

Cougars: Alsea area the 'front range of cougar expansion'

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New information

Wildlife managers believe cougars could be reaching a saturation point elsewhere in the state, forcing young animals to seek new territory. However, on the coast and in the Willamette Valley, human populations have increased along with cougar populations, opening the door for potential clashes and an uptick in sightings.

In the updated cougar management plan, there are maps of the coastal zone sprinkled with dots that represent the location of dead cougars — cats killed by hunters, struck by cars, shot by wildlife managers after they threatened human or animal safety. The mortality numbers, along with the ages of the dead cougars, are one way wildlife managers estimate the total population.

On one map, showing cougar mortality from 1987 to 1994, there is a smattering of dead animals. Each dot is distinct. In the map for 2006 to



National Park Service

Cougar sightings have increased on the Oregon Coast.

2016, the dots form thick black clusters in the south, especially around the Alsea management area near Newport where biologists plan to begin to collar and tag cougars this fall.

Broman calls the Alsea area the "front range of cougar expansion."

Jason Kirchner, a state wildlife biologist who is leading the collaring efforts, is rep-

licating a study from northeastern Oregon, an area known for having a robust cougar population. The Alsea team hopes to collar 10 adult cougars, preferably five males and five females. They are curious what they will discover.

In northeastern Oregon, male cougars can have a home range of 78 miles. But there, the big cats roam a landscape of open grassland and ridges, a different type of forest. They hunt Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer. Cougars on the coast must navigate a very different terrain — dense forests where Roosevelt elk and black-tailed deer don't cover as much ground, where the undergrowth tangles and ensnare, where towns cluster near the ocean and cities sprawl in the valleys.

Ten or 20 years ago, Kirchner says the Alsea area didn't see the number of cougar sightings and cougar-related damage complaints he is receiving now. The blood and scat samples, the GPS coordinates, all the information he and his

team will collect this year and next year could provide a baseline for future management decisions on the coast.

"Something's going on and we just don't quite know what," he said.

Local big cats

An estimated 6,493 cougars lived in Oregon in 2015, a healthy population, according to the state.

"Cougars have proven to be highly adaptable to human disturbance," the updated state management plan notes. "... Assuming adequate cover for movement and dispersal, there is no reason to doubt that cougars are capable of utilizing urban habitats in Oregon."

This summer, people reported multiple cougar sightings near downtown Tigard, a city of more than 48,000 outside of Portland. In the Redland area, a Clackamas County sheriff's deputy's dash camera caught a cougar on video as it bounded out in front of the car, its legs kicked back in a long, exaggerated stretch before it

cleared the road and disappeared into the trees.

It's rare to see a cougar in Astoria. Still, sightings do occur every few years — usually on the wood-hemmed roads high above downtown, on Pipeline Road near the dump, for instance. People will report a cougar dashing across the road in front of them.

Ken Nelson, the city's public works superintendent and a lifelong hunter, can count on a hand and a half the number of times he's seen a cougar, even as he's roamed the woods around Tillamook or in eastern Washington and the Cascades. It's been several years since he had to put up a "cougar sighted" sign anywhere in Astoria.

Hunters in the wider coastal management zone, even when they have cougar tags just in case, are more likely to report taking a cougar while hunting for a different animal entirely.

But, as Broman said, "The chances are plenty of cougars have seen you and you have not seen them."

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New Today!

PUBLIC NOTICE FOR A CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

The Oregon Health Authority — Drinking Water Services has determined that the proposed drinking water 2017 Water System Improvements for the Wickiup Water District conform to the criteria and requirements of Oregon Administrative Rules 333-061-0063 and the supporting guidance manual, the Environmental Review Process Handbook. The project, which involves replacement of approximately 700 feet of existing water main on Old Route 30, 1,750 feet of water main between the Little Creek Reservoir and Koppisch Road and valve vault improvements at the Ivy Station Reservoir in Svensen, is therefore categorically excluded from further environmental review as allowed in the above referenced rules. A copy of the Categorical Exclusion and information upon which it is based is available for public viewing at:

Oregon Health Authority
Drinking Water Services
800 NE Oregon Street,
Suite 640
Portland, Oregon 97232
(971) 673-0405

Additional copies are available for review at the Wickiup Water District Office located at 92648 Svensen Market Road, Astoria, OR. 97103
Phone: (503) 458 - 6555.

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