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Mountain lions are around us, plentiful, so let's be careful out there

By Mark A. Hart

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Western wildlife agency managers believe that mountain lions appear to be more secure as a species now than ever before in recent history.

Between 2,500 and 3,000 mountain lions live in Arizona. Current habitat estimates suggest that approximately 67 mountain lions live in the Santa Catalina, Rincon and Little Rincon mountain ranges east to the San Pedro River.

That figure is consistent with a large white-tailed deer population there, which has been growing since the late-1990s to mid-2000s, when major fires improved habitat.

Other factors make the ranges good mountain lion habitat; for example, the remoteness of some parts of Saguaro National Park

East, which is closed to hunting, and of Sabino Canyon Recreation Area, where discharge of firearms is prohibited.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department in Tucson fields approximately 100 calls about mountain lions annually, many of them from the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area and the Foothills. The vast majority are sightings, classified by a department response protocol as a visual observation of a lion, or a report of lion tracks or other sign.

There has never been a fatal mountain lion attack in recorded Arizona history. But there have been two attacks causing injuries in the state, and numerous reports of "close encounters" here and throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Meantime, a recently completed Game and Fish study with the University of Arizona using radio

collars shows mountain lions ranging widely throughout the mountains surrounding Tucson, and using travel corridors to routinely move about Southern and Central Arizona.

All this makes situational awareness in the wilderness vitally important.

If a mountain lion is seen, experts advise:

- Do not approach the animal. Most mountain lions will try to avoid a confrontation. Give them a way to escape.

- Stay calm and speak loudly and firmly.

- Protect small children so they won't panic and run.

- Do not run from a mountain lion. Running may stimulate a mountain lion's instinct to chase. Stand and face the animal. Make eye contact.

- Appear larger. Raise your

IF YOU SEE ONE

Mountain-lion sightings, encounters, incidents and attacks — especially in neighborhoods, recreational areas, and schools — should be promptly reported to Game and Fish at 628-5376 during regular business hours, or 1-623-236-7201 any time. For more information, see www.azgfd.gov/w_c/urban_lion.shtml

slowly back away toward a building, vehicle, or busy area.

- Fight back if attacked. Many potential victims have fought back successfully with rocks, sticks, caps, jackets, garden tools, their bare hands, and even mountain bikes. Since a mountain lion usually tries to bite the head or neck, try to remain standing and face the animal.

Given a mountain lion's instinct to chase, trail runners and bikers need to be especially cautious, and avoid using headsets or other devices that prevent hearing what is going on around them. In addition, those who encounter a mountain lion should not stop to take photos, but instead take action to deter an incident or attack.

arms. Open your jacket if you are wearing one. Throw stones, branches, or whatever you can reach without crouching or turning your back. Wave your arms slowly. The idea is to convince the lion that you are not easy prey and that you may be a danger to it.

- Maintain eye contact and

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