

GHOST



CAT

THE ENDURING MYSTIQUE OF THE MOUNTAIN LION LIVES ON

BY
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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.

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"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 cougar*) 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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When a major predator like a mountain lion is on the landscape, it is likely to leave behind tracks, scat and evidence of kills. Shown actual size, a mountain lion track (above) averages about 3½ inches across.

PHANTOMS OF THE FOREST

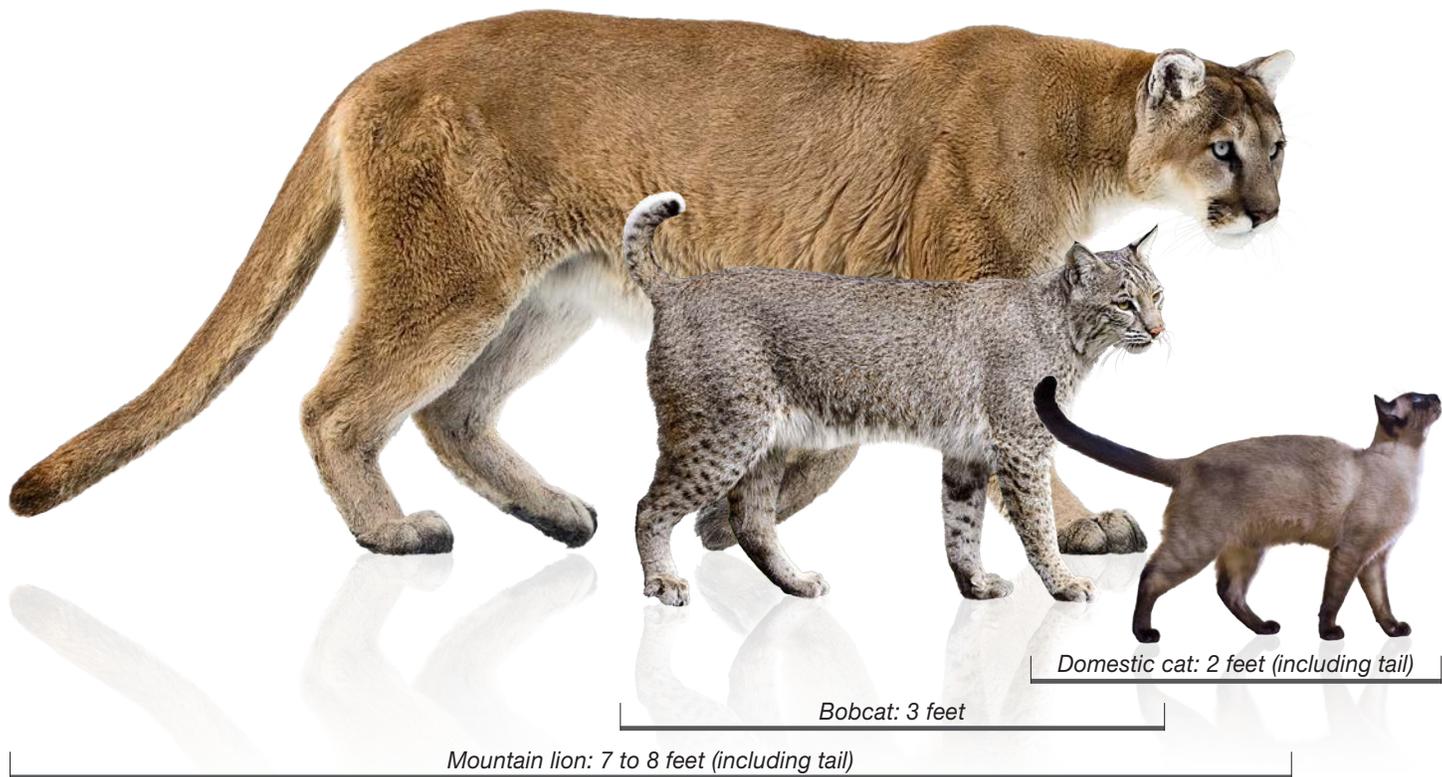
The mystique of the mountain lion has an enduring allure for many Granite Staters. Between 2005 and 2014, Patrick Tate, a wildlife biologist at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, recorded 400 reports of cougar sightings in the state. “To date,” he says, “none of these reports have included the 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



Mountain lions are massive, compared to a bobcat or domestic cat. Note the difference in overall size and length.

DREAMSTIME.COM IMAGES: MOUNTAIN LION © MIKELANE45 / BOBCAT © DONALD FINK / DOMESTIC CAT © IAKOV FILIMONOV

making his way along a deer trail looking for shed antlers hiked up a small hill. As the hunter crested the rise, out stepped a full-grown animal that could have weighed more than 150 pounds.

Unfortunately the reporting parties were unable to bring Tate to the location where the photograph was taken, nor could they produce the original image or 35mm negatives. The picture offered as proof of the presence of a cougar turned out to be at least seven years old.

Sightings are not a modern phenomenon. “Rumors of panthers [cougars] persist,” wrote Silver and Carpenter. “Some of the alleged panthers have certainly been fishers. Most New Hampshire people are familiar with wildcats [bobcats] and lynx, but few have seen either fisher or panther.” Despite the lack of definitive current evidence of cougars in New Hampshire, Tate and colleagues acknowledge that anything is possible, given the experiences of other Northeast states.

GHOST CATS GONE WALKABOUT

In nearby states such as Massachusetts, cougars have left clearer signs. While living in New England two decades ago, biologist Mark Elbroch, now of the wild cat conservation organization Panthera, investigated 43 mountain lion sightings from Connecticut to Maine. “I turned up one cougar,” remembers Elbroch, “in the Quabbin Reservoir area of Massachusetts. The cat had killed a beaver – and kindly left scat behind to send for genetic testing, which confirmed the identification.”

A wild cougar, albeit not an eastern cougar, was sighted on December 16, 2010, in Lake George, New York, on the southeastern edge of the Adirondack Mountains, and, as the crow flies – or the mountain lion roams – some 100 miles from the New Hampshire border. Out of twilight snow squalls, a cougar walked straight through the backyard of Lake George resident Cindy Eggleston. She gaped at it from her kitchen window, barely believing what she saw. The last mountain lion glimpsed in New York had been more than 100 years earlier.

DNA testing of hair left by the cat in its tracks later proved that it was indeed a mountain lion. It ultimately turned and headed south toward Interstate 95, where it was sadly killed on the highway in Connecticut.

Could the mountain lion have passed through New Hampshire on its travels? We will likely never know, but the cat’s “dispersal path demonstrated that cougars have the capacity to recolonize long-vacant habitat,” says John Litvaitis, a wildlife ecologist at the University of New Hampshire.

The cougar came from South Dakota’s Black Hills. It might just as easily have trekked into the Northeast from Midwestern states such as Oklahoma and Missouri, says biologist Michelle LaRue, executive director of The Cougar Network, a research organization dedicated to studying cougar-habitat relationships and the role of cougars in ecosystems. Cougars are returning to and recolonizing many of their former habitats in the Midwest, she says.

Writing in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, LaRue and colleagues report that the situation for cougars began to improve in the 1960s and 1970s, when many states designated cougars as managed game species. Since then, the cats have been spotted in Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas and Illinois.



*Out of twilight snow squalls,
a cougar walked straight through
the backyard of Lake George, N.Y.,
resident Cindy Eggleston.*

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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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