# Why are Cougars so Elusive?

To many people, the cougar or mountain lion, remains a mystery, a legend and, in some cases, a monster. The world's fourth largest cat, an apex predator of the Americas who live out their existence in the shadows, cougars are misunderstood by many, and that may be in part because of their elusive nature.

Much of this species' elusiveness is the result of evolving alongside other predators. In places where wolves and bears compete with cougars for resources, the felines fall lower on the apex scale and run the risk of losing their kills, their young or their lives. Young dispersing cougars, in particular, face threats from other adult cougars, roads, human development and hunters.

Photos by Alycia Scheidel @alyrenwildlife

Photo by Jeff Wirth.

# Behavior and Biology

Cougars have many names depending on location: Mountain Lion, Cougar, Puma, Florida Panther and Cat-A-Mount. All refer to the same species: *Puma concolor*.

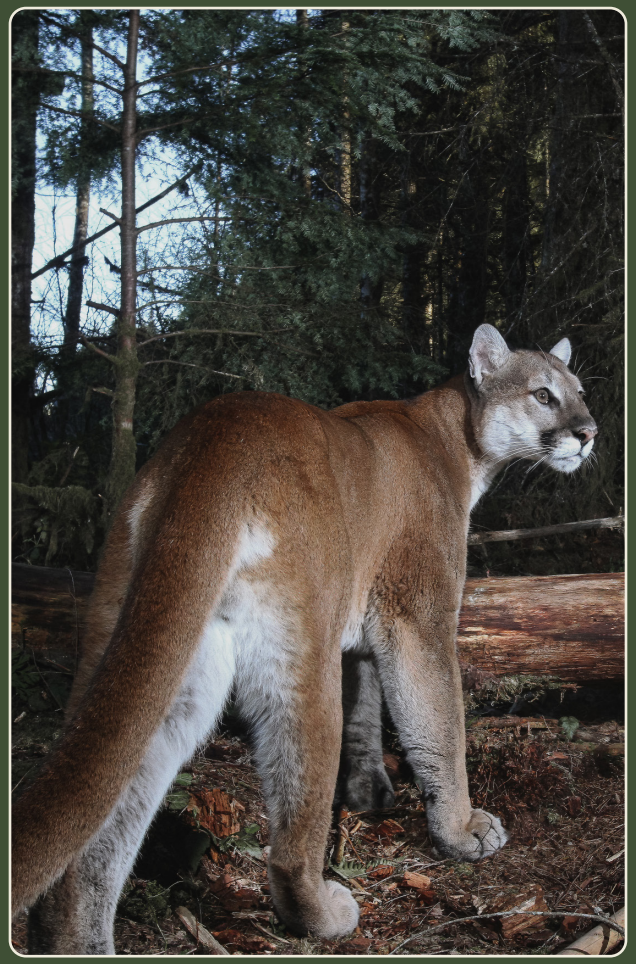
Cougars are the most widespread terrestrial carnivore, ranging from central Canada to the tip of South America. Cougars in Washington can live just about anywhere, and with increased human expansion into wild areas, there are greater numbers of cats living on the fringes of human development.

Cougars specialize in hunting mule, white-tailed deer and elk in North America, but will also hunt other species including beaver, raccoon and coyote.

Wandering is fundamental to the natural history of cougars. Cougar kittens stay with their mother until around 1.5 to 2 years of age and depend heavily on her for food. Following dispersal, young cougars are usually hungry and inexperienced, and more likely to become involved in conflict with humans or domestic animals as they search for unoccupied habitat.

# Cougar

## In Washington State



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*A study conducted by Panthera's Teton Cougar Project revealed that cougars can share up to 39% of a kill while still sustaining themselves. This provides food for animals like foxes, coyotes, opossums, skunks and many others.*

### Cougars Play an Important Role

Cougars play a vital role in the ecosystems they inhabit. From ungulate management to providing food for other species, the landscape of the Americas would look very different without them.

### Displacement from Recreation

Recreational activities such as hiking, mountain biking and off-roading can temporally displace cougars. These activities can also disrupt ungulate populations which directly affect cougars and their ability to find food. Activities that include off leash dogs or off trail travel may also contribute to increased displacement.

### Cougar Territory Awareness

Social dynamics in cougars are complex. Dominant males regulate the population within their ranges by keeping juvenile males out. When these more dominant males are killed or displaced, younger transient sub-adults (teenagers), are more prone to conflict with humans and livestock as they compete for the open territory. This can also lead to the killing of cougar kittens by transient males.

# Encounters with Cougars

If you encounter a cougar, don't automatically assume they are a threat to you. If they are visible, they may simply be curious. Cougars cannot afford to be injured as injuries may cost them their life. Cougars will go well out of their way to avoid confrontation with perceived threats.

Encounters with cougars are extremely rare, but when they do happen it is important to ensure mutual safety and respect.

1. *Always remain aware and alert in cougar habitat (i.e. refrain from using headphones).*
2. *Make noise (i.e. singing or talking) or travel in groups of two or more when possible.*
3. *Keep pets on leash when on trails.*
4. *Limit outdoor recreation activities between late dusk and early dawn.*
5. *Carry bear spray and know how to use it (always keep it in an easy to reach spot).*

*As human presence continues to expand into cougar habitat, the potential for human-cougar encounters increases.*

**Move Slowly**
*Do not run!*

**Stay close together**
*Pick up and secure any young children or small pets under your care.*

**Give space**
*Allow ample space for the cougar to leave the area. Slowly back away from the cougar, if needed*

**Make eye contact**
*This can show the cougar that you are aware of their presence and not afraid.*

**Make noise**
*Yell, bang your trekking poles or water bottle.*

**Act big and aggressive**
*Raise your arms, wave trekking poles or backpacks.*

**Assess the situation**
*Why is the cougar there? Are there kittens? Are they guarding a carcass? If a cougar doesn't leave, kittens or a kill may be the reason.*

**Use bear spray**
*If the cougar continues to approach within 30 ft., deploy spray in a 'z' shape aimed at the cougar.*

*In the very unlikely event that you are attacked, fight back. Protect your neck and throat.*