



## Mountain Lions



If Big Bend National Park has a symbol, it might well be the mountain lion. Solitary and secretive, this mighty creature is Big Bend's top predator, and is vital in maintaining the park's biological diversity. Everywhere you go in Big Bend, you are in the territory of at least one lion. From mountain to desert, biologists estimate that the park has a stable population of approximately two dozen lions.

Since the 1950s, there have been more than 2,700 recorded sightings of mountain lions by the visiting public within Big Bend National Park. While 90% of sightings are along park roads, observations of lions on park trails also occur. Although your chances of seeing a mountain lion are remote, and the chances of meeting an aggressive one smaller still, you should still be prepared for the possibility.

### Wild Spirit

Reviled by some as a killer of livestock, and revered by others as a symbol of wilderness, the mountain lion prowls at the edge of our consciousness. It personifies strength, grace, and independence. Its solitary and stealthy lifestyle feeds the mystery, but can also breed fear and misinformation. How much do you really know about this powerful cat?

Learning more about lions will help you to better understand their behavior, the role they play in maintaining the integrity of natural systems, and how our behavior can negatively impact these fascinating creatures.

### Maintaining a Balance

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.

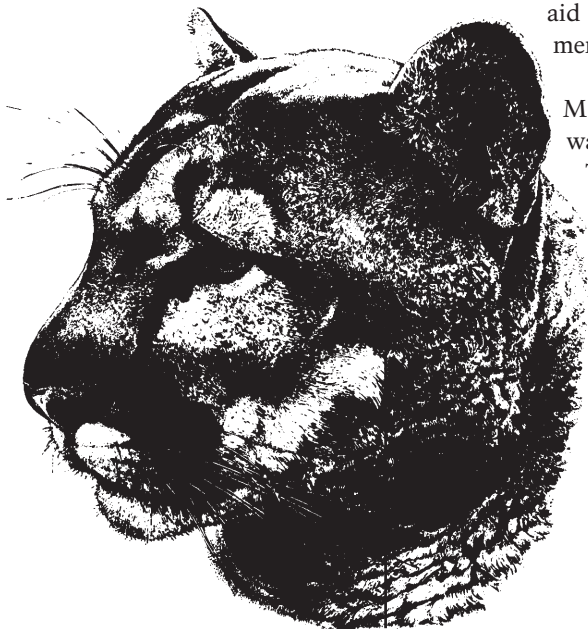
Mountain lions stand two feet tall at the shoulder and may reach five to eight feet from nose to tail. Adults average 80 to 130 pounds. Males are up to 40% larger than females. Extremely powerful, lions can leap 15 feet vertically and 45 feet horizontally. Their long tails aid in balancing during these movements.

Mountain lions are digitigrade walkers - they walk on their toes. This allows them to move quickly. 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 lion's home range may extend over 100 square miles. Lions may be on the prowl day or night, but are most active during dusk and dawn.

Favorite prey in Big Bend includes javelina, cottontails, jackrabbits, white-tail and mule deer. An adult lion may consume the equivalent of one deer every 4-14 days.



The mountain lion is vital in maintaining the Big Bend's biological diversity. Within the delicate habitats of the Chihuahuan Desert, mountain lions support a balance between herbivores and vegetation they eat. Research shows that cats help keep deer and javelina herds within the limits of their food resources. Without a healthy mountain lion population, the complex ecological network we know as Big Bend would be vastly different.






## Lions and the Park

By law, the National Park Service is required to protect and preserve its wildlife resources. At 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.




Visitor education about mountain lions and a good understanding of lion behavior and ecology through research is essential for the continued well-being of these majestic animals. 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

Mountain lions live throughout the park, including the Chisos Mountains, where they sometimes use man-made trails. Since 1984, four encounters have resulted in lion attacks. In each case the aggressive lions were killed.




Simply put, an encounter can compromise visitor enjoyment and safety, but any loss of mountain lions as a result of encounters will adversely impact the park's biological diversity.

### Avoid behavior that may attract lions:




-  Do not allow children to run ahead on trails.
-  Avoid hiking alone or at dusk and dawn.
-  Do not jog on trails.



### If you see a mountain lion:

-  Remain calm! Enjoy the sighting. Most visitors never get the chance to see a mountain lion.
-  Never run from a lion! No one can outrun a mountain lion.
-  Do not crouch down; the lion has seen you long before you saw it.

### If you encounter an aggressive lion:

-  You must convince the lion that you are not prey and that you may be dangerous yourself.
-  If you have small children with you, pick them up and do all you can to appear large.
-  Hold your ground, wave your arms, shout! If the lion behaves aggressively, throw rocks at it.



 Report all lion sightings, IN DETAIL, to a park ranger.

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. As we discover more about the lion, we fear it less and appreciate it more.

During your visit to Big Bend, you may wish to learn more about the mountain lion and its habits. For many visitors, seeing a track...or just knowing lions are out there...will be reward enough.

Sequential mountain lion photographs courtesy Tracy Carter.



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