

Hikers beware: cougars are lurking

■ Cougar populations have grown since a ban on hunting, but the chance of an attack on a human is low

By Inge Scheve
for the Emerald

The presence of resident cougars in Lane County has increased sharply over the last few years, resulting in conflicts between cougars and humans whose livestock and pets are attacked.

Although only one Oregon incident, a 1972 Lane County attack, has resulted in bodily damage, it is only a matter of time until a fatality will take place in Oregon said Bill Castillo with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Fatalities have been reported from other western states. In California and Washington, cougars have killed joggers and hikers along community running trails on the outskirts of town.

In Arizona, a cougar attacked a 4-year-old girl in April. The girl was camping with her family when she was attacked. She was then treated at a Phoenix hospital.

"It's just a matter of time before we have the same thing here," Castillo said.

After handling an average of six complaints annually in the 1980s, ODFW now investigates over 100 claims per year.

Since 1994, ODFW has observed cougars become established residents on the Willamette Valley floor. In the last six years, ODFW has investigated 42 dead cougars in a 15-mile radius of the Eugene-Springfield city limits, Castillo said. Twenty-five years ago there were no reported resident cougars on the Valley floor.

The boost in the cougar population is partly due to Measure 18, which since 1994 has outlawed the use of dogs to track down cougars in Oregon.

"People need to understand that by banning the use of dogs, the result is that cougars are going to be in populated areas," Castillo said. "People are going to have more encounters with cougars, and the risk of being attacked increases."

The majority of the complaints are from people who own livestock or live on the outskirts of forests, he said. But with more cougars in the area, Castillo also expects more encounters between cougars and hikers, runners and other recreational forest users.

Environmental factors also determine the cougars' behavior. Their prey of choice is deer and elk. Because of extended drought in western states, the deer population is at a 20-year low, which forces cougars to prey in populated areas, said Kevin Bergersen of the Arizona Department of Game and Fish.

Cougars are predators that attack to kill. They stalk and ambush their prey, and then with extreme quickness aim for the prey's throat or neck. Often, they break the neck or the back of their prey and then feed on the dead animal for a day or two.

Unlike bears, which are scavengers and can feed on dead carcasses for days, cougars will not eat an aged corpse of an animal they encounter.

The fact that cougars eat only fresh meat makes them hard to trap and track down, Castillo



Cougar attacks on humans are rare, but experts warn hikers and outdoor recreationists to use caution when entering into cougar habitats, even in town.

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