

MOUNTAIN LION

The Mountain Lion has many names. In other parts of the country it is known as the cougar, the panther, the painter, the puma, and the catamount (cat of the mountain). It is the largest of the North American cats. An adult male can weigh over 200 pounds and measure 9 feet from nose to tip of tail. The female is smaller.

Unlike the African lion, the cougar is a solitary animal and, also unlike the lion, it does not roar. The cat genus is divided into two families, Panthera and Felis. The voice box of each is attached differently giving the African lion its deep gruff tones and roars and the cougar more highly pitched tones and purrs. In fact, the mountain lion sounds like an overgrown house cat.

The male and female mountain lion come together for only about two weeks a year in the breeding season and three months later one to six spotted cubs will be born. Breeding is not confined to any one part of the year though in the northern parts of the animal's range it tends to occur in the early spring.

The cubs are born in a cave or other sheltered spot and are blind and helpless at first. They grow rapidly and the mother brings meat to them in addition to giving milk. The male cougar takes no part in rearing the cubs and, indeed, may attack them if they are found unprotected. After about two months the youngsters leave the home den and live in temporary dens and caves while the mother hunts for food. The spotted coat of the young mountain lion is excellent camouflage. As it grows older the spots gradually give way to the uniform color that gives the species its name (concolor). The family stays together for 18 months to two years, the cubs being taught to hunt and to be self-sufficient. As they mature they gradually drift away and find their own hunting territories.

Members of the cat family are excellent hunters. They have keen senses, good night vision, and lean muscular bodies. The forelimbs are armed with sharp claws and the longer hind limbs provide for amazing leaps and bursts of speed. The jaws and teeth are designed to seize the prey. The specialized tongue is covered with sharp bumps which rasp the meat from the bones of the prey and are also used to groom the animal's coat. But the mountain lion still has a tough time finding enough to eat. Deer are its

favorite food, and it helps the herds by taking the old and sick animals and keeping the numbers under control. Without any control measures browsing animals, such as deer, will increase in number until they outstrip their food supply and starvation results. Deer are hard to catch and the mountain lion may have to travel many miles and wait days between kills. It can get pretty hungry. A cougar does not waste food. After it has eaten its fill, it will hide the remains of the carcass, covering it with leaves or dragging it to a secluded spot. The lion remains in the area until the food is finished or has become too decomposed. Like humans, mountain lions like only fresh meat.

The male mountain lion maintains a year round hunting territory of about 100 square miles. It marks the boundaries with "scrape stations", piles of earth and leaves scraped up into a small mound. The animal may urinate on the mound. Another mountain lion coming along will respect the boundary line. Mountain lions rarely fight each other. Since they are such solitary animals they need to be in good health to survive, not maimed from a fight with their own kind.

Mountain Lion (*Felis concolor*)

