

Walk Softly and Carry a Big Tail

2014

In Marin, as elsewhere, the secretive mountain lion has a population vastly diminished from historic levels due to dwindling habitat, loss of natural movement corridors, hunting, use of rodenticide and other poisons, and conflict with humans.

At a Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed presentation at San Anselmo City Hall in September, Felidae Conservation Fund Executive Director Zara McDonald spoke about her organization's efforts to promote protection of wildlife ecosystems and ways for humans to coexist with wild cats and their habitats. The Fund is a Sausalito-based non-profit that supports international wild cat research and conservation.

This keystone predator, she said, once ranged from the Yukon to the tip of South America, but was extirpated in the eastern U.S. by 1900. In California, Proposition 117 in 1990 mandated protective measures to help revive the population of this powerful indicator species. Around the world, forest fragmentation is leading to rapid mammal extinction, she said, and estimated habitat loss for various wild cat species is between about 40 and 90 percent.

Ms. McDonald noted the following facts about lions, or pumas:

- Males weigh up to 260 pounds, although the largest found in California was 180 pounds; females generally weigh 110 to 120 pounds.
- They do not roar but make sounds similar a house cat.
- They are five to nine feet long(including the tail), capable of vertical jumps of 18 feet and horizontal jumps of 20-30 feet.
- Males have home ranges between 100 and 200 square miles; males are intolerant of each other and their home ranges do not overlap. Except when mating, they lead solitary lives. (Marin County Parks Chief Ranger Rob Ruiz estimated Marin's mountain lion population to be somewhere between five and 12 individuals, but emphasized that this is purely a guess. "They are very cryptic animals," he said.)
- Females have ranges of about 50 square miles, which overlap the home ranges of both males and other females.
- Deer provide about 60 to 80 percent of their diet but they also prey on rabbits, raccoons, porcupines and other wildlife.
- Litters are two to four cubs, which are born blind. They open their eyes after about two weeks and eat meat within six weeks.
- They live six to 13 years.

Up to 90 percent of reported mountain lion sightings, she said, are bobcats or other animals, and not mountain lions. Bobcats are smaller cats with much smaller tails. A mountain lion can be identified by its long tail, between one-third and one-half of its total length.

Felidae Conservation Fund heads a Bay Area Puma Project to find out more about these predators. Its research involves studying scat, installing motion-activated cameras, and conducting GIS mapping and modeling. There is a companion Santa Cruz Puma Project.

Ms. McDonald said that there have been six recorded human deaths in California from mountain lions from 1890 to 2013, and about 20 in North America. Many more deaths are due to hunting accidents.

More information on the Felidae Conservation Fund is found at www.felidaefund.org.

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