

## If You Encounter A Mountain Lion

There's been very little research on how to avoid mountain lion attacks. But mountain lion attacks that have occurred are being analyzed in the hope that some crucial questions can be answered: Did the victim do something to inadvertently provoke an attack? What should a person who is approached by a mountain lion do—or not do? The following suggestions are based on studies of mountain lion behavior and analysis of attacks by mountain lions, tigers and leopards:

- **Do Not Hike Alone:** Go in groups, with adults supervising children.
- **Keep Children Close To You:** Observations of captured wild mountain lions reveal that the animals seem especially drawn to children. Keep children within your sight at all times.
- **Do Not Approach a Lion:** Most mountain lions will try to avoid a confrontation. Give them a way to escape.
- **Do Not Run From a Lion:** Running may stimulate a mountain lion's instinct to chase. Instead, stand and face the animal. Make eye contact. If you have small children with you, pick them up if possible so they don't panic and run. Although it may be awkward, pick them up without bending over or turning away from the mountain lion.
- **Do Not Crouch Down or Bend Over:** In Nepal, a researcher studying tigers and leopards watched the big cats kill cattle and domestic water buffalo while ignoring humans standing nearby. He surmised that a human standing up is just not the right shape for a cat's prey. On the other hand, a person squatting or bending over looks a lot like a four-legged prey animal. If you're in mountain lion country, avoid squatting, crouching or bending over, even when picking up children.

• **Do All You Can To Ap-**

pear Larger: Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you are wearing one. Again, pick up small children. Throw stones, branches, or whatever you can reach without crouching or turning your back. Wave your arms slowly and speak firmly in a loud voice. The idea is to convince the mountain lion that you are not prey and that you may be a danger to it.

• **Fight Back If Attacked:** A hiker in Southern California used a rock to fend off a mountain lion that was attacking his son. Others have fought back successfully with sticks, caps, jackets, garden tools and their bare hands. Since a mountain lion usually tries to bite the head or neck, try to remain standing and face the attacking animal.

**Immediately Report All Encounters or Attacks:** If you are involved in a face-to-face encounter with, or an attack by, a mountain lion, contact the California Department of Fish and Game 24 hour dispatch center at (916) 445-0045. The threat to public safety will be assessed and any appropriate action will be taken. Also report any sightings of dead or injured mountain lions.

## California Department of Fish & Game Offices

Northern California-North Coast Region  
(530) 225-2300

Sacramento Valley-Central Sierra Region  
(916) 358-2900

Central Coast Region  
(707) 944-5500

San Joaquin Valley-Southern Sierra Region  
(559) 243-4005

South Coast Region  
(858) 467-4201

Eastern Sierra-Inland Deserts Region  
(562) 590-5132

Bishop Office  
(760) 872-1171

Eureka Office  
(707) 445-6493

Visit the  
California Department of Fish and Game  
Online at:  
[www.dfg.ca.gov](http://www.dfg.ca.gov)

# Living With California Mountain Lions



California Department of  
Fish & Game  
1416 Ninth Street  
Sacramento, California 95814



## California Mountain Lions

About half of California is prime mountain lion country. This simple fact is a surprise to many residents and visitors. These large, powerful predators have always lived here, preying on deer and other wildlife, and playing an important role in the ecosystem.

The status of the mountain lion in California evolved from that of “bountied predator” between 1907 and 1963, meaning monetary incentives were offered for every mountain lion killed, to “game mammal” in 1969, to “special protected mammal” in 1990. The change in legal status reflected growing public appreciation and concern for mountain lions.

You may live or play in mountain lion country. Like any wildlife, mountain lions can be dangerous. People who live in or visit mountain habitat have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat they share. It is important for people to understand mountain lions so that we can coexist with these magnificent animals.

### Some Facts About Mountain Lions

**Physical appearance:** The mountain lion, commonly known as cougar, panther or puma, is tawny-colored with black-tipped ears and tail. Although smaller than the jaguar, it is one of North America’s largest cats.

Adult males may be more than 8 feet long, from nose to end of tail, and generally weigh between 130 and 150 pounds. Adult females can be 7 feet long and weigh between 65 and 90 pounds.



Mountain lion kittens, or cubs, are covered with blackish-brown spots and have dark rings around their tails. The markings fade as they mature.

**Behavior:** Mountain lions are very powerful and normally prey upon large animals, such as deer, big-horn sheep and elk. However, they can survive preying on small animals as well.

They usually hunt alone, at night. They prefer to ambush their prey, often from behind. They usually kill with a powerful bite below the base of the skull, breaking the neck. They often cover the carcass with dirt, leaves or snow and may come back to feed on it over the course of a few days. Their generally secretive and solitary nature is what makes it possible for humans to live in mountain lion country without ever seeing a mountain lion.

Generally, mountain lions are calm, quiet and elusive.

**Habitat:** Mountain lions live in many different types of habitat in California, from deserts to humid coast range forests, and from sea level to 10,000 foot elevations. They generally will be most abundant in areas with plentiful deer.

**Home Range:** An adult male’s home range often spans over 100 square miles. Females generally use smaller areas—about twenty to sixty square miles. Along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, where competition for habitat is intense, as many as ten adult lions occupy the same 100 square mile area.

**Population:** In California, mountain lion populations have grown since the 1920s when they were pursued by bounty hunters. Population estimates, based on field studies of mountain lions, revealed a population of more than 2,000 mountain lions in the 1970s. Today’s population estimate ranges between 4,000-6,000.

**Mortality:** A mountain lion’s natural life span is probably about 12 years in the wild and up to 25 years in captivity. Natural enemies include other large predators such as bears, lions and, at one time in California, wolves. They also fall victim to accidents, disease, road hazards and people.



Mountain Lion Track



Dog Track

*Note the obvious toenail prints for dogs that are absent for mountain lions. Also the lion track has a distinctive “M” shaped pad.*

### When Mountain Lions Meet People

Generally, mountain lions are calm, quiet and elusive. They are most commonly found in areas with plentiful prey and adequate cover. Such conditions exist in mountain subdivisions, urban fringes and open spaces. Consequently, the number of mountain lion/human interactions has increased. This increase likely is due to a variety of reasons: more people moving into mountain lion habitat, an increase in prey populations, more people using hiking and running trails in mountain lion habitat, and a greater awareness of the presence of mountain lions.

Even so, the potential for being killed or injured by a mountain lion is quite low compared to many other natural hazards. There is a far greater risk, for example, of being struck by lightning than of being attacked by a mountain lion.

### Living in Lion Country

Now that people and mountain lions occupy so much of the same geographical areas in California, encounters are expected to increase. If you live in mountain lion habitat, here’s what you can do to reduce your chances of encountering a mountain lion near your home:

- **Don’t Feed Wildlife:** By feeding deer, raccoons or other wildlife in your yard, you will inadvertently attract mountain lions, which prey upon them.
- **Deer-proof Your Landscape:** Avoid using plants that deer prefer to eat; if your landscaping attracts deer, mountain lions may be close by. The California Department of Fish and Game has a brochure entitled “Gardening To Discourage Deer Damage” available at most DFG offices.
- **Landscape For Safety:** Remove dense and/or low-lying vegetation that would provide good hiding places for mountain lions, especially around children’s play areas; make it difficult for mountain lions to approach your yard unseen.

Teach children what to do if they encounter a mountain lion.

- **Install Outdoor Lighting:** Keep the perimeter of your house well lit at night—especially along walkways—to keep any approaching mountain lions visible.
- **Keep Pets Secure:** Roaming pets are easy prey for hungry mountain lions. Either bring pets inside or keep them in a kennel with a secure top. Don’t feed pets outside; this can attract raccoons and other mountain lion prey.
- **Keep Livestock Secure:** Where practical, place livestock in enclosed sheds and barns at night, and be sure to secure all outbuildings.
- **Keep Children Safe:** Keep a close watch on children whenever they play outdoors. Make sure children are inside before dusk and not outside before dawn. Talk with children about mountain lions and teach them what to do if they encounter one.