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Cat Tales' in the Alleghenies

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Officially, there are no mountain lions in West Virginia.

One of the last in this state is said to have been killed here in Pocahontas County, near Tea Creek in the late 1870s.

But don't try telling that to the scores of people who say they have seen the big cat with its rounded ears and long tail or heard its blood-curdling scream in the middle of the night.

Belief in the persistence of panthers has deep roots in these parts. Long-time readers of The Pocahontas Times are well aware that the venerated editor and conservationist Cal Price firmly believed the eastern cougar still roamed the "endless mountains" of Appalachia - particularly the Allegheny highlands. Price often published reports of sightings, mauled livestock and that eerie, unmistakable cry.

The big cat known scientifically as puma concolor cougar has a number of local monikers: cougar, puma, panther, painter, catamount, mountain lion and the like. Native Americans referred to them as "ghosts of the forest".

Today, with numerous sightings but little hard evidence of their existence, that name seems particularly apt.



Coopers Rock Mountain Lion Sanctuary, near Morgantown, provides a safe haven for abused, neglected, and unwanted cougars. Visitors can view Tecumseh and others in their natural environment.
Photos courtesy Coopers Rock Mtn. Lion Sanctuary.

The eastern cougar is one of 15 puma subspecies found in North America.

Eastern cougars are described as large, unspotted, long-tailed cats. They may exceed eight feet in length, including the distinctive long tail. The cats generally weigh between 80 and 150 pounds, with males typically being heavier than females. Their body and legs are a uniform tawny hue, while their belly is pale reddish or reddish white. The inside of the cats' ears are light-colored, with blackish color behind the ears. Sometimes their face has a uniformly lighter tint than the overall hue of the body.

Mountain lions were not uncommon in the Mountain State when early settlers moved into the area, and these cats were most abundant in the Allegheny Mountains, according to the Department of Natural Resources. The numerous Panther Knobs and Panther Runs found across the state speak to the animal's influence on early mountaineers.

Cougars, as well as wolves, were the top predators throughout the forests of eastern North America. The European settlers who began arriving in the late 1500s were familiar with wolves but had no knowledge of cougars, which are unique to the New World.

The unlucky animals were quickly viewed with the prejudice that Europeans had against all predators. At first, settlers thought cougars were African lions or leopards. Only gradually, over a period of about a century, did Americans realize that the cougar was a distinct species. Cougar folklore combined European ideas about predators with Native American knowledge, mixing psychological fantasy with biological fact. Not until about the mid-twentieth century were scientific methods used to study cougars and determine their true nature.



Mariah the cougar relaxes at CRMLS. CRMLS is an all volunteer facility that provides permanent homes to neglected cougars in their natural environment. Visit them online at cougarsanctuary.org

Photos courtesy Coopers Rock Mtn. Lion Sanctuary.

Because cougars are powerful predators, settlers feared for their own safety and for the source of their food and livelihoods: their livestock. Cougars were hunted, often with dogs, until they were believed extirpated in the eastern United States and Canada by about 1900. Widespread deforestation across the East in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the market hunting of deer herds almost to extinction during that same period, also contributed to the decline of cougars.

The original distribution of the cougar was across lower Canada in the north to Patagonia, in South America. It was the most widely distributed land mammal in the Western Hemisphere. It was found in a variety of habitats, including tidal marshes, deserts, mountainous terrain and deciduous, coniferous and tropical forests.

With the exception of Florida, the cougar has been extirpated from east of the Mississippi River since 1900, according to wildlife officials. In the west, it is still quite common in wilderness areas of the Rocky Mountain states and British Columbia.

Here in Pocahontas County, the killing of the last cougar is credited to a party headed by Col. Cecil Clay. The September 29, 1927, Pocahontas Times gives a detailed account of the events that took place on Yew Mountain.

Clay served in the 68th Pennsylvania Infantry during the Civil War. While he was badly wounded during the war -his right arm was off above the elbow and his left hand was disfigured by a minie ball- he was an avid hunter and had a specially-made Winchester rifle that accommodated his condition.

The Times notes that the colonel "got on extremely well with the people of Pocahontas County" and was a frequent guest in local homes.

Clay was also a capitalist who kicked off the region's white pine logging boom of the late 19th century. At the time Clay and his party encountered the Tea Creek cougar in 1876, they had actually set out in search of a coal seam discovered by a Thomas Galford.

On their way, they found the carcass of a doe, partially eaten and covered up with leaves.



Mountain lions are as comfortable perching in trees as roaming the forest floor.

Photo courtesy
freewildlifepictures.com.

Forgetting the coal seam, Clay, Galford and Frances McCoy returned to the spot with a muzzle loader and five hounds.

After treeing the cougar, Clay made the shot by supporting the heavy gun on McCoy's shoulder and firing with his crippled hand.

"Col. Clay took a careful aim and when the gun cracked it was apparent that the panther had been hit", the Times article recalled. "It seemed to spring away from the tree and it started to fall among the limbs of the hemlock. It afterwards appeared that the shot had struck and broken one shoulder. As the beast fell with its one good front paw it grabbed a limb of the tree and for a moment it seemed as though it would be able to maintain itself in the tree when that limb broke and down came the limb, panther and all."

Before the gun could be reloaded, the dogs finished off the cougar.

Even after that last confirmed kill, cougars continued to be sighted in the county.

Just 11 years after Clay bagged his cougar, S.C. Baxter, of Stony Creek, was riding his horse near Elk when a cougar reportedly pounced upon them. The panther's claws tore into the shoulder of Baxter's mare and left three claw marks between four and nine inches long on Baxter's leg.

In 1936, tracks in the vicinity of Kennison Mountain, Pocahontas County, were reported by workers from the U.S. National Museum. Although there are still sightings of mountain lions in the Mountain State, the DNR maintains that the source of these animals is difficult to determine. Two cougars captured in Pocahontas County in 1976 were western cougars that had been transported here and released. Subsequent sightings reported to the agency have also been escaped or released animals.



Native Americans referred to them as ghosts of the forest.

Despite their troubled history, sightings of cougars in remote areas of the East never completely ceased. By the 1960s, sightings had increased to the point that the eastern cougar was believed to be possibly still existing and was included in the first Endangered Species Act in 1973. An official U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service search for cougar signs in the late 1970s and early 1980s turned up several promising scats, but technology available at that time could not confirm them as cougar, and no other confirming evidence was found. But in the 1990s, DNA analysis as well as other methods began to confirm field evidence of cougars.



A cougar skull
Photo courtesy US Department of the Interior.

At least two groups have dedicated themselves to searching for evidence of eastern cougars and are eagerly anticipating the comeback of the once-reviled cats.

[Paragraphs omitted.]

Mind you, shoot the camera, not the gun if you think you see the real deal. While cougars are officially believed to be wiped out in these parts, they are also officially still under the protection of the Endangered Species Act.

The forests of Pocahontas County have, in fact, been the subject of an intense, methodical search for evidence of cougars in recent years. The Eastern Cougar Foundation, founded by West Virginian Todd Lester in 1998, conducted two rounds of remote camera surveys on the Monongahela National Forest in coordination with forest biologists and the DNR.

During 2003 and 2004, the surveys netted around 1,000 photos of 339 bear, 104 coyotes, 43 bobcats and a mess of other critters, but zero cougars.

Judging by similar studies that were conducted by scientists in search of jaguars and tigers, the Monongahela camera study had a 95 percent chance of getting at least one photograph per 1,000 "trap nights", even with a low population density, according to a report the ECF released following the study. Between 2003 and 2004, the cameras had a combined 5410 trap nights.

"While we can not confirm cougar presence across our study site,

it may be that we did not have high enough trap effort if cougar density was extremely low or if only newly dispersing animals are entering the area," the report states.

Dr. Jay Tischendorf, the ECF's current president and a wildlife biologist who has studied mountain lion populations in the West, conceded that in light of the camera study, there appeared to be no cougars in the area.

"On one hand, its mind boggling," Tischendorf said. "It seems so improbable that you would have so many reports, yet most of the time there is no hard evidence to tell you anything about what was seen."

Even with the small population that exists in Florida, between 15 and 20 cougars were struck by vehicles last year, Tischendorf noted. In the Great Plains and midwest, where cougars haven't roamed for 100 years or so, there have now been confirmed cougar roadkills.

If mountain lions did indeed roam these endless mountains, Tischendorf believes at least a few would fall victim to West Virginia motorists.

Skip Johnson, the long-time outdoors writer with The Charleston Gazette, believes that if the eastern cougar truly has been vanquished, such "newly dispersing animals," might eventually lead to cougars reestablishing themselves in the Appalachian chain, much as coyotes dispersing from the west have now made a home in these mountains.

"I think that eventually, perhaps in 20 years or so, there will be a wild, breeding population in the East," said Johnson.

The writer points to the Great Plains, where sightings increased until a breeding population had eventually established itself in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Wildlife officials in that state have even implemented a regulated hunting season. Sightings have also picked up in Kansas and Missouri, Johnson noted.

In eastern West Virginia, Johnson believes conditions are right for the cougar to make a comeback. The abundance of white tail deer means an ample food supply for the predators, while the Monongahela National Forest offers an oasis in the East of nearly one-million acres of relatively unbroken habitat. Without a doubt, the coyote has caused consternation among farmers who have lost livestock to the animals. Whether or not people are willing to accept cougars in their midst is a whole other debate, concede those like Lutz, Johnson and the ECF.

From a sportsman's perspective, Johnson said such a comeback would be exciting news, not unlike the rebounding of the state's deer

and bear populations, or the reestablishment of trout in the North Fork of the Cranberry River.

"If it is ever determined and everybody agrees that cougars are here, then that's the biggest wildlife story of the past 100 years," Johnson said.

The Eastern Cougar Foundation has a hotline and e-mail address to take reports of cougar signs:

Eastern Cougar Foundation, easterncougar.org;

ChristopherSpatz@easterncougar.org; 845-658-9889

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