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LIVING WITH MOUNTAIN LIONS

A solitary cat struggles to survive against the odds.

BY ELAINE ROBBINS



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As the sun started its slow descent, wildlife researcher Bill Adams and a friend watched a cottontail rabbit hop down the road toward his truck. They had been tracking locations of a radio-collared female mountain lion for a research study. Suddenly, about 20 yards in front of the truck, a mountain lion kitten dashed out and chased the rabbit into the brush.

Surprised and delighted, they waited a few minutes. Then they searched along the brush line for signs of a kill. "We saw [the kitten] sitting right in the brush watching us," recalls Adams. "Soon he felt comfortable and nonchalantly walked across the road and sat under a mesquite tree. There he found a Texas tortoise. He actually played with it like a housecat might play with a toy." The lion cub began chewing on the tortoise.

"Out of 6.2 billion people on the planet," Adams remembers thinking, "my friend and I are probably the only ones watching a mountain lion eat dinner."

Indeed, it was a rare opportunity to see a mountain lion in the wild. Secretive and solitary, these cats (also known as cougars or pumas) live under most of our radar screens. In fact, many people are surprised to learn they still exist in Texas.

"Mountain lions live on the fringes of municipalities and in rural America and most people never know it," says Dede Armentrout, director of the Mountain Lion Foundation of Texas. "It's amazing to me that they've survived—and thrived—on the edges of human civilization."

In Texas, mountain lions continue to roam the desert mountain ranges of the Trans-Pecos

(especially Big Bend) and the dense brushlands of South Texas. Although there are no confirmed populations elsewhere in the state, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department mammalogist John Young regularly receives calls reporting sightings in other areas, like East Texas and Fort Worth.

“Recently we’ve had a lot of sighting reports in the Bastrop-Lockhart area—at least a couple of them that were fairly detailed and appeared reliable,” he says. But people mistake everything from bobcats to deer to housecats for the lions. Such sightings are so notoriously inaccurate that wildlife biologist Harley Shaw once dismissed them as “UFOs—unidentified furry objects.”

Mountain lions have endured amazingly well in the American West, despite human efforts to wipe them out. They have survived hunting, poisoning and trapping. A few decades ago, when scientists predicted that human encroachment on their habitat would finally send the lions over the brink, they rebounded instead. Today between 10,000 and 50,000

mountain lions live in the western states, from Colorado to California. Although lions were eradicated in eastern North America more than a hundred years ago, a remnant population of Florida lions hangs on in the Everglades. That subspecies, one of the most seriously endangered animals on the planet, recently got an infusion of new genes from Texas mountain lions that were released there for breeding.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

How has the mountain lion survived? A natural athleticism certainly helps. With a body 3 to 4 feet long and weighing up to 200 pounds, “a lion can jump flat-footed 18 feet and land on the roof of a two-story house,” says Armentrout. By comparison, the Olympic record for a human high jump is a wimpy 7.8 feet.

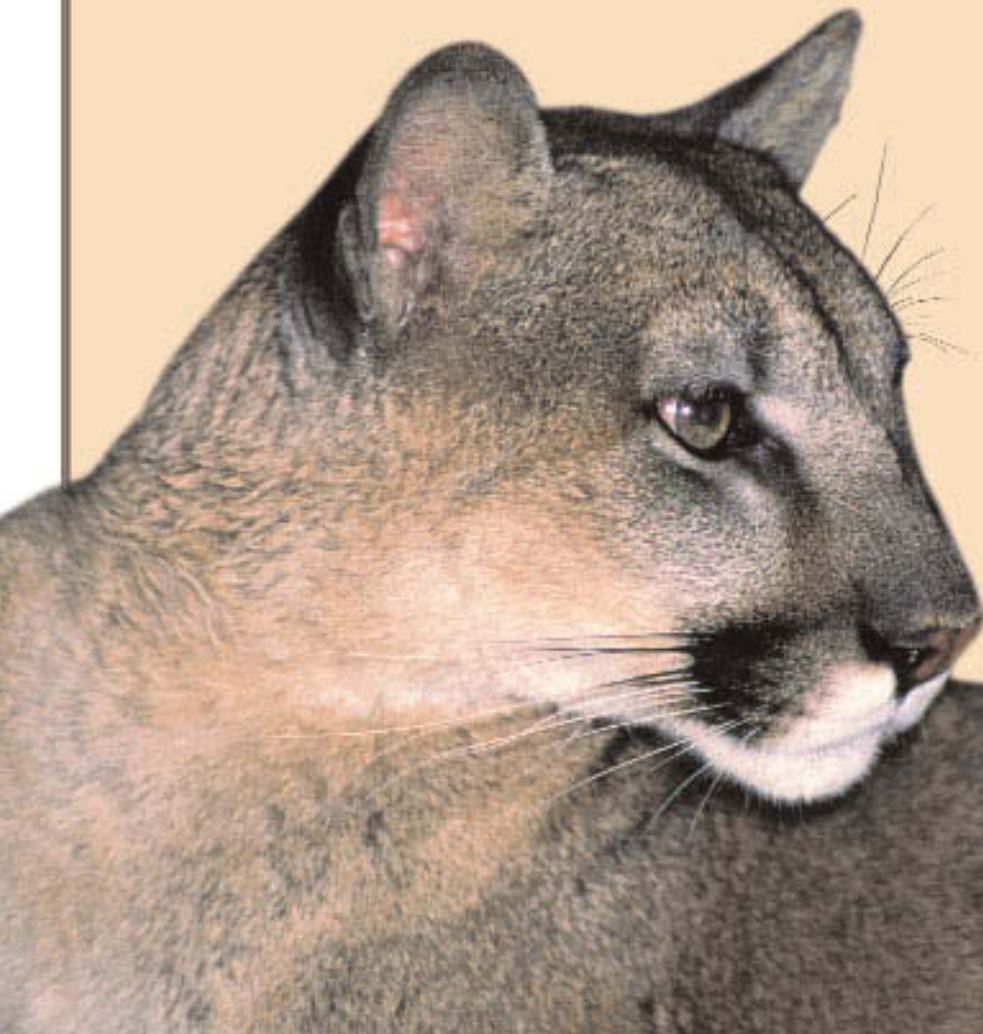
The mountain lion is also a consummate hunter. It can drop a 600-pound elk—that’s three times its size. It can kill a deer or a bighorn sheep with barely a fight. Perhaps most

impressive, the mountain lion is what biologists call a “porcupine specialist.” How do you eat a porcupine without self-administering acupuncture? “Carefully,” replies one mountain lion expert.

Hunt training starts early, when a mother leaves her kittens at a kill while she looks for their next meal. In his book, *Soul Among Lions*, Harley Shaw describes the distinctive look of a kill site that has been worked over by kittens as “a minor tornado. Grass and ground litter may be disturbed for 50 feet surrounding such a carcass. Much rough-and-tumble romping occurs. Leg bones, ribs and even the skull are chewed into small pieces. Chunks of hair, hide, ears and tail are torn and scattered, suggesting that such fragments are used as toys.”

Although athleticism is an undeniable factor in the lion’s survival, attitude seems to play a part as well. The lion’s game plan for dealing with humans combines three parts avoidance with one part contempt. Writer Rick Bass observed this attitude during an unexpected face-off with a mountain lion on a deserted logging road near his home. After glancing back and forth between Bass and his dog, the cat stared at him with “the purest distillation of scorn I have ever encountered.” In the end, writes Bass, “it was all just a little too weird for the lion. After more scowling, he turned and walked off.”

This feisty attitude develops early. Kittens, adorably furry with black



spots and bright blue eyes, hiss and bare their teeth in their best imitation of fierceness. "Sure, they're cute," admits Adams, who once tracked down a den to fit a kitten with an expandable radio collar. "But they can be pretty nasty. We were definitely wearing leather gloves, and we didn't get bit. But it wasn't for lack of effort on their part."

At about one-and-a-half years old, young lions strike out on their own to establish their own territories. According to Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD) studies, a male's territory covers 130 square miles in West Texas and 80 square miles in South Texas, where deer are more plentiful. Female territories are slightly smaller and can overlap. Except for brief mating interludes and females' time with their kittens, mountain lions spend the rest of their lives alone, hunting and defending their territory from intruders.

This loner subsists primarily on mule deer in West Texas and white-tailed deer in South Texas and supplements its diet with wild hogs, javelina, raccoon, skunk, rabbit and other small game. Although a mountain lion has been known to make quick work of a herd of sheep or

goats—a fact that doesn't endear it to ranchers—its impact on cattle is minimal, only occasionally killing a single calf.

The loneliness of the long-distance hunter ends every two years, when a male and female come together to mate. During this period, they are the picture of domestic bliss, hunting and dining together and mating as often as 60 or 70 times a day. But after a week or two, the male leaves as suddenly as he arrived. Single parenting is the rule for mountain lions. The female nurses, raises and trains her young completely unassisted.

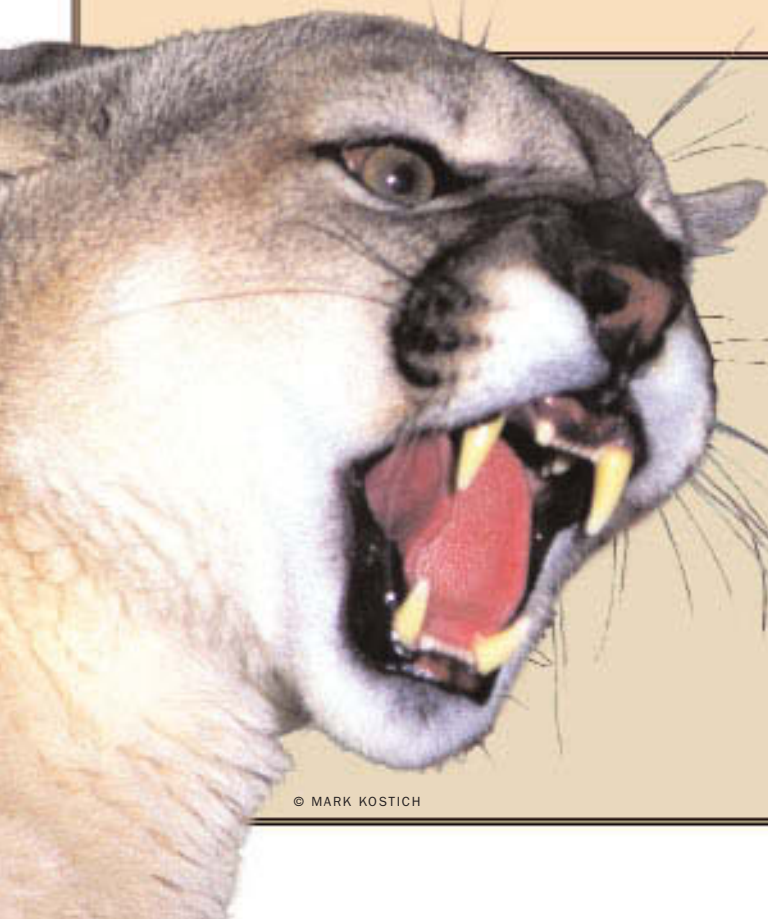
CAN HUMANS AND MOUNTAIN LIONS COEXIST?

Although this creature has shown remarkable resilience, its fate in Texas is a cause for concern. Texas is the only state in the nation with mountain lions where these cats have no legal protection. In the 1970s and again in the 1990s, the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club petitioned for protection, but their efforts were defeated.

Texas Parks and Wildlife argues that the mountain lion population is

stable and therefore doesn't need protection, but no credible data exists to back this position. Mortality rates are alarmingly high. During a recent TPWD study at Big Bend Ranch State Park, 15 of 21 cats collared for study were killed by a private predator control specialist on a private ranch adjacent to the park. Ten of 19 cats radio-collared for a South Texas TPWD study were killed during the study—this time by hunters. Last year Wildlife Services, a predator-control division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, killed a record 86 mountain lions in Texas. Says one former TPWD wildlife biologist, "There is a real concern, especially in South Texas, as to whether lions can sustain a kill rate of this magnitude."

Texas landowners have always fiercely defended their right to control predators on their land. Ironically, some ranchers don't worry about their livestock, but fear the mountain lions will kill their deer. With a big buck worth as much as \$10,000 to a rancher, a deer-eating lion poses a substantial financial threat. But that threat may be more perceived than real. Adams recently studied deer predation by lions in



WHAT TO DO IF YOU ENCOUNTER A MOUNTAIN LION

In the past five years, there has been only one confirmed mountain lion attack on a human in Texas. However, a mountain lion encounter is always a possibility, especially in Big Bend. Here are some tips if you encounter a mountain lion:

- ✿ **Stand tall. Mountain lions are intimidated by height.**
- ✿ **Put children up on your shoulders.**
- ✿ **Don't run, bend over, or turn your back.**
- ✿ **Yell, throw things, fight back.**

Because mountain lions are solitary hunters, injuries can threaten their ability to survive. As a result, they may back off from a fight. Many people who have put up a good resistance have successfully fought off a lion attack.

TEXAS MOUNTAIN LION MORTALITY RATES 1983-2001



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South Texas. His conclusion? Mountain lions actually consume less than 1 percent of the overabundant white-tailed deer population of South Texas.

For decades, the debate over mountain lion protection has been hampered by a lack of reliable population figures. Now a new study will provide the first real numbers. Using cutting-edge genetics testing, researchers—Jan Janecka and Michael Tewes of the Cesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute in Kingsville—will determine current population figures. They will also determine whether Texas populations still have enough genetic diversity to remain stable, as well as which travel corridors need to remain open to allow dispersal of young and access to mates. The study (see www.tpwd.state.tx.us) should give TPWD the information it needs to determine whether to put a management plan in place. One approach would be mandatory licensing for professional trappers and required reporting of any lion kills.

Is there enough room in Texas for both mountain lions and people? It's a question that says as much about our tolerance for wildness as it does about geography. "We're demonstrating right now that humans are compatible with mountain lions, and we've been compatible for a long, long time," says Armentrout. "They don't like to eat us very much, and we rarely see them, and that can continue for the foreseeable future."

As Adams watched the kitten dining on Texas tortoise, he thought with admiration about its mother. "Several mountain lions had been killed on that ranch, but she hadn't," he says. "She was pretty wily and educated." Finally, after about 10 minutes, he noticed the kitten look up from its kill and over its shoulder in the direction of the radio-collared female.

"We got the impression that maybe she was communicating that

he needed to move on from where he was," Adams recalls. It would be a crucial lesson in the young cat's life. Reluctantly leaving the tortoise behind, the kitten, all spots and spunk, ambled away and disappeared into the thick brush.

Elaine Robbins wrote "Drive Yourself Wild" in the April 2004 issue of Texas Co-op Power. She covers nature and travel from her base in Austin.

Emergency Kit

PACK YOUR EMERGENCY KIT NOW!

Have you taken steps to prepare for severe storms before they strike? Why not put together an emergency supply kit now?

Here's what your kit should include:

- First-aid kit
- Cash (banks and ATMs may be unavailable in a power outage)
- Battery-operated radio
- Flashlight (and extra batteries)
- Important documents and records, photo IDs, proof of residence
- Three-day supply of nonperishable food
- Three gallons of bottled water per person
- Coolers for food and ice storage
- Fire extinguisher
- Blankets, sleeping bags and extra clothing
- Prescription medications, written copies of prescriptions, hearing aids and other special medical items
- Eyeglasses and sunglasses
- Extra keys
- Toilet paper, clean-up supplies, duct tape, tarp, rope
- Can opener, knife, tools



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