

Return of the Ghost Cat?

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Cougar, puma, panther, mountain lion, catamount, ghost cat--all have been found to have the same DNA. Have these big cats returned to New York State?

Bruce and Mary Anne Thon of Penn Yan, NY, have been volunteer investigators for the Eastern Puma Research Network (EPRN) since August 1999. During this time they have recorded nearly 300 sightings of large feline carnivores in the central New York region. In the six years prior to 1999, Norm Davis recorded over 60 sightings.

The purpose of the organization is to prove that these cats do exist east of the Mississippi in areas other than those inhabited by the Florida panther. As indicated by the name "Ghost Cat," the animals are shy, agile and very fast. Most people fortunate enough to snap a photo in the field find the image somewhat blurred. Carcasses seem to be nonexistent. The testimony of witnesses is not sufficient proof for governmental wildlife agencies who claim the animals do not live here. They claim that if one is seen, it probably is a pet that was released into the wild.

Another purpose of the EPRN is to educate the public, particularly those who enjoy being out in the wild, about safety precautions.

Two to five kittens are usually born in the spring every two years, after a gestation period of about 90 days. A characteristic "screaming" often accompanies the mating ritual. The cubs stay with the mother for at least 18 months learning survival skills. By then, the young males are often larger than the mother. The cubs set out to establish their own territories. Male cougars often cover over 100 square miles overlapping the territories of several females.

Eastern adult males weigh between 100 and 150 pounds, with eastern females usually ranging between 60 and 100 pounds. Body length may be 3 to 4 feet with an additional 2 ½ to 3 foot tail. Color ranges from tawny to dark brown to grey and solid black. About half of the sightings in this area are of black animals. At a distance, the long tail is the characteristic that most quickly identifies a cougar. The body is muscular and moves with the same grace as a housecat. The head is proportionately small with ears that can rotate to catch sounds in all directions. Eyes reflect a yellow color. Paw prints rarely show claws because the claws are retracted when running and come out only when the cat attacks or is climbing.

The cat's primary food is venison, although turkeys and all sorts of rodents provide sustenance as well. The decline of the deer population in New York in the late 1800's forced the native eastern cougars to slaughter farm

animals resulting in government placement of bounties on the cats. Are the animals currently being spotted remnants of the population that has begun to regenerate itself because of the dramatic rise in the deer population? Or, are present-day cats migrating from Canada or the “Black Forest” of Pennsylvania?

Dogs are used by hunters and some researchers to tree cougars so they can be tranquilized and tagged. The dog and humans are the only animals that bring fear to a cougar.

Here are some safety tips for people who venture into the gullies and woodlands which form the habitat of the cougar:

- 1. Hike in groups.**
- 2. Be aware of your surroundings. Remember cats sometimes lie in trees above paths or in brush along game trails waiting for dinner to happen along.**
- 3. If you encounter a cat, make yourself look big-open and wave your coat, Make noise. Put small children on your shoulders. Do not bend over which makes you look like prey.**
- 4 Do not run, but back off slowly**

Eastern and some western cougars are protected animals and may be shot only with a camera. If you are fortunate enough to catch sight of one of these elusive cats, please call 315-536-1269, or notify your local law enforcement agency.