"A cougar is like a light breeze in the country," says John Seidensticker, a conservation biologist at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., who has spent decades studying big cats. "At first, you're not aware it's there," he says. "But as you slowly become more attuned, you begin to feel it on the back of your neck."

**POWERFUL PREDATOR**

Weighing between 110 and 220 pounds, the eastern cougar (Puma concolor couguar) stands – or stood, as it's believed to be extinct – 24-35 inches tall at the shoulders, and averaged 6 to 9 feet in length. This magnificent tawny feline boasted powerful forequarters, neck and jaw, which the cat used to overpower its prey.

Eastern cougars once roamed as far north as south-eastern Ontario, southern Quebec and New Brunswick in Canada; south to South Carolina; and west to Kentucky, Illinois and Michigan. Settlers believed the eastern cougar was a danger to livestock and humans, and a competitor for wild game. Eastern cougar range contracted significantly between the 1790s and the 1890s. The last three known eastern cougars were killed in 1930 in Tennessee, 1932 in New Brunswick and 1938 in Maine. Cougars had been hunted and trapped until only their ghosts remained.

New Hampshire's last eastern cougar, according to the book *A History of New Hampshire Game and Furbearers* by Helenette Silver and Ralph Carpenter, may have been taken in the White Mountains in 1885. "Until its disappearance in the late 19th century, the panther's range extended over the whole state," wrote Silver and Carpenter. However, "even where they were common, panthers were seldom seen and difficult to hunt. In spite of man's best efforts to eradicate them, they held on at least into the 1880s."

Although early residents of the Northeast routinely killed cougars, they nonetheless acknowledged the cats' charisma by naming thousands of geographic features after them. All but six states in the U.S. boast a Catamount Creek or the like. Perhaps best-known are the Catskill Mountains in New York, whose name comes from the Dutch term "Kaaters Kill," or Wildcat Creek. In New Hampshire, hikers may be familiar with Mount Washington's Lion Head and the steep, rocky trail that claws its way to the top.

The love-hate relationship between humans and eastern cougars, however, ultimately reached a sad ending. In 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to remove the cat from the endangered species list. The move is largely after the fact, as the eastern cougar – an animal that's been called the best hunter in the world – may have been extinct for decades.

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"The ghost cat, it's been called, this feline that roams backcountry from the Yukon to Chile. It has dozens of names, from panther, to puma, to mountain lion, to catamount. But its best descriptor, perhaps, is cougar."
PHANTOMS OF THE FOREST

The mystique of the mountain lion has an enduring allure for many Granite Staters. Between 2005 and 2014, Patrick Tate, a wildlife biologist at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, recorded 400 reports of cougar sightings in the state. “To date,” he says, “none of these reports have included the physical evidence necessary to confirm the species as a mountain lion. In fact, only a few of the 400 have included any physical evidence. All proved to be something other than a mountain lion, typically a bobcat or coyote.”

Tate acknowledges that many sightings remain unresolved, but without physical evidence, “it’s impossible for us to confirm the presence of mountain lions in our state.” For biologists, “physical evidence” equals tracks, scat or hair to obtain DNA, or verifiable photographs.

Is there any chance that eastern cougars, melting into and out of forest shadows, could still be with us in places such as New Hampshire? Like phantoms, in rare circumstances, mountain lions have materialized east of the Mississippi River, but they are thought to be animals on the move from populations in the western U.S., or cats that have been released or escaped from captivity.

Still, the reports continue. In May, 2012, a Manchester, New Hampshire, middle school sent out an alert after an animal thought to be a mountain lion was spotted circling the soccer field. A letter was sent home with local schoolchildren asking families to stay out of wooded areas. However, film of the animal allowed N.H. Fish and Game to conclude that the animal was a bobcat.

The New Hampshire Union Leader reported another sighting in its August 21, 2012, edition, calling it “the first verifiable mountain lion in modern New Hampshire history caught on film.” A hunter...
Out of twilight snow squalls, a cougar walked straight through the backyard of Lake George, N.Y., resident Cindy Eggleston.

Young male cougars may roam hundreds, if not thousands, of miles in their search for territories and mates. Whether cougars could return to New Hampshire, and survive in high enough numbers for a healthy, breeding population, are open questions.

For now, as biologist Gary Turbak of Montana has said, "It’s sufficient just to know that sometimes, in the shadows of dusk, felines on large paws still creep across the land."

Cheryl Lyn Dybas, an ecologist and science journalist, also writes for National Geographic, National Wildlife, BioScience and Yankee, among other publications.
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