

Headlines & Highlights

FROM THE LOCAL NEWS



Cougar Country

MOUNTAIN LION STALKS LOCAL RESIDENT

By Olivia Exstrum

When Kyra Kopenstonsky found herself the target of a mountain lion stalking in early August while hiking the Coltrains Trail in San Miguel County, the incident made headlines. The lion followed the Placerville resident for approximately 20 minutes, and only receded after Kopenstonsky made herself appear bigger and even sang. This recent episode, although an exceedingly rare occurrence, begs the question: Are mountain lion attacks and stalking increasing? And if so, what can we do about it?

Joe Lewandowski, a spokesperson for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, says no. "A sighting of a mountain lion in the wild in Colorado is quite rare," Lewandowski says. "Certainly, this incident is no reason for any sort of alarm or any indication that there are more or fewer mountain lions in the area."

In fact, says San Miguel County Sheriff Bill Masters, this is only the second mountain lion stalking incident officially reported in the area in his nearly 40 years in law

enforcement. Masters says he once received a report of a fisherman spotting a lion across the river. The fisherman moved downriver, only to have the lion follow from across the stream. However, Masters says he does believe mountain lion activity and sightings have grown in recent years, and says it was rumored that there was another

stalking on the Jud Wiebe Trail in Telluride this summer. "I've seen a few mountain lions over the years, but it does seem to be growing a little bit," Masters says. He mentions a friend's encounter with a lion while walking down the street and reported sightings in the Ilium Valley and the San Miguel Canyon.

Ken Logan, a researcher at Colorado Parks and Wildlife, points to the swell in people in the woods to

the seemingly increasing encounter rate between lions and people. "The most important thing to convey is that people who live and recreate in San Miguel County are in cougar habitat," Logan says. "It's cougar habitat year-round. The probability for any individual to encounter a cougar is extremely low, but when you have a lot of people, the number

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of people that encounter them may increase in time. The Placerville area is very high-quality cougar habitat. We expect them to live there."

In the case of the August incident, Masters and Lewandowski says Kopenstonsky did all the right things. "She stood up and made herself look big; she tried to do something to scare the cat off; and she didn't run," Lewandowski says. Because mountain lions are so elusive, Masters

explained, the report was unusual. "Mountain lions usually tend to run away," he says. "They'll watch people and won't move, but in this case she reported that the lion followed her even after she started making loud noises and making herself look bigger. But she's a small woman, and the lion probably thought she could be some form of prey." He advises not turning and running, which is a "natural prey reaction."

By nature, mountain lions are solitary creatures. Cubs will only stay with their mothers for the first 12 to 18 months before they're on their own, and Lewandowski says it's because of this that younger lions are more likely to get into trouble. "The younger lions don't have as much knowledge, and they're curious like any other cat," he says. "They get into an area and take a domestic pet, and if they see a human, there could be some curiosity. We look very odd to them. We're on two legs, we have weird-colored clothing, we talk, and we make noise."

Lewandowski estimates there are between six- and nine-thousand lions in Colorado. Although that may seem like a huge figure, to put it into perspective, there are approximately 400,000 deer in the state. As a result of their relatively small number, biologists classify mountain lions as a low-density species, and Lewandowski says they are difficult to study. "There are just very few of them spread across a huge landscape."

Although there's currently little information on mountain lion populations, Logan is conducting a study on the effects of sport hunting on cougar populations on the Uncompahgre Plateau. Logan says the ten-year study won't be completed for another year, but in his study area, the mountain lion population has actually declined in recent years. "I have been studying cougars in the West for the last 34 years," he says. "The number of times I have encountered a cougar by accident while I've been studying them is about six, and I'm in the field practically every day. But when you have lots of people, and that probability is compounded by lots of people in the woods, then somebody's going to spot a cougar." *