

An Opinion: Oregon Cougar Management - Looking Back to be More Effective Looking Ahead

By Jim Akenson

The fatal cougar attack on a hiker in the Mount Hood National Forest last year was a tragic thing. Evidence evaluation indicated the cougar was a female in good health. Is this a surprise? Not really. Cougar numbers are at all-time highs for our state, and the distribution of these cats encompasses the entire state. What has accounted for this cougar population expansion from an estimation of less than 3,000 in the mid-1990s to well over 6,000 today? Some of the answer is biological, some is social, and much is connected to management capabilities and practices. We need to find a way to return to this socio-biological balance, and looking to the recent past might just be the best bet – back to a time when hound hunting was a legal and effective management tool in Oregon.

What are the consequences of there being double the number of cougars in Oregon? These effects are best described as alarming and pattern changing. One such pattern is for prey animals, specifically deer, relocating to human development areas to avoid a higher predation risk. This relocation is also drawing in cougars that will go where the next meal can be found. Many hunters and state wildlife managers report that deer are now less abundant in the wilder mountain, high desert, and canyon regions of our state. Meanwhile, Oregon cities are wrestling with the number of deer inhabiting city limits, and cougars are showing up.

As cougars become more comfortable in human-altered landscapes, the probability of negative encounters with humans, as well as pets and livestock, increases.

So, what is the solution? Biologically, I believe it is plain and simple – more intensive cougar management through various hunting techniques. With an estimated population of 6,400 cougars, and roughly 14,000 people hunting cougars and harvesting from 250 to 300 cats per year, this only equals a harvest rate of 4 percent, which is not enough to even flatten the ever-rising

cougar population curve.

Reducing human threat, increasing deer and elk survival, and bringing a cougar population back in balance with other interests in our state will require increased management action and efficiency. According to the 2017 Oregon Cougar Management Plan, the success rate for 2016 cougar hunters was 1.9 percent, with 13,879 people reporting that they did hunt cougars. Contrast that with 1994 data, the last year that dogs were allowed in conservatively controlled, limited-entry cougar hunting, showing 358 people hunted cougars and harvested 144 for a success rate of 40.2 percent. Bottom line: hunting efficiency with dogs is dramatically higher, and provides wildlife managers a reliable tool for maintaining the cougar population within its management objectives.

Oregon's cougar management and record keeping are divided into six zones, each of which is assigned a desired harvest quota to keep the population in balance with the varied activities of all Oregonians. Employing the current limited management methods, only one of the six zones has met the harvest quota in recent years. A criterion for quota establishment is complaint frequency. By far the most cougar complaints are recorded on the west side of the Cascades, including the coastal region, in Zones A and B. This is also where the bulk of the human population lives. More than 350 cougar complaints per year were received during the last de-

cade in these two zones. Unfortunately, this recording system was not initiated until 2001, so we don't have data for the time before the dog ban of 1994. We do have records for administrative actions connected to human safety and pet conflicts before and after the dog ban of 1994. For eight years before the ban, they averaged only four per year, and then seven years after the dog ban these complaints increased to 27 per year – nearly a seven-fold increase.

Oregon does have a legislatively authorized agent program wherein highly vetted houndsmen are permitted to lethally remove cats to reduce human conflict and bolster deer and elk survival. These agents work closely with ODFW district biologists. Even with this program in place, cougars are steadily increasing in Oregon, where hunting them is very impractical without the aid of dogs. At present, the law authorizing the use of agents is up for renewal, and I hope it will receive legislative support and then be applied more broadly for both reaching zone harvest quotas and to help curb the upward statewide population trajectory.

Jim Akenson is a wildlife biologist, book author, and Conservation Director for the Oregon Hunters Association (oregonhunters.org). He invested much of his career in researching the Northwest's predators.

Upcoming Events

Jamboree Crab & Brisket Dinner - Saturday, February 16, 6:00 pm at Cedar Ridge. \$25/person. Tickets at www.eventbrite.com/. Proceeds benefit Vernonia Friendship Jamboree & Logging Show.

Mardi Gras Masquerade Dinner & Ball - Saturday, March 2 at Cedar Ridge. \$50/person. No-host bar, live music, catered event. Tickets at Vernonia True Value or VernoniaSociety.org. (503) 537-8128

Field to Market Workshop - Thursday, March 7, 9:00 am - 1:00 pm at Columbia Soil & Water Conservation District, 35285 Millard Rd. St. Helens, OR 97051 Registration fee: \$25/person, \$40/couple, includes snacks and resources. Scholarships available; please call (503) 397-3462 to inquire. To Register: <http://bit.ly/2019FTM> or call.

Tree Sale - Saturday, March 9, 8:30 am - 1:30 pm at Pacific Pride, Hwy 30, St. Helens. 22 species of seedlings. Benefits Columbia County Small Woodlands Assoc. (503) 708-9066

TOPS Group (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) meet Fridays at the Mist-Birkenfeld Fire Dept. 8:30 am weigh in, 9:00 am meeting. Men and women invited to join. (503) 429-7505



The Mist-Birkenfeld RFPD Board of Directors will meet for their regular board meeting Tuesday, February 19, 2019 at 7:00 pm at the Main Station, 12525 Highway 202, Mist, OR.

Auction Notice

Storage Too
58645 Nehalem Hwy. S.
Vernonia, Oregon 97064
503-429-7867

D19 - 10 x 10 - T. Eggleston
E03 - 10 x 10 - T. Eggleston
F10 - 5 x 10 - W. Easley

**Auction will be held
Noon, Tuesday
February 26, 2019**

Please call prior to auction
Cash or certified check only

HOW TO SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vernonia's Voice welcomes and requests your thoughts, opinions and ideas. Please include your name, address and phone number, limit your letters to 300 words or less. *Vernonia's Voice* reserves the right to edit, omit, respond or ask for a response to letters submitted. We will print letters space permitting. Deadline is the 1st and 3rd Monday of each month. Email: scott@vernoniasvoice.com or mail to: Letters, PO Box 55, Vernonia, OR 97064.

AA Meetings

Open Meetings
Mondays & Thursdays
6:30-7:30 pm
Vernonia Christian Church
410 North Street

Women's Meeting
Tuesdays 6:30-7:30 pm
Vernonia Christian Church
410 North Street

Vernonia's Voice is published on the 1st and 3rd Thursday. Look for our next issue on February 21.



Columbia Humane Society



Purr-fect Pals

Elsa is a two year old female domestic short hair that is looking to find a forever home. This girl came to the shelter with her litter of kittens, has since been spayed, and is now looking for that one special place to call her own. Elsa has come so far in her time at the shelter. We have found that she loves treats and will do a lot of work for food. She does not seem to mind other cats when they are around, and she does

not seem to be reactive to dogs either. She would love to spend her days lounging around watching the world pass by. If you are interested in meeting Elsa please don't hesitate to call or email.

CHS requires that all adopters have an approved application on file prior to meeting a pet. Once that application is approved, we will then schedule a time for you to come and meet with the pet that you are interested in. Our kennels are not open for public walk through as we believe that is too stressful on our pets. If you are interested in meeting any of our pets please don't hesitate to call 503-397-4353, please leave a message and we will return your call ASAP. Also please feel free to email animalwelfare@columbiahumane.org if you have any other questions.

Featured Dog

Hi, my name is Marley and I am a spayed female, about three years old. I weigh around 30 lbs and I'm a very athletic dog. Other dogs make me nervous, especially if I am on leash. I need to be in a home where I get to be an only child. I also need to have a fenced yard, and preferably I would like to live in an area that isn't too busy. I haven't ever really been around kids and to be honest they make me a little nervous. I also am not going to do well in a home with cats. I really like to chase them and I'm not sure what I would do if I could get one, but they really do annoy me.

