

Search For NC Cougar Continues

Dr. Robert Downing spends much of his time "chasing ghosts" in the Great Smoky Mountains. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist works out of Clemson University in South Carolina, and his goal is to determine if the Eastern cougar is extinct. "The cougar is one of America's most adaptable predators," said Downing. "Its original range extended throughout the Americas except for the Arctic and areas above timberline on top of our highest peaks. Of the 30 cougar subspecies 15 were found in South America, and 15 in North America. Two subspecies were found in the eastern United States, and one of these - the Florida panther - still inhabits the Everglade's Big Cypress Swamp. However, only about a dozen of these cats exist in the wild.

"The other subspecies - the Eastern Cougar - ranged throughout most of eastern North America. In the past ten years, cougar reports have been widespread throughout North Carolina and the rest of the East. We are trying to determine if a handful of Eastern cougars may have survived."

The Eastern cougar had disappeared from most of the East by the turn of the century. Early settlers hunted the big cats with a vengeance, but the two chief culprits in the cougar's demise were the loss of large wilderness areas and the decimation of its favorite prey, the white-tailed deer. The last reports of cougars being killed in North Carolina's coastal swamps predate the Civil War. Reports of panthers being killed in the Great Smoky Mountains persisted until the 1930s, but no newspaper stories, photographs or mounted specimens exist to substantiate these accounts.

"One of the problems with Eastern cougar research is that very little is known about the animals because they were killed off so long ago," said Downing. "For example, there are only nine skins or mounted specimens of Eastern cougars in existence and none is from North Carolina. This doesn't give us much to go on.

Indeed, it doesn't. Perhaps that is why the story of the Eastern cougar is riddled with contradictions.

For example, many cougar sightings involve black panthers. Downing says that if you asked mountain people over the age of 80 what color cougars, are, most would say black.

How common are black panthers? According to Downing, of the thousands of panthers that have been killed only two were black, and both were taken in Brazil. According to Helenette Silver's classic book, "A History of New Hampshire Game And

Furbearers," Eastern cougars found in the Northeast ranged from a tawny yellow to a rusty brown. Cougars were relatively rare even in colonial times, and most early accounts of cougar kills include detailed descriptions of the animals' color, weight and length.

"It's possible, but highly unlikely, that black panthers were occasionally found in the past," said Downing. "Since there are so few specimens in existence, it's hard to say they weren't here with any certainty. However, many cougars are rust-colored, and in the dim light of dawn and dusk these animals would certainly look black. Legends about black panthers are also common in European folklore because of a black phase of the leopard in some parts of Europe. Since these tales were passed down for generations, people may have been seeing black panthers because that's what they expected to see."

Yet, all cougar sightings can't be easily discounted. The North Carolina Museum of Natural History has been recording cougar sightings in the State for the past five years and now has over 500 sightings on file. About 20 percent of these reports were made by reliable observers who obtained prolonged views of the animals under favorable lighting conditions. Many reports in this category come from Park Service, Forest Service, State Park and Wildlife Commission employees.

Downing has been searching for cougar tracks for the past several winters. He has covered over 500 miles of roadway - much of it on the Blue Ridge Parkway - seeking cougar tracks after snowstorms. He still hasn't found one.

"The lack of cougar tracks doesn't mean that the cats aren't here," he said. "One problem is rapid temperature fluctuations destroy good tracks very quickly. It also takes a virtual expert to tell the difference between a cougar track and a large dog track. It's quite possible that cougars lie low during our infrequent snowstorms and don't move until after a thaw, which would eliminate the chances of finding a good track."

The sites of reported cougar kills also provide intriguing possibilities. Several deer kill-sites have been found in the Smoky and Uwharrie Mountains that strongly resemble cougar kills. Another deer kill found recently in the Shenandoah National Forest in Virginia was identified as a cougar kill by a renowned German big-cat expert.

However, cougar kills do not necessarily mean that the eastern cougar is still with us.

Downing cites an example. Five years ago, a West Virginia farmer found two cougars killing his sheep. He shot the first cougar, and the other animal remained at the kill site. The farmer called the Wildlife Department and a biologist shot the live cougar with a tranquilizer gun.



Does He Have A Wild Cousin?

Researchers for the U. S. Fish and Game Service say that captive cats released in the wild could account for cougar sightings in North Carolina. The cougar pictured above is held in captivity at Grandfather Mountain, and is a different subspecies than the native eastern cougar.

"The dead cougar was loaded with parasites that are common in zoos that raise large cats," said Downing.

Still, Downing hasn't given up his search for the Eastern cougars, and is planning different strategies to find the elusive cats. Among the possibilities are setting up scent station lines similar to the "scratch and urinate" sites cougars leave when they search for a mate. He has also taped the mating sounds of female cougars, as well as deer bleating and pigs squealing to see if the cats can be called in. Another

intriguing possibility is setting up scent stations of pure catnip which cougars - like all cats, large and small - love.

"Right now, there isn't a shred of evidence anywhere, including the Canadian provinces, to prove that the Eastern cougar isn't extinct," said Downing.

"However, the East now has the large blocks of wilderness habitat and healthy deer populations that cougars need for survival. If a handful of cats did survive in the Smoky Mountains or elsewhere, they have the habitat and food needed to thrive."

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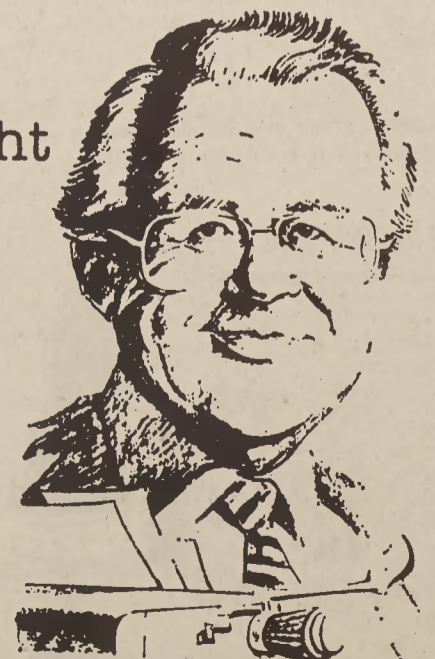
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Kays Gary, Columnist

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A collection of his writings compiled by his friends