



Contact

Doug Burt (602) 789-7215
Public Information Officer, AGFD

Arizona Game and Fish Department

NEWS RELEASE

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Biologists capture, collar and release mountain lion on Kofa NWR

Game and Fish continues active management program to aid bighorn sheep herd

The Arizona Game and Fish Department captured, collared, and released a male mountain lion on Friday, Feb. 27 in the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge as part of the continued effort to actively monitor the effects of mountain lion predation on the historic bighorn sheep herd on the refuge.

Biologists who snared the animal field aged it at four years old, weighing 109 pounds, and reported it was in good health at the time of the release in the area near the Kofa Mountains. The animal is fitted with a satellite collar carrying the identification KM04. Early tracking data suggests the animal is back to its normal activities.

"The sustained health of the Kofa NWR bighorn sheep population is extremely important, and understanding predation is one critical element to returning this herd back to its historic numbers," said Pat Barber, regional Game and Fish supervisor in Yuma. "Mountain lions are managed like other big game animals, and the department manages them as a valued part of the natural system but to also assure there is a balance with other wildlife, land uses and other management objectives."

Historically, mountain lions have only been rare transient visitors to the Kofa NWR. There are no verified records of mountain lions on the refuge between 1944 and 2001. The Kofa NWR is neither critical nor essential to the health of the Arizona mountain lion population. To the contrary, bighorn sheep from the Kofa NWR have been a critical source of animals for the re-establishment and maintenance of bighorn populations across Arizona and throughout the southwestern United States, to include New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas. At its historic average of approximately 800 animals, the Kofa mountains complex herd represents the largest population of this subspecies in the United States.

Research indicates that mountain lion predation can have significant population-level effects on bighorn sheep. Removing lions whose predation has an adverse affect on the herd's ability to repopulate to its historic levels remains an available management tool. An "offending" mountain lion is one that has demonstrated a focus on bighorn sheep by killing at least two in a six-month period.

Currently, the department is observing a self-imposed moratorium restricting any lethal removal of mountain lions captured and collared on the refuge to allow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct an environmental assessment for the development of a mountain lion management plan. The moratorium ends April 17, 2009.