

# Oregon News

## Cougar stats spark debate

By Erin Ross

Oregon Public Broadcasting

PORTLAND (AP) — A fatal cougar attack has reignited debates over hound hunting and cougar management in Oregon. Groups of Oregonians, particularly hound hunters, say that Oregon's cougar population is growing out of control. Cougar advocates, on the other hand, say that Oregon is over-hunting cougars, which research suggests can lead to an increase in problem encounters.

But before you can figure out if Oregon's cougars are being over-hunted or under-hunted, you need to know how many cougars there are in the state.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates there about 6,600 cougars here, and possibly as many as 7,600. That's three times higher than the numbers reported by Washington or Idaho. It's even slightly higher than the estimate for California: 4,000 to 6,000 cougars are thought to roam the massive state.

But hunting groups, ranchers and Oregonians who live in cougar country say that Oregon's cougar count severely underestimates the state's actual population. Conservationists argue it's too high. Biologists and wildlife officials from other states say it's a lot more complicated, and more than just a question of numbers.

One of the big reasons Oregon's number is so much higher than its neighbors: Oregon's estimate includes kittens, which rarely survive to adulthood, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

Oregon does not count the juveniles of any other game species, like elk or bighorn sheep.

"The fact that they don't clarify themselves every time says that they want people to assume there are 6,600 big cats running around the state," said John Laundré, a predator ecologist at Western Oregon University in Monmouth. "They don't include babies for other ephemeral species, like ducks or deer."

And only adult animals can be hunted.

Derek Broman, ODFW's state carnivore biologist, said whenever he gives a presentation he makes it clear that all ages are included in official population estimates. But there's no mention of that on the department's cougar webpage, and you have to look deep into the cougar management plan to find adult cat estimates. A brochure specifies that the population includes all age classes, but never offers adult numbers.

Even if you exclude kittens and juvenile cougars from population estimates, Oregon still reports some of the highest densities of adult cougars in the country.

Washington's research into cougar densities dates back nearly two decades and includes seven study areas. Across those areas, the state has documented consistent findings: Roughly two cougars for every 100 square kilometers, said Rich Beausoleil, the bear and cougar specialist at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. He said Washington's cougar-density numbers are consistent with what other studies — except Oregon's — report.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's surveys found adult densities twice that, depending on the ecosystem.

"I've not seen such high densities anywhere in the world," said Rob Wielgus, former director of the Large Carnivore Conservation Lab at Washington State University, commenting on a controversial density survey conducted by Oregon.

Beausoleil has spoken to ODFW about the state's population estimates before, and has criticized the design of Oregon's studies, which he says will naturally overestimate regional populations. Derek Broman says ODFW controlled for overestimation and stands by their data.

It's not unusual for cougar surveys to arrive at different conclusions, said David Stoner, a cougar biologist at Utah State University. Cougars are extremely hard

to study because they're so hard to find.

ODFW says these surveys confirm their statewide population estimates, which they calculate using a model. They estimate statewide density by mapping cougar deaths, and then add expected birth rates. They also tweak the numbers depending on food availability in the region.

Laundré said the growth estimate used in the study is an optimistic "best-case scenario" one: "A model is only as good as what you put into it. I could make their model show that there were only 3,000 total animals or 10,000 total animals."

All of this might seem like an internal debate about the best way to count cougars. Everyone agrees that at one point in the 1960s there were only 200 or so cougars in the state, and today there are several thousand. The cats are in no danger of going extinct.

But a lot rides on accurate population estimates. Not only do these numbers tell management officials if populations are growing or shrinking, they're used to help set hunting quotas for each region. Some scientists found that when cougars are over-hunted, problem encounters with humans and livestock increase.

Wielgus, who has left Washington for the Bend area, was one of the first to identify such a link.

"In the 20 years of research I did with WDFW, we conducted the largest study of cougars ever done anywhere. We found that heavy retaliatory killing or preventive killing actually causes increased problems," he said.

It works like this: Female cougars have smallish overlapping territories that seem to fluctuate with prey abundance. Male cougars have larger, non-overlapping territories that encompass multiple female ones.

Only large, older males are capable of holding down these territories, "and you don't get to be a 10-year-old male by attacking humans or livestock or pets."

### STATE BRIEFING

#### Second Amendment preservation ordinances pass in 8 of 10 counties

PORTLAND — Voters in eight Oregon counties have approved ordinances to bolster residents' gun rights that were championed by militia groups.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported Wednesday that the ordinances say that residents of those counties now have the right to own semi-automatic weapons and high-capacity magazines, regardless of state or federal law.

They also empower sheriffs to determine if state and federal gun laws are constitutional and prohibit the use of county funds to enforce them.

But the ordinances are likely to be challenged in court and are seen as mostly symbolic.

The measure appeared in Baker, Columbia, Douglas, Jackson, Klamath, Lake, Lincoln, Linn, Umatilla and Union counties.

It passed in all but Jackson and Lincoln counties. Two militia groups, the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers, campaigned for the ordinance across the state.

#### Baker City man arrested in 'Operation Grand Canyon' child sex abuse sting

BOISE — A Baker City man is among 11 people arrested as a result of a joint operation that targeted child sexual abuse in the Treasure Valley Nov. 2-4, a press release from Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden stated.

Shawn T. Conaway, 44, of Baker City was arrested Saturday. He is one of four men who face federal charges. He is accused of attempted sex trafficking of children and travel with intent to engage in illicit sexual conduct.

Also facing federal charges are:

- Dylan Steele, 24, no address known, accused of coercion and enticement and attempted transfer of obscene material to a minor;
- John Albjerg, 22, of Nampa, Idaho, accused of coercion and enticement.
- Larry D. Morck, 59, of Meridian, Idaho, accused of coercion and enticement and attempted sex trafficking of a child.

Seven other men — six from Idaho and one from Lake Havasu, Arizona — face prosecution for state charges of enticing a child through use of the internet or other communication device.

The project, titled Operation Grand Canyon, was a cooperative effort between federal, state and local agencies.

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