

ECF Newsletter

Winter 2002

Update on ECF Activities:

- The year 2001 brought several additional cougar confirmations from areas where the existence of cougars has been questionable. The details of these confirmations are provided in this newsletter. All ECF board members have returned for another term, with the exception of Thomas Linzey. Tom had to decline to the press of other obligations. Cougar sighting reports came in at a steady pace, and were reported from about every eastern state. A couple of new projects are currently being planned for the ECF in 2002.

Grants Committee Established:

Helen McGinnis has taken the chair position for the grants committee. Helen is a long time eastern cougar advocate. The committee will write grant proposals and pursue funding for all ECF projects. The committee is currently working on writing a grant to obtain funding for automatic infrared cameras, which will be setup in areas where cougars are thought to be living.

Scats To Be Tested:

Three scats that were collected in 2001 are being sent to Dr. Melanie Culver for DNA analysis, and the results of the testing will be made available after the results are received. The first scat was collected on June 30, 2001 in the Dolly Sods Wilderness area of Tucker County, WV. Todd Lester, Mark Jenkins and Dave Rohm collected the scat while doing a field search. The second scat was collected on July 4, 2001 in the Cranberry Glades Wilderness area of Pocahontas County, WV and was collected by Todd Lester while doing a field search. The third scat was collected in November 2001 in the Dolly Sods Wilderness area of Tucker County, WV by Helen McGinnis while doing a field search.

Volunteers Needed:

The ECF is currently looking for volunteers to fill the following positions: Newsletter Editor and Membership Coordinator. The Newsletter Editor, will be responsible for putting the newsletters together. The Membership Coordinator will be responsible for attracting new members to the ECF. If you are interested in one of these positions, please contact us for more details. And as always, please keep us informed on cougar news around your area. If you haven't sent in your 2002 membership dues please do so.

Cougars Found In Michigan

October 29, 2001 Dr. Patrick Rusz 989-865-6701

Dennis Fijalkowski 517-641-7677

FOUNDATION'S FIELD STUDIES CONFIRM COUGARS IN MICHIGAN

Bath... Recent field studies by the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation located at least seven cougars (mountain lions) at four Upper Peninsula and two Lower Peninsula sites. The non-profit conservation group found indisputable physical evidence that the big cats inhabit some remote parts of Michigan. The Foundation believes they represent a resident breeding population.

The Foundation launched its field work in May led by Dr. Patrick Rusz, its Director of Wildlife Programs. The research crew initially focused on a 33-mile stretch of beach, sand dunes, and woods along Lake Michigan near Seul Choix Point in Schoolcraft and Mackinac Counties. Over a four-week period, they repeatedly found cougar tracks, several cougar-killed deer, and eight droppings (feces) that DNA analysis by the Wyoming Game and Fish Laboratory verified as cougar scat. They returned in July and found the track of a larger cougar along with three more cat-killed deer.

Photographs of the physical evidence were reviewed by nationally-known cougar expert Harley Shaw, of New Mexico, a former cougar research specialist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Additional information was examined by Dr.

John Stuht, a furbearer specialist retired from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. The Foundation eventually searched other sites, finding tracks near Naubinway in Mackinac County, and with the help of volunteers, both tracks and suspected cougar scat on the Stonington Peninsula in Delta County. The Stonington scat has not yet been analyzed, but the Foundation used DNA tests to verify that scat found in Houghton County by Michigan Technological University student Nancy Gagnon was from a cougar.

In the Lower Peninsula, Dr. Rusz photographed a cougar track near Tower in Cheboygan County, and confirmed by field measurements that a cat videotaped by Christi Hillaker near Mesick in Wexford County was an adult cougar.

Each area where cougar sign was found has a long history of persistent cougar sighting reports. Skeptics had assumed the animals seen were really dogs, wolves, bears, fishers, or bobcats. Others had long attributed any actual sightings to pet cougars that escaped or were released. However, the repeated findings of sign in the Seul Choix Point and Stonington areas indicate the animals are resident cougars, because transient cougars don't persist in an area for extended periods. The evidence that the cougars found in the

other four areas are residents is also very strong because of the histories of sightings.

In March, the Foundation released a 66-page report that concluded cougars roam our state. The recent field studies prove that thesis. The Foundation found no evidence that escaped or released pets can account for the cougars they detected. The remote nature of the study areas, and the continuous sightings suggest a wild population.

The Foundation is pressing forward with additional DNA analyses that may shed more light on the status of the cougar in Michigan, which is currently protected as an endangered species under state law. Genetic analysis using DNA from scat is a new and very useful tool to monitor certain wildlife populations. However, only a handful of laboratories have the expertise and experience to extract and read the DNA from scat. So, it sometimes takes months to get results. In addition to species identification, genetic analysis can be used to determine sex of the animal, bloodlines and other relationships among animals, and whether there are inbreeding problems. The techniques have been employed in research on bears, cougars, and other animals in other states.

The Foundation urges deer hunters and other citizens who see cougars to report their sightings to the Department of Natural Resources or the Foundation. The field study was funded by Whitetails Unlimited of Traverse City.

Cougar confirmed in Ontario, Canada After Biting Cornwall Area Man

On August 04, 2001, David Wood went out to feed his brother's rottweiler dog around 1am. He noticed a long tail next to the goat pen. He approached the animal from the rear and it suddenly spun around and lunged at him. He blocked it with his forearm, which was bitten, and then he kicked the animal in the ribs, with his steel toe boots. It came at him once more, but he scared it away. Mr. Woods is six foot five and 285 lbs. He saw the animal the next day, in the same spot next to the goat pen and said that it was unmistakably a cougar.

The Ottawa Citizen newspaper, sent pictures of the bite marks on Mr. Woods arm to two cougar experts here in the U.S. for identification. Dr. Lee Fitzhugh of California did the calculations and compared them with the jaw structure of cougar skulls, and they matched. Michael Sanders of Montana also examined the pictures and agreed with Dr. Fitzhugh's findings.

This area is right across the St. Lawrence River from New York State. It is the 2nd confirmation of a cougar since the scat found northeast of Kenora in 1999 was analyzed by thin layer chromatography (separating bile salts) by the Alberta Natural Resources Service and determined to be cougar. The last cougar shot in Ontario was in 1884. The Ministry of Natural Resources says that it will now start investigating cougar reports. Mr. Woods recovered and is doing fine.

Cougar Killed In Georgia

We received a report a few months ago, of a cougar being killed in northern Georgia. After doing some searching, 2 pictures were obtained that confirmed the kill. One of the pictures is shown below.

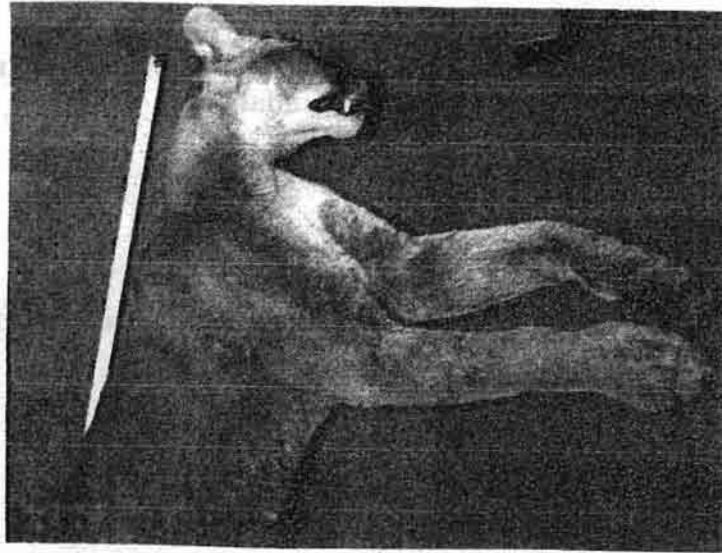
Upon further investigating, it turns out the cougar was an escaped pet. Some time in March 2000 an adult male cougar escaped from the Cohutta Springs Wildlife Center in Crandall, Georgia. It was shot and killed 4 to 6 weeks later in April 2000 in Cisco, GA which is only a few miles away.

I spoke with Clark McCrain owner of the Wildlife Center and he verified that indeed he was the owner of the cougar that was killed. He said the adult male had all his claws when he escaped and from the looks of the pictures, he was still a healthy cougar, and had been able to capture prey.



Cougar Killed In Minnesota

A female cougar was shot and killed near Big Sandy Lake in Aitkin County, in August 2001. The guy shot the cougar because it was fighting with his pet dog. The carcass was picked up by the Dept. Of Natural Resources. The next day, 2 cougar kittens were seen in the same area, and they were trapped. They were the 16 week old kittens of the female that was killed. The kittens were taken to the Minnesota Zoo. It was the first confirmed killing of a cougar in the state in more than 100 years. At the time of this writing, we haven't been able to determine if DNA tests were conducted. The cougar can be seen on the next page.



Cougar shot in northern Minnesota

Cougar Killed In Iowa

A 7 1/2 foot male cougar was killed by a car in Shelby County near Harlan on U.S. Highway 59. This was the first confirmed kill of a cougar since 1867 in Iowa, although there has been confirmed sets of paw tracks found in the state in recent years. The cougar weighed 130 lbs and had all its claws intact. It was healthy and believed to be a wild one.

