Voluntary Cougar Orientation Course

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UTAH DNR WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Why a cougar orientation course?

One of the objectives in the Utah Cougar Management Plan is to

> "Educate all cougar hunters on how to determine the age/sex of cougars to increase harvest selectivity….".

Utah's cougar management program uses the percent of adult females in the harvest as the primary factor in determining whether the number of permits available or quotas should be increased or decreased. In general, if the percent of adult females in the harvest gets above a certain point, the number of permits available or the quota is decreased. Conversely, permits are increased if the percent females drops below a certain level.

Why manage cougar populations based on the percent of adult females in the harvest?

Research has shown that the adult female segment of a cougar population is the least susceptible to harvest. As a result, the percent of adult females in the harvest serves as a "barometer" for the status of the population. In general, if adult females make up < 20% of the harvest the cougar population is likely stable, whereas if adult females make up > 25% of the harvest the population is likely decreasing.

In addition to helping the Division meet the management objectives of the cougar management plan we hope this orientation course will help:

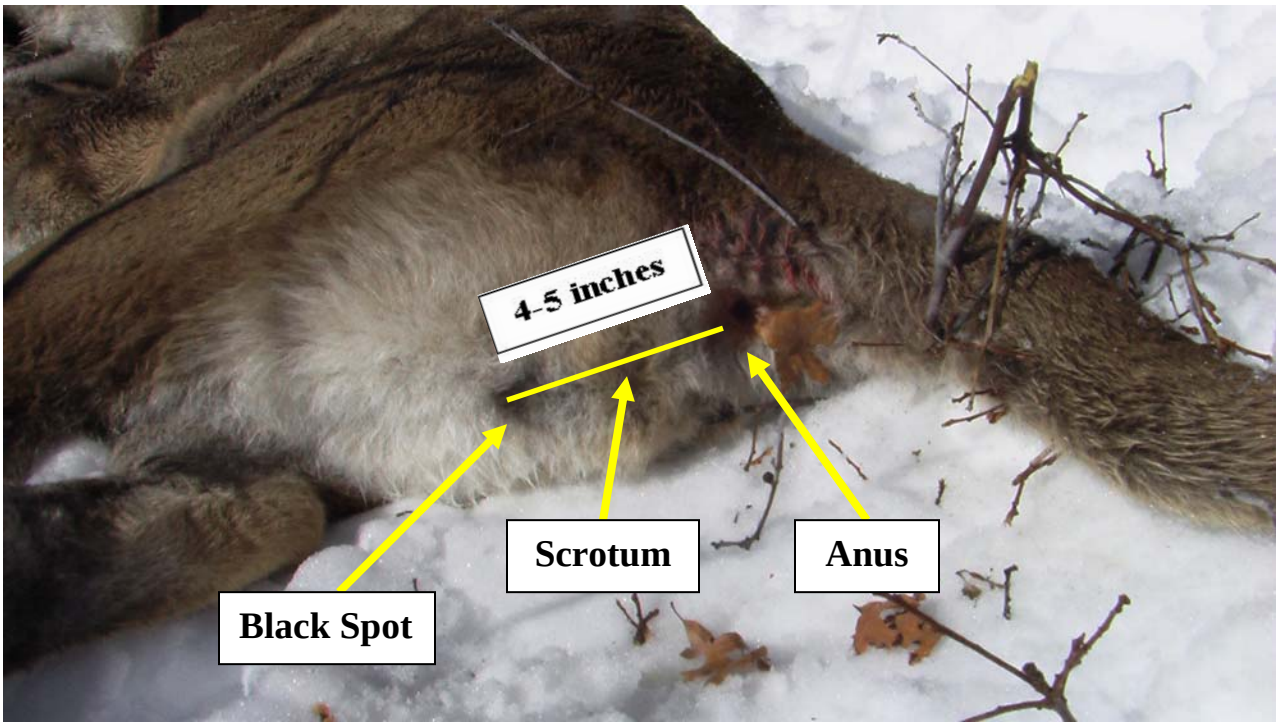
1. Reduce unwanted female cougar mortality
2. Reduce cougar kitten mortality as a result of orphaning
3. Increase hunter satisfaction

Cougar Gender Identification in the Field:

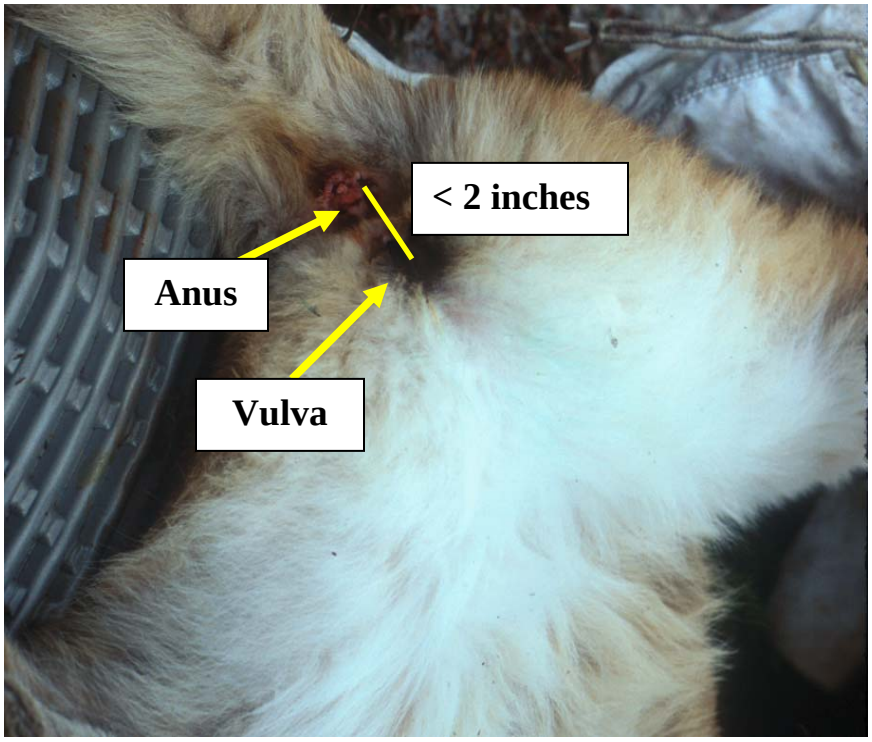
Determining the gender of a cougar in the field is not as straightforward as most hunters are accustomed to. Obviously cougars don't have antlers or horns like big game animals and male and female cougars aren't colored differently like waterfowl and most upland game birds. As a result, determining the gender of a cougar requires looking at the genitalia and other physical characteristics like head size. Cat genitalia is not as easy to identify as some other species.

What to look for:

Male Cougars have a conspicuous "black spot" of hair, about one inch in diameter, surrounding the opening to the penal sheath. The black spot on a male cougar is located behind the hind legs and about 4-5 inches below the anus. Between the penal sheath and the anus is the scrotum which is usually covered with silver, light brown, and white hair. The anus is usually hidden below the base of the tail.



Female Cougars do not have a black spot behind the hind legs. On female cougars the vulva is directly below anus (< 2 inches). Both the anus and the vulva are usually hidden by the base of the tail.



Depending on the position of the tail on a treed cougar and the angle of view, you may notice a black spot on a female. Some females have black hair associated with their vulva that may be confused for the penal sheath of a male. To tell the difference between a male and female in this situation, you need to look at the distance between the black spot and the base of the tail (or the anus if visible). If it's clearly 4 inches or more then it is a male, if it's quite a bit less than 4 inches then it is a female. Typically, the tail will cover up the black spot on the female and you would not be able to see it at all.

Identifying the gender of a treed cougar can sometimes be determined with the naked eye, but using binoculars makes sexing cougars easier and less likely to lead to an incorrect determination. If the cougar's position in a tree obscures your view, get the lion to move a bit to give a better angle. Try banging a stout branch against the tree trunk, or, if there is snow on the ground, lightly toss a few snow balls toward the lion. Moving around the

base of the tree may get the lion to change position as it moves to keep you in sight.

Head Size
The head of adult male cougars are larger and more round with the ears set lower on the head when compared to adult female or sub-adult cougars. In addition, mature males often have tattered ears and scaring on their face.

6 year old male

8 year old female

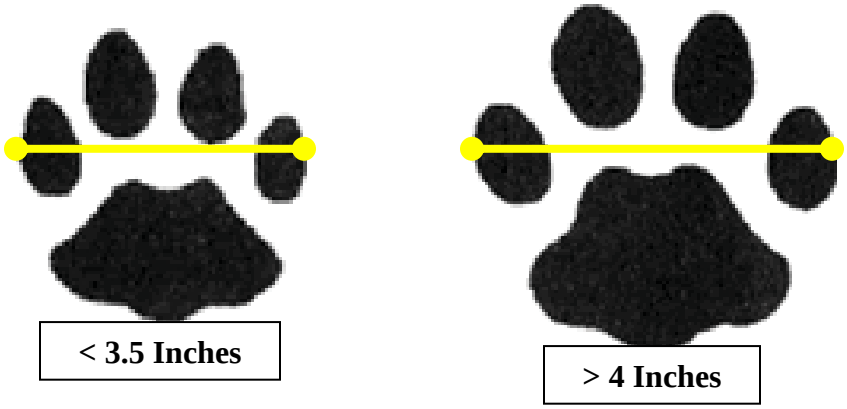
Other Indicators of Gender

Before You Ever See the Cougar—

- More than one set of tracks most often indicates a female with young. (remember it is illegal to pursue or take any cougar accompanied by young).
- Stride length can be measured to help distinguish a mature male from an immature male or female.
- Track size can help you tell a mature male from a female.

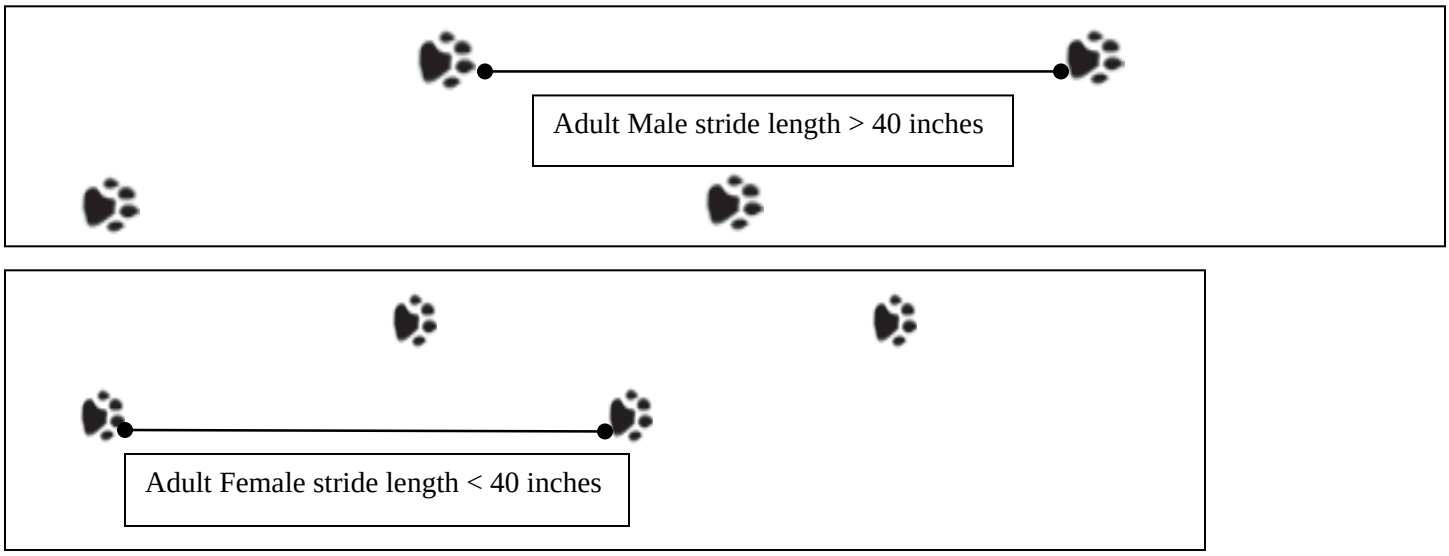
Female and Male Cougar Track Sizes:

Large adult male tracks may be up to 5” wide. The average male tracks are approximately 4” wide. Adult female tracks are 3.5” in width or less.



Stride Length

When walking in snow, on level ground, mature males have an average stride greater than 40”. Females and young cougars have a shorter stride, measuring less than 40”. The illustration of tracks below shows a male stride (top) and a female stride (bottom).



Cougar Age Identification in the Field:

The best way to determine the relative age of cougar (adult vs sub-adult) is by looking at the teeth and pelage.

Teeth

The teeth of adult cougars are usually stained yellow and the tips of the canine teeth are often blunt and rounded. The teeth of sub-adult cougars are usually bright white and the tips of the canine teeth are sharply pointed.

Sub-adult (2 year old) male

Adult male

Pelage

Sub-adult cougars (< 3 yrs old) will often still have faint spots on their sides and back, barring on the inside of their legs and spots or barring on their bellies. Adult cougars (> 3 yrs old) usually have uniform, tawny colored pelage everywhere except their bellies, which is white.

Sub-adult male

Adult female