

Big Cats SMALL CONCERNS

Submitted by Cam Hill, Program Coordinator, Livestock Protection Program • Photos from LPP File



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If a cougar gets my kid I will see you in court!... and then she slammed the phone down. Apparently my lack of commitment to track down and kill a cougar that her neighbour's friend had heard may be in the neighbourhood was not satisfactory to her. That comment was relayed to me back in my CO days. Cougars spook people up, no doubt about it. **But are their fears reasonable?**



Cougars rarely target cattle. Note the head trauma on this calf.



Cougars will generally loosely cover their kills with forest debris as will bears however bears, particularly grizzly bears, will do a more thorough job, raking in material from a greater radius.



Cougars are efficient predators. Bites to the head or base of skull or most common on midsize prey such as calves.

Cougar population estimates vary widely in this province but a recent article I read suggested there may be as many as 7000 of the big cats. BC's human population is currently around 5.32 million. In the last 100 plus years this province has documented only five human fatalities and about 30 non-fatal cougar attacks. That's one fatality every 20 years on average. Across the United States there are over 30,000 cougars estimated and again the frequency of fatal attacks amounts to about one every five years. In the United States you are more likely to be killed by a cow than a cougar (20 deaths by cow per year). In BC, ICBC's records indicate that over 280 people are killed in vehicle accidents in the province every year and

yet we don't hesitate to throw the kids in a car and hit the road. So why is there so much irrational fear about being stocked and ravaged by a cougar? Perhaps it's the lack of knowledge and understanding of the animal its self and/or a lack of knowledge and understanding of how to react should a close up encounter occur. Or maybe it is the shy, secretive nature of the big cats. It may also be in part due to the sensationalism by the media when rare conflict encounters do occur.

Cougars have voracious appetites. An adult cat will kill a deer or other large ungulate every 4-12 days (depending on size and whether the cougar has young in tow). That's a lot of protein. Contrary to popular belief cougars don't have the time

to hang around the edge of town waiting to pounce on unsuspecting humans. They spend the majority of their time out hunting and typically their favourite foods consist of cloven hooved prey. They will also target small animals such as grouse, rabbits and even coyotes and foxes. One radio collared cougar that was part of a study south of the border was documented, during a 15 month period to have killed 24 badger, 17 elk, two antelope, two mule deer, nine coyotes, eight beaver, two porcupines, one mouflon sheep and one feral dog. That is a lot of protein!

Domestic livestock are also occasionally on the menu. If you happen to be a woolly sheep you best keep your chubby pasture mates between you and the

tree line. Cougars love to dine on sheep. They also rate horses, goats, pigs and alpacas high on their menu list. What isn't high on the menu list, fortunately, is cattle. Considering the numbers of cattle spread throughout the province, the opportunity for interaction is considerable. And let's face it, a cow critter ain't all that difficult sneak up on. Nor are they noted for their lighting speed.

Since January 1, 2021 the Livestock Protection Program has documented, across the province, only eight confirmed cattle losses to cougars. During that same 23 month period, 62 sheep have been verified as having been killed by the big cats. Eight confirmed cattle losses out of 640 files which amounts to slightly over 1% of the total files. In the US, the USDA data also shows that cougars cause less than 1% of the unwanted cattle losses.

Despite the rarity of cattle/cougar conflicts, we still need to recognise the signs when they do occur. Of all the predators that we deal with in BC, cougars are the most efficient killers. Their short muscular jaws have tremendous strength and their canine teeth are very sharp in comparison to wolves, coyotes and bears. Their retractable claws are razor sharp and once they take hold of their prey, there is little re-adjustment or letting go. Their sharp claws make for smooth cuts often resembling that of knife work. The edges of cut hides are very clean and straight, again looking like they have been cut with a knife. Cougars generally kill their prey in one of two ways; they will either bite the skull or back of the neck or they will target the throat to crush the wind pipe. A very effective way to identify whether a cougar was responsible for a loss is to open the skin of the throat with a knife and

examine the inside of the hide and trachea for puncture wounds and clotted blood. Once dead, cougars will general carefully pluck mouthfuls of hair before making an incision to access the internal organs. The blood infused organs of larger prey are generally consumed first – the heart, lungs, kidneys and liver. Their raspy cat tongues will also lick up blood from the hair or wool of their prey and they will often puncture a hole in the neck early in the killing process in order to lap up the blood while the heart is still pumping. After the initial feeding, the carcass is often disembowelled before being loosely covered up with snow, grass, leaves, sticks and/or dirt. In most cases, the cat will return and continue feeding. Often consuming most everything. This includes large bones leaving only the hide, parts of the jaw and teeth and the earlier discarded stomach and contents.

When examining or verifying any potential predator kill, it is always important to look beyond the carcass for other indications of what, if any, predator was involved. In cattle pastures, I always look for tracks in cow dung patties. Cattle trails and water holes are also good sources to seek out tracks. Cougar tracks are usually cleanly marked, with the cat's weight being evenly distributed. Mature cougars are 3 to 4 inches in diameter with no claw marks. Their tracks are quite round in comparison to wild canids however one of the most distinctive features is the "M" shape to the back of their pads. Cougars have three lobes at the heel where as those of dog family only have two. When walking a cougar's hind foot steps in its fore track, and its toes slant to the left or right. In contrast the canid tracks do not slant to the side and claw marks will be visible. Cougar claws rarely show unless

the cat is running or pouncing. Cougar scat is segmented with round ends often with a bit of a tail. The scat will be firmer when squeezed then similar sized coyote or wolf scat. It will have hair and bones fragments throughout revealing their strict carnivorous diet.

Cougars are picky eaters and prefer their meals fresh. They are not typically carrion consumers as are bears, coyotes and wolves. In hot weather they may quickly abandon a kill thus complicating mitigation efforts. Although the Livestock Protection Program verifiers are trained to recognise and complete the verification process on all predator conflicts, it is the Conservation Officer Service that will address mitigation. If a cougar kill is suspected, a rancher's first call should be to the COS's RAPP line. A Conservation Officer may choose to attend or, through the LPP Program Coordinator, request that a trained verifier do the initial assessment to confirm the predator species involved. The request for compensation may be made by either a Conservation Officer or a certified verifier. As with any suspected predator attacks on cattle prompt reporting increases the odds for compensation and mitigation.

Further information about the Livestock Protection Program can be found at www.cattlemen.bc.ca/lpp.

For incidents of cattle or sheep losses, injury or harassment where wolves, coyotes or birds are suspected please call our toll free number 1-844-852-5788.

For incidents involving other wildlife such as bear and cougar please contact the COS RAPP line at 1-877-952-7277.

