

Wilderness Way Tips

by Tamarack Song

They're Back!

What purrs like a kitten, jumps like a kangaroo, and enjoys children – for eating. Oh, and another thing: one could show up in your backyard. Attacks on humans have been escalating in recent years, and even though this results in only about one death per year (where dogs might kill 25, lightning, 60, and bees, over 100), this animal makes much better press.

Give up? It's our American lion, the cougar. He has been spreading eastward from the Mountain states to reinhabit his former range, which included all of the lower 48. In the past 15 years there have been confirmed sightings in most of the states east of the Rockies.

And yet very few people have been fortunate enough to see a cougar. I live right in the epicenter of sightings in Wisconsin, and still I have not seen any sign. Cougars are much harder to spot than other predators of similar size, such as wolves, because they are...well, catlike. Being solo, nocturnal animals who stick to heavy vegetation, have retractable claws and hardly ever run, and bury their scat, they leave little evidence of their presence.

So why the increased attacks on humans? I posed the question to cougar experts of all persuasions, from Don Myers, who has been live-trapping for zoos since 1948, to advocacy groups such as the Mountain Lion Foundation, and I found that there are two theories:

- With cougars being protected in most Western states, the rebounding population is forcing young males to migrate greater distances to find a niche (Like bears and deer, female cougars stay close to their mothers).
- They've always been there, and we are moving into their territory. This is compounded by the fact that we have taken to feeding wild animals, which attracts predators.

I'm writing this piece not because I cannot tolerate one human death a year, but because I prefer cougars to suburban sprawl. The media hoopla over attacks, whips up anti-cougar frenzy; however, I know that with common sense and some understanding of cougar's ways, we can peacefully coexist. Here are some tips for honoring our tawny brother that I learned from cougar experts, colleague Jason Faunce's research, and my experience with wolves and other predators:

Out in the wilds

- Keep a clean camp
- Avoid dead deer or elk, esp. if fresh or covered with debris/snow – cougars defend their kills
- Camp or hike with a friend – never alone
- Keep children close by

In residential Areas

- Don't feed pets outside or leave pets out overnight
- Don't feed wildlife, especially deer
- Don't go jogging alone (Joggers are second to children as attack victims)
- Have children play in groups, and indoors by dusk

If you encounter a cougar

- Stop – do not run
- Pick up children (Their erratic movements, shrill voices, and tendency to flee, say "Prey!")
- Don't approach, esp. if feeding or with cubs (who may be at kill site when only 8 wks. old)
- Leave him an exit route
- Back up slowly

If the cougar is aggressive

- Maintain eye contact and keep facing animal
- Stand tall, inflate your size – open coat, arms up, holding branches
- Wave arms, shout, throw rocks, sticks – convince cougar you are a threat rather than prey

If attacked

- Stay on your feet
- Fight aggressively – go for eyes, shove fist down throat
- Protect your neck

A zookeeper gave me this advice, “Get your back up against a tree – you’ll look taller, and he won’t be able to jump on your back – his favorite way to attack .”

One of my students just told me about his brother-in-law who walked up to a cougar he saw hiding in a bush. That prompts me to leave you with this tidbit a wild animal handler gave me, “Animals are more intelligent than us because they have nothing to prove.”

