

# Conservation Corner:

## Haven't Seen a Cougar? Well, It's Seen You

By Niki Wilson



In early April several years ago Geoff Skinner, my husband and a Parks Canada resource management officer, received a call from Jasper Park Lodge about a cougar that had taken down a cow elk at Mildred Lake. Geoff specializes in human/wildlife conflicts and responded to the Lodge's call since this cougar kill posed a public safety concern for skaters and others in the area. At the same time three cougars, what looked like a mother with two young, were spotted successfully taking down sheep in the eastern part of Jasper National Park. A week later a local guide and his very lucky clients – it was their first day in

Canada – spotted a cougar across Highway 16 from the Jasper transfer station about 10 kilometres east of Jasper. The cat was yawning and stretching on an elk carcass just beyond the tree margin. (The group later went on to watch three wolves hunt sheep – what a once in a lifetime holiday they had!).

These stories of cougar sightings reminded me that I'm a smallish woman who, around this time of the year, is renewing her love of running alone in the bush. This reminder that cougars are an important part of the Park's ecosystem pushed me to do a little research, research I hoped would reassure me. How

many cougars are there around Jasper? How likely is it that I'll run, literally, into one? Might one of North America's largest species of cat be perched on a branch as I ran by and I just don't know it?

Alberta's 2012 cougar management plan estimated that, in the foothills adjacent to Jasper and most of Banff National Park, cougar density ranged from 10 to 25 cougars per thousand square kilometres (about 386 square miles). This estimated density increased the further south you travelled. In the foothills southwest of Calgary to the U.S. border the estimated cougar density per thousand square kilometres was 35 to 40 animals. Specific studies have not been done in Jasper National Park, but Parks Canada's remote wildlife cameras record cougars moving along the Athabasca River Valley. Cougars are attracted to where their prey is. In early spring, deer, elk and sheep seek out the snow-free grasses of the valley bottoms and cougars are nearby waiting for an opportunity to catch a meal. Research in the foothills east of Banff suggests cougars kill a large animal every week or two. At this time of year, many local prey are hanging out in view of highways, or near public facilities, making sightings more likely.

Although cougars favour large game for food, they are survivors. This carnivore will eat virtually anything – insects, rodents, small mammals, an unfortunate pet. When I was a child, an innovative female with damaged teeth took up residence under our neighbour's trailer and had her kittens there. She took to making



Black Diamond residents were warned in 2011 about a cougar sighted within the town's limits. PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS

easy kills — neighbourhood pets — and her presence went undetected for weeks. The fact that a large cat could live and kill without notice in a densely populated trailer park is a testament to their stealth hunting ability and instinct to survive and protect their young. Needless to say, my sister and I weren't allowed outside until the situation was resolved.

Due to their adaptability, cougars have the widest range of any large cat in the world. Historically they have occupied most of the Americas, ranging from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts and from the southern tip of the Yukon to the southern tip of Chile. Today they are found primarily in the western third of North America, some Central American countries and the majority of South America. They live in a variety of habitats, from the swamps of Florida to our boreal forest. Decades ago hunting and human habitation eliminated them from the Eastern two-thirds of their range in North America, but cougars continue to fare better than many of the world's big cats.

Cougars, like household cats, are fastidious. The elk kill my husband Geoff found at Jasper Park Lodge had been partially buried. This was the cougar's attempt to reduce the odour and hide the carcass until it returned. Nearby was a "latrine site," used the same way a domestic cat uses a litter box to keep droppings away from food and living space. From the carcass, rounded, clawless tracks led to a bedding site nestled under a spruce tree. Nice and orderly.

The neat freak side of cougar behaviour fits well with their solitary, wary, and territorial nature. We rarely see them (or evidence of them), although they most certainly see us. A Jasper photographer famously took a picture of a family under a tree at a local resort, only to notice when developing the photo that a cougar was hanging out in the branches directly over their heads. They are experts at blending in and, if a cougar doesn't want to be seen, it's quite easy to walk by one in a wooded or grassy area and not know



Can you see me? PHOTO: © E. HEINZ

what you just passed.

Camouflage and stealth are critical to cougars; they survive as "ambush killers." As solitary predators, they rely on the element of surprise to take down their prey. Although capable of sprinting, they tend to stalk prey quietly and undercover, before powerfully leaping upon them and delivering a suffocating bite to the neck. There is evidence they seek out prey that is more vulnerable. One study found that female members of the deer family accounted for a higher proportion of cougar diet in the spring, just prior to and after birthing. The proportion of male ungulates taken increased in the fall during the rut when males are more pre-occupied with fighting each other and trying to mate all the ladies.

With this knowledge, I've discovered my feelings on traveling in cougar country haven't changed much. They're out there, and I'm probably in their presence more than I like to think about. It is thousands of times more likely that harm will come to me in the form of a car accident, and I try to let this fact be the pole that guides my fear compass.

If you encounter a cougar:

- don't run,
- reduce your apparent vulnerability by holding your jacket or sweater over your head, waving your arms, and maintaining eye contact with the cat,
- throw sticks and rocks at the animal,
- carry bear spray and use it.

Fight back if the encounter becomes an attack.

Do not play dead.

These days when I'm out on the trails in and around Jasper I carry bear spray, tuck my pony-tail into a bandana, and in the words of a friend who has tracked cougars, "remember to look up." 🐾

A version of this article appeared in Jasper's *The Fitzhugh* in the spring of 2011. It has been updated to include data from Alberta's most recent cougar management plan. Niki Wilson is a multi-media science communicator and biologist living in Jasper. Visit her at [www.nikiwilson.com](http://www.nikiwilson.com).