

Cougar Conflict Resolution Team (CCRT) Update

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What is the Cougar Conflict Resolution Team (CCRT)?

EMT Charter for the original team - June 17, 2020

Goal: Facilitate internal and external change to better address cougar public safety concerns

Objectives:

1. Demonstrate and demand cross program problem solving to ensure a One-DFW approach
2. Improve executive accountability to issues raised by staff and public
3. Ensure delivery of high-quality products that increase faith in DFW science, management and communication

What tasks came out of the CCRT?

1. Revisions to Policy/Procedure 5401 Controlling Dangerous Wildlife Policy (dated 1998)-ONGOING
2. “FAQ” document created to provide clarity on dangerous wildlife response while policy 5401 is re-written-COMLETE
3. Consideration of a “strike approach” for certain incidents before lethal removal –ONGOING – Policy 5401
4. Staffing and roles and responsibilities review for these calls-ONGOING (Policy 5401 and SOP revisions)
5. Equipment inventory and ordering of new and/or replacement items – COMPLETED

What tasks came out of the CCRT?

6. Evaluation of current condition, and determine who needs to maintain proficiency in capture and immobilization-COMPLETED AND ONGOING
7. Provide scenario-based training-COMPLETED AND ONGOING for Wildlife Conflict Specialists (WCS)/ENFORCEMENT
8. Livestock Depredation Investigation Training-COMPLETED AND ONGOING for WCS with 7, above
9. Review of sources of outreach materials and put together self-help kits for distribution-ONGOING, with assistance of CAPE
10. Develop a messaging strategy-ONGOING with assistance of CAPE.

What tasks came out of the CCRT ?

11. Updated set of talking points and an FAQ document for use by Regional and Headquarters office staff to use-ONGOING
12. Improve ease of rural communities contacting the department with questions or incident reports-COMPLETED - WILDCOMM
13. Ensure we are collecting all needed or required data on incidents and animals removed for all staff that handle calls-COMPLETED AND ONGOING
14. Explore compensation program for domestic animals not currently covered under law- UNDER CONSIDERATION – REQUIRES RCW CHANGES



Cougar Focus Group

Initial Recommendations and Status from Cougar Focus Group (CFG) – August 2023

- Expectations for pre and post incident – ONGOING– Policy 5401 – Fall 2024
- Messaging to staff on policy, appropriate educational materials – ONGOING
- Improve field staff data collection on incidents – ONGOING – Spillman
- Outreach at trailheads and state-owned lands – ONGOING - CAPE
- Education to livestock owners on tools – ONGOING - more funding is needed (DecPack)
- Seek state funding to support small-scale livestock owners – ONGOING (DecPack)
- Follow up with landowners post incident – more funding is needed (DecPack)



OUTREACH & EDUCATION IMPROVEMENTS



GUIDEBOOK

**Coexisting with cougars
in Washington:**
A guide for small livestock owners



SEPTEMBER 2021



- **Prevention**
- **Exclusion**
- **Deterrents**
- **Attractant removal**
- **Deer & elk feeding**
- **Encounters**
- **Cougar behavior**
- **Recreating with dogs**



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Washington's Cougars

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.

History and Legal Status

In the 1800s and early 1900s, many people viewed cougars, wolves, and grizzly bears as threats to people, domestic livestock, and game species, and they targeted these large carnivores for extermination. Due to their adaptable nature, cougars were able to survive in the rugged and remote mountainous areas of the West.

Since 1968, the cougar has been a protected game species managed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Hunting seasons are regulated with established season dates. Hunting of cougars requires a hunting license. Cougar now occupy suitable habitat across the state. While cougar populations are currently stable, loss of habitat, loss of prey, disease, poaching and vehicle collisions can affect cougars as Washington's human population continues to rise.

Role in the Ecosystem

Cougars are apex predators whose presence helps to maintain an ecosystem's health and diversity. Scientific studies show that when large carnivores are missing from places where they were once present, ecosystems can be altered; for example, ungulates (i.e. deer and elk) can over-browse the landscape, which may alter habitats, and affect populations of other species such as birds and amphibians.

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 its fill.
- 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.

Most Frequently Asked Questions About Cougars

1. How many cougars live in Washington?

Cougars are solitary and are difficult to track and study. However, WDFW has funded and partnered with local universities on 7 study areas over 15 years in Washington. Based on this research WDFW estimates the independent-aged (>18 months) cougar population size is 1,900 to 2,100 animals.

2. Do cougars travel alone or in groups?

Cougars are generally solitary in nature. Anytime more than 1 cougar is seen it is likely a family group or when males and females come together to breed for a short time. The average litter size is 2 and a female cares for her kittens until they are 15 to 24 months old, at which time they may be as large as or larger than their mother, giving the impression that they are not solitary.

3. Do cougars overpopulate?

No. Cougars self-regulate their populations, they are density-dependent meaning that the number of resident cougars on the landscape is limited by the amount of available space and prey. Male cougars are highly territorial, establishing and defending a home range free of other males so that they have exclusive access to reproductive females. A cougar's social structure translates into low population numbers of resident cougars, approximately 4 cougars per 100 square miles. One of the highest mortality factors for cougars, other than human-caused mortality, is the killing of each other, especially males killing other males for territory, food, or a reproductive female. This is the primary reason they maintain a low population density.

4. Does a cougar sighting mean there are more in the area?

No. A cougar sighting does not necessarily mean that there are more cougars in an area. It might just be an animal passing through an area in search of an open territory. However, to avoid attracting cougars to human areas, do not feed deer and elk or allow them to bed nearby, as ungulates are the cougar's primary prey.

5. What do cougars eat?

Cougar's principal prey includes deer and elk, but they also catch prey as small as deer mice. Other prey includes coyotes, rabbits, rodents, raccoons, beaver, and infrequently, pets and livestock. Usually a cougar kills only one large animal at a time and kills one deer-sized prey every 7 to 12 days.

6. Do cougars reduce their prey populations?

Cougars can affect the behavior of prey populations and help to maintain elk and deer populations at healthy levels. As a species, they co-evolved with their prey over millennia. Cougars rarely cause substantial declines in prey populations. However, there are rare situations where cougars impact a prey population's growth rate, such as when prey numbers have already fallen to critically low levels. Other factors are more significant in deer and elk population declines, including habitat loss, changes in habitat quality, disease, weather, hunter harvest, road kills, and poaching.

7. Do cougars prey on livestock?

Cougars rarely attack domestic livestock. When they do, individual producers can suffer losses. Weather, disease, and birthing problems have a much greater effect on livestock than cougars. In Washington, domestic goats, sheep and fowl are the most vulnerable to predation. Changing animal husbandry practices may reduce livestock loss. Find out more about husbandry practices at: wdfw.gov/westernlifedlife.org.

8. Will more hunting or removal of cougars increase safety?

Not necessarily. The death of a single cougar creates a territorial vacancy that several other cougars will attempt to occupy and hold. Research data shows that younger cougars will move into an area to occupy the vacancy. This can temporarily result in more cougars in that territory until the population re-establishes its social structure to limit the numbers as described in Question #3.

9. Do cougars pose a significant threat to public safety?

No. Cougar attacks on people are extremely rare. A person is one thousand times more likely to be struck by lightning than attacked by a cougar. Cougars, like any wildlife, can be dangerous; therefore people who live, work, or recreate in cougar habitat should take precautions to reduce their risk of an encounter. In Washington, there have been 2 human fatalities between 1924 and 2018. While it may seem that cougar encounters are increasing, we must realize that the human population in Washington has grown from 4.1 million in 1960 to 7.6 million in 2018. That, coupled with the growing popularity of outdoor recreation, especially high-speed sports like mountain biking and trail running, means more people are passing through cougar habitat; yet cougars are almost never seen.

Cougar Signs

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

Scats

Cougars generally cover their scats, or droppings, with loose soil. Cougar scats (roughly the size of those of a large dog) are dense and segmented, blunt at both ends, and roughly one to one and one-half inches in diameter and four to six inches long. Scats may include hair, bones, and teeth from prey, and possibly grass, but usually no other vegetation. Cougars leave scats near scrapes, along trails, under overhangs, in caves, and near kills. Smaller cougars may deposit scats similar in size to those left by bobcats.

Scrapes

Cougars make scrapes and scratches to attract a mate, or to avoid each other by marking territory. Male and female cougars make scrapes by using their hind feet to push up a mound of pine needles, leaves, dirt or other debris. Cougars place scrapes in conspicuous places along trails, at junctions in canyons, in caves, and along ridgelines. Occasionally cougars urinate or defecate on the scrape. Bobcats make similar, but smaller, scrapes.

Scratches

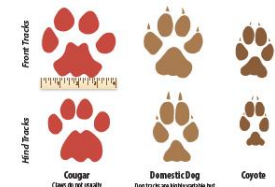
Cougars make scratches on logs, trees, and on occasion, fence posts. On trees, long, deep, parallel scratches run vertically four to eight feet above the ground rarely taking off much of the bark. All cats may scratch on occasion, but visible evidence is rare. Marks on trees are more likely made by bears.

Tracks

Cougar tracks show four toes on both the front and hind paws, and an M-shaped heel pad with two lobes at the top or leading edge, and three lobes at the base. Their retractable claws do not show in their prints except on slippery or difficult terrain where they need more traction. A cougar carries its heavy tail in a wide U-shape at a normal walk, and in snow, the lower portion of its tail can leave drag marks between each print.

	Adult Males	Adult Females
Track Width	4-5 in. (9-13 cm)	< 3.5 in. (5-8 cm)
Heel Pad	> 2 in. (6-13 cm)	< 2 in. (4-6.5 cm)
Stride Length	> 40 in. (9-11.5 cm)	< 40 in. (4.5-7.5 cm)

Note: When observing tracks, recognize that additional factors may be needed to make conclusions about the gender and general size of animal making the track, i.e., an adult male cougar typically leaves an impression of 4 in. or greater.



Cache Sites

After a cougar catches 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 close to the cache site and spend three to five days feeding. Never approach or linger near a dead or partially covered deer or elk.

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

Learn more about cougars and cougar safety on the poster inside.



OUTREACH & EDUCATION IMPROVEMENTS



KIOSK & TRAILHEAD SIGN

WILDLIFE LIVE HERE | LA VIDA SILVESTRE VIVE AQUÍ



To avoid surprising animals, make noise, keep pets leashed and attended.

Evite sorprender a los animales - haga ruido, mantenga a las mascotas atadas y vigiladas.



Washington Department of
FISH and WILDLIFE

- Do not feed, leave food, or make garbage accessible to wildlife
- If you see wildlife:
 - Do not approach or follow
 - Keep a safe distance
 - Give wildlife a way to leave the area
 - Do not run or turn your back
- Carry bear spray and know how to use it

- Favor de no alimentar a la vida silvestre, y no haga que la comida o basura sea accesible para la vida silvestre
- Si usted ve vida silvestre:
 - No se acerque ni siga
 - Mantenga una distancia segura
 - Darle a la vida silvestre una forma de salir del área
 - No corra ni le dé la espalda
- Lleve spray de oso, y sepa cómo usarlo

*Discover more about Washington Wildlife
Descubra más sobre la vida silvestre de Washington.*



QR Code = multiple languages



Decision Package

Solutions - Ongoing biennial request \$8.5 million

- Increase Wildlife Program Conflict and Communication staff levels statewide
 - 24 new positions (currently 18 WCS's statewide)
 - Conflict Specialists, technicians, beaver relocation staff, Communication staff, Admin, etc.
- Increased focus on preventive tools and training
 - Non-lethal measures, property owner outreach and education, proactive planning and tools
 - Education materials to landowners and communities early and often

Anticipated Benefits

- Increased Outreach and Education
 - Share resources and tips on living with wildlife
 - Work with landowners on preventative measures before issues happen
 - Receive and provide training to staff and partners
- Increase collaboration and improve relationships
 - Tribal involvement
 - Non-profits, community groups, local governments, Farm Bureau, Cattlemen's, etc.
- Increased law enforcement focus for Law Enforcement Personnel
 - More time to focus on law enforcement specific responsibilities
 - Enforcement will still handle 911 – dangerous wildlife related calls



Questions?

Request this information in an alternative format or language at wdfw.wa.gov/accessibility/requests-accommodation, 833-885-1012, TTY (711), or CivilRightsTeam@dfw.wa.gov.