

# Santa Monica Daily Press

## The mysterious mountain lion

By Dr. Reese Halter  
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Known by different names including phantom cat, cougar, panther and puma, this extraordinary furtive feline is not only at the top of the food chain but is the most perfect hunter to walk the earth. Mountain lions are feared, with good reason, by all prey. They are loathed by farmers and ranchers.

From its small head to the distinct black tip of its tail, a male measures 11 feet long and weighs an average 225 pounds. The ancient Amazonian Tupi tribe dubbed this cat "the false deer" recognizing that this predator blended so completely into its environment with its tawny brown coat. Its eyes and forehead have black markings; its throat and chest are white and its long tail is as thick as a man's wrist.

Since the last glacial period, this beauty of a beast had the largest range of any animal in the Western Hemisphere. The closest related kin of the mountain lion is the cheetah. Whether it came across the Bering Strait or evolved in South America is still debated. All but gone now in the eastern United States, except for a dwindling number of Floridian panthers, it has retreated to the forests of the West extending from the northern Rocky and Coastal Mountains into Mexico and as far south as South America.

The mountain lion depends on forest cover and will deliberately avoid openings, meadows and clearcuts. They are nocturnal, highly secretive, elusive and, contrary to popular belief, rarely seen in the wild. Special adaptations in the eyes enable it to see up to six times better than a human in the dark. And a thin membrane at the back of the eye boosts night vision and gives this animal an eerie mirrored greenish shine when light is shone into its eyes.

They cannot focus well in the dark at close range. Front whiskers, usually 24, combine with bristly hairs on their paws to help them feel their way in the dark by sense of touch and by movement of air currents. Specialized and sensitive ears enable them to hear both high and low frequencies and swivel their ears around with the assistance of some 30 different muscles.

So what makes this puma such a fearsome, lethal hunter? It is the awesome combination of sinewy muscles which enable it to spring 30 feet ahead and 18 feet in the air, sledgehammer front paws with retractable switchblade claws, a muzzle with an enormous grasp and teeth that slice and dice better than any butcher's knife.

Mountain lions are solitary. Their muscular spines lack ligaments and so they are able to slink low to the ground and stealthily hunt their prey. Their preferred prey are mule deer, though elk and moose also comprise a large component of their diet.

No other predator on this planet can take down prey that is eight times larger than itself. Mountain lions routinely sneak-up on their unlucky and unwary prey and pounce. Eight out of 10 times they are successful. Their teeth instinctively pierce the jugular, razor sharp claws rip open the windpipe and powerful front paws pull back the head until the neck snaps.

Mountain lions mate at any time during the year. Males are polygamous. Females are excellent single mums. The mating ritual and copulation can last up to 16 hours. Numerous copulations are necessary to induce ovulation and an unfit male would lack stamina to mate for an entire day. Soon after mating, females chase males away, for males are known to eat young kittens.

When the spotted kittens are born about 90 days later, one to five per litter, they are blind until 10 days after birth. Kittens stay with mothers for up to 18 months while they learn the fine art of hunting. A mountain lion does not reach its full size until its fourth year.

The best cougar territory may hold one cat per two square miles. And while a cat may prowl up to 20 miles a day, usually it ranges from one to five miles a day. Males have a home range of up to 500 square miles and are very territorial.

More people are killed by lightning each year than mountain lion fatalities total over the past 100 years. If mountain lions encounter domestic stock they will kill dozens of animals. This is because in nature it's feast or famine; and when prey is plentiful, instinctively a hunter will kill.

A mountain lion can pack away 18 pounds of meat in a sitting. On average over a winter they will eat about 13 pounds a day, which translates into a deer, elk or moose every seven to 10 days.

A mountain lion needs wilderness. Scientific understanding of this beast is limited and, therefore, it is very difficult to manage.

A house cat and a mountain lion have much in common, with size being the main difference. Wild cats are exposed to the same diseases as are humans but have developed a resistance to them through genetic solutions.

Policy-makers need to safeguard the existence of the truly mysterious mountain

lions. They are crucially important in keeping a healthy balance of big game deer, elk and moose populations. They also hold the genetic answers to solving many human diseases and, perhaps, ultimately the destiny of our species.

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