

# The Foothills View

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BOILING SPRINGS NC

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## Cougar Springing A Comeback In Cleveland County?

As a boy in the South Mountains, Ed Fortenberry had heard the stories. But until last August he had never seen one.

Then, three months ago, Fortenberry was driving on the Golden Valley Road in the northern county: "It was sitting on the side of the road on a hedgerow, watching something in a wheatfield.

"It was about the size of a big dog. I'd seen the tracks before in the Brier Creek, but I'd never seen one before."

"It" was a panther, Fortenberry is certain. His sighting joins a group of persistent reports from throughout Cleveland County — including a sighting by Marion Butler along the First Broad at the southern end of the county — that this wild cat, once thought nearly extinct, may be living here.

Robert Cornwell, who lives on the Double Shoals Road, remembers some unsettling encounters a couple of years ago. "I went up to the hog lot and this thing ran out. It was the fastest thing I ever saw in my life — it was black, had a long tail that crooked up..."

"Then not too long after I saw him the first time I was walking in the woods one day, it was after a rain. This shower of raindrops came down from a tree and I looked up and saw him, up in that tree. I saw him jump down and run..."

"A year ago this past July my son and his father-in-law were up here from Florida and we were riding around the pasture. My son hollered, 'What's that?' — he saw something moving in the brush. 'It's a dog,' I said. And he said, 'I reckon I know a cat when I see one.' It was a cat as long as my truck is broad."

Cornwell and his wife have heard fearful yowls and wailings around their countryside in the night. "I'm real bald but I could still feel the hair a-raisin' up," he says.

Such reports cause excitement among wildlife officials and scientists as well as among the startled Cleveland Countians and our Carolina neighbors. Some of them will be re-told this week at a meeting of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's cougar experts, in Jacksonville, Fla.

The cougar — also called panther, puma, mountain lion, and at one time, "painter," in the upland South — comes in several sub-species, one of which thrives in the western U.S. and another hangs on, visibly but barely, in the swamps of Florida.

But the eastern species, *Felis Concolor*, fared poorly with civilization. Killed off by early settlers and starved by the decline in deer population, as farms replaced wilderness, the eastern cougar was long thought to be extinct by the early 1900s. However, persistent sightings, occasional reports of kills and other signs brought it cautiously to the federal endangered species list — therefore stringently protected — in 1973.

Still, the cougar is almost as elusive as the unicorn. Many claims have produced no pictures of a live cat, and few if any substantiated remains.

"No subject is more controversial among professional wildlife managers and researchers in the East than the cougar," says Dr. Robert L. Downing, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and longtime cougar researcher. "Many people, including several biologists, have seen cougars at



Western cougar, *Felis concolor*

close range, but have not been able to produce substantial supportive evidence. Many cougars have been reported killed within the past 80 years but few of these reports have been confirmed because the specimens were not preserved."

Downing, whose office at Clemson University has for the past five years been the headquarters of a painstaking search, is always on the trail of evidence. He's had many reports from the Carolinas, including several along the Broad.

One recent find he investigated recently, some remains in a ditch in Rutherford County, turned out to be the body of an African lion, apparently either escaped or discarded from a zoo. Another was a five-pound housecat, shot by a fellow who is still convinced, Downing says, that he had bagged a fearsome cougar.

(Woe unto him who does make such a kill, reminds N.C. wildlife agent Lewis Barts, whose territory includes Cleveland County; the panther is under both state and federal protection and can cost a hunter a \$5,000 to \$10,000 fine.)

The survival of the eastern cougar, if its survival can be proven, is due in good part to its intelligence. From local reports, it follows, even perhaps walks down, streambeds, traveling under cover of brushy banks and leaving no trackable trail. Raids on livestock seem to be very rare. Sightings increase in areas with swollen deer population, for deer is a favorite food and an adult cougar, which may weigh between 150 and 200 pounds, will eat a deer a week. Rabbits and other small wild animals rate as second choice.

"They don't recognize anything as food unless their mother fed it to them," Downing said, having based his observations on captive Western cougars. "If a cougar was not fed rabbit by its mother, it will play with it, but it won't kill it for food."

Far too shy, at least to date, to be any threat to humans, its night-songs still can chill the blood. Roy Lail, who lives below Boiling Springs, very near the Broad River, well remembers these eerie cat-calls, described as the sound of a woman screaming. "I've heard bobcats and that's not it," he says. Though he has never seen a cougar, "I've heard 'em holler all up and down this river."

Development along his once much wilder road

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## Christmas Parades Putting Best Foot Forward

Christmas parades are planned at three area cities, Boiling Springs, Kings Mountain, and Shelby, beginning three weeks from this Sunday.

Kings Mountain will take the first step for municipal parades, holding its downtown march on Sunday, Nov. 28, at 3 p.m.

Shelby's Christmas parade, sponsored by that city's merchants association, begins at 3:30 Sunday, Dec. 5.

Boiling Springs will hold its parade the following

day, Monday, Dec. 6, at 3:30.

In other government news, the Boiling Springs town council Tuesday night voted to hire a private chemical company, Mead Compuchem, to analyze water from one of the town's wells.

Unpleasant odors and taste in Boiling Springs' water have troubled townspeople and brought complaints to the council, although a test earlier this year by the Environmental Protection Agency disclosed no dangerous substances in the water.

## How To Track A Cougar

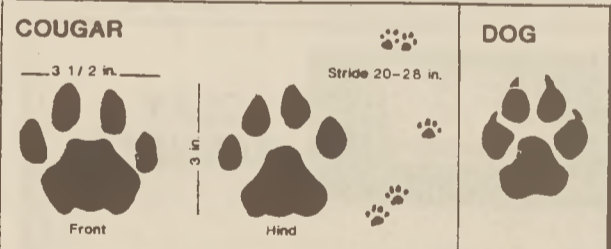
*Felis concolor*, the cat with all colors, slips out of the naturalist's description — and out of the woodman's sight. Even experienced hunters of the western cougar admit that the big cat is difficult to see against the landscape and the tracks of the wary predator are difficult to distinguish from a wild dog's. Nevertheless, panther tracks differ from dogprints in noticeable ways, according to cat expert Robert Downing of Clemson University.

Many people never think of the possibility of a cougar's being in their vicinity until they see a track so large "it couldn't possibly belong to a dog"; however, Downing cautions that many dogs can make tracks larger than most cougars. Most cougar prints are only 3-3½ inches wide, Downing says, while many dogs leave a track larger than four inches. Dogs may also share with cougars the characteristic lack of nail marks. Dogs with worn nails may have to sink one-half inch into mud or dust before leaving nail marks, Downing says, resulting in a paw print similar to a cougar's.

If nail prints are visible, look closely and remember that the cougar's nails are very sharp; its nail prints are correspondingly very narrow, whereas the nail marks left by dogs are quite broad.

There are other differences. The symmetrically printed toes of a dog are all the same size, Downing says, while the cougar's four, differently sized, tear-shaped toes include a "little toe" corresponding to the little finger of the human hand. Downing recommends placing your hand in

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## Slim Pickings For Pecans

Now we know what the squirrels already knew — pecans will be few and far between this fall, the result of the same cold snap last spring that decimated the peach and apple crops.

"We had sub-freezing weather last March 27, 28, and 29, and much lower temperatures than normal April 7," recounted county agricultural extension agent Curtis Styles. "The low temperatures tended to freeze a lot of the pecan flower buds."

The inconspicuous pecan flowers bloom both male and female on the same tree, Styles said, and even had temperatures not dropped, fewer pecans will occur if both sexes of flowers were not blooming at the same time for germination.

And what of that other fall food, the wild persimmon?

There are a "goodly number" of bearing persimmon trees in the northern county, Styles said, their blossoms apparently having survived the freeze.

The bell-shaped flowers of the persimmon tree are yellow-green and produce what is in fact a berry, the largest in North America.

Persimmons are used to make bread, beer, and persimmon pudding.

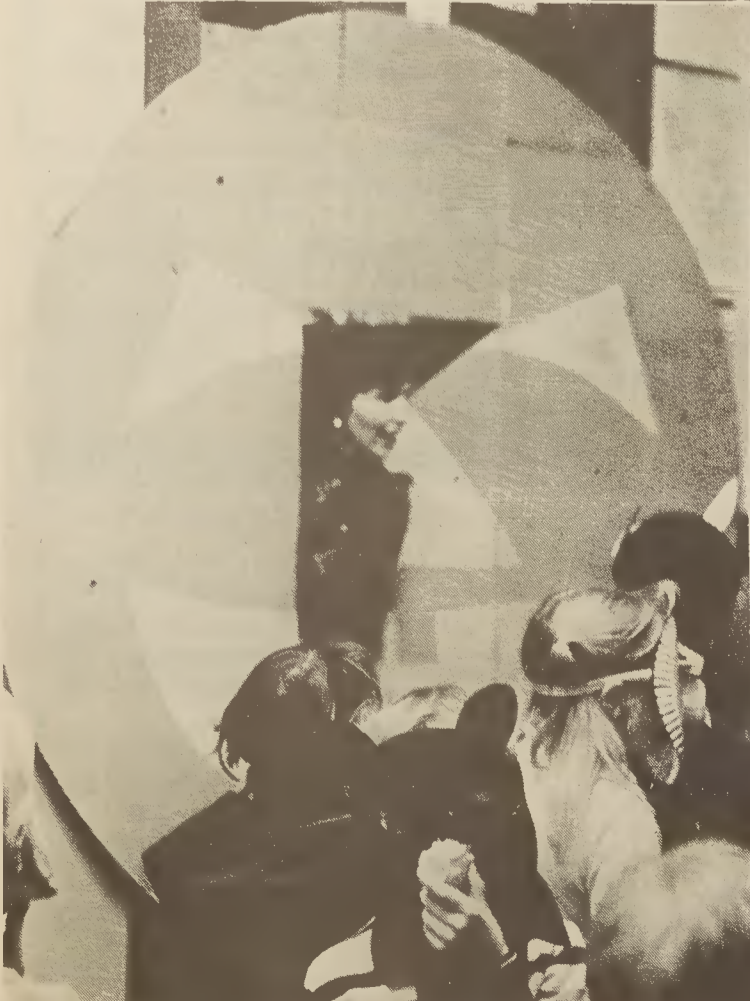
### What's Your Recipe?

Do you have a favorite recipe for persimmon pudding? If so, send it to *The Foothills View* and we'll publish it in the next county edition. Send to Persimmon, PO Box 982, Boiling Springs, NC 28017.

## The Inside VIEW

Ask The News Stand Man  
Billy Graham  
Kathryn Hamrick  
Movies  
Shopping Coupons

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Smells of chalkdust and cafeteria meatloaf were banished last Thursday by the scent of candle-wax, candy apples, and crepe paper as Boiling Springs Elementary School and Lattimore School celebrated their Halloween carnivals.

Harriet Brooks, at left, is the mother com-

ing out of the pumpkin at the Boiling Springs school Thursday afternoon. Jeremy Fern is the bear, with Heather Helton in cape behind Jeremy. Deborah Freeman is in her mask to the right of Jeremy, and Dewayne Byers is at far right behind Deborah. The children in the foreground are unidentified.

At center, left to right, Melinda Cherry, Jeremy Fern, and Travis Wilson seem not to have noticed the witch — yet.

At right above, Brian Devon, 4, patiently awaits his new face at the Lattimore School carnival Thursday night. Brian is the son of Janet Devon, of Boiling Springs.