



Mountain lion attacks seem to be on an increase lately. Perhaps he does not like us encroaching on his territory. (Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

Mountain lion attacks: headline grabbers or real threats?

I don't watch the news on television in the traditional sense. Getting involved in politics, world affairs and civil uprisings just leaves me with a headache. My wife says I get "cranky" whenever I watch the news, so in the interest of marital bliss, I leave world affairs to others.

I do, however, pay attention to any news that involves my constant pursuit of all things outdoors. One of the things I have noticed lately is that the mountain lion seems to be claiming quite a few headlines and I decided to look into this a bit further.

In January of 2020, a family hiking in Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park in California survived an outdoor nightmare when a mountain lion grabbed a 3-year-old boy by the neck and dragged him off. The lion seized the boy by the neck, creating puncture wounds, and began to drag him away.

Thinking quickly, the boy's father threw a backpack at the lion. The play worked and the lion dropped the kid and went for the pack instead. The boy suffered some injuries but did make a full recovery.

In January of 2004, in the same park, a 35-year-old biker was not so fortunate. Mark Reynolds



Tips from the Posse
By Mark Rackay

was alone and crouched over fixing his bicycle when a lion attacked and killed him. After partially eating the man, the big cat partially buried Reynolds (a common behavior in cats.) The same cat later attacked another biker, assuming bikers were easy prey. Other bikers nearby fought off the cat from the second attack, and the biker survived.

Felis concolor is known by many names, including mountain lion, puma, cougar and panther. In fact, there are 30 subspecies of the mountain lion. For our purposes here, I will refer to him as the cougar. Is the American cougar a potential man-eater? Considering that his closest counterpart is the leopard of Africa, I would venture to say yes.

The leopard and cougar are the same size and strength, and both easily kill deer-sized game. They both climb

well and frequently hunt as much from ambush as by stalking and charging their prey.

The great outdoors writer, Elmer Keith wrote about a man-eating cougar in his book Big Game Hunting. A 13-year-old boy was killed and partially eaten by a cougar when he was running an errand to a neighboring ranch. Even though such killings are rare, they cannot be discounted.

Cougar attacks are fairly rare in North America. There have been some 127 documented attacks since 1890, with 27 of them resulting in fatalities. If you ever have a notion about wanting to make the record book as having been a cougar victim, I would send you to Washington State or British Columbia. For some reason, a large percentage of cougar attacks occur there. Must be something in the water.

Many of the cougar attacks can be partially attributed to blinding acts of idiocy. Take for example an incident at one of those drive-thru wildlife exhibits. A family in a motorhome allowed a cougar to enter through an open window.

Whatever the big cat's motives, it pounced on an 18-month-old baby and badly injured it before the grandmother, armed with

a butcher knife, stabbed the cat to death, thereby saving the child from the statistic book. Don't mess with granny is the moral of that story.

There is much evidence that at least some of the cougar attacks on man are a result of the cat having rabies. The cougar is often exposed to rabies through its prey and a certain percentage is bound to contract it.

Perhaps you saw a video on social media, circulating last fall, showing a cougar following a Utah hiker up a trail for six nail-biting minutes. Critics claim the media's reporting on the video misrepresents cougar behavior. The critics argued that the cat was merely fending off a potential threat to her cubs.

I argue that fact with the critics. I have encountered many game animals with young in the wild, including the very dangerous bear sow with cubs. In all of my encounters, once I backed away, and showed an obvious retreat and withdrawal to the area, the mother animal returned to their young. The cougar in the video followed and made false charges on this hiker for a great distance down the trail, clearly far away from her young. Obviously, something else was going

on here.

Cougar are often reported to have stalked humans on a trail. I have, on several occasions, had a cougar walking along my back track. This is a rare behavior, as the cougar is very elusive and shy, often going out of its way to avoid human contact. My guess is that it was just mere curiosity and not an actual stalk with an intent of attack.

I have noticed an uptick in cougar encounters over the last several years. There have been more frequent sightings as well. I attribute much of this to an increase in the cougar population in our state. It is estimated that 40,000 cougars live in North America and as many as 7,000 in Colorado. That number seems somewhat conservative to me.

Personally, I have seen more cougars, and the spoor of cougar, in the last several years. This indicates that the cats are either increasing in numbers or are losing their fear of man. Probably both.

As man continues to encroach into the cougar territory through uncontrolled urban sprawl, I suspect cougar encounters will become more commonplace. Areas like Colorado Springs and Golden are seeing more of

the cats in backyards and other urban areas.

As we hike, bike, and generally enjoy the outdoors in areas where cougar is known to live, we will have to become more diligent with our trail awareness. Hike and bike in groups, rather than alone and keep children close at hand. Seems kids, with their smaller size, are more susceptible to a cougar attack. Dogs should be kept on a leash and close to you at all times when outdoors.

I am not trying to instill any unnecessary fear in anyone or prevent someone from enjoying the outdoors. Cougar attacks are very rare indeed. Just be aware when you are in cougar country. You don't want to be lying on the trail, face up with a cougar standing on your chest reading the dinner menu.

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