



The cougar (*Puma concolor*), also called the mountain lion, is among the largest cats in North America. (The jaguar, which occurs in New Mexico and Arizona, is larger.)

Cougars live throughout the park in summer, but few people ever see them.

The northern range of Yellowstone is prime habitat for cougars because snowfall is light and prey always available. Cougars follow their main prey as they move to higher elevations in summer and lower elevations in the winter.

Adult male cougars are territorial and may kill other adult males in their home range. Male territories may overlap with several females. In non-hunted populations, such as in Yellowstone, the resident adult males living in an area the longest are the dominant males. These males sire most of the litters within a population; males not established in the same area have little opportunity for breeding.

Although cougars may breed and have kittens at any time of year, most populations have a peak breeding and birthing season. In Yellowstone, males and females breed primarily February through May. Males and females without kittens search for one another by moving throughout their home ranges and communicating through visual and scent markers called scrapes. A female's scrape conveys her reproductive status. A male's scrape advertises his presence to females and warns other males that an area is occupied. After breeding, the males leave the female.

As of January 2011 . . .

Number in Yellowstone

14–23 resident adults on the northern range; others in park seasonally.

Where to see

Seldom seen.

Behavior and size

- Adult males weigh 140–165 pounds; females weigh about 100 pounds; length, including tail, 6.5–7.5 feet.
- Average life span: males, 8–10 years; females, 12–14 years.
- Preferred terrain: rocky breaks and forested areas that provide cover for hunting prey and for escape from competitors such as wolves and bears.
- Prey primarily on elk and mule deer, plus porcupines and other

small mammals.

- Bears frequently displace cougars from their kills.
- Male cougars may kill other male cougars within their territory.
- Adult cougars and kittens have been killed by wolves.
- Litters range from 2–3 kittens; 50% survive first year.

Interaction with humans

- Very few documented confrontations between cougars & humans have occurred in Yellowstone.
- If a big cat is close by: Stay in a group; carry small children; make noise. Do not run, do not bend down to pick up sticks. Act dominant—stare in the cat's eyes and show your teeth while making noise.

In Yellowstone, most kittens are born June through September. Female cougars den in a secure area with ample rock and/or vegetative cover. Kittens are about one pound at birth and gain about one pound per week for the first 8–10 weeks. During this time, they remain at the den while the mother makes short hunting trips and then returns to nurse her kittens. When the kittens are 8–10 weeks old, the female begins to hunt over a larger area. After making a kill, she moves the kittens to the kill. Before hunting again, she stashes the kittens. Kittens are rarely involved in killing until after their first year.

Most kittens leave their area of birth at 14 to

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Cougar



Between 1998 and 2005, researchers documented 473 known or probable cougar kills, which included:

- 345 elk
- 64 mule deer
- 12 bighorn sheep
- 10 pronghorn
- 10 coyotes
- 7 marmots
- 5 porcupines
- 1 red fox
- 1 mountain goat
- 1 blue grouse
- 1 golden eagle

Cougars also killed six of their own kind, but few were eaten.

18 months of age. Approximately 99 percent of young males disperse 50 to 400 miles; about 70–80 percent of young females disperse 20 to 150 miles. The remaining proportion of males and females establish living areas near where they were born. Therefore, most resident adult males in Yellowstone are immigrants from other areas, thus maintaining genetic variability



This cougar kitten was photographed by researchers under controlled research conditions.

across a wide geographic area.

Yellowstone's cougars are not hunted within the park. Thus, their life span may be 12–14 years for females and 8–10 years for males. Cougars living in areas where they are hunted have much shorter life spans.

In Yellowstone, cougars prey upon elk (mostly calves) and deer. They stalk the animal then attack, aiming for the animal's back and killing it with a bite to the base of the skull or the throat area.

A cougar eats until full, then caches the carcass for later meals. Cougars spend an average of 3–4 days consuming an elk or deer and 4–5 days hunting for the next meal. Cougars catch other animals—including red squirrels, porcupines, marmots, grouse, and moose—if the opportunity arises.

Cougars are solitary hunters who face competition for their kills from other large mammals. Even though a cached carcass is harder to detect, scavengers and competitors such as bears and wolves sometimes find it. In Yellowstone, black and grizzly bears will take over a cougar's kill. Coyotes will try, but can be killed by the cougar instead. Wolves displace cougars from approximately 6 percent of their elk carcasses.

Management History

In the early 1900s, cougars were killed as part of predator control in the park. By 1925, very few individuals remained. However, cougar sightings in Yellowstone have increased dramatically since the mid 20th century.

In 1987, the first cougar ecology study began in Yellowstone National Park. The research documented population dynamics of cougars in the northern Yellowstone ecosystem inside and outside the park boundary, determined home ranges and habitat requirements, and assessed the role of cougars as a predator.

In 1998, the second phase of research began. Researchers collared 87 cougars, including 50 kittens in 22 litters. Between 1998 and 2005, researchers documented 473 known or probable cougar kills. Elk comprised 74 percent—52 percent calves, 36 percent cows, 9 percent bulls, 3 percent unknown sex or age. Cougars killed about one elk or deer every 9.4 days and spent almost 4 days at each kill. The study also documented that wolves detected and may have scavenged 22.5 percent of cougar-killed ungulates. This cougar monitoring study ended in 2006.

Very few cougar/human confrontations have occurred in Yellowstone. However, observations of cougars, particularly those close to areas of human use or residence, should be reported.