

Eastern Cougar Foundation



W I N T E R 2 0 0 2

“Surplus” Florida Panther Kittens Spur Talk of Reintroduction by Helen McGinnis

Derived from Fort Meyers News Press, 9/23/02; article by Mark Derr (newspaper unknown), 10/15/02; miami.com, 9/24/02.

The year 2002 has been a banner year for the Florida panther. As of October, 13 females have given birth to 30 kittens, up from 23 kittens in all of 2001 and only seven in 2000. If survival data accumulated for panthers so far is correct, 60% of those kittens will die before their first birthday. Even so, a major population increase is likely.

But maybe only for the short term. The problem—where will those kittens live when they grow up? Darrell Land, leader of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s panther team, suspects that current habitat in southern Florida is already saturated with the 70 to 100 adults now in residence. He bases his conclusion on the increasing number of road kills and mortally wounded young males.

The life of an adolescent male panther is likely to be brief and unpleasant. Between the age of 18 months and two years, he must leave his mother’s territory and find his own. For a male, that means between 100 and 200 square miles with an adequate food supply, access to resident females, and minimal contact with humans. If he attempts to relocate in a territory already claimed by an adult male, he’s likely to be severely wounded or even killed. But, the farther afield a young male disperses, the less chance he has of finding potential mates. And the more contact he has with humans, the more likely it is that he will end up dead on a highway or shot.

The boom in panther births is credited with a project that began in 1995 to increase the genetic diversity of the surviving population. In the late 1980s, clear evidence of inbreeding, such as kinked tails, cowlicks, heart defects, and disorders of the immune system were typical. Most males were cryptorchid (only one descended testis) and had a very high percentage of malformed sperm. The World Conservation Union predicted that without intervention, the Florida panther would probably be extinct by 2055.

In 1995, eight female pumas imported from western Texas were released in southern Florida. Three died without breeding; the others mated with male panthers. At least 40 of the panthers now inhabiting southern Florida are partially of Texas origin. None of these so-called hybrids have the disorders of inbred panthers.

Inbreeding is not the only threat of small, isolated populations of rare species. Catastrophes such as hurricanes and disease also put them at risk. For these reasons, the recovery plan calls for reintroduction of panthers elsewhere in their assumed historic range outside southern Florida. Until the recent surge in birth, this part of the plan had been sidelined.

John W. Kasbohm, the US Fish & Wildlife Service biologist leading the panther recovery project, says a new recovery plan is being prepared. This revision, which will likely take two-years, is the first priority. In the meantime, Joe Clark and Frank Van Manem, both at the University of Tennessee, have been contracted to do a GIS study of the best sites, biologically, for panther reintroduction within its historic range (northern and central Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana).

A 31-member team, including most state and federal wildlife agencies, the timber industry, the Farm Bureau, and two environmental groups (Defenders of Wildlife and the National Wildlife Federation), will help with the recovery plan. All of the state wildlife agencies except Arkansas accepted the invitation. The team is divided into two groups: one will consider the future of panthers in their existing range. The other will consider reintroduction into other areas.

Following the completion of the recovery plan, the team will consider reintroduction. Reintroduction will likely be more of a political than a biological process. Selection of site(s) would involve public outreach and going through the NEPA process. Most likely, the sites selected will be federal or state-owned lands.

Cat of Many Names

by Helen McGinnis

If this is the newsletter of the Eastern Cougar Foundation, why does it include an article on Florida panthers? It's because *Puma concolor* (in older studies known as *Felis concolor*) is a cat of many names.

An eastern cougar is any native cougar inhabiting the assumed range of *Puma concolor couguar*. This range is guesswork based on outmoded taxonomy (methods of classification) by Edward A. Goldman in 1946. Goldman had only five skulls and one tanned skin from New York, one skull from Pennsylvania, and one skull from West Virginia when he drew lines on a map. *P. c. couguar* is supposed to be a medium-large cougar, darker in color than most, but this characteristic is impossible to verify.

The assumed range of the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) is also guesswork. Goldman had 17 specimens for his 1946 work—14 from Florida, three from Louisiana. Many biologists believe that the pelage and skull characteristics of cougars in southern Florida are distinctive. However, Melanie Culver could not distinguish their DNA from any other North American cougars in her study of cougar DNA, published in 2000.

H.H.T. Jackson split the cougars of the western Great Lakes and northeastern prairie into a separate subspecies, *Puma concolor schorgeri* (Wisconsin puma) in 1955. The eastern cougar and Florida panther are on the federal endangered species list. Cougars in the range of the Wisconsin puma are considered extinct, but are also candidates for endangered species listing.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service probably uses this map to determine the range of the endangered species of cougars. They are committed to aiding the recovery of Florida panthers by reintroducing them outside southern Florida within their assumed historic range. Thus Florida panthers could be reintroduced to Arkansas but not into North Carolina. Cougars in the small population of the northern end of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, if native, would be classified as *couguar*, but those on the Upper Peninsula would be *schorgeri*.



The assumed ranges of cougars in eastern North America, based on a standard reference work used by mammalogists. No. 4 is the Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*), No. 6 is the eastern cougar, (*P. c. couguar*), No. 13 is the Wisconsin puma (*P. c. schorgeri*), and No. 14 is the Texas puma (*P. c. stanleyana*). The stippled areas show the locations of the only three documented breeding populations.

Field Notes

by Todd Lester

The new "Rapid Response Camera" has arrived. It is a PhotoScout- Infrared & Motion Detection Game Scouting Camera made by Highlander Sports, Inc. This camera will be kept on standby until a good opportunity for pictures presents itself. For example: It could be setup at the site of a fresh kill. This will be a big asset to our efforts in the field.

A new lab will be conducting DNA analysis on scats and hair samples for the ECF, starting in January 2003. The first two scats that are being sent to this lab came from Kanawha & Greenbrier Counties in West Virginia. They were collected during field searches in the summer of 2002. The results should be known by early spring 2003.

Three scat samples collected in 2001 are still being held on a frozen-waiting-list at another facility. We are in the process of getting an estimation on when testing will be conducted on these scats. If testing isn't performed soon, we will request them back and send them to the new lab.

Winter field searches are now being planned. If anyone is interested contact Todd Lester at the ECF.

Cougar Confirmations

by Helen McGinnis

Missouri

Derived partially from articles by Bill Graham in the Kansas City Star, 10/14/02 and 10/16/02

On October 14th a motorist struck a cougar on Interstate 35 in the Northland, northern Kansas City. Police officers were skeptical when Susan Ratliff reported that a cougar had suddenly appeared in her headlights about 1:45 am, but a broken headlight and blood and hair on the bumper convinced them to search the vicinity. They found a mortally injured cougar and shot it.

The animal was a 125-lb male, 7 feet 1 inch from nose to tail tip, and was estimated to be 2 or 3 years old. The stomach was empty, but hair resembling deer hair was found in the intestine.

Officials found no evidence that the cougar had been in captivity. Captives sometimes have tartar buildup on their teeth, but this cougar had clean teeth. No evidence of abnormal tooth wear, which occurs when captives chew on bars or wire, was noted. Captives often have tattoos or ear tags; this individual had none.

"If it was found anywhere other than where it was, I'd say it was a wild animal," said Dave Hamilton, a biologist who leads the Missouri Department of Conservation's Mountain Lion Response Team. "But the location where it was found makes it suspicious."

In July, Edward J. Heisel, Senior Law and Policy Coordinator for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, posted an update on the easterncougar listserv on confirmations in the state. "Our Department of Conservation (MDC) considers there to be five confirmed sightings in recent years," he wrote. "In 1994, MDC prosecuted a case involving photographic evidence of a dead mountain lion and obtained confessions from the men who shot it. In 1998 a mountain lion skin was found in the Ozarks and it was later determined it was probably this same animal and that the skin had been frozen for many years. DNA analysis indicated that the animal was from North America. There was no evidence to indicate whether it was an escaped animal, transient or product of a local breeding population."

"There have been four other videotapes (one filmed by an MDC agent) taken of free-ranging mountain lions since 1995. The most recent that I'm aware of was in December 2000 from northeastern Missouri. There have been DNA tests done on deer carcasses from mountain lion kills, although MDC claims that these tests were inconclusive as to the animal's origin."

"The last documented report of a "wild" mountain lion in Missouri was an animal killed in 1927 in the bootheel region."

The Ozarks continue on into Arkansas. The Missouri confirmations bolster alleged recent finds of tracks and scats in that state.

Quebec

Derived partially from article by Kate Jaimet, Southam News/National Post, 10/15/02

In 2000, a truck driver contacted Dr. Marc Gauthier, a wildlife biologist at Envirotel 3000 in Sherbrooke, Quebec. He said he had hit a cougar with his truck near East Hereford in Quebec's Eastern Townships. Could Gauthier determine if such a cougar was an escapee from captivity or a true eastern cougar, he asked? Intrigued, Dr. Gauthier set up velcro-covered poles treated with cougar urine in the Gaspé region, the Eastern Townships and the Mont Tremblant area. He hoped that cougars—if there were any—would be attracted to the poles, rub against them, and leave some hair behind.

Hair samples caught on the poles were taken to Dr. Virginia Stroehrer's microbiology laboratory at Bishop's University at Lennoxville, Que. In August, one of Stroehrer's students came in with a problem. He'd worked up a hair sample from the Gaspé region three times; each time, the result was cougar. Stroehrer and the student went through the procedure once again. Again, the result was cougar.

Stroehrer is refining her DNA techniques and hopes to eventually be able to distinguish cougar populations from different regions of North America, including eastern cougars. At this point, based solely on the published work of Melanie Culver, the DNA of North American cougar

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.....continued Cougar Confirmations

“subspecies” can’t be distinguished. Culver was able to distinguish the DNA of five cougar subspecies in Central and South America but found only one type across North America. A wild cougar with one of the Latin American genotypes would definitely be a former captive or its descendant, but one of North America genotype could be of from captive stock, a survivor of the original population, an immigrant from the West, or a combination of the previous three sources.

The Gaspé hair sample is the second announced confirmation of a cougar in Québec.

On May 27, 1992, a 90-lb male was shot and killed in a front yard near Abitibi Lake, far to the west of the Gaspé region near the Ontario border. Dr. Culver analyzed a sample of the flesh of this cat. Its closest match was to pumas in Chile. So this animal almost certainly was a former captive.

State, provincial and federal wildlife officials in the United States and Canada insist that any wild cougars in the East today are former captives. The evidence to date shows they are at least partly correct. A young cougar, accompanied by a larger individual that escaped, was killed in Crawford County, Pennsylvania in October 1967. Its physical characteristics matched those of a puma from Costa Rica. The DNA of a kitten killed on a highway in Floyd County, eastern Kentucky, in June 1997 showed that one parent was of North American descent, the other South American.

Many sightings have been recorded in the general vicinity of the Gaspé. The late Bruce Wright, who is responsible for much of the current serious interest in cougars in the East, worked in the Northeastern Wildlife Station at the University of New Brunswick and collected many reports from the Gaspé, New Brunswick, eastern Maine and Nova Scotia. In the 1990s evidence backing up sightings began to come in. Tracks and a scat were recorded in central New Brunswick in 1992; the scat contained snowshoe hare bones and leg hairs from a cougar. Two game wardens investigated a sighting of three cougars near the St. John’s River in NW Maine, about 150 miles from the New Brunswick site, in 1994. They found tracks, which were officially reported as cougar.

Native Cougars in Michigan? Michigan DNR and US Fish & Wildlife Service Remain

Dubious Derived partially from articles in Grand Rapids Business Journal, 11/7/02; Detroit Free Press, 9/28/02; The Detroit News, 10/6/02; Traverse City Record-Eagle, 9/19/02

The latest round between Dr. Patrick Ruzs, who appears to have indisputable evidence of cougars from both the northern end of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula (LP) and the Upper Peninsula (UP), versus the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the US Fish & Wildlife (USFW) Service continues to play out this fall. It all began in August when the Bill and Linda George, who own a farm in Kalkaska County on the LP, reported that two of their horses had been attacked during the night in their corral near the farmhouse. “One of the horses suffered a series of long, deep scratches on its back, and another horse had a number of scratch and bite marks on its rump and back legs,” said DNR wildlife biologist Tim Webb.

A Percheron mule and a large dog were also attacked on the Larry Strauss farm nearby. More than 200 chickens also vanished. Strauss’ 17-year-old son Alan says he’s seen the cougars—a large one assumed to be the mother and a smaller one, presumably a kitten—on at least two occasions. The Traverse City Record-Eagle printed a photograph of a large presumed cougar track found on the George farm. This track, however, is almost certainly a dog’s.

Webb issued permits to Strauss and George allowing them to kill “one large, feral cat, species unknown.” Those permits expired on September 30th. Strangely, cougars are protected by both Michigan state law and by USFW. Representatives of both agencies explain that they consider cougars endangered but extirpated. Following this line of reasoning, any cougar in Michigan must be a former pet or its descendant and thus is not protected.

Ruzs, working for the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation, disagrees. He suspects that Michigan’s cougars are survivors of the original Michigan populations and that, like the Florida panther, have lost much of their genetic diversity. Between 2000 and late June of this year, he and his associates collected more than 100

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cougar scats from 20 sites on both the UP and LP. One of their early finds was analyzed by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and determined to be North American cougar. Other, later finds are being carefully studied at a laboratory at Central Michigan University. Their findings will be published in a scientific paper.

The DNR ignores Rusz' work. As late as November 7th, it continued to speculate that Michigan cougars are most likely escaped or released pets. However, the agency no longer advises killed a cougar. "If you see an animal like that, just stay away," says Steve Griffith of the DNR.

Paul Willison, a resident of Michigan and active participant in the eastern cougar listserv, says that cougars are a hot item this year. People who believe they've seen cougars in

the past but opted to say nothing about them are freely discussing sightings.

Perhaps it will just take time and the publication of Rusz paper. "Wolves have successfully recolonized the UP, with a population now approaching 300," Willison says. **1962, Place** **Wolves, Calif** **UP, are celebrated as a DNR success, even** **Photo by William R. Hewlett**

though the DNR has nothing to do with the recovery (it was entirely natural, the wolves having self-located from Minnesota and Canada). . . However, people who report wolf sightings from the Lower Peninsula are given about the same treatment as those who report cougar sightings." Wolves have been seen, tracks found and even howls recorded on the LP, "but the DNR will not even consider the possibility that wolves are now on the lower."



A Gift for Cougars

These T shirts make a strong statement advocating the return of a top predator to our eastern wild areas. Your purchase would help to support the Eastern Cougar Foundation conduct field investigations to document reproducing cougar populations in the East. If you request it, the shirt will be gift wrapped and accompanied by a card with the name of the gift giver. To order, visit ECF's store at its website: www.easterncougar.org.

Cougar Field Guide Available

Dr. Patrick Rusz has prepared a field guide for volunteers who are looking for cougar sign in Michigan: **DETECTING COUGARS IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION**. It is well illustrated with photos of scrapes, scats and tracks. The guide is more relevant to conditions throughout the East than other guides, which reflect conditions in the West, where large expanses of dust make tracks relatively easy to find. To obtain a copy, send a check for \$10.00 to the Michigan Wildlife Habitat Foundation, PO Box 393, Bath, MI 48808.

New Book Features Eastern Cougar Foundation

The latest book by Chris Bolgiano, environmental writer and vice president of the ECF, has recently been published by Stackpole Books. In *Living in the Appalachian Forest: True Tales of Sustainable Forestry*, Bolgiano devotes a chapter to Todd Lester, his work to recognize eastern cougars, and the role of cougars in the East. You can purchase an autographed copy of this paperback book by sending a check for \$23 to Chris Bolgiano, 10375 Genoa Road, Fulks Run, VA 22830. Be sure to include a note that says you saw this notice in the ECF newsletter, and indicates what you'd like the inscription to say. Half of all proceeds are donated to the ECF.



Eastern
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Foundation

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The Eastern Cougar Foundation



Conducts investigations to document the presence of cougar in eastern North America



Promotes full legal protection of all cougars living wild in the East, regardless of origin.



Builds tolerance through education

Position Statements

On Reintroduction: The ECF advocates full and immediate implementation of the FL Panther reintroduction plan including community outreach and education.

On Origins of Cougars: There are three possible sources for cougars in the East: remnant natives, escaped/released captives, and migrants from known populations in Florida, the western U.S., and Canada. It is entirely possible that cougars from two or all three sources are mingling. The ECF believes that any cougar capable of living independently wild is capable of filling the eastern cougar niche regardless of origins, and should be protected and respected as an eastern cougar.

On Cougars as Pets: The ECF opposes the breeding and maintenance of cougars as pets