

Cougar killed in rare daytime car accident

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

Cougars live in the Grand Ronde area, but rarely are they seen or hit by a car on the highway during daylight hours.

An adult 145-pound male cougar was hit and killed in the corridor on Highway 18 at milepost 16.5 (summit of Murphy Hill) on Wednesday, May 18. One of the drivers involved called in the incident right after it happened at about 10:30 a.m.

Grand Ronde Tribal Police Sgt. Tim Hernandez responded to the call and was first on the scene. Hernandez was soon joined by officers from Polk County Animal Control and Oregon State Police.

Grand Ronde Police Chief Jake McKnight said Hernandez and the other responding officers loaded the cougar in the back of the Animal Control truck and brought it to the Tribal Police Department adjacent to Spirit Mountain Casino. Oregon State Police then transported the cougar to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife office in Corvallis for testing.

"This is the first time I've ever gone to a call about a cougar," said Polk County Animal Control Deputy John Kincaid. "Normally they are pretty nocturnal so this is unusual."

Kincaid, who has been in his current position with the Sheriff's Office for 15 years, said he sees bobcats, coyotes and bear routinely, but not cougars.

"They have been getting kind of bold lately in Polk County," said Kincaid. "People have been seeing them in the daytime, but this is the first one I've seen in the daytime."

Kincaid said an eastbound truck first struck the cougar.

"It went up in the air and a westbound vehicle took it right in the windshield," said Kincaid. "The first vehicle continued on and didn't stop."



Courtesy photo by Sgt. Tim Hernandez



Courtesy photo by Kelly Dirksen

This 145-pound adult male cougar was stuck by a vehicle and killed at milepost 16.5 (summit of Murphy Hill) on Highway 18 on Wednesday, May 18. At left, this photo shows the size of one of the paws of the cougar that died after being struck by a vehicle on Highway 18.

McKnight and Hernandez also said they have never seen a cougar hit

by a car.

"Sgt. Hernandez has been doing this for a long time and he lived in the Bend area for most of his police life and he's never heard of one being hit by a car," said McKnight. "I think it is super rare especially during the day because they are a nighttime animal."

Tribal Wildlife Biologist Lindsay Belonga was notified of the cougar being hit and immediately went to work with multiple agencies to secure the cat's remains for the Tribe.

Belonga also said that cougar sightings in this area don't happen very often.

"It's super rare," said Belonga. "I'm sure they are existing in and around the Reservation all the time. We just never see them because it's super thick and brushy and they are elusive."

Belonga said for an adult male to be crossing the highway during the day is rare.

"It's hard to pinpoint why it was trying to cross the highway or what it was up to, but it seems like we have been noticing that there is some daytime movement both with sightings and trail cameras," said Belonga.

At the request of McKnight, Belonga worked with Conservation and Regulation Specialist Nancy Taylor of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife office in Corvallis to secure the cat's remains. Taylor registered the permit form in McKnight's name.

"I just didn't want it to go to waste," said McKnight, who had the cougar sent to a taxidermist in Lincoln City. "It was out of our Trask Unit. I think it's important that we were able to preserve that animal as much as possible."

The cougar will find a new home in the Grand Ronde Tribal Police Department.

Belonga said she worked with Fish and Wildlife Committee member Tyson Mercier to find the taxidermist.

Mercier called a taxidermist he knew in Lincoln City who would take the cat right away. Mercier was in touch with Mike Downing of Memories Taxidermist Studio. Downing has been in business for

25 years.

Mercier, who is a lifelong hunter, said he has never seen a cougar in person.

"I've never seen one in my many journeys," said Mercier. "I've had trail cameras set up for probably the last 10 years and I've had one picture of a cougar in those 10 years."

Downing said this was third cougar he had worked on but the first one that had been hit by a car.

"It's pretty unusual for an adult," said Downing. "An adult will usually go across the road so fast you won't even see it."

Oregon State Police Lt. Casey Thomas of the Fish and Wildlife Division responds to these types of calls and said he has never been to a call of a cougar being hit by a car during his career.

"I can't think of any other time that I have responded to a road-struck cougar off the top of my head," said Thomas, who has worked for the State Police for 11 years. "I can confidently say it's pretty rare."

Thomas, who supervises Fish and Wildlife troopers in Astoria, Newport, Tillamook, Portland, McMinnville, Salem and Albany, said he was impressed with how the situation was handled by everyone involved.

"It was great inter-agency cooperation and Sgt. Hernandez of the Tribal Police Department and the Polk County Sheriff's Office were just great," said Thomas. "Everyone worked really well together on it."

Thomas said his main focus in responding is always to make sure the remains get to Taylor and the biologists at the Department of Fish and Wildlife so they can collect useful information.

Taylor said there have been six cougars reported killed on Oregon highways so far this year. This one makes seven.

Taylor, who has 30 years of experience in conservation work, said cougar populations are increasing and that the deal worked out allowing for the remains of the cougar to stay with the Tribe is what's most rare in all of this.

"You guys are kind of a rare entity because we don't normally have an organization that has super educational purposes that are coming to us," said Taylor. "We can release them for educational purposes. Most of the times in this situation we keep them and dispose of them."

Belonga said the relationship between the Tribe and the Department of Fish and Wildlife continues to advance in beneficial ways for both organizations.

"ODFW is really good about working with us," said Belonga. "We're usually working as a collaborative team to make stuff happen." ■

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