

Panther Legends & Modern Sightings

Tales & Reports from the North Carolina Mountains

By Kelly Coffey



Photo credit: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

No animal in the southern Appalachian Mountains can match the panther for legend, drama, and persistent modern-day sightings despite official consensus that the cat was eradicated in the East over a century ago (Florida excepted). An older generation of mountaineers grew up hearing tales from their grandparents of panthers stalking people, panthers stealing livestock, horrifying panther screams in the night, and epic fights between panthers and bears. For comparison, the elk and wolf once roamed these mountains, but no folklore has been preserved about elk, and modern wolf sightings are nonexistent. There's something primal about the panther that's kept legends alive and excited many who claim to have encountered one within the past few decades.

For our ancestors, that primal feeling was fear. Fear of being attacked. Fear of starvation when livestock were killed. They had no respect for what we see today as a noble creature, no admiration for its cunning, no esteem for this animal at the top of the food chain. An oft repeated anecdote is that a panther could kill a small hog (or even a calf), sling it over its shoulder, and carry it off with little difficulty.¹ Remembering such stories passed down through his family, Watauga County native Jay Presnell has the impression of a dangerous animal that could do serious damage to a person's livelihood.² In response to such a situation, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation in 1785 that would allow counties to pay a bounty to anyone killing a panther.³ The effectiveness of this Act is questionable, since by the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted observed while traveling in the North Carolina mountains that panthers still "are numerous and kill young stock of every description."⁴

Newspapers from the turn of the century dutifully reported any panther sightings and the reactions stirred when one was said to be prowling about. "It has gotten a lot of our galax pullers afraid to go to gather leaves,"⁵ says one report, while another noted that "the blackberry crop was neglected."⁶ One sighting in Wilkes County in 1925 got "the people very much excited over the appearance of this wild animal," so much so that 75 men went to hunt it but failed to catch it. One person observed that "few people in that section travel after the sun goes down."⁷ Two men hunting one night near the Tennessee line heard a panther scream and "frightened by the noise, called their dogs, but they would not run it, and then the men got scared worse."⁸

¹ Stanley Young & Edward A. Goldman, *The Puma: Mysterious American Cat*, 1946, 60

² Author interview of Jay Presnell, September 5, 2021

³ *Laws of North Carolina*, 749-50

⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Backcountry*, 251

⁵ *The Lenoir Topic*, November 23, 1909

⁶ *The Lenoir Topic*, August 15, 1894

⁷ *The North Wilkesboro Hustler*, July 8, 1925

⁸ *The Lenoir Topic*, November 11, 1885

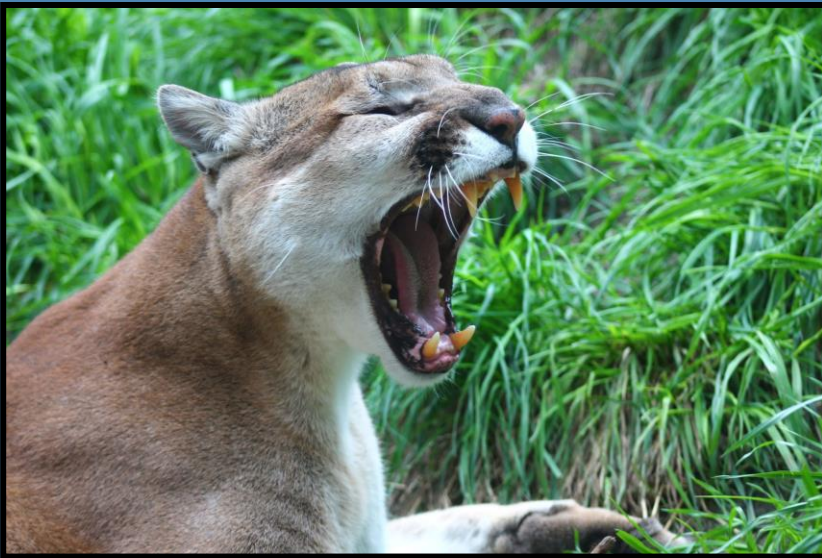
It goes by many names-

panther, cougar, puma, mountain lion. *Puma concolor* is its scientific name. The Cherokee called it “Lord of the Forest.” In the past, the animal had a vast range, from Canada to the tip of South America, from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific, from sea level to high mountains. No other land mammal in the western hemisphere could match its spread. Because it intersected lands with so many different languages and cultures, the cat has more names (about 100) than any other animal in the world.⁹ When Europeans arrived in the Americas, it reminded them of the Old World panther (also called a leopard) and so that was the name they used. The name stuck in eastern North America even though naturalists later came up with the name “cougar” to distinguish it from Old World panthers (it evolved from the Brazilian name “cuguacuarana”). TV and movie westerns called it “cougar” and so that has become the more common name and most widely used by wildlife professionals. “Mountain lion” is heard frequently but it is misleading because they live in the lowlands too. I prefer “panther” because that is what it has been traditionally called in this part of the country.¹⁰

The creature is all muscle and sinew

The average male cougar weighs 140 lbs., stands two feet tall at the shoulders, and measures seven feet from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail, but some old mountain legends report cats as long as ten and eleven feet from tip to tip. A panther’s hide hangs loose, like an oversized garment. One expert states, “A mountain lion’s entire dismantled skeleton would fit inside a hiking boot box. The creature is all muscle and sinew.” Such a physique enables them to drop as far as 65 feet from a tree to the ground without injuring themselves.¹¹ They can jump as high as 15 feet and leap as far as 45 feet.¹²

Panthers are solitary creatures. They live alone, hunt alone, and have well-defined territories of about 15 square miles (for comparison, the town of Boone covers six square miles). They come together only to mate. The females give birth to 3-6 spotted kittens every other year who stay with the mother from 12 to 24 months.¹³ Panthers are most active at dawn, dusk, and at night, which is the same movement pattern of their primary prey, deer.¹⁴



A terrifying scream

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of a panther is its scream. Most people say it sounds like a woman shrieking in terror. That vocalization was usually more frightening than a visual glimpse of the animal. An observer in 1890 wrote that it is “a cry so unearthly and so weird that even the man of stoutest heart will start in affright; a cry that can only be likened to a scream of

⁹ Kevin Hansen, *Cougar: The American Lion*, 1992, 1

¹⁰ Gerry Parker, *The Eastern Panther: Mystery Cat of the Appalachians*, 1998, 6, 17, 19, 23; Bob Butz, *Beast of Never, Cat of God, The Search for the Eastern Puma*, 2005, 6

¹¹ Butz, 7

¹² Hansen, 49

¹³ Hansen, 12

¹⁴ Hansen, 32

demoniac laughter. This is the cry of the male cougar. If it is answered by the female the response will be similar to the wail of a child in terrible pain.”¹⁵ Another witness in 1899 said the “unearthly scream of a panther close at hand will almost freeze the blood in one’s veins, and for an instant paralyze almost any form of man or beast.”¹⁶ Scotty Eller from Pottertown, Watauga County, says his father saw a panther cross his yard in 2002. His dog began chasing it, but the panther turned and “squalled.” The dog instantly stopped, hunkered down, and crawled away whimpering.¹⁷ I remember as a child in the 1970s a “panther scare” one summer in the Blowing Rock area set off by people hearing what they thought were panther screams. Children were warned to stay close to the house and not go out at night. These aural incidents were never confirmed with any solid evidence, although Cheryl Smith says her father Paul Smith saw one cross the road in front of his vehicle on Flannery Fork Road during this time period.¹⁸ (Want to experience a panther scream yourself? Just go to YouTube and enter “mountain lion screaming” in the search engine. A couple of trail camera videos of cougars from out West will pop up and you can see and hear that legendary shriek.)

While that scream is dramatic, panthers do not wander the countryside screaming frequently and randomly. They are actually silent most of the time and when they do vocalize, they make other sounds such as chirps, grunts, purrs, whines, and whistles.¹⁹ Biologists think the scream might be related to mating and thus can be heard only occasionally.

Eating habits

A panther will eat a wide variety of animals, but its preferred prey is deer. A single deer will feed a panther for about two weeks. In between meals, a panther will cover the leftover carcass with leaves, twigs, or whatever is handy, including dirt and small rocks. These coverings keep it cool and deter other predators.²⁰ One might expect panthers to also gather leaves for bedding, but just the opposite is true. Panther dens are bare rock or ground. They make no attempt to line their sleeping quarters with any materials, even when they give birth²¹, which led me to question the veracity of a legend told by my grandfather, Howard Coffey. He said a man was out in the woods and took shelter from the rain under an overhanging rock. The man fell asleep, and when he awoke, he discovered a panther was building a nest of leaves and twigs beside him. The man stayed still until the panther left, then he hid and waited for the cougar to return. The cat came back with a litter of kittens. After I learned that panthers don’t make nests, I dismissed this story as a tall tale, until I



Panther kittens are born with spots, which fade as they reach a year old.

¹⁵ Young, 85

¹⁶ Ibid, 88

¹⁷ Author interview of Scotty Eller, October 25, 2021

¹⁸ Author interview of Cheryl Smith, December 8, 2021

¹⁹ Young, 83

²⁰ Parker, 28

²¹ Young, 117

read a documented account of something similar happening to a hunter in Pennsylvania. The hunter got tired, laid down on the forest floor, and fell asleep. He woke up to find himself covered in leaves, with a panther nearby. The hunter plausibly concluded that the cougar assumed he was a dead animal, but still fresh meat, and covered him for later consumption.²² Could the cougar in my grandfather's story have been doing the same thing, only the man drew the wrong conclusion? She was likely bringing the kittens for a meal.

Panthers are not intimidated by the size of their prey, even when it is much larger than themselves. On Daniel Boone's first trip to Kentucky, he encountered a herd of buffalo running wild and erratic. He saw that the cause was a panther riding on the back of one of the biggest buffalo, with its claws sunk deep in the animal's flesh.²³ Such attacks are risky, as large deer, elk, or buffalo have been known to throw panthers against trees so hard as to break their bones or impale them on their antlers.²⁴

How dangerous is a panther?

Tales of being stalked by a panther are common, but they rarely end in an attack. My great-great grandfather Jesse Hodges told of the time a panther followed him home to the Aho community from Blowing Rock sometime in the late 1800s. The cat kept a steady distance from him and when he would stop walking, the panther would stop but never leave. Jesse had no weapon but a small pocketknife that he unfolded, ready to use when the attack came. But it never did and he made it home safe.

Jay Presnell tells of a stalking incident with a twist that illustrates a common habit of panthers. His great-great aunt had been to the store in Heaton (Avery County) to sell herbs and buy supplies. She set off for



Photo credit: Grandfather Mountain

home and soon a panther began to follow her. Among her purchases were two tin cups that she began banging together, hoping the racket would scare off the cat. It didn't, and soon the cups became crushed and useless. In desperation she removed her bonnet and threw it at the beast. Looking back, she saw it do something curious. It stopped and began scrapping the ground long enough to cover the bonnet with dirt. She got the idea that if she could keep it busy with this odd ritual, maybe she could make it home before it attacked. So, she began removing her clothing, piece by piece and throwing it at the cougar, and each time it would stop long enough to bury the fabric. The ploy worked and she made it home safely, though almost naked.²⁵ What she had witnessed was the panther marking its territory. They do so by scrapping up mounds of dirt and sometimes urinating on them. The clothing, for whatever reason, must have triggered this compulsion.

After collecting panther folklore and doing an exhaustive search of western North Carolina newspapers from the turn of the century (that often report stories already 100 years old), I

²² Henry W. Shoemaker, *Extinct Pennsylvania Animals*, 56-57

²³ Young, 97-98

²⁴ Hansen, 15

²⁵ Presnell interview

have found only two incidents that could be interpreted as attacks on people, though they both involve horses, so I suspect that the panthers were after the horses, not the people on them. Both occurred in Jackson County. In one incident, reported in the *Watauga Democrat* in 1907²⁶, a lady on horseback was chased by a panther as she was nearing home. She arrived at her house screaming for help and slid from the saddle just as the panther leapt into it. The panther was promptly killed by her husband. The second story took place sometime in the 19th century. A man named Andy J. Wood was riding horseback when a panther jumped the horse and landed behind him in the saddle. As Andy scrambled forward off the saddle, the horse lunged ahead in fright with such exertion that the saddle girth broke and in a cinematic display of good luck and perfect timing, the saddle slid off the rump of the horse, carrying the panther with it, while Andy and the horse traveled on home to safety.²⁷

The curiosity of domestic cats is proverbial, and panthers are no different. More than one panther expert has noted the trait and given examples of panthers following people just to observe, with no intent of doing harm.²⁸ One chased a girl up a tree, touched her with the tip of its nose, and then ran off, its curiosity seemingly satisfied.²⁹ I suspect that the many alleged stalking folktales are just panthers being curious. For example, the panther followed Jesse Hodges for over a mile with nothing impeding an attack if it chose to kill him. One cougar expert points out that a human standing erect does not have a neck in a horizontal position (like a deer) that would tempt a cougar to attack.³⁰ A researcher found that from 1890 to 1990 only 10 deaths and 48 injuries occurred as a result of panther attacks in the western United States and Canada. By comparison, dogs kill about 20 people *annually* and injure over 200,000.³¹

Other close encounters

Panthers can be bold when looking for a meal. Caleb Coffey, who lived on Flattop Mountain, Watauga County, told a story in 1890 of when he and his brother Reuben were hunting ginseng in the Richlands section of Caldwell County. They camped for the night and Reuben was sleeping with meat under his head, presumably to guard against it being taken by wild animals. A panther came by during the night and pulled a handkerchief off his head trying to get at the meat. They ran it off and were not bothered the rest of the night. Caleb claimed to have killed 25 panthers in his life and said a panther was “the most ferocious animal that roamed the Watauga mountains.”³²



Photo credit: Grandfather Mountain

²⁶ *Watauga Democrat*, January 30, 1907

²⁷ *Jackson County Journal*, “Autobiography of Andy J. Wood”, January 30, 1914.

²⁸ Young, 98

²⁹ Robert H. Busch, *The Cougar Almanac*, 1996, 90

³⁰ Hansen, 71

³¹ Parker, 30. Ironically, the nation’s most dangerous animal is the panther’s prey, the deer. Annually, about 200 people are killed in auto accidents involving deer collisions, Hansen, 71

³² *Watauga Democrat*, September 25, 1890

An early settler in Transylvania County was deer hunting when he came upon a deer that had been killed moments before by a panther, who apparently fled as the hunter approached. He field-dressed the carcass, slung it on his back, and headed for home. The panther returned and tried to pull the deer off the hunter's back. The animal continued its attempts to reclaim the deer for half a mile until the hunter reached his house. The man recalled, "I felt sorter mean. It was out of meat as well as I, and it had run that deer down to get it and was loathe to give it up. I felt like I had stolen it."³³ Well, he had; but at least he didn't shoot the panther. This poignant story is the only legend I've found where sympathy was expressed for the beast, rather than fear and hatred.

A chilling close encounter happened to Jordan Council, Sr. (1769-1839), who lived near what is now the town of Boone. One night his dog treed what he thought was a raccoon. He climbed the tree to shake it out, but it climbed even higher, sending down an unusually large cascade of bark, leaves, and moss. When he finally got close to the creature, he suddenly felt a long furry tail swipe across his face and he knew in an instant that it was a panther. Needless to say, he exited the tree faster than he had climbed it.³⁴

Panthers & bears

The panther is a top predator, and nothing can challenge it in combat except a bear. There have been some epic battles between the two. My great-great grandfather, Jesse Hodges, was walking home from Blowing Rock one evening in the late 1800s. About the time he got to the Aho community, he heard a commotion in the hollow down below him. It was a panther and a bear in a fight. They were evenly matched with one unable to get the advantage over the other. He witnessed paws swinging, teeth snapping, snarling,

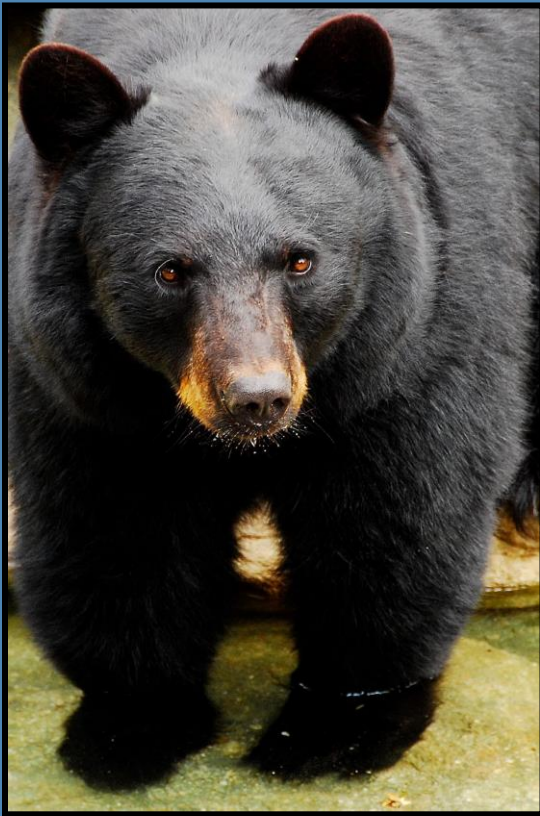


Photo credit: Grandfather Mountain

growling, and tumbling for several minutes until at last the bear's chest was exposed and with one great slash of the panther's paw, it split open the bear's chest, killing the bear instantly. The panther shook itself and sauntered off. Jesse was terrified. He hurried on home as fast as he could go.

An even more dramatic fight occurred in Mitchell County around 1810. A man was out deer hunting and came to a tree that had recently fallen across a creek with the leaves still on it. Realizing that it would make an excellent deer stand, the man climbed in among the branches and was thus concealed. Soon he saw on the opposite bank a bear climbing on the fallen tree and proceeding across. About the time he got to the middle of the creek, a panther sprang up from the leaves not far from where the man was sitting and attacked the bear. The bear knocked the panther off into the creek, but it sprang back up, landed on the bear's back, and they both fell off into the water. It wasn't long before the panther got the upper hand and the bear expired. As the hunter was crossing the log to get a closer look at the fight, he came upon a mound of leaves covering a freshly-killed deer that the panther had cached. The bear had scented the deer from the opposite bank and was on his way to check it out when the confrontation took place.³⁵

³³ *Brevard News* April 18, 1919

³⁴ *Watauga Ancestry*, June 1991

³⁵ *The Lenoir Topic* January 28, 1910

White & black panthers?

Around 1840, Joshua Storie- one of the founding settlers of Aho, Watauga County – was hunting on Bull Ruffian Mountain at the head of Laurel Creek. It was late in the afternoon and he was overtaken by a dense fog, such that he couldn't find his way home. He was near a rock shelter and since night was approaching, he decided to camp there. He built a fire near the opening and after dark he heard the scream of a panther. It made its way to the camp. Amazingly, Joshua reported that it was white. The cougar hung around the rock shelter all night, getting closer whenever the fire burned down, At one point it jumped on top of the overhanging rock and Joshua could hear its tail thumping overhead. It was so close it knocked leaves off, which fluttered down to where Joshua was sitting. Morning came, the fog lifted, and the panther retreated into the woods. Joshua made it home safely. However, the legend of the white panther continued for many years. Numerous people in Aho saw it thereafter and “almost every family has a story to tell” about the creature, according to Aho historian Roy Weaver.³⁶



A game camera captured this photo of a white panther in Brazil in 2013. Such a picture helps validate the legend of the white panther of Aho.

This story highlights an interesting question about panthers- do they come in other colors besides the familiar tan? What about black panthers? The white panther of Aho is certainly plausible. Albinism and a related condition called leucism are the lack of color pigment in skin, fur, or feathers due to a genetic mutation. Though rare, the conditions occur in almost all animals, from snakes to birds. White cougars have been reported and even photographed. The opposite condition- melanism, the presence of black pigment in skin and fur due to a genetic mutation- is somewhat controversial and confusing in the context of the American cougar. The image of a black panther is common, but it actually originated in the Old World leopard, a species that sometimes produces solid black individuals that are called black panthers. But biologists agree that it just doesn't happen to the cougar. They point to the tens

of thousands of cougars killed since the settlement of America and none have been reported as black.³⁷ However, a surprising number of people report seeing black panthers, which has been attributed to low light conditions and the fact that panthers grow a winter coat that is grayish and darker than the summer coat (similar to a deer's).

Were panthers completely eradicated?

Since the time of the earliest settlements, panthers were hunted relentlessly or shot on sight with an aggression usually reserved for rats. They were viewed as a threat to people and livestock, with no practical reasons for letting them live. At the same time, the deer population – their primary food source – was in decline, which is the reason panthers turned to domestic livestock for sustenance. Eradication efforts, aided with the loss of deer, were successful. By 1900, reports of panthers were so rare or

³⁶ Roy Weaver, *Ghost Stories and Other Tales of Aho and Sampson*

³⁷ Butz, 131

nonexistent that they were considered extinct in the East. Yet, there has never been a time when panthers were not reported in the East, even after they were assumed to be extirpated. Panther sightings exhibited a pattern in that not many were reported in the early 20th century, then reports increased significantly in the 1950s and swelled impressively in the 1960s and 1970s. Coincidentally, deer populations began to recover over this same time period.³⁸

In 1977, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Forest Service jointly sponsored an effort to determine if panthers existed in the southern Appalachian Mountains. Robert Downing, a wildlife biologist, was hired to do the job. This was after a professional cougar hunter from Colorado (hired by the same agencies) failed to track down any evidence. After searching for several years, Downing concluded that he had been “unable to positively confirm that there are self-sustaining populations of cougars in the eastern United States north of Florida.” and later added, “but it sure is hard to believe everyone who saw one was wrong.”³⁹ Downing’s mission was a turning point because it “settled the matter of eastern cougars as far as the wildlife establishment was concerned,” according to nature writer Chris Bolgiano.⁴⁰ But the sightings have continued for decades since.

A recent sighting

Jessica Welborn is a level-headed, thirtysomething GIS Planner for High Country Council of Governments who lives in Watauga County’s Cove Creek community. She was on her porch one evening in the summer of 2019 when she saw a panther cross her yard approximately 35 feet away and disappear into the brush beside her house. She is certain it was a cougar. “When I saw it I knew it wasn’t a dog, it wasn’t a coyote, it wasn’t a bobcat. It had that big, long tail.” She was amazed by its stealth. When it entered the woods she heard no twigs snapping or leaves rustling. Curious about whether or not it was still there, she followed its route into the brush and saw no sign of it.⁴¹

Stories similar to Jessica’s are repeated throughout the eastern states. In 1983, the Eastern Puma Research Network developed a set of criteria for a credible report that consisted of the following: multiple witnesses, experienced observer, extended time of sighting, and evidence such as hair, tracks, or a photo or video. Between 1983 and 1994 they collected 2,200 credible reports that met the criteria, and 3,900 reports that did not. The organization had similar results in the following decade.⁴² Yet the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has



Photo credit: Grandfather Mountain

³⁸ David S. Lee, “The Status of the Panther in North Carolina,” *Wildlife in North Carolina*, July 1977, 8; Chris Bolgiano, *Mountain Lion: An Unnatural History of Pumas and People*, 1995, 164; Robert Tougias, *The Quest for the Eastern Cougar*, 2011, 16

³⁹ Parker, 145-46; Hansen,

⁴⁰ Bolgiano, 166

⁴¹ Author interview of Jessica Welborn, December 23, 2021

officially declared that the eastern cougar is extinct. Most state wildlife agencies concur, including North Carolina's. USFWS states, "During a 2011 review of the subspecies' status...no states or provinces provided evidence of the existence of an eastern cougar population, nor did analysis of hundreds of reports from the public suggest otherwise. The conclusions are based on a review of more than 100 credible studies dating back to 1900."⁴³ So, what are people like Jessica seeing? If we accept USFWS's conclusion that the native population has been eradicated, there's only two other explanations- 1) they are captive panthers that have escaped or been released; or 2) western cougars have moved east, like the coyote.

Released captive cougars is a possible explanation, but it is illegal in North Carolina and other states to keep a panther captive as a pet. Of course, many might be held illegally but one wonders if released pet cougars can account for so many sightings.

Experts say there are more cougars in the West now than when Europeans arrived in America, and that such abundance is pushing many east.⁴⁴ In 2011, a male cougar was hit and killed by an automobile in Connecticut. DNA analysis showed that it was from South Dakota, over 1,700 miles away.⁴⁵ This incident shows that people could be seeing roaming male cougars, but the movement of a breeding population into the east would be extremely slow because females prefer to give birth in or near the territory where they themselves were born.

Wildlife agency investigates all evidence

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) gets between five and ten reports of cougars every year, but have not been able to verify any of the reports for the past 100 years (with the exception of a pair of escaped pets), according to Falyn Owens, an Extension Biologist with the agency. "Every single one that is accompanied by any sort of evidence, whether it's a photo or a carcass- anything like that that we can follow-up on, we always do, because it would be very exciting if it was a cougar," she says, "We



always take these reports very seriously because it's not impossible that it could be an escaped captive cougar or one from Florida could wander up here or even cougars from the western populations, but it always ends up being a misidentified house cat, bobcats, or we've had dogs or bears misidentified."

While the agency is eager to investigate purported evidence, they don't have the capacity to search for a cougar based on a sighting alone. Owens explains, "If it's just someone saying 'I

⁴² Tougias, 40

⁴³ U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service News Bulletin 01/22/2018, "Long Extinct Eastern Cougar to be Removed from Endangered Species List Correcting Lingering Anomaly"

⁴⁴ Butz, 99-100

⁴⁵ Tougias, 131

saw it and I didn't get any pictures and I just want to let you know'- we can't follow-up on that where there's no evidence at all. We just don't have the staff time."

WRC gets hoax photos every year; i.e. real cougars in photos that were taken out West. But the agency seems pretty savvy in figuring these out. "Usually we can track down where the photo was originally taken," Owens says.

What would you do if you conclude that an image in a photo is a real cougar taken here in North Carolina? I asked. Owens replied, "If we got a legitimate report and there was solid evidence of a cougar, it would hit the news and we would be very happy to say, 'Yes, there's a cougar that was spotted'. We probably wouldn't give an exact location because we wouldn't want to put a target on its back. We wouldn't try to catch it and take it somewhere; we would just try to keep an eye on the reports and make sure it didn't get into trouble. We would let it be."⁴⁶

Dr. Donald Linzey, a biology professor at Wytheville Community College and Virginia Tech, has the evidence that has eluded the WRC for many years. In his book *Mammals of Great Smoky Mountains National Park* he writes, "I now possess three photographs of mountain lions taken by park visitors...Thus, we know there are, or recently have been, mountain lions in the park. However, we still do not know where they might have come from, nor do we have proof of a breeding population." Photographs such as these "have been acquired in my role as chief investigator for all cougar reports in the park. Every report that comes to the park's wildlife biologist [5 to 10 a year] is sent to me for possible investigation," he tells me in an email.

Even if all sightings in the past 100 years have been misidentifications, that doesn't mean we've seen the last of panthers in these mountains. Owens concludes, "I think any wildlife biologist that is worth their salt that has seen the expansion of the range of the western cougar, knows and will admit that one day we are probably going to get cougars in North Carolina that are from that western population. And when that day comes, evidence is going to be pretty easy to come by because where there are cougars they get hit by cars and the carcasses can be recovered, there's a million trail cameras out there, or somebody will shoot one because they were hunting deer and saw it and wanted a trophy- there will be evidence."

Appendix

In late 2021, I solicited panther stories via Facebook, Ray's weather website, and word-of-mouth. Following are the stories that didn't make it into the main article above, but are interesting nonetheless.

Jay Presnell, September 4, 2021

Jay said that he has seen a couple of panthers in his lifetime. Once when he was a boy he was crawling through a laurel thicket and came face-to-face with one. It whirled around and he could see the blond fur that made him recognize it.

He said that his grandfather saw one up in a tree and his neighbor saw one in a tree about 20 years ago.

⁴⁶ Author interview of Falyn Owens, Extension Biologist, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, February 3, 2022

Alvin Coffey, October 31, 2021

Brothers Alvin and Russell Coffey were about 9 and 10 years old around 1940. They were in Headache Holler where they lived in Upton, Caldwell County, when they heard a panther scream. They saw it from a distance on its hind legs as if pawing at something. Their cousins, the Thompson boys, made fun of them, not believing that it was a panther. But soon after that the Thompsons were coon hunting and something scared their dogs, which they believe was the panther.

Florence Coffey

Florence Coffey said in the 1920s that her family would walk to church revivals in the fall in Upton, Caldwell County, and they would often hear a panther scream in the woods.

Scotty Eller

In addition to the information in the article above, Scotty says he saw paw prints near the creek as big as his hand. The next night Scotty and his wife heard it scream about 11:00 pm, which he said sounded “freaky” and would make “your hair stand on end.”

Around 2014, Scotty’s son, who was 11 years old at the time, saw a long panther tail extending above a log, flicking back and forth like it was ready to pounce.

Jerome Ford, November 8, 2021

Jerome Ford says that when he was about ten years old in the 1970s, he and his family saw something along a ridge near where they lived. It shrieked very loud, which sounded like a woman screaming. His father said it was a panther. This incident occurred in the Blackberry community in Caldwell County.

Tracie Salinas, October 26, 2021

Hi -

I moved to Boone in 2004 and had grown up in a very rural area of Mississippi. It was not unusual for us to hear panthers/cougars at night or to find remains of cattle or deer that had been attacked by them. I recall very clearly coming home late from a night class and seeing one stroll in no hurry across our road in the light of my headlights.

We moved to Snaggy Mountain Boulevard in Boone in 2005 after renting elsewhere in the county for a year. We were frequently visited by bears and coyotes and would occasionally see a portion of a track in the mud or snow that didn't quite look like a canine paw print. In about 2010/11, our neighbors got a miniature donkey to help "mow" their yard and kept it in the back yard with a pretty sizeable old metal building as its shelter. One winter afternoon I returned from work to find the neighbors and a representative from the state there examining what was left of the donkey inside the shelter. Apparently when the donkey had gone into its shelter earlier in the day or morning, something seemed to have leaped from above and killed it before eating parts of it. There were clear pawprints in the snow that looked much more feline and were about 3-4 inches across (estimating in my memory). The person from the state wildlife office said that he agreed it looked like a panther kill but that panthers were extinct in NC, so he couldn't put that down on the paperwork. Instead he put something else, like coyotes, but I hadn't ever heard of coyotes attacking livestock at the tops of their shoulders. That wasn't what they did to cattle growing up.

It didn't take long before other neighbors started hearing and then sharing stories of their own. A friend up the road told us that before we bought our house, he saw a panther cross the road and run through the yard of our eventual house. Another reported paw prints in the mud. Even I had seen three long tailed tawny cubs - best I could tell from afar! - in the road one afternoon. They quickly scattered as I hesitated, aware that a mother could be close. They sure weren't dogs or bobcats.

After the Cottages got built, the sightings and pawprints and findings of occasionally curious scat stopped.

Hope these stories help with your collection!
Tracie

Richard Philipsen, November 19, 2021

Kelly,

I have two stories about panthers in WNC that might interest you.

I worked as a part-time interpreter at the Zebulon B. Vance home-place (NC State Historic site) on Reems Creek RD in Weaverville of Buncombe County. One of the full-time employees, Sudie Wheeler, who lived next to the property, told of a mountain lion that she saw walking between the two (2) properties toward Reems Creek. She described the tan color, the long tail, and the size of the cat. This would have been in the early 1970's.

The second story is from one of my sixth grade students; I was a teacher at Pisgah E.S. (Pisgah Highway in Candler of Buncombe County) from 1974-1985. One of my sixth grade students, Kurt Burnette, told me about hearing a "Painter" screaming one night near his home on Black Oak Cove RD. When I told him that panthers were on the extinct list in WNC, he described the scream as a woman screaming as loud as she could scream. Several other students also reported hearing a similar scream from a panther. This story would have been in 1977 or 78.

Richard Philipsen

Jan Diefenbach, December 9, 2021

Hello Mr . Coffey,

I live in the Broad River area near BlackMountain North Carolina. Within the past 10 years I have seen a dark panther cross in front of my car in the late afternoon on Crooked Creek Road.

About five or six years ago a panther attacked and carried off a small doe that I had been watching all summer.

I live on my grandparents property and when they were alive we had an encounter with a panther that came very close to the house and got our barn cat.

I know all of the claims that they are extinct and they don't live here anymore. They are wrong. Whether they have migrated here from Florida or been released by people who had them captive we do have them.

My horse vet told me around the time that we were hearing them ... yes it's a hair raising sound, To make sure I vary the times I went to the barn. He told me they would watch for me if I kept her regular schedule. That was pretty creepy since I was feeding it 5:30 in the morning.

I also have a neighbor who used to ride horses on the trails here and came across two of them on one of her trips.

Hope this is the kind of thing you are interested in... There's no doubt in my mind they are around in our mountains.