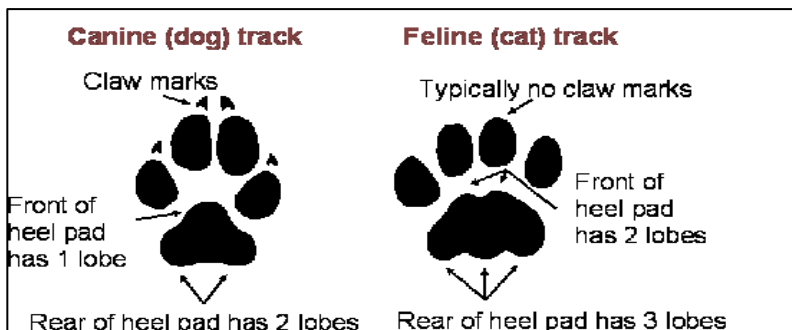


Cougars: Big Cats of the PNW

Did you know that cougars live in the Pacific Northwest? Cougars, also called Mountain Lions and Pumas, range throughout Washington state. Males' territory is about 150 square miles. Females, which are smaller than males, roam an area of 50 square miles. Usually, three females live in the same territory as one male cougar.

Cougars are very large cats. Males can weigh up to 180 pounds, but most of them are about 160 pounds. They are 7-8 feet long. Females are smaller; they weigh about 110 pounds. Both are reddish-brown or tawny and have a black-tipped tail. Cougar kittens have spotted coats until they are over a year old.

Because they are carnivores, cougars eat meat. They hunt mainly at night but can hunt during the day also. Cougars like to eat elk, moose, and mountain goats, and deer are their favorite food. They can also survive on smaller mammals, such as raccoons, rabbits, and coyotes. If cougars range near a farm, they may kill and eat livestock. Male cougars eat about 20 pounds of meat at a time. To survive, they must make a kill about every 10 days. They bury the leftover meat and come back for it when they are hungry again.



Someday you may be walking outside and see tracks in the dirt or the snow. Look at the differences between feline (cat) prints and canine (dog) prints here. Do you think you could recognize them on your own?

It isn't easy to spot cougar tracks. Unlike dogs, cats keep their claws retracted until they need them. Also, cougars have a "soft" walk, so they seldom leave tracks unless they are in snow or mud.

Another way to know if a cougar has been in the area is by finding their poop. Cougar poop will have pieces of bones and fur in it. Canines usually don't crunch the bones of their kill, but felines do!

Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates that 1,900 – 2,100 cougars live in our state. They are shy animals and tend to stay hidden in the forests. Females have 2 kittens at a time, and cares for them until they are 15-24 months old. Just like pet cats, cougars have many sounds. They can hiss, mew, growl and purr. They also wail and moan in the middle of the night – which would be scary!

Speaking of scary cougars, what would you do if you came across a cougar in the wild? Well, wildlife biologists have some suggestions. First, always hike with a group and make noise when you walk along the trail. Cougars prefer to avoid people, so if they know you're around, they will probably go somewhere else. If you see a cougar, don't run. Cougars' instinct is to chase prey, and you don't want it thinking you're tasty! Don't turn your back, either. Face the cougar and speak to it in a loud voice. "Go away, cougar!" is a good thing to shout. Also, try to look big: hold your arms up in the air as you are yelling. Lastly, if the cougar still isn't retreating, start throwing stuff at it: your water bottle, rocks, etc. Cougars are big, beautiful, and fierce.