Cougars, also called mountain lions, panthers, or pumas, are the second largest members of the cat family in the western hemisphere (after the jaguar), and the fourth largest in the world. Long before humans arrived, this carnivore lived on the North American continent, as well as right here in Washington State.

Cougars are shy, elusive, and rarely observed. But as Washington's human population grows, and more and more people are recreating outdoors, the chance of observing or encountering cougars may increase. To help you understand Washington's cougars, while living, working, and recreating in cougar country, this brochure explains the ecology and behavior of these animals, their signs, their role in the ecosystem, and how to avoid a negative interaction, keeping people, pets, and livestock safe.

Ecological Benefits of Cougar Presence

Cougars provide food and habitat for a diversity of species, contributing to healthy ecosystems:

1. Carnivores such as bears, coyotes, foxes, and skunks eat once the cougar has filled its stomach.
2. Eagles, ravens, crows, jays, vultures, and other foraging birds are drawn to carcasses to feed.
3. Beetles and other insects forage on the remains and even reproduce there, breaking down the carcass into soil nutrients.
4. Soils are enriched which encourages vigorous growth of plants.
5. Cougars keep their prey naturally wary and help keep populations healthy.

Cougars Signs

Cougars avoid people. You may never see a cougar in the wild, but cougar signs you might see include cache sites, tracks, scat, scratches, and scats.

Tracks

Cougars track shows four toes on both the front and hind paws, and an M-shaped heel pad with two toes at the top or leading edge, and three toes at the base. Their track can show a variety of marks indicating their size, age, and sex. By analyzing the size and shape of the track, biologists can make conclusions about the gender and species of the animal making the track, i.e., an adult male cougar typically leaves an area of 6-12 inches.

Scat

Scat is the excreta of a mammal, usually the waste material eliminated from the digestive system. Scats can be used to determine the age, sex, and health of the animal. Males tend to have larger scats than females. Scats can vary in color from dark brown to light tan, depending on the diet of the animal. Scats can also be used to determine the type of food consumed by the animal, as different types of prey leave different characteristics in the scat. For example, scats from a deer-eating cougar may contain pieces of bone and antlers, while scats from a rabbit-eating cougar may contain small pellets of fur or eggshells.

Scrapes

Scrapes are large, wide scratches that are made by the animal as a means of marking territory. They are often found near rocks, trees, or other objects that the animal is using as a means of communication.

Cache Sites

After a cougar catches a large prey, it drags the body to a cache site, or secluded area, where it will continue to feed over several days. You might see a drag mark near fresh kill sites. Cougars cover the remainder of their prey with leaves, pine needles, branches, or other debris to hide it from scavengers, and to prevent the carcass from spoiling. The cougar may stay near the cache site to guard the meat and spend three to five days feeding. Never approach or linger near a dead or partially covered deer or elk.
**Cougar Safety Tips**

**Home Safety**
- Landscape around your home for safety.
  - Avoid landscaping with plants that are palatable to deer. Deer can attract cougars to your yard.
  - Prune shrubs and trees around the base to keep cougars from using them as hiding spots.
  - Install lighting to illuminate walkways at night.
  - Seal off spaces under buildings and porches to prevent use as shelter.
- Do not make food, water, or shelter available at ANY time.
- Cougars use natural areas to move through populated areas into more remote habitat. If food, water, and shelter are not available, cougars generally move on more quickly.
- Keep garbage cans tightly sealed and compost secured.
- Do not feed deer or other wildlife which can attract cougars.
- Supervise small children outdoors especially during the hours around dawn and dusk when cougars are most active.

**Pet Safety**
- Keep dogs and cats indoors, especially after dusk and before dawn, to prevent them from becoming prey for cougars and other carnivores.
- Keep pet food indoors. If you feed animals outside, gather up the food and water bowls and clean up spilled food so as not to attract wild animals.
- If you must keep pets outside, consider installing a cougar-resistant fence or covered enclosure.

**Livestock Safety**
- Wherever possible, confine livestock and other domestic animals in secured and covered enclosures or barns, especially goats, lambs, sheep, chickens, and other fowl.
- Consider using a livestock guard animal to protect livestock and domestic animals from cougar attacks.
- Install an electric fence around areas where livestock or domestic animals are kept.

**Hiking & Camping**
- The best defense is to be aware of your surroundings and look and sound human! The human voice is a great deterrent.
- Hike in small groups and keep children close to the group.
- Make enough noise to avoid surprising wildlife, especially at bends in the trail. Whistle or speak loudly.
- Avoid approaching dead animals, especially deer or elk; they could be cougar prey left for a later meal.
- Keep your camp clean and store food and garbage in double plastic bags away from sleeping areas.

**Mountain Biking**
- Riding with a with a partner or in a small group is always recommended as a safety measure against getting injured, getting lost, or avoiding conflicts with wildlife, including cougars.
- Use a bell or make noise as you go along the trail.
- Have bear spray handy in a holster or bike holder made for the product.
- Avoid being in low-light conditions.

**Running**
- Avoid running in cougar country alone, particularly at dawn, dusk, or after dark.
- Avoid running with headphones or ear buds that can block out sounds around you.
- Make noise as you go along the trail.
- Always stay aware of your surroundings.
- Have bear spray handy in a holster or harness.

**If You Encounter a Cougar**
- Cougar kittens can look similar to domestic cats. Always give a cougar or cougar kittens a very wide berth.
- Never approach the cougar or offer it food.
- Stay together in one group.
- Face the cougar. Talk to it firmly and hold your ground.
- Always leave the animal an escape route.
- Move slowly. Running or rapid movements may trigger an attack.
- Try to appear larger than the cougar. If wearing a jacket, hold it open to further increase your apparent size. If you are in a group, stand shoulder-to-shoulder to appear intimidating.
- If the cougar does not leave the area, be more assertive. If it shows signs of aggression (crouches with ears back, teeth bared, hissing, tail switching, and hind feet pumping in preparation to jump), shout, wave your arms and throw anything you have available (water bottle, book, backpack) at the animal. Use bear spray at this point.
- If the cougar attacks, fight back. Be aggressive and stay on your feet. Spraying bear spray (EPA approved) in the cougar’s face is also effective, even if the spray ends up on you and the cougar. Remember: keep bear spray accessible and review directions on its use.

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**When in cougar country, always carry bear spray, and keep it accessible.**