



# Foothills

## Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

### Mountain Lions



Historically, the mountain lion once ranged throughout North America from the Pacific to the Atlantic coasts. Although they are making a comeback, their range mostly has been reduced to the states west of the Rockies and a few populations in the southern states. In California, the lion lives in a variety of habitats: from desert to humid coast, from sea level to 10,000 feet. Lions are carnivores and their natural prey consists of deer, elk, bighorn sheep, wild boar, rabbits and gophers.

The mountain lion is also called a cougar, puma, or panther. The scientific name, *Felis concolor*, means “cat of one color.” A young lion has a spotted coat, but as an adult its coat is a uniform color. The color may vary from tawny to gray. The coat is white on the underside, and the ears, muzzle, and tip of the tail are dark brown or black. Full grown adult lions can measure from 6 to 9 feet from nose to tip of tail. Males weigh between 100 and 200 pounds, and females between 75 and 110 pounds. The average life span of a lion in the wild is 12 years. An adult male’s range can span as much as 100 square miles. Females generally have smaller ranges of between 20-60 square miles, occasionally shared with other females. In California, the density of lions is between 3 and 10 adults per 100 square miles.

The lion is a very elusive and solitary creature, and seeks companionship only to mate. During a two-week breeding period, the pair hunt and sleep together, and mate frequently. After the gestation period of about 90 days, the female will seek out a sheltered area, such as a cave, thicket or crevice. There, she will give birth to one to six kittens. The young are born blind and helpless, and with a spotted coat. After two weeks their eyes open. They are weaned at about two months. Young lions stay with their mothers for up to two years before becoming independent. This “independence” occurs when the mother chases the young lion out of her home range.

Mountain lions have always been on the lands comprising Foothills Park and Pearson Arastradero Preserve. Most sightings occur at dawn or dusk. More sightings are occurring during the day because more of their prey are out and about during daylight hours.

Mountain lion attacks on humans are rare. There have been only 17 verified mountain lion attacks on humans in California since 1890, six of them fatal. The last documented attack occurred in September 2014 in Cupertino. The last attack before that was in 2007 in Humboldt County.



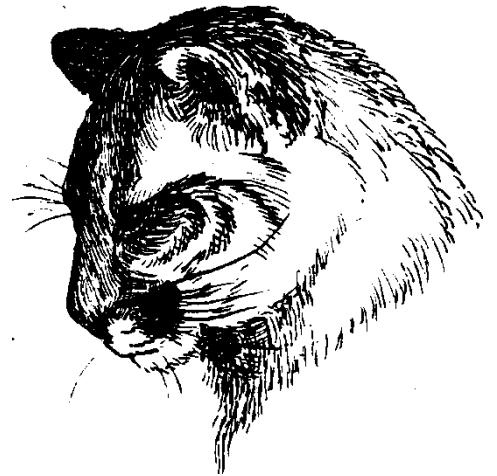
The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has been studying mountain lions since the early 1970s. Sport hunting seasons have not been held in the state since 1972. In 1990, Proposition 117 was passed by the voters and gave the lion permanent protected status. However, permits to shoot lions are often issued by the California State Fish and Wildlife Commission to farmers and ranchers who have lost their livestock to predation. From 1971 to 1974 an average of 13 predation permits were issued, and 4 lions were shot annually. In contrast, between 2004-2013, an average of 170 permits were issued and 86 lions were shot annually. The number of permits and predated lions has steadily decreased since a high of 256 permits issued in 2003.

The DFG says that mountain lion activity, such as depredation, attacks on people, and predation on prey populations, peaked in 1996, then decreased somewhat, and have remained stable for the past several years. DFG “guesstimates” that are are between 4,000 and 6,000 lions statewide.

Mountain lions and people are confronting each more frequently these days. There are more lions now because they are protected and because deer and other prey populations are increasing. Humans are moving into their habitat and shrinking their territories. Other human activity, such as gardening and hand feeding, bring deer into populated areas. Lions follow, resulting in increased sightings and confrontations with people.

For more information, see the DFW publication *Keep Me Wild*, which is available at the DFW’s website (<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/keepmewild/>).

*By Robert Badaracco, First Park Ranger  
Edited by Kathleen Jones  
Illustrated by Virginia Kolence*



**The California Department of Fish and Wildlife offers the following suggestions for living in mountain lion country:**

- **Do Not hike alone**
- **Do Not approach a lion**
- **Do Not run from a lion**
- **Do Not crouch down or bend over**
- **Do Keep children close to you**
- **Do all you can to appear larger**
- **Do fight back if attacked**

**Report all sightings to Palo Alto Police Communications  
24-hours a day at (650) 329-2413**