



Mountain Lions

Mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) have one of the most extensive ranges of any land animal extending from the southern tip of South America to the Canadian Yukon. In Arizona, they occur in all areas except the low desert surrounding Yuma and highly urbanized metropolitan areas. Here, their distribution coincides with their primary prey species, deer. Human/mountain lion interactions have been increasing due to a range of factors including habitat loss from development, increased outdoor recreation, and periods of drought.



Mountain lion, *Puma concolor*. Joy Viola, Northeastern University, Bugwood.org.

Adult mountain lions are essentially solitary animals. They are capable of breeding at two to three years of age and at any time of the year; consequently litters may be born in any month. However, summer is the peak period of kitten births and litter sizes of two are most common in Arizona. Young remain with the mother for 15 to 22 months. During this time, the kittens learn hunting and survival skills. Juvenile males tend to disperse long distances compared to relatively short dispersals for juvenile females. Adult females breed every two to three years and are not normally associated with other adult animals except for mating purposes.

Mountain lions are usually nocturnal hunters, but are occasionally active during the day. Whitetail and mule deer are their principal prey species in Arizona. Elk, javelina, bighorn sheep, coyotes, turkeys, rabbits, livestock, pets, and other species are also killed and eaten by mountain lions. They will almost always attempt to cover the uneaten portion of a kill with soil, grass, leaves, or other debris and return to the kill to feed again. Mountain lions kill their prey with a bite to the head or neck and feeding usually begins in the chest or abdominal cavity. It is valuable to be able to recognize a fresh lion kill because the lion may still be nearby and you should not linger in the area.

Mountain lions are very specialized top predators and consequently do not normally exist in high concentrations. Their home range often extends up to 100 square miles. The spatial separation between individuals assures that each has resources necessary to survive. If these separations are not maintained, mountain lions will kill each other, which is the normal method of population regulation in undisturbed mountain lion populations. Mountain lions kill large prey species with regularity, usually one deer-sized animal is killed every six to 12 days.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) estimates 2,500 to 3,000 mountain lions live in our state. They are not considered endangered and are actively managed through regulated hunts. With increasing development, habitat is lost and the potential for conflict increases. Movement corridors between backcountry habitats are essential to maintain genetic diversity for a healthy population. We must realize the valuable role mountain lions play in native ecosystems and the relatively low threat they pose to humans. While uncommon, some attacks on humans have been fatal. If you encounter a lion, do not run. Face the lion and slowly back away leaving an escape route. You should also try to appear larger by raising your arms over your head. You may also throw rocks and sticks as long as you can avoid crouching down. Report all lion encounters to the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

October 4, 2023

Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or genetic information in its programs and activities.