

The cougar conundrum: do mt. lions roam W.Va. wilds?

From The Logan Banner ~ West Virginia



At left, note the long tail and spotted coat of this mountain lion kit

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No other
creature in
these parts stirs
more curiosity
than the cougar.
Also known as
the puma,
catamount or
mountain lion;
do the big cats
inhabit the wilds

of our home state? If so, where are they and how many of them are out there?

Per several of our readers, they do. Over nearly two decades here, we've got many a phone call and personal contact from perfectly normal folks claiming that they've seen cougars in the readership area.

In fact, one such sincere face-to-face talk was held just the other day. This week's column is at the humble request of that gentleman and the folks that preceded him.

He's a woods wise fellow and has seen many a coyote, bobcat, bear and you name its. He says he has seen cougars and that he knows there are plenty of critters for them to eat here including deer, turkeys and wild boar. The fellow is somewhat tormented by his observations and wants a little info. So here goes.

First and foremost, he wanted to know if I had personally seen one here. I haven't but am all ears to outdoor observations ... And yes, he's not alone in his opinion. Furthermore, I can relate to seeing something that you ought to just keep to yourself for being thought crazy by the rest of the human hoard. Maybe there's a parallel.

More than a decade back, I saw one of the smoke-gray or white varieties of the wild turkey in the Man area of Logan County. It was a sleek, wild and ghostly critter with all the speed, guile and cunning of its normal colored brethren. Eventually and through our readers, we got some photos and lots more witnesses to these unique critters.

The state turkey experts dismissed them as tame stock or some such. Eventually, the Turkey Federation's Turkey Call magazine began running features on color variations of the wild turkey. As the years passed, the Banner had actually covered (with photos) a local gobbler of the smoke-gray color variation and an acquaintance actually bagged one in a more distant county. Don't tell these guys that the birds were

tame ...

A lot of folks thought the coyote thing was a hoax too. As a former conservation officer, I have photographs of coyotes from Pennsylvania circa 1976. We now know the rest of the coyote story as they are all but everywhere and in decent numbers.

Could the cougars follow the same route? Why not? If there's a few of them out there, lots of country and good numbers of prey; they sure could make a comeback. Yes, they were once part of the native fauna here.

And then there was this other seemingly crack-potted call of an albino porcupine again from those officer days. Thinking the caller might have had too much to drink or just couldn't sort his 'possums from other critters, until we had a look see for ourselves, that is. They had a snow white, pink-eyed, full albino porcupine at their residence.

Moving from other strange critters back to mountain lions, the big cat reports were actually much more common a decade ago. We proposed here that many of those long-tailed and blackish critters being observed and usually at night were actually coyotes. That was when most folks had yet to see a coyote.

At any rate, the mountain lion reports kind of dwindled and we stick to that theory. But that was then and this is now with a much more coyote savvy human flock. And, the mountain lion reports keep rolling in. Just to have some fun, there definitely are mountain lions in West Virginia! However, we must separate the captive variety from the truly wild ones. Therein lies the kicker.

If or when a real lion turns up dead in some manner, it automatically begs the question. Was it an escaped pet or zoo critter? The State Wildlife Center at French Creek near the town of Buckhannon in Upshur County keeps some big cats on site for visitors.

Near Morgantown there's the Coopers Rock Mountain Lion Sanctuary (CRMLS). It's a licensed rehab center that takes on abandoned pets and that like. Tours and speakers can be arranged by contacting CRMLS. CRMLS is "dedicated to rescuing abused and neglected cougars."

Their web-site is found at www.cougarsanctuary.org. The site features a neat photo gallery. The non-profit can be contacted by writing to: Mark Jenkins, Director of CRMLS, Route 1, Box 332, Bruceton Mills, WV 26525.

If you want more info or need someone to talk to, you don't have to look too far. The Eastern Cougar Foundation (ECF) is headquartered at the nearby Wyoming County town North Springs. The Foundation is a non-profit that you can join. Its

president is Todd Lester and they can be wrung up on the internet at www.easterncougar.org. They even have a hotline for reporting big cat info by calling 304-664-3812.

Both ECF and CRMLS feature links to each others sites. In 2004, ECF sponsored and Eastern Cougar Conference right here in West Virginia. Even National Geographic magazine acknowledges scattered reports of mountain lions in the wilds of Appalachia including West Virginia and surrounding states.

Mountain lions are fully protected here and cannot be harmed indiscriminately. A generation ago folks would have thought you crazy for believing elk and coyotes could become regulars on the Appalachian home front. Could the mountain lion be next?

As can be seen from these sources, an increasing number of sound minded folks believe not only that the big cats could be next. They seem quite certain that they're already here...oh my!

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