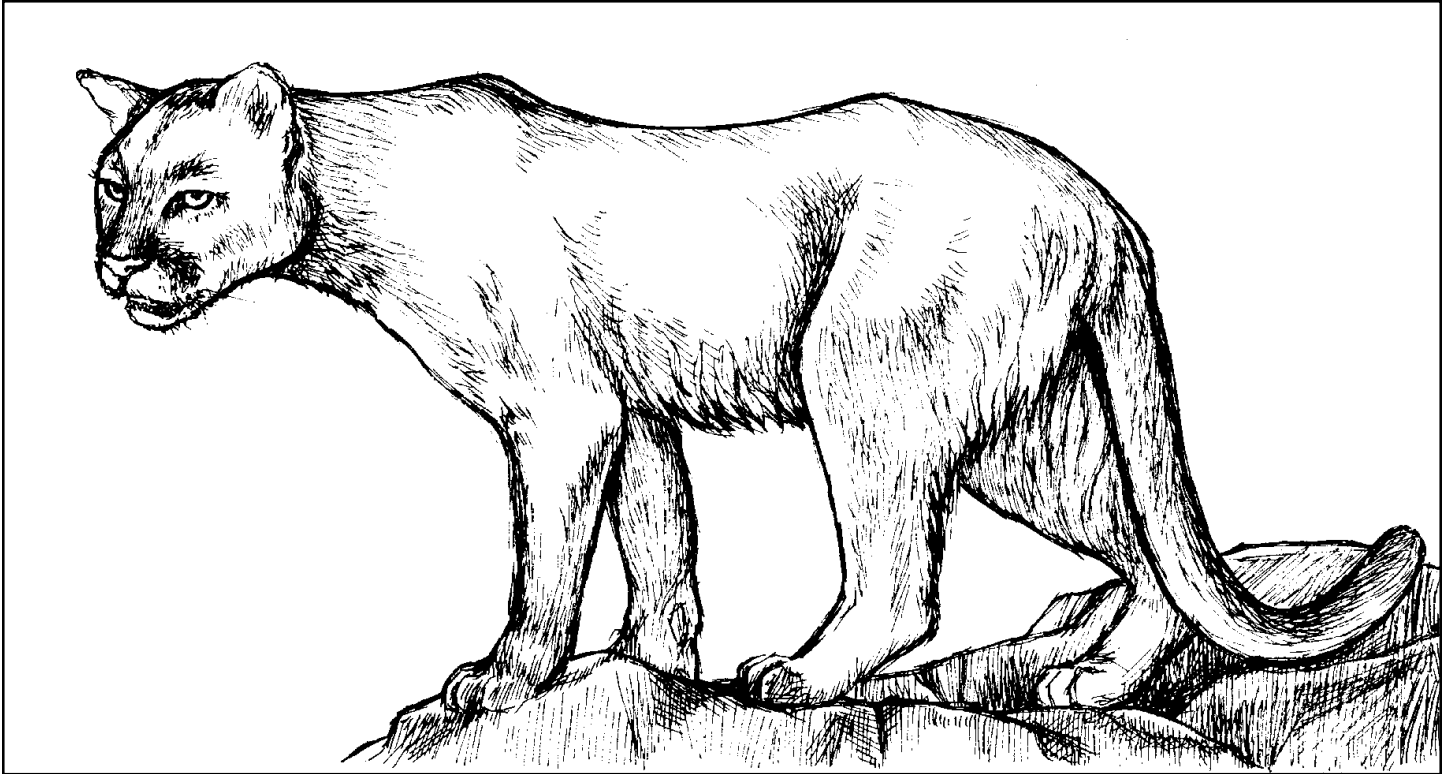


# Mountain Lion

(*Felis concolor*)



The mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), also known as cougar, puma, panther, painter and catamount, is a member of the cat family, Felidae. Mountain lions were once found in all lower 48 states, as well as in Canada and Mexico. Today mountain lions are found only in western North America, with the exception of a small population of endangered lions, known as Florida panthers, that exists in Florida. In Utah mountain lions are found distributed throughout the state except in the barren salt flats west of the Great Salt Lake. Other members of the Felidae family that are found in Utah include bobcats, which are found statewide, and Canada lynx, which are occasionally sighted in Utah. Although mountain lions are found throughout the state and are "common" in some areas, they are extremely secretive and thus rarely seen. Because mountain lions usually know you are in the area well before you know they are there, sightings of lions are very rare.

## Description

The fur of adult mountain lions appears generally uniform in color but may be gray, dark brown, cinnamon

or tawny. The underside of the body, including the chest, is light gray or white, and the fur above the upper lip is also white. The ears and tail are tipped with black.

Mountain lions vary considerably in size and weight. Males may attain a length of nine feet, including a tail which is about one-third of its total body length, and may weigh 160 pounds. Larger males may occasionally weigh as much as 200 pounds. Female mountain lions generally weigh between 100 and 125 pounds and measure nearly seven feet in length. It is often difficult to differentiate between male and female lions. Male lions tend to have a larger head, more prominent jaw and larger overall body size than the females.

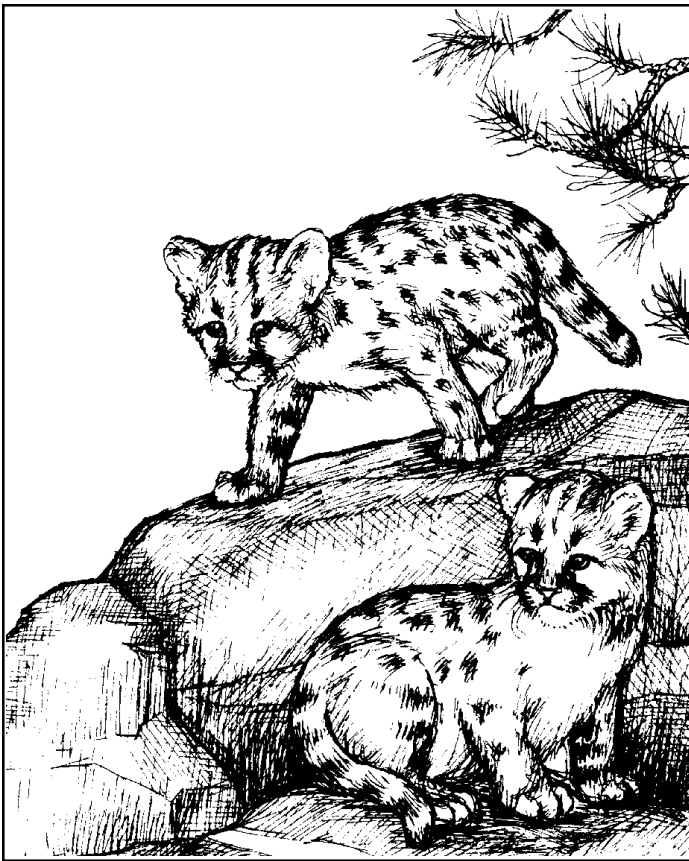
Mountain lion young, called kittens, weigh one to one and a half pounds at birth and have blackish-brown spots and a dark-ringed tail. The spots and tail bars begin to fade when the kitten is about two months old. By the end of the first year, the coat of the young lion is generally tawny in color. Black bars inside the forearm may be present up to two years of age. Young lions reach adult size by the time they are three to five years old.

## Notable Adaptations

Mountain lions have several physical features which make them highly specialized predators. Their highly developed sight is extremely critical for hunting success, and it includes both diurnal and nocturnal vision. Because they hunt primarily at dawn and dusk, their nocturnal vision requires a large pupil to gather light. In order to protect the lions' eyes during daylight hours, their pupils contract to a vertical slit or "cat's eye" in bright light. Mountain lions also have excellent depth perception which enables them to attack their prey with extreme accuracy.

Mountain lions have short, powerful jaws which are capable of crushing the neck of their prey in a single bite. Their teeth are typical of carnivores. They have carnassial teeth for tearing large pieces of meat from their prey. Food is swallowed with a minimum of chewing, and digestion occurs at a later time, often when the lion has moved to a secluded place. Females will regurgitate food to feed their kittens.

Sharp, retractile claws also help mountain lions to be successful predators. These claws are used primarily for grasping prey and not for traction. In comparison, the claws of other carnivores, like those of wolves, coyotes and foxes, are not retractile and are used primarily for traction when running or walking.



## Food Habits

Mountain lions are opportunistic carnivores. In Utah mule deer make up over 80% of the mountain lions' diet. Mountain lions will also eat rabbits and hares, rodents (especially porcupines), elk, bobcats, coyotes and, occasionally, livestock. Lions will also eat some grasses.

Mountain lions are attracted to prey by movement, and this may be why prey species tend to "freeze" after detecting a predator. Lions will usually lie in wait and then stalk their prey or attack after a short chase, seldom over 100 yards. Because mountain lions prey on porcupines, they often have quills in their paws and faces. This occasionally causes some fatalities when the quills prevent the lion from being able to eat or drink.

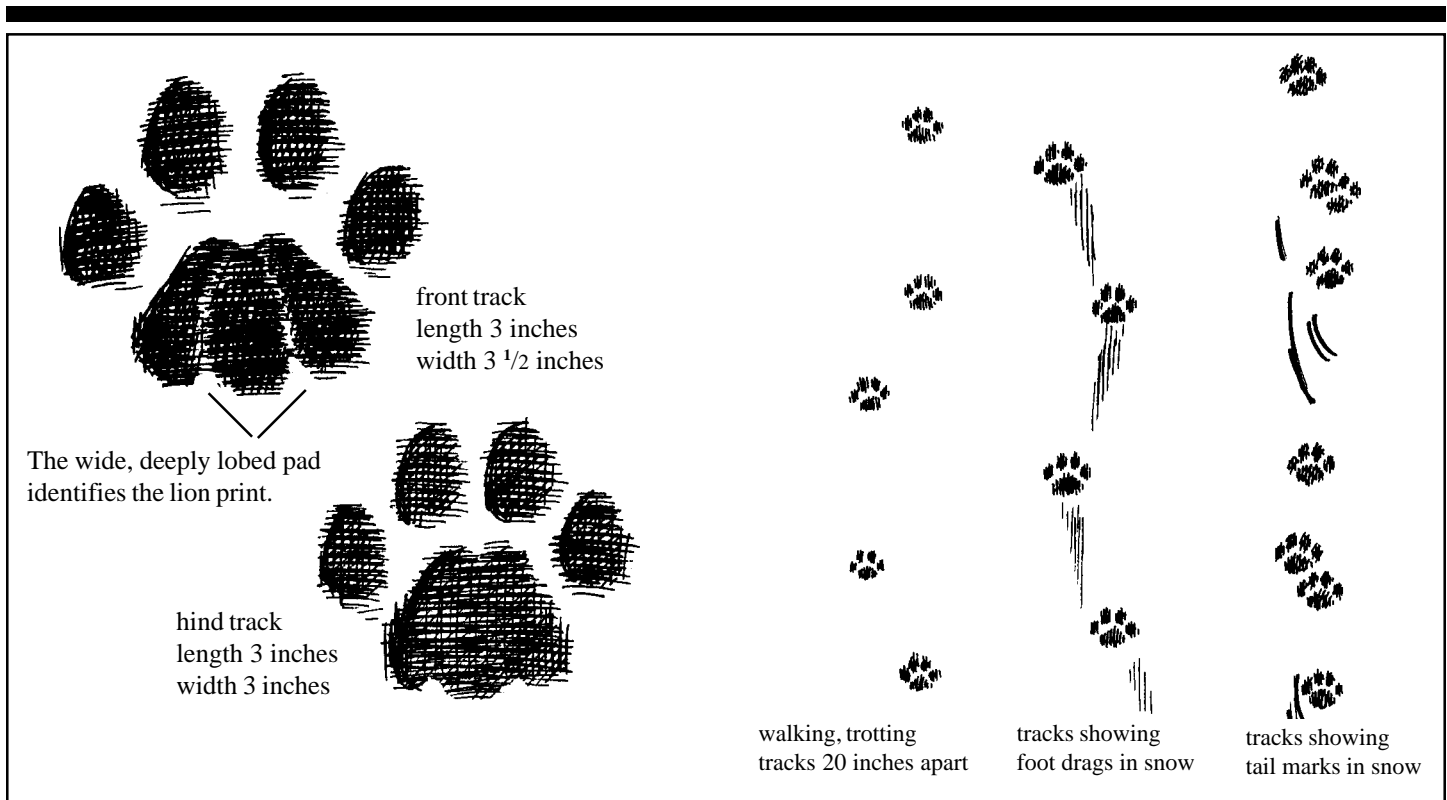
Mountain lions usually bury prey carcasses such as elk or deer kills after each feeding. This helps prevent scavengers, like magpies, ravens, eagles, bears and coyotes, from feeding on the carrion. Lions eat about 70% of a large carcass before making another kill.

## Reproduction

Mountain lions may breed when two years old, but females tend to breed for the first time after they have established a home range or territory, usually at two and a half to three years of age. Male lions breed with several female lions that have home ranges within the male lions' larger home area. When a male lion encounters a female lion without kittens, he remains with her for four to six days, during which time courtship and breeding occur. The male leaves the female after breeding. Breeding can occur year-round, but in Utah there appears to be a high incidence of kittens born in the fall. This may occur so that the greater feeding demands on the females by the kittens coincides with greater concentrations of mule deer on their winter range.

Mountain lions can have up to six kittens, but litter sizes usually average three. Kittens are born about 13 weeks after breeding. Female lions give birth in simple dens, found in caves, rock crevices, brush piles or secluded areas in tall vegetation. When the kittens are young, the female moves them frequently to new den sites to provide protection and to improve access to prey. The young kittens stay with their mother for 12 to 20 months. Females usually breed soon after the young leave, and they typically produce litters every 24 months.

The mortality rate for a litter of young kittens is about 20%. Causes of mortality include accidents, starvation and predation by other mountain lions, coyotes and other predators.



**Habitat**

Mountain lions are most often found in habitats where there is abundant prey. In Utah, mountain lions prefer pinyon-juniper and pine-oak brush areas. Within these habitat types, lions prefer areas where there are rocky cliffs, ledges and tall trees or brush that can be used for cover. Mountain lions often climb trees to avoid detection and danger. Generally, lions avoid areas of sagebrush and low-growing shrubs, areas used for agriculture and pasture lands, and any other areas without adequate tall cover. Female lions with kittens prefer areas with large conifers, boulders and dense shrubs that provide shelter and protection for the kittens.

**Management**

The Utah Wildlife Code has included the mountain lion as a protected wildlife species since 1967. Prior to this, there were no regulations governing the taking of lions, and hunting occurred throughout the state without restriction. Between 1967 and 1989, various strategies were employed to manage lion populations. In 1989, a statewide limited-entry permit system was established, and in 1996, a Harvest Objective permit system was implemented as well.

Limited-entry hunting provides for a specified number of permits to be issued for each such unit. For Harvest Objective units, a set number of lions are designated to be harvested for a particular unit, and hunting is permitted until that number has been reached.

Division of Wildlife Resources biologists consider habitat quality, prey availability, lion population information, public safety factors, public uses of the area and depredation occurrences before making recommendations to the Utah Wildlife Board. After agency input and public comment, the Wildlife Board determines permit and harvest objective numbers, and establishes regulations for the hunting of lions throughout the state.

To hunt lions, hunters must first purchase an annual Wildlife Habitat Authorization, a valid small game or combination license, and draw for a limited-entry or purchase a harvest objective lion permit for a specified management unit.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Animal Damage Control, under the United States Department of Agriculture, investigate occurrences where lions are suspected of killing livestock. All cases of depredation must be confirmed as lion-caused before trained personnel from Animal Damage Control are authorized to take the lion.

Mountain lions usually are very shy and attempt to avoid humans. However, lions occasionally wander into cities or other areas where they may come into contact with people. When this occurs, personnel from the Division of Wildlife Resources attempt to tranquilize the animal and move it to a remote location within the management unit.

For more information about mountain lions in Utah, contact the Division of Wildlife Resources, P.O. Box 146301, Salt Lake City, UT 84114-6301. (801) 538-4700.

# Safety in Mountain Lion Country

Mountain lions are found throughout most of Utah. Attacks by this usually secretive predator are **very rare** but can occur. The following guidelines are provided to help ensure your safety when you're in mountain lion country.

## To Prevent Conflicts with Mountain Lions:

- Do not feed deer, raccoons or other wildlife on which mountain lions prey. Feeding these animals may attract lions, encourage them to remain in the area and increase the possibility of conflict with humans.
- Do not leave pet food out where lions or other wildlife have access to it.
- Do not allow pets to run freely. Lions will prey on dogs and cats, quickly learning that they are easy to take. If pets are left outside, they should be in covered cages. A lion can easily leap over an 8-foot fence.
- Do not leave doors of barns or sheds open. Inquisitive lions may go inside for a look.
- Do not allow children to play alone in foothill areas, particularly at dawn and dusk when lions are most active. Clear brush away from bus stops and other areas where children may congregate.

## If You Encounter a Mountain Lion:

- Do not panic. Most lions will try to avoid confrontation.
- Raise your arms to make yourself appear as large as possible. Lions prefer smaller prey.
- Slowly back away. Never run and never turn your back toward the cougar. Yell at the lion and wave your arms as you back away.
- Do not make direct eye contact. Lions perceive eye contact as aggressive behavior.
- If you are attacked, fight back. Try to prevent the lion from getting behind you.
- ***If you observe unusual or threatening behavior by a mountain lion, please notify your nearest Division of Wildlife Resources office.***

## Additional Reading

- Chapman, J., and George Feldhamer, editors. *Wild Mammals of North America*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1987.
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*Wildlife Notebook Series No. 5 written by Jordan Pederson, Regional Supervisor, Central Region; edited by Brenda Schussman; and illustrated by Jill Rensel (IMAGES MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED)*



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