

RECREATION
REPORT

PARKING
CHANGES
PROPOSED AT
SPOUT SPRINGS

To alleviate safety concerns raised by the Spout Springs Mountain Resort near Tollgate, the Forest Service is working toward an agreement with the resort regarding the parking lot north of Highway 204. Once Spout Springs opens for the season, the north parking area would become day use parking only for all vehicles, including the area designated to allow for truck/ trailers parking.

This agreement responds to safety concerns expressed by Spout Springs regarding their ability to obtain liability insurance needed to open for winter operations.

The north parking area is within the Spout Springs Mountain Resort Special Use Permit and is utilized by ski area customers and other winter recreationists. The parking area is managed in partnership with Spout Springs and the Forest Service and is part of Oregon's Sno-Park program.

"Our objective is to have Spout Springs operate their downhill and cross country operations during the 2018 and 2019 ski season, while providing for the safety of all users," Walla Walla District Ranger Mike Rassbach said in a press release. "To address the issues identified by the resort, I have agreed to designate the north parking area for day use only during their winter operating season. We understand this is a change from previous years and thank the public for their cooperation to help us have a safe and successful winter season."

Sno-Park use would continue to be available on a first come-first serve basis and require an ODOT snow park permit from Nov. 1-April 30.

Alternative overnight parking for truck/trailers is available at neighboring Sno-Parks, including Morning Creek, Woodland, and Andie's Prairie. Additionally, vehicles without trailers can continue to park overnight at the south parking area (on the south side of Highway 204).

Forest officials would assess the effectiveness of these changes in addressing safety issues raised by the resort at the end of the season. Comments or concerns can be submitted to Walla Walla District Ranger Mike Rassbach at 509-522-6293 or mrassbach@fs.fed.us.

COUGAR HUNTING IN OREGON

COUGARS: TOO MANY CATS, OR HUNTERS?

■ Some say Oregon's cougar population is out of control, others contend overhunting is the bigger problem

By Erin Ross
Oregon Public Broadcasting

PORTLAND — A fatal cougar attack has reignited debates over hound hunting and cougar management in Oregon.

Groups of Oregonians, particularly hound hunters, say 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 in 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 the Oregon 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 they don't clarify themselves every time says 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. "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 find adult cat estimates. A brochure specifies 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 densi-



Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife photo
A treed cougar in the Sled Springs Unit of Northeastern Oregon.

ties 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. 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."

But Wielgus found that those 10-year-old males were far more likely to be killed by hunters. "And we found that when you remove an older male, you have two or three teenage males come in to take their place. And those are the ones that are responsible for most bad encounters between cougars and people, as well as the majority of livestock and pet depredations."

This movement of younger animals also means it can be difficult to tell if a population is declining due to over-hunting or staying the same.

Wielgus is a controversial figure in the predator management community, in part for research indicating that hunting wolves can increase attacks on livestock. He says he was silenced and forced out of his position at Washington State University because of his work.

A smattering of papers have attempted to debunk his cougar research, but even more have supported it. One of the most recent was a massive, 30-year look at hunting and problem cougars in British Columbia. For their part, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife stands by Wielgus' research and their own: Today, they manage cougars specifically to avoid the consequences of over-hunting.

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Cougar harvests: Blue Mountains zone

YEAR	HUNTER HARVEST	NON-HUNTER HARVEST	TOTAL HARVEST	ANNUAL QUOTA
2018*	63	25	88	270
2017	91	23	114	270
2016	93	21	114	270
2015	79	31	110	270
2014	77	17	94	245
2013	96	40	136	245
2012	101	64	165	245
2011	93	76	169	245
2010	92	71	163	245
2009	113	45	158	245
2008	109	65	174	245
2007	110	72	182	245
2006	127	35	162	245

*through Nov. 6