

Voices From the Crowd: Cougars on Facebook

By Dale Webb

It's hard to miss. When a cougar is spotted in our area, the Face Book posts erupt. It isn't long and the huggers and the killers are soon at each other's throats and the cougar, well they are probably on the back porch looking for an easy pet snack. Meanwhile one poster surmises that this is a problem that has gone on since man walked into the Nehalem Valley, that it is simply nothing new. Well let's look at the facts.

Of course cougars predated man in the Nehalem Valley, but it is estimated that cougars evolved around 390,000 years ago and then went extinct in North America around 10,000-12,000 years ago. Then they re-colonized North America from Central America. Cougars are found in North, Central and South America. When white men walked into the Nehalem Valley they found low game populations due to the vast stands of old growth timber and consequently cougar numbers were low also. In the areas that did have game, like the Burn area, new settlers were quick to remove cougars, as they were direct competition for the food source that came in the form of deer and elk. As the Nehalem Valley became more settled and deer and elk became even scarcer, cougars didn't stand a chance.

Once the harvest of the old growth forest started the deer and elk populations started a slow growth period mainly hampered by the local inhabitants that continued to utilize the deer and elk for food. Since this period, the cougar population remained very low in our area as they were viewed as a predatory animal up until 1967, when they were petitioned by sports people to be granted game animal status.

Once the Oregon Department of Fish and Game was granted authority to manage the cougar populations they immediately suspended hunting on cougars for two years due to the estimated 200 cougars left in Oregon. In 1970 the department authorized 25 tags in eastern Oregon and none for western Oregon. In 1976, 115 tags were authorized in eastern Oregon and only 10 in western Oregon. In 1994, tags were 308 in eastern Oregon and 280 for the west-side of the state. Things had changed, in fact the cougar population was estimated at exceeding 3,000 cougars state wide in 1994. ODF&W had actually done a great job of restoring cougars across the state, but some people in the state

of Oregon were not happy with that. In 1994, ballot measure 18 was passed by the populous counties in western Oregon, rural counties in the rest of the state voted the opposite. Measure 18 banned the hunting of cougars with hounds.

Between 1970 and 1994 cougar hunting was mainly conducted with the aid of hounds; hunters had to draw for a tag and as is noted above the tag numbers were not numerous. Cougar hunting was mainly a trophy hunt, and guides made a good living in the winter taking hunters who got lucky enough to draw a tag, out on hunts. The deer and elk hunters in the state could not shoot a cougar if they saw one, unless they had a tag and hardly anyone did. The guides encouraged their clients to take mostly males, which helped protect the cougar population even further. ODF&W also could control the harvest in the different regions of the state by allocating tags for certain areas, this also helped safe guard the cougar populations.

Many think that hunting cougars with hounds is too easy and unsporting. I would challenge that they have not been on a hound cougar hunt. It takes many hours to locate a fresh track and success is not always guaranteed. Females with kittens were not allowed to be taken and hunter success while high was not a slam-dunk, averaging around 40%. As far as sporting, shooting a cougar sitting up in a tree or shooting an unsuspecting deer or elk are really no different, that moment is the conclusion of the hunt. The hunt is all the points in time up until the trigger is pulled.

Once Measure 18 passed the hunting for cougars in Oregon drastically changed. ODF&W naively started out with a four-month season during the deer and elk seasons and didn't sell a lot of \$50 tags. The tag price was soon reduced to \$10 to encourage hunters to buy the tags and a year-around season was set in place in 1997. Hunter harvest started to pick up and soon exceeded the total cougar harvest in 1994 of 145, but it was apparent the cougar population was still expanding and at a fast rate. In 2005 two tags could be purchased for eastern Oregon and in 2007 all of Or-

egon became valid for the second tag in an effort to gain control of the cougar population. It can be fairly claimed that ODF&W efforts to control the cougar population state wide have failed; they basically now are at or close to the carrying capacity of the land with a population estimate of over 5,700.

Hunter attitudes towards cougars have also changed over the years. Hunters now find themselves in the same position of the first settlers in Oregon; they are in competition with the cougars for deer and elk. Many studies have been conducted on cougar predation and the answers are primarily that cougar kills consist of 66% deer and 33% elk and throw in a porcupine now and then. Actually one of the first thing sports people notice is the absence of porcupines which have greatly diminished across the state. Cougars kill one deer or elk on average once every 8 days, so the math is quite clear 5700 cougars times 45.6 kills per year=259,000 deer or elk. While that is an over simplification of the actual ungulate

kill by cougars because of the number of young cougars in the population, it does drive home the fact that cougars far exceed hunter harvests in Oregon. In 2012 hunters harvested 18,128 elk and 43,098 deer across the state. In 1961, 163,439 deer were harvested and ironically 1994 was the peak harvest of elk in Oregon at 26,064.

Hunters now buy a cougar tag not only for the opportunity to harvest a cougar, but also as a matter of doing their part to help stop the cougar population from damaging their hunts any further. I believe that is somewhat in vain and only bringing back the hounds will solve this problem. Back in the hound era cougars were selectively harvested, now it is lead in the air if a cougar is spotted. I'm not sure that is the best way to manage a game species, but cougars will never be in danger of a population crash caused by hunters, but maybe caused by themselves as they continue to deplete the deer and elk in the state. Many hunters are starting to question if they should be hunting in certain areas of the state due to low game populations, they know they are only supposed to be harvesting

In regards to cougars being dangerous to humans, well if they really wanted to eat us, there would be tons of missing hikers and hunters in this state... When cougars start hanging out around humans though it is cause for concern, this is not normal behavior and should be addressed.



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the surplus and in some areas that is a stretch of the imagination.

In regards to cougars being dangerous to humans, well if they really wanted to eat us, there would be tons of missing hikers and hunters in this state. Cougars are more than capable of taking out a human and most victims would never know what hit them. When cougars start hanging out around humans though it is cause for concern. This is not normal behavior and should be addressed.

So to answer the question as to whether the recent cougar sightings are simply nothing new, the answer is, there has never been a generation of Nehalem Valley residents that have had this many cougars in and around their community.

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