

Hazelton Standard-Speaker SUNDAY
March 4, 2007

Wildcats won't be reintroduced to Pa. anytime soon

By ALAN GREGORY
alangregory@standardspeaker.com

Jay Tischendorf has been around animals all his life, both as a veterinarian practicing in Schuylkill Haven, State College and the Harrisburg area, and later as a wildlife biologist.

He's handled a lot of cats in his career, mostly of the domestic type. But his favorite feline might be the cat most often called mountain lion, cougar, puma, panther or any of several other names.

Today, the Montanan is a director of the American Ecological Research Institute and also serves on the board of the nonprofit Eastern Cougar Foundation. The latter organization was set up to advocate for "the recovery of cougars in as much of the East as possible," its Web site states.

But the foundation's more immediate mission is to keep track of and investigate reported sightings of the big wildcat in the East, especially within the Appalachian Mountains. Eastern Cougar Foundation, field analysts include Tamaqua resident Joe Lankalis. Officially, there are no cougars in Pennsylvania and the state Game Commission has long been on record as opposing any proposal to reintroduce Puma concolor cougar to the state.

"The Game Commission has stated many times that we would oppose and would not approve any proposal by any individual, group or government agency ... to release mountain lions, or wolves for that matter, into Pennsylvania for one very simple reason: There is no area of the state remote enough that we wouldn't see conflicts with humans if such predators were released," said Game Commission spokesman Jerry Feaser.

The agency considers the cougar to be extirpated from the state, he said, and it has been unable to "scientifically authenticate the current existence of mountain lions living and breeding in the wilds of Pennsylvania."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, keeper of the federal endangered and threatened species lists, considers the cougar "endangered" throughout its former range in the East, including Pennsylvania.

Additionally, the Pennsylvania Game and Wildlife Code provides legal protection to any truly wild cougar that may be in the state - and there are reputed sightings almost yearly.

Cougars were extirpated from the state by the late 1890s. But sightings - nearly all of them later disproved - have increased in recent years.

"Typically, there is nothing to prove or disprove puma reports, just the observer's testimony," Tischendorf said. "Where there is definitive evidence - be it pictures, video, track casts or whatever - the many cases I have been involved with in Pennsylvania have all proven to be other non-puma animals," he said.

"This includes house cats and bobcats, primarily. It is a strange phenomenon - even when, for instance, a photograph is clearly a bobcat, there are seemingly credible people who will tell you matter-of-factly that it is a cougar."

Tischendorf submitted e-mail responses to questions about cougars and other wildcats and reputed sightings.

Is there a future for the cougar in the East, and more specifically in the Northeast?

Tischendorf: "I like to think so, but I readily admit there may be some hurdles and obstacles. The anti-predator voices, for instance, can be quite loud and often are quite savvy in playing the political game.

"And the future of the cougar is probably more a question of politics than biology and ecology. Ultimately the people of eastern/Midwestern America will be the ones to decide if they want pumas, also known as cougars or mountain lions, back. Natural resources, including all wildlife, are for all the people; in a democracy, no minority whether for or against pumas, or for that matter any other species - should be able to dictate what survives or doesn't."

What are the social/economic/cultural barriers to reintroduction?

"First a determination has to be made that the public does or does not want mountain lions in the East. So far no objective attitude survey has been done to conclusively demonstrate either of these scenarios. Suitable habitat would have to be identified and plans constructed to provide for variable options in managing the cats, depending on where they are within the designated ranges or zones. Public education would be needed, as it always is for everything else."

People regularly report having seen what they say is a cougar, or mountain lion.

What do you think is behind all of these sightings? What are people likely seeing?

"Number one, the huge majority of reports have no hard evidence of any kind to support them at all, so it is impossible to determine what, if anything, the observer actually saw. Second, when a puma report is accompanied by hard evidence of some kind, in my experience that evidence usually points to some other animal than a puma having been seen.

"Bobcats and, yes, even house cats, are often implicated in puma sighting reports. And, yes, people get very upset if anyone tries to explain that their puma was in fact a house cat or a bobcat. That is why I try to stay out of that fray, or at least try to stick with reports where there is substantial solid evidence that multiple experts can independently verify as puma or non-puma.

"Having said this, despite the high number of erroneous reports, I always say that even if one in a million puma reports is valid, we need to try to explain it."

If there is a small number of cougars about in the region, how come there's so little evidence, like a road-kill carcass, or high-quality photos or video, or prints?

"That is an important issue. I have been actively involved in the subject of pumas in eastern North America for 25 years and I used to say pumas could easily elude detection. But I have had to change my tune on this.

"Today I acknowledge that the lack of verifiable evidence certainly suggests that east of the Mississippi River there are very few if any pumas roaming around....

"Pumas aren't ghosts. Where there are pumas, even apparently a small number, they can be, and in fact *are*, documented. I've done this - searching for and confirming pumas in the West - as a field biologist. The lack of roadkilled pumas or even confirmed puma tracks and trails despite so many reports in Pennsylvania, tells me that, again, most reports are erroneous. The one exception referred to above was in 1967 in western Pennsylvania and it involved what was most likely a couple of escaped or released pumas, one of which was shot and killed."

What should a person do if she/he truly believes he/she saw a cougar? Who should be told? What about evidence? "As thoroughly and carefully as possible they should try to gather as much hard evidence as possible. Photographs of the animal or its tracks, hair samples, or even the carcass if they happen to find a road-kill or other dead puma, are extremely important.

"In any case, regardless of whether evidence is collected or not, a state wildlife biologist, conservation officer, naturalist or forester should be notified, as should officials at the Eastern Cougar Foundation. It is best for the observer to keep a, sampling of any evidence from the observation in the event the other portion of the evidence is lost or mishandled.

"Scat or tissue samples should be refrigerated but not frozen. Photographs should be duplicated and stored in a safe dry place."

What are the human society's previous attitudes toward carnivores like the cougar? Are attitudes shifting?

"Historically predators were feared and condemned. Animals like the wolf, bear, and puma were direct competitors with us in the day when man had to hunt to feed his family. Today an objective, thorough attitude survey would be necessary to determine what the prevailing attitudes are toward these and other predators. ...

"I realize some people don't like, or even hate, predators. That is their prerogative. But if you don't like these animals and you are a hunter, especially if you consider yourself skilled, successful hunter, then I have to ask why is it you don't like the predator?"

"Is it fear? Insecurity? Misdirected awe? Of all beings, you - as a fellow hunter - should have nothing but respect for these animals that hunt every night and day of their lives, not only to feed themselves but also, often, to provide for their families.

"Not because they can buy a license ... not because they want to, but because they have to. And they have to do this 24-7, 365 days a year, with no GoreTex, no wool coat, no sno-pac boots, rain gear, down coat, high-powered rifle, razor-sharp broadhead or four-wheeler, but with only their teeth, claws and instinct.

"Give it a try sometime. This truly is hunting, and if you consider yourself a hunter, then you in particular should have nothing but respect and admiration for the wild animals that live this life. ..."