

# Eastern Cougar Foundation



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## Cougars in Missouri – Here for Now, But Future Uncertain

by Edward J Heisel

Until recently, the last documented report of a wild mountain lion in Missouri was an animal killed in 1927 in the state's southeastern "bootheel" region. After more than one-thousand reported sightings – seven of which have been confirmed by the Missouri Dept. of Conservation – it is now no longer disputed that at least a small population of mountain lions once again roams the state.

Confirmed sightings include some caught on video, a road kill and some verified through tracks and other evidence. They cover a wide geographic range from northeastern Missouri, to suburban Kansas City, to the remote Ozark region. While only a few years ago state biologists considered cougar sightings akin to UFO reports, they now appear more open minded to the presence of big cats. It is simply too hard to ignore the mounting evidence.

In 1994, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service prosecuted a case against coon hunters in the Ozarks who had killed a mountain lion. Photographic evidence and even confessions from the men who had shot it were obtained. Over the next eight years, six more confirmed sightings occurred, including a road kill last fall just north of Kansas City. According to state biologists, only one of these cats showed clear evidence of being an escaped pet.

The 100-pound cougar killed last October on a suburban Kansas City freeway was found to have fed on deer and raccoon, according to microscopic tests of hair found in its digestive tract. DNA tests performed at Central Michigan University showed that the cougar was a North American type, further indicating that it probably was not an escapee. "I think it was living on its own for awhile, if not totally wild," said Dave Hamilton, a biologist with the Missouri Department of Conservation. Hamilton speculates that the cat could have

wandered south along the Missouri River from the population in South Dakota's Black Hills. The closest stable populations to Missouri are found in Texas, Colorado and South Dakota.

It is unknown why cougar sightings are becoming more common in Missouri and states further east. Wildlife biologists note that the large prey population could have an impact on the number of big cats, but no one knows for sure. There seems little doubt, however, that cougars are reclaiming their former range in the east.

For its part, the Missouri Department of Conservation seems ready to acknowledge that cougars, from whatever source, do inhabit our state. The Department has formed a task force that investigates sightings and, if enough evidence is present, will provide confirmation. However, the agency's biologists have found that more than 99 percent of reported sightings turn out to be dogs, cats or other wildlife.

Mountain lions remain classified as "endangered" under Missouri law, meaning they are protected unless they are pursuing or attacking humans, livestock or domestic animals. In those instances they may be killed, but must be reported immediately to a conservation agent and turned over within 24 hours.

The future for the mountain lion in Missouri looks bright if the state's residents can be convinced that the species is a positive addition to the already abundant wildlife. Although humans continue to encroach further into rural parts of the state, the large population of white-tail deer and substantial public landholdings may be enough to sustain a population of the big cats.

*Mr. Heisel is the Senior Law & Policy Coordinator at the Missouri Coalition for the Environment in St. Louis, Missouri.*

## ECF News

### ECF WINS GRANTS! by Chris Bolgiano

Late last fall, ECF president Todd Lester received notices from the Summerlee and Norcross Wildlife Foundations that awarded both the grants for which the ECF had applied, for a sum of \$13,300. These funds are for the purchase and deployment of a fleet of motion-detection cameras, plus locks, film and development, a GPS unit, and other expenses necessary to deploying and maintaining the cameras in a remote area of Monongahela National Forest. The goal is to capture images of wildlife activity in areas where cougars, if present at all, are most likely to be found.

Credible reports have been coming from parts of the Monongahela National Forest for many decades, and cougar tracks were confirmed to the south of the national forest in 1996. If a cougar image is obtained, field searches for evidence such as scats, tracks, and kills will immediately be conducted to determine whether the cat is a transient or part of a reproducing population. Finding a viable population would galvanize eastern cougar recovery efforts.

Working with very supportive representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, as well as with members of the ECF Board of Directors, ECF officers have compiled a "Study Design and Field Manual" to guide the field work. The field season will run from approximately April 1 to mid-September.

The ECF is committed to working with rural communities in cougar habitat as well as with wildlife agencies and academic scientists. ECF officers and volunteers have contacted several community service clubs in towns near the survey area, to discuss the project and make the ECF brochure, *Living With Cougars in the Appalachian Mountains*, widely available. (This brochure is also available online or by sending a self addressed, stamped business envelope to the ECF). We may also be doing presentations upon invitation from local groups.



The Field Advisory Committee in action, L to R: Dr. Marcella Kelly, Va Tech; Helen McGinnis, ECF volunteer; Jeff Hajenga, WVDNR; Jay Martin, USFS; Todd Lester, ECF president; Dr. David Maehr, U of KY. (Photo by Chris Bolgiano)

## FIRST CAMERA SURVEY FIELD REPORT

by Todd Lester, Fieldwork Leader

Friday, March 28, 2003: Set all 18 cameras up. Held two out for spares as agreed during our Field Advisory Committee meeting. The 18 cameras are all within the 5 mile grid system we came up with during that meeting. This covered 7 large creek watersheds.

Deer sign was abundant due to the animals being stranded in the lower elevations all winter. Also saw a few fresh bear tracks. So besides possible bear damage right now, ramp diggers are probably our biggest threat for theft or vandalism. And around the end of April, we will have to deal with spring gobbler hunting.

The first check of the cameras will be April 4th & 5th. And they are scheduled to be moved to another grid on May 2nd & 3rd. I'll post the results of the first batch of film to the website as soon as the 36 exposure film is used up.

Field searches and camera checking trips are being planned most weekends this spring and summer.

Editor's Note: check the website [www.EasternCougar.org](http://www.EasternCougar.org) for a running log on Todd's field work.

## The Right Place at the Right Time

by Kevin Heyde

It all started in the early 1980's, when I had an encounter with a cat of the "rather large kind." I only told my family of this first encounter because I was afraid of ridicule from others who would dismiss it as a hoax or as a story by someone with an over active imagination.

In the fall 1987, I was watching a brushy ditch connecting two pieces of timber, my back against a large locust tree. It was firearms deer season, and I was waiting for a large whitetail buck. Suddenly, a ghostly apparition appeared just 80 yards in front of me. I couldn't believe what I was seeing—a cougar standing on a pond dam. I dialed my riflescope up to 10 power, blinked several times, and looked through the scope again. It was still a cougar! Then, with a powerful leap, it propelled itself off the dam and vanished into the creek below. I found myself shaking uncontrollably with excitement.

Many still scoff at the idea that lions may be in the same woods where they mushroom hunt. Paraphrasing a local newspaper writer, "It is a mystical dream to think they are out there." In the late 90's, more northern Missourians sighted cougars. Finally, the Missouri Department of Conservation has begun to acknowledge that there are cougars in Missouri. When a person shoots one, they have to admit it. Many people feel that it is a belated confession.

My interest in "hard evidence" increased as time passed. More sightings were reported, always followed by denials. I began to search the Internet for cougar sightings and other information. I found a newspaper article that described how scats were being DNA tested to confirm the presence of mountain lions in Michigan.

On Christmas morning 2002, I was celebrating with my wife's relatives. One of my brothers-in-law said a young man had told him that he had seen a panther cross the road several days earlier. My wife's brothers kept tossing around the idea of taking one of my coonhounds to see if we could find a trail, or maybe even tree the cougar - if there really was a cougar at all. I finally agreed to take one of my dogs, since the sighting was only a few miles north.

We went to the exact spot the cougar had supposedly crossed the road and walked downhill into a chest high switch-grass field. A timbered draw led down through the field into a dried-up pond. Several of us looked for tracks, and we joked that this cougar story had been made up so that people could get a good laugh at our expense. We had just decided to leave when my coonhound began to run a track about a ¼ mile away. We headed for the pickup

because there wasn't a chance of finding a track of any kind in the dry, frozen ground. My brother-in-law glanced at his Blue Heeler cattle dog and noticed she was chewing on something. It was a long, large diameter feces. We took it from the dog. It seemed to be composed of compressed deer fat, meat, and hair.

We renewed the search for clues while my coonhound trailed into the distance. My brother-in-law spotted a large mound of fresh dirt about 18" across and 8" high. There was also a large scrape about 2½ feet by 2½ feet in front of the pile where "the cat" had dragged the dirt to cover the scat, which I kept. It measured 1" to 1 ½" in diameter. There were two pieces approximately 7½ inches long, and a third about 3½ inches long.

I began to worry about my hound. She was rapidly getting out of hearing distance, so I left the rest of the search party to follow her and finally caught her after a 3-mile chase. I found her treed at a large brush pile where whatever it was had taken refuge. When I returned to the truck, my brother-in-law said they had discovered three more scat piles, and had also found where the cat had urinated and scraped over it (frosty yellow ice crystals). I thought, "Great, three more samples!" but I learned that the Blue Heeler had eaten all of them. If I hadn't been on the trip, no sample would have been saved, and our story would have had no more credibility than another sighting—completely hearsay. In reality, the Blue Heeler gets the credit for making the discovery. I just prevented all the evidence from being consumed. Hopefully, it will be confirmed through DNA testing as cougar scat.

One month later, I was trying to sneak behind a fence row to get behind a calf so that I could chase it into the corral with its mother. In a strip of snow on the north side of this fence-row behind my house, I accidentally found a set of possible cougar tracks. That instant I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I haven't seen anything quite like this before! I absolutely have to come back and look at these again!" I remembered that two days earlier, I had discovered one of our horses had jumped a tall fence and was in the wrong pasture. This filly was born in this pasture and had lived there for two years. I couldn't imagine why she had jumped out—until I saw the tracks.

Later that evening, I made it back to look at the tracks with my brother. We could tell by the lack of definition that they were several days old. I wasn't certain how to tell a cougar

track from a dog's, but I wasn't going to let this evidence get away. I made a cast using concrete, and I took several pictures (in the dark). I have now learned to hold the light source low and off to the side to create a shadow effect in the track. The next day the tracks were all melted except for a set that showed the length of the stride to be approximately 21 inches. Since discovering the big tracks, I have studied a lot of bobcat, coyote and dog tracks. The more I examine, the more I am sure that these were big cat tracks. But like most things concerning these "ghosts of the forest," the tracks I found aren't indisputable evidence, mainly because because the heel pad is not well defined.

For each sighting that is reported, I'll bet there are at least ten to twenty that aren't. Most rural Missourians have lived out in the brush all of their lives. In their eyes, they don't need to have anyone confirm what they saw. Most reported cases are said to be "probably a dog, coyote, or bobcat" due to lack of evidence. After word gets around that just seeing a cougar doesn't count, why would anyone bother to report a sighting. In the last 5 years, I personally have heard of around 15 sightings within 20 miles of my house.

Even if the "evidence" I have found cannot be proven to be cougar, at least I now know how to recognize a cougar track in the future. I hope to "win the lottery" again, and find more scats. With luck, maybe I will be in the right place at the right time, and get to see a third cougar in another plain-as-day setting.

## Why I Want Cougars Back

By Kevin Heyde

What a breath taking experience! A cougar, it was only 80 yards away, and totally unaware of my presence. It appeared instantly, stayed for a short while, and then vanished with an explosive, powerful leap. Cougars are the epitome of beauty, grace, and awesome deadly power. I have been blessed with two such encounters here in northern Missouri. The first one mentioned above was during deer season in the late 80's, and the second one was treed by my coonhounds in the late 90's. For any person who enjoys the outdoors, an experience like this is priceless. For me it was like winning the lottery. It is similar to having a wild deer feeding close enough to you that you can almost count its eyelashes. I wish everyone could have a similar experience with a cougar.

I'm not convinced that this should be titled "Why I Want

Cougars Back". I think it should be titled "Why I Want Cougars to Increase," at least here in the Midwest. From talking to many "old timers" about the subject, there seems to be a really good chance that they have always been here in Missouri. There are many sightings, which I personally know of, that go all the way back to the 1940's. Some of these observations have even been made by biologists. I know many people find the idea ridiculous. They say things like, "There is no way there are cougars out there, but my parents used to see those long-tailed panthers quite often when I was a kid." I have talked to several Gentry county residents that think a panther and mountain lion are two different animals.

The most frequent thing I hear when confronting someone about the possibility of an increasing cougar population is, "We don't want them around here! They will kill livestock, and people for that matter!" When I quote the sightings from as early as 1940 to them, and ask them where are all the casualties, they seem to come around to the idea that maybe they can live with us without causing any problems. Coyotes have always been with us, and it is very rare that one turns into a problem animal. When they do become a problem, they are dealt with and the world goes on. Another thing I often hear against cougars is, "Just wait until they get over populated." Through nature's own design, I think it would be very rare for them to over populate an area, they don't reproduce rapidly. On the other hand, we have witnessed the bobcat becoming so plentiful in a short time period that they have had to open a season on them.

I feel that we need to work together to educate people about this wonderful creature. The more they know the less fear they will have. If they become a problem in the future then they can be dealt with accordingly. Let's not find them guilty before they commit a crime. Out of all of the sightings I know of personally, there isn't one mishap between man and beast.

I have an idea that we may not get to have a say in the outcome. The sightings have increased dramatically in the past 10 years indicating that there might be a population increase whether we like it or not. The general public seems to accept the idea of an increase better than having a new population.

In local circles it used to be, "Hey, so and so thinks they saw a cougar." Now it seems to be more common to hear, "Hey, I heard you saw one too." I doubt it is possible, but who knows, maybe in the future they will become common enough to reach game animal status. After all, fifty years ago deer sightings were scoffed at in many places. Regardless of the size of their population, re-read the first paragraph and you will know, "Why I Want Cougars!"

## Cougars in Michigan

by Helen McGinnis

Last year an important article was published in the Wildlife Society Bulletin, a journal read mainly by natural resource professionals and academics. Entitled "The eastern cougar: a management failure?" this paper by James Cardoza and Susan Langlois, both with the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife in Massachusetts, reviews the history of the assumed disappearance of cougars from the East and the onset of legal protection under the Endangered Species Act in 1973. They consider the thousands of alleged sightings that have been reported to state wildlife agencies and collected by private groups and individuals, and conclude that a high proportion of these are cases of mistaken identity, but that there is evidence of a few cougars.

The article ends with a set of recommendations for the US Fish & Wildlife Service, which is responsible for the protection of the eastern cougar because it is a listed endangered species. Further general recommendations are seemingly aimed at the state wildlife agencies. They include setting standards for defining and investigating evidence, establishing protocols for biological samples such as scats, holding workshops "for providing structure and guidance and coordinating research and guidance efforts," and training researchers in the detection and identification of cougar signs.

The state wildlife agencies east of the Mississippi River seem to have little interest in these recommendations. Instead, documentation, education, training and workshops are left entirely to private organizations. Only one workshop on eastern cougars has been held—the Eastern Cougar Conference in Erie, PA in 1994. It was organized by Jay Tischendorf and his private organization AERIE. A second conference, which would be sponsored jointly by the Eastern Cougar Foundation (ECF) and AERIE, is now being planned.

The Michigan Wildlife Conservancy (formerly the MI Wildlife Habitat Foundation) has taken leadership in defending cougars in their state. It's a relatively large organization with a paid staff that has been in existence for 21 years. Its primary focus is the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat by providing technical and financial assistance to landowners and managers.

In 2001 Dr. Patrick Ruzs , who works with the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy, announced the discovery of verified evidence of cougars on both the Upper and Lower Peninsulas of Michigan—one of the most significant developments in the history of the recovery of cougars in their former range. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources response was less than enthusiastic. They do not accept the presence of breeding populations, implying that any cougars that do inhabit the state must be recent releases or escapees from captivity. The subspecies of cougar that occurs in Michigan is a candidate for endangered species listing, but last fall state wildlife biologists issued permits to several landowners officer to kill "a large feral cat" that attacked livestock.

This year the Conservancy has decided to aggressively defend its cougars. They have set up the Michigan Cougar Protection Fund to compensate livestock owners for proven depredation. A similar program established for wolves in Minnesota and the West by Defenders of Wildlife has worked well for many years. They have scheduled a lecture series in several communities to educate the public. Dr. Ruzs is holding one-day Cougar Tracking Schools (\$40.00 for Conservancy members and \$55.00 for nonmembers). The next one is scheduled on May 17<sup>th</sup> in Traverse City, Michigan. For more information, go to [www.mwhf.org](http://www.mwhf.org) or write to Michigan Wildlife Conservancy, PO 393, Bath, MI 48808.

We may see this level of advocacy in other eastern states when resident populations are documented there.

Continue to insert....



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Win an ECF T-SHIRT by answering the question: Why do we want cougars back?

Can you explain in less than 500 words why you would like to see the East's top predator return in viable numbers? If so, you may win an ECF T-shirt and the publication of your essay on the ECF website. Email your essay by July 1 to ECF vice president Chris Bolgiano at [bolgiace@jmu.edu](mailto:bolgiace@jmu.edu)



The Eastern Cougar Conference, 2004

April 29th, 30th, and May 1st, 2004

This special conference, only the second such meeting ever devoted entirely to the fascinating subject of the cougar in eastern and midwestern North America, is being organized jointly by the ECF and the American Ecological Research Institute (AERIE). The gathering is open to anyone with an interest in wildlife, conservation, nature, cougars, or related topics. Students are encouraged to attend. Registration fees have not yet been set. AERIE and the ECF are currently soliciting proposals for papers pertinent to the subject of eastern, midwestern or Great Plains cougars. If you have questions about the conference, or if you would like to have a presentation, poster, or display considered for inclusion in the final schedule of events, please e-mail a brief (500 words or less) abstract as soon as possible to Jay Tischendorf at [Jay\\_Tischendorf@Merck.com](mailto:Jay_Tischendorf@Merck.com)

