

## NATURALISTS' NOTES

### Cougars

The cougar is the one big British Columbia mammal that never figures on a First Nations' totem pole and is barely mentioned in their legends, though sometimes their claws figure in ceremonial regalia. Possibly this is because cougars are largely nocturnal and very secretive. The ghost walkers of American folklore, they are also called mountain lions, pumas and catamounts.

*Felis concolor* is the cougar's Latin name meaning cat of one colour. Its short fur is predominantly tawny brown, with a lighter belly and a black tip to the tail. Males weigh 60-90 kg and females a little less. Their claws being retractable do not show in their footprints making it easy to distinguish them from those of dogs. In snow, the tail may leave drag marks.

Cougars reach puberty at about three years. Courtship is similar to that of domestic cats. Zookeepers say the females emit a bloodcurdling scream much like a Siamese cat but a lot louder. It is seldom heard in the wild. Litters of one to six kittens are born after a gestation period of 90-96 days. They have blue eyes and spotted coats and remain with their mothers for about two years.

With a lifespan of about thirteen years, cougars range in proud solitude over territories of 35000-45000 hectares. Although they prefer deer, they will eat anything from mice to elk. If the prey is too big to eat all at once, they bury it under leaves and earth. Stay away from such caches. In winter, they may kill a deer every two weeks but in summer less often as they feast on ground squirrels.

Back in May a sign went up at Nancy's Bakery in Lund warning people to watch out for their pets and small children as several cougars had been seen locally. Some years cougars are sighted in Westview and other parts of town. Though there are lots around, few people are lucky enough to glimpse one. Dusk and dawn are the most likely times.

Though hikers rarely have encounters, it is well to be prepared. Hike in small groups rather than alone. Never jog as running can trigger an attack. When hiking with children, keep them close by. Don't let them run ahead or lag behind. Pick them up if cougars might be around. Carry a walking stick.

On meeting a cougar, talk to the animal in a calm voice. Maintain eye contact, stand up and slowly back away facing it but never turn round. Wave arms or branches to appear big. Yell and throw things and be prepared to fight back.

Lyn Hancock, who has raised cougar kittens, will give a talk on cougars Sept. 28<sup>th</sup> at the Malaspina Naturalist meeting. You will find a BC Environment pamphlet on cougars at the Visitors Bureau.

*Written by Heather Harbord for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. Photo by Lyn Hancock.*

*For more information on cougars contact the Malaspina Naturalist at 604.485.6134,*