

# Nature News: Living with Elusive Felines

By Angela McLaughlin ~ THE JOURNAL

Life in the backcountry is full of surprises. People often move to get away from the city and absorb the nature that comes with having a little bit of space. But living farther from densely human-populated areas brings the potential for encounters of another kind — larger

refer to the same American lion. As the largest native cat of North America, the mountain lion is very adaptable to different environments and climates. They average between 80 and 180 pounds, with males even reaching up to 220 pounds, and with a tail more than a third of the total body length. Barton

In Southern California, as in other areas, mountain lions help keep the deer population under control, healthy and constantly moving to prevent over-grazing. This improves the habitat for native plants, birds and other animals.

Unlike the African lion, they are solitary animals,

long. If you're in the backcountry, you may hear them purr, chirp or make their distinctive caterwaul.

Bobcats, on the other hand, are the most common

wildcat in North America and are more likely to be encountered than mountain lions.

They get their name from the See **ELUSIVE FELINES** continued on page 15



Bobcats are named after the "bobbed" appearance of their tail. PHOTO BY RAY EUBANKS, COURTESY OF FUND FOR ANIMALS WILDLIFE CENTER



Mountain lions are large, impressive felines that roam the backcountry. PHOTO COURTESY OF FUND FOR ANIMALS WILDLIFE CENTER

predators, specifically bobcats and mountain lions.

Though you may go your entire life without ever seeing one of these elusive felines, it is always a good idea to learn more about the wildlife we share the landscape with. From forests and wooded areas to open meadows, canyons, mountains and more, these felines roam nearly every type of terrain.

"Bobcats are more common in urban areas nowadays, and mountain lions in more rural areas," says Christine Barton, director of operations at the Fund for Animals Wildlife Center.

With fewer wild places left for large animals to roam, an animal that may once have gone unseen — save for a few tracks or scat — is now more commonly encountered than you might think.

"We have encroached so much on their territory that their home ranges have become smaller, and they've been forced to venture closer to populated areas bordering the wilderness," says Barton.

These fascinating predators are valuable residents of our environment, and understanding them may help decrease fear and chances of negative encounters.

Cougar, puma, catamount, panther, mountain lion — this impressive feline goes by many names, but they all

adds that they are "one of the longest and most muscular of all feline species."

The Mountain Lion Foundation states that unlike bears and wolves that can supplement their diets with other things, mountain lions can only eat other animals, depending predominately upon deer for their survival.

only coming together to mate or when a mother is raising her young. Mountain lions disperse from their mothers at around 18 months of age, though possibly sooner if raised well. Their large range stretches from 100 to 300 square miles, meaning they will seldom stay in one place for very

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## Elusive Felines *Continued from page 13*

“bobbed” appearance of their tail, and they look strikingly similar to their close relative, the lynx.

According to Barton, bobcats are about half the length of mountain lions and only a fraction of the weight. Since they are much smaller, their diet mainly consists of quail, field mice, rabbits and squirrels. Their territory size is also smaller, ranging from merely five square miles to 25 square miles. Bobcats are also solitary animals and typically disperse from their mothers at around eight months of age.

“The most important difference is simple — a bobcat can hurt you but a mountain lion can kill you,” says Barton, adding that although a mountain lion will most likely run away during an encounter with a human, the last thing a person should do is turn around and run.

“Look the lion in the eyes; do not lose eye contact; make yourself big, mean and loud. If you turn or run, it will initiate the natural predator-versus-prey instinct, and it will chase you down.”

Though both bobcats and mountain lions are nocturnal and primarily active during dawn and dusk, Barton warns that they may be more visible during this time of year.

“The normal pools of water or running streams are low or drying up, and the prey are hiding out more because of the heat,” she says. “They

eventually have to come in where there are manmade resources.”

She adds that with all of the wildfires, animals are forced into areas that didn’t burn, which are often the human-populated areas that are saved by firefighters. In addition to this, the females are beginning to teach their young how to hunt for food and water.

“Bobcats will start moving around with mom as early as eight weeks old but more commonly around 10 to 12 weeks, and mountain lions will be a little later,” Barton says.

If you encounter an animal and believe it needs assistance, contact the Fund for Animals or a licensed rehabber for help. California Department of Fish and Wildlife is another good resource.

To prevent unwanted feline visitors, make sure any animals kept outdoors are in secure enclosures, and keep areas clear of places that attract rodents. Visit the Mountain Lion Foundation at [www.mountainlion.org](http://www.mountainlion.org) for suggestions to lion-proof your home.

Proper knowledge and understanding allows humans to peacefully coexist with these large predators — and these fascinating felines are some of the greatest curiosities that we share our landscape with.

*To contact the Fund for Animals Wildlife Center in Ramona, visit [www.fundforanimals.org](http://www.fundforanimals.org).* ■

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