

Pocono Record

Pocono Outdoors

John Serrao



Mountain lion sightings could indicate its comeback to Pa.
... or some wild imaginations



The mountain lion officially survives in the East only in southern Florida, where it is called the Florida panther.

By [John Serrao](#)
Pocono Outdoors
October 21, 2007

A phantom creature has been sighted in the vast Delaware State Forest region of Pike County.

Reports of a mountain lion have come from several residents of Hemlock Farms who were hiking on trails in the forest adjoining this sprawling community. A security guard claims to have seen a mother lion with cubs. In early October, large footprints were discovered and photographed by a biologist, and these are now being studied — do they belong to a big bobcat, a coyote or a mountain lion?

Sightings of this controversial animal are reported every year from the forests of Pennsylvania, especially during hunting season when thousands of people are stalking the woods. Just about every eastern state receives similar claims, even though the mountain lion officially survives in the East only in southern Florida, where it is called the Florida panther.

So, what's the truth? If all of these sightings are cases of mistaken identity, what are the people seeing? And if at least some of them are, indeed, mountain lions, where are they coming from? Are they escaping from zoos, being released by people tired of keeping them as pets, or actually dispersing into the East from established populations in the western United States and Canada?

Or, as some folks claim, are they from a remnant population of mountain lions that managed to survive in some remote, rugged wilderness areas of our eastern states while most of their species were exterminated?

I attended a very interesting program on Oct. 4 at Beltzville State Park by Kerry Gyekis, an author, forester and investigator for the Eastern Cougar Foundation. ECF is a non-profit, science-based, volunteer-run educational organization that advocates the restoration of viable cougar (mountain lion) populations in suitable areas of the eastern and central United States via natural recolonization by the cats themselves.

The organization seeks proof of cougar sightings in the form of scat (droppings); plaster casts of footprints; or photographs of the footprints (with a coin for size-reference) or — better yet — of the animal itself. Sightings alone aren't accepted as scientific evidence because they can't be proven and — as Gyekis demonstrated in his slide program — other animals are commonly misidentified as mountain lions.

When the first European arrived on these shores, the mountain lion was the most widely distributed animal in the Western Hemisphere. It occurred from sea level to the top of 14,000-foot mountains; from tropical South American rain forests to southwestern deserts, from northern hardwood forests to Florida's Everglades, from coastal pine woods to Canadian alpine forests. By the late 1800s, mountain lions were wiped out of almost the entire eastern United States by hunting, trapping, deforestation and the decimation of their main prey — white-tailed deer.

Populations in many of the western states, however, remained healthy. Today, some of these mountain lions are dispersing eastward where forests have recovered and deer are more abundant than ever.

Road-killed mountain lions have recently been found in many Midwestern states, including Illinois, Missouri, Iowa and Arkansas. They've returned as breeding populations from Texas to Minnesota, and it's possible they've come back to Louisiana and Ontario, too. In the 1990s, Dr. Maurice Hornocker, the foremost expert on mountain lions, predicted that they would soon be found east of the Mississippi again, and it appears that this has occurred.

What about Pennsylvania? Despite the annual reports of cougars being sighted in our state, their presence is far from accepted by biologists, including those from ECF. Gyekis showed photo after photo of animals which were sworn to be mountain lions by the photographers, but which turned out to be either bobcats or house cats.

It's hard to believe that a 25-pound bobcat or 10-pound house cat could ever be mistaken for a 100- to 180-pound mountain lion with a tail almost 3 feet long. However, the size of the cat walking across an open field at the edge of a line of small trees can easily be vastly overestimated, as Gyekis repeatedly demonstrated.

Members of the audience, including me, were astounded about how easy it was to identify the blurry image of a cat walking in front of saplings as a mountain lion at the edge of a forest. Even footprints are very difficult to identify with complete certainty. And, although the great majority of these observers were genuinely fooled, there have been a few fakers, including a well-known cougar "expert" who photographed "footprints" that he made with plaster casts.

Nevertheless, if mountain lions continue to move eastward, or southward from Canada, it may just be a matter of years before they return to Pennsylvania's extensive system of national and state forests and game lands.

Some residents of Hemlock Farms may say that they have already arrived — the evidence awaits verification.