attack rather than mountain lion.

In the mix, however, are the “needles in the haystack” – eight cases that proved to be the real deal. The first was in 1994, when a man shot a small adult female cougar in Carter County. There is considerable evidence that this was the same animal whose pelt turned up in Texas County four years later.

A mountain lion was videotaped in Reynolds County in 1996, another in Christian County in 1997, and a third in Lewis County in 2000. In 1999, a rabbit hunter treed a mountain lion in Texas County, reported it to the MLRT, and within hours, we had taken photos of the tracks in the snow and discovered two fresh deer

kills nearby to confirm the sighting. Then in 2002, a motorist killed a young adult male cougar four miles from downtown Kansas City on busy Highway 435, about a mile from the Missouri River. The following year, a motorist killed a juvenile male cougar in Callaway County, less than 15 miles from the Missouri River.

The increasing incidence of mountain lion sightings in Missouri parallels neighboring states' experience. Mountain lions used to be rare in South Dakota, but they have a well-established population there today. Folks in Nebraska are seeing them more often, and there have been increases in verified sightings in Minnesota, Iowa, Arkansas, and Illinois.

The increase has caused quite a stir amongst a sometimes fearful and paranoid public. In some quarters, people are even spreading the rumor that the MDC is responsible for the outbreak, claiming that we are secretly releasing them in an effort to control the deer herd.

The MDC isn't stocking mountain lions and isn't doing anything to encourage the species' return to Missouri. What the evidence suggests is that Missouri may be in the path of natural dispersal from western populations. The Missouri River provides a convenient travel

corridor for dispersing mountain lions, which are mostly young males. All three carcasses that we've handled have had North American cougar DNA, suggesting that perhaps they are wild rather than captive animals, who tend to have South American DNA.

South Dakota estimates they have a population of 165 cougars, mostly in the Black Hills. Each year, we are told that 20 to 25 yearlings – mostly males – are being forced out because the habitats are already occupied by adult males, and they are moving in all directions. One moved 667 miles before it was killed by a train in northern Oklahoma; it was wearing a radio-collar, attached during a study of mountain lions in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Now our job is to try to educate Missourians, and prepare ourselves to deal with a skeptical public, the hyped-up media, and maybe someday, more mountain lions.

