

Frequently asked questions about mountain lions

Q: Are mountain lions a threatened, endangered or sensitive species?

A: No, mountain lions are not an endangered, threatened or sensitive species in Arizona or in North America, with the exception of a small population in Florida. In fact, for a large predator they are relatively abundant, especially in Arizona.

Mountain lions occur only in the Western Hemisphere and they have one of the most extensive ranges of any land mammal, from the Straits of Magellan in South America to the Canadian Yukon.

In Arizona, mountain lions can be found in a variety of habitats statewide, even on the fringes of urban areas. As a general rule, if an area has deer, it can likely have mountain lions as well.

Q: How many mountain lions are in Arizona?

A: Biologists estimate that there are approximately 2,500 to 3,000 mountain lions in Arizona, but exact numbers are unknown. Studies show that the relative abundance of mountain lions in Arizona is primarily influenced by the abundance of deer.

Genetic studies conducted in Arizona suggest that population estimates derived by other survey techniques tend to be conservative.

Q: Where are mountain lions found in Arizona?

A: Mountain lions can be found throughout Arizona. In general, the abundance of mountain lions in Arizona corresponds with the distribution and abundance of its major prey species, deer. Mountain lions are found in all the major habitat types of the state. They prefer steep, rugged terrain and generally try to avoid gentle terrain with open, flat areas lacking vegetation or ambush cover.

Q: How big do mountain lions get?

A: Mountain lions typically weigh from 70 to 150 pounds, but occasionally can be much larger. Mountain lions can be about 24 to 26 inches tall (similar to a German shepherd dog) and adults can range from 5½ feet to more than 8 feet long.

Q: Why do we seldom see mountain lions?

A: Mountain lions are secretive, shy and elusive animals that prefer to remain hidden and blend in well with their surroundings. They typically hunt at night, although they can be active during the daytime. They are adept at using terrain features to remain hidden.

Q: What do they eat?

A: Mountain lions primarily feed on deer, but also a wide variety of other animals, including javelina, bighorn sheep, elk, and even smaller species like rabbits and rodents. They can also prey on livestock or domestic pets.

Q: How do mountain lions hunt?

A: Mountain lions hunt by stealth and ambush. They also prefer steep, rough terrain and high vantage points that provide hiding cover and ambush opportunities.

Mountain lions can jump 20 feet vertically and 40 feet horizontally. They are adept at using terrain features to their best advantage to stalk or ambush prey. Mountain lions often seek a high point in the terrain where they can leap onto the back of prey.

Q: When do they breed and have young?

A: Mountain lions can breed any time of year. Consequently, litters may be born at any time during the year, although summer is the peak period. In southeastern Arizona, the peak of birthing is July to September. Litter sizes between two to four are most common. Young remain with the mother for approximately 18 months while learning the skills necessary for survival.

This ability to breed any time of year and have multiple offspring allows mountain lions to respond readily to favorable environmental conditions, such as an increase in the number of prey available.

Q: Do mountain lions come into conflict with humans?

A: Sometimes mountain lions and humans come into conflict, particularly in urban-wildland fringe areas. In fact, continued urban sprawl from human development and loss of habitat are likely the reason for the increasing conflicts between humans and mountain lions in Arizona and elsewhere.

Conflicts can occur when a mountain lion becomes too accustomed to the presence of people, often near where we live or recreate, and begin preying on livestock or other domestic animals. Although uncommon, mountain lion attacks on humans occasionally occur. Small children can be especially vulnerable because they can resemble the size of typical prey species.

Since 1890, there have been 48 fatal attacks by mountain lions on humans in North America.

Q: Are mountain lion and human encounters or conflicts increasing?

A: Yes, recorded accounts of encounters, injuries or fatal attacks from mountain lions on humans seem to be increasing in North America. This may be occurring for a variety of reasons, including the abundance of mountain lions near urban areas, increased urban sprawl into wildlife habitats, intensive recreation by humans in mountain lion habitats, and increased predation on pets by mountain lions in urban areas.

Q: Can pets be in danger from mountain lions?

A: Yes, mountain lions are opportunistic predators that can and do take small dogs, cats and livestock, especially in the urban-wildland fringe areas.

Q: Since mountain lions are so elusive and secretive, how can we tell if mountain lions are around?

A: It's difficult, but not impossible to find signs of a mountain lion. Signs include large four-toed tracks (3-5 inches wide) without claw marks; large segmented, cylindrical droppings; food caches where a kill has been partially eaten and then covered with leaves, brush or dirt; and scrapes in soft dirt or leaf litter.

Q: What attracts mountain lions, especially to urban areas?

A: Mountain lions most often just pass through human-occupied space, but may stay longer if they have access to food, water, or shelter.

Food sources found near people's homes include deer, javelina, rabbits, unsecured domestic animals, or livestock. Some wildlife that mountain lions prey on may be more abundant near urban settings because the maintained lawns or water from neighborhood sources provide attractive habitat for prey species.

Water for drinking can include a swimming pool, fountain, pond, or pet's water bowl.

Mountain lions might use "cave-like" areas beneath sheds, unused buildings and storm drains, or elevated wooden decks, for shelter.

Q: What impact do mountain lions have to the deer population?

A: As a general biological principle, predator species do not control prey species. In fact, just

the opposite is true – the abundance of prey species, or lack of abundance, is a major factor determining the abundance of predator species.

However, in some geographical areas or habitats, mountain lions can have a controlling influence on a prey species, such as desert bighorn sheep.

Other factors can also come into play, such as the availability of alternate prey species such as javelina or livestock, to help sustain a mountain lion population, especially in times of drought. This might result in mountain lions having a more significant impact on deer populations.

Q: Are mountain lions hunted in Arizona?

A: Yes, there is a mountain lion hunting season in Arizona. They are considered a big game species. Harvested mountain lions must be physically inspected by Department biologists so that harvest rates may be carefully monitored.

Q: Have mountain lions been hunted historically in Arizona?

A: Yes, but they were not always classified as a big game animal. In fact, prior to 1970 there was a statewide bounty on mountain lions. In 1970, the Arizona Legislature classified mountain lions as big game animals, but ironically, the statewide mountain lion harvest differed little from when bounties were paid.

December 2011/ LL