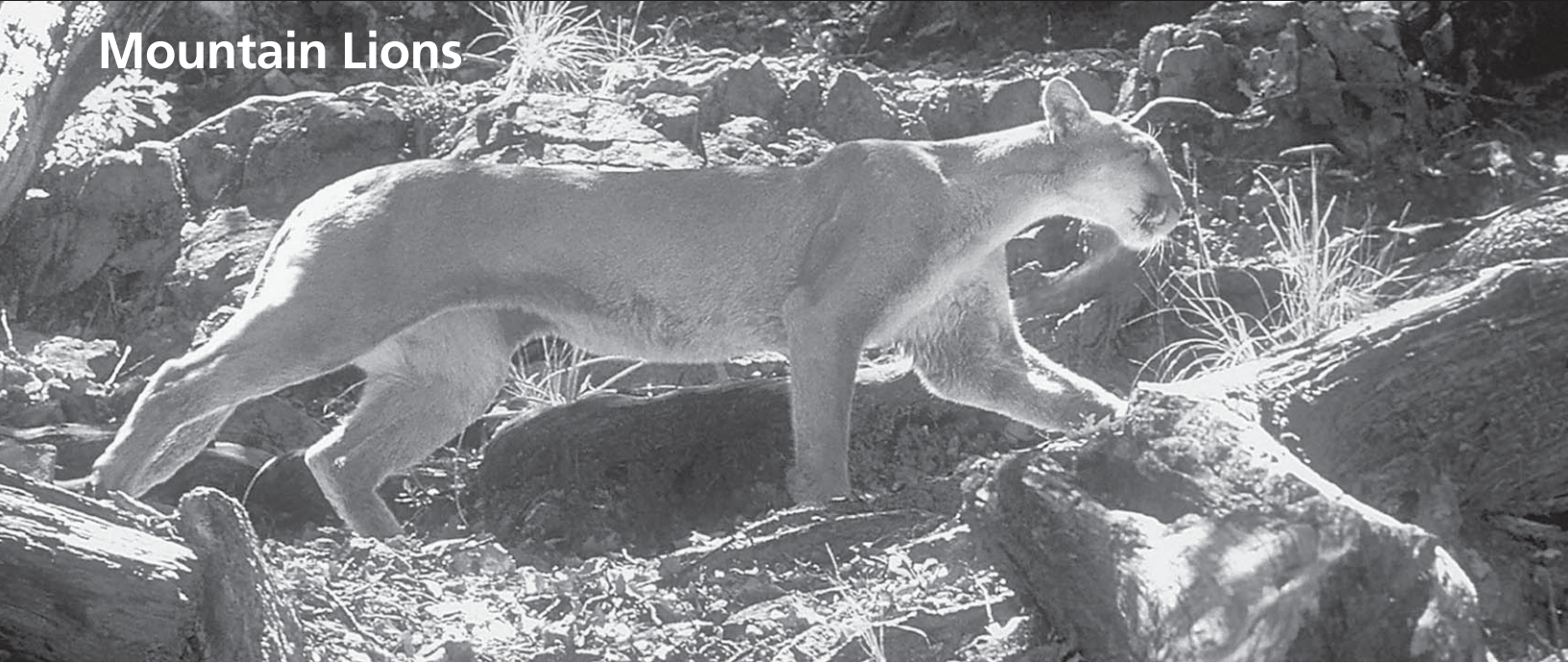




## Mountain Lions



“Have there been any mountain lion sightings lately?” “When was the last mountain lion sighting?” “How likely are we to see a mountain lion?” Park staff hear these questions almost every day. Some visitors ask because they hope to see a mountain lion; others ask because they hope to avoid them. Whatever the reason, all are curious about these great cats.

Despite their name, mountain lions are found in all types of park habitats, from mountains to desert to river floodplain. Biologists estimate that approximately two dozen lions live in Big Bend National Park. Around 130 sightings of mountain lions are reported each year in the park, primarily along roads.

### At home in all environments

The mountain lion, *Felis concolor* (“cat all of one color”), has the widest distribution of any wild cat, from western Canada to the tip of South America. Because of this, it is known by many names, including cougar, panther, catamount, and puma.

Mountain lions stand two feet tall at the shoulder and may reach eight feet in total length from nose to tail. Adults average 80 to 130 pounds. Males are up to 40% larger than females. Extremely powerful, lions can leap 15 feet vertically and 45 feet horizontally. Their long tails aid in balancing during these movements. They are built for speed, not endurance, reaching speeds of 40 mph in less than 50 feet.

Mountain lions are solitary animals. Adult females may be accompanied by kittens, but do not associate with other adults except during mating. A female lion’s home range varies between approximately 40-90 square miles







depending on where it lives in the park. Male lion home ranges may exceed 200 square miles and will overlap the home ranges of several female lions.

Lions may be on the prowl day or night, but are most active during dusk and dawn. Favorite prey in Big Bend includes white-tail and mule deer, javelina, porcupines, cottontail rabbits, jackrabbits, and skunks. An adult lion may consume the equivalent of one deer every 4-14 days.

The mountain lion is vital to maintaining the remarkable biological diversity found within Big Bend National Park. Lions support a balance between herbivores and vegetation by controlling herbivore numbers. Research shows that lions help keep deer and javelina herds within the limits of their food resources. Without a healthy mountain lion population, the complex ecological network that exists within Big Bend could be vastly different.

### If you see a mountain lion








-  Remain calm! Enjoy the sighting. Most visitors never get the chance to see a mountain lion.
-  If you have small children with you, pick them up. Do not allow children to run ahead on trails.
-  Do not crouch down or play dead—the lion has seen you long before you saw it. Try to appear larger.
-  Hold your ground, wave your arms, shout! If the lion behaves aggressively, throw rocks at it. You must convince the lion that you are not prey and that you may represent a danger to the lion.
-  Never run from a lion! No one can outrun a mountain lion.
-  Report all lion sightings, IN DETAIL, to a park ranger.

## Lions and the park

By law, the National Park Service is required to protect and preserve its wildlife resources. Within Big Bend National Park, management strives to maintain the natural abundance, behavior, diversity, and ecological integrity of native animals, including mountain lions. The primary objective for lion management in Big Bend National Park is to preserve and maintain natural populations of lions as part of the park's native fauna while providing for the safety of park visitors.

To better understand lion behavior, numerous studies have been conducted in the park. Among their findings were the following:





-  The Chisos Basin provides an ideal habitat for mountain lions, as water, prey and hunting cover are available on a year round basis.
-  Mountain lion home ranges in the Chisos overlap areas of heavy visitor use. The behavior of lions was not modified or affected by heavy visitor use periods.

-  Mountain lions use hiking trails as travel corridors and often pass through or near visitor use areas in their nightly movements.
-  Mountain lions usually remain stationary when humans are nearby, so as not to reveal their location.
-  Effective communication to visitors is essential to limit negative encounters between mountain lions and humans inside the park.

Educating visitors about mountain lions and continuing to develop a better understanding of lion behavior and ecology through research is essential for the continued well-being of Big Bend's healthy natural resources. The more we know about lions and how to behave around them, the better life will be for them and for us.

## Lions and the visitor

The prospect of an increasing number of visitors in the future poses significant challenges to park managers who are faced with protecting mountain lions while also ensuring that visitors are provided the opportunity to experience and enjoy the park. The potential for conflicts between mountain lions and visitors is always a reality in Big Bend, and park managers are forced to consider difficult questions and sometimes harsh management actions in order to ensure the safety of both the resource and the visitor. For example:

-  As visitation to Big Bend increases, will lion behavior change in response to changes in patterns of visitor usage?
-  Past encounters between humans and lions have resulted in four attacks by lions that have caused significant human injury. Given that each attack on a human resulted in the death of the aggressive lion, what can be done to ensure that both lions and people continue to utilize park resources in a safe manner?
-  With increased visitation, will it be considered acceptable to continue the practice of closing areas of the park if lion activity in the area threatens visitor safety?
-  For some visitors, a lion encounter, or merely fear of mountain lions, can detract from a positive park experience. Is it necessary for park managers to deal with such concerns, and if so, what action is required?

Stated simply, an unpleasant encounter with a mountain lion would likely compromise visitor enjoyment and safety, but the loss of one or more mountain lions as a result of such an encounter may adversely impact the park's biological diversity. Neither outcome is acceptable.

All areas within Big Bend National Park are within the home range of at least one mountain lion. Lions are observed in campgrounds, in developed areas, and along park roads, and are known to use established trails. The best way for a visitor to ensure their own safety is to learn as much as possible about how to act in the presence of a lion. Because visitor actions that mimic the behavior and sounds of prey species are known to draw the interest of lions, it is very important to instruct children how to act when hiking trails or in campgrounds.

Like all predators, the mountain lion's role is fundamental to the health of the entire ecosystem. Research and further human understanding of the cat's habits pave the way for conservation efforts in its behalf. For many visitors, seeing a track—or just knowing lions are out there—will be reward enough.

During your visit to Big Bend, you may wish to learn more about the mountain lion and its habits. See the mountain lion exhibit in the Chisos Basin Visitor Center or attend a Ranger-led program to learn more.

