

# Cougar : *Puma concolor*

## A Saskatchewan Species at Risk

Class: Mammalia - the mammals  
Order: Carnivora - the meat-eaters  
Family: Felidae - the cats  
Genus: Puma - the Puma cats  
Species: *Puma concolor* - the cat of one colour

*Cougars Malcolm and Jethro at the  
Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park and Zoo.  
Photo courtesy of Ernie Husulak.*



### Did you know?....

Two cat species are famous for their jumping ability: The Snow Leopard and the Cougar. The record long jump for a Cougar is 11.7 m, while the Snow Leopard tops the record book with a jump of 15 m. Both species are good high jumpers as well. The Cougar is able to leap up to a tree or ledge to a record height of 5.4 m.

But most impressive is a record of a Cougar leaping 3.6 m up into a tree with a carcass of a deer in its mouth!

Historically, the Cougar ranged from northern British Columbia to Patagonia on the southern tip of South America, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. This made the Cougar the most widely distributed mammal (except *Homo sapiens*). Cougars can be found in a wide range of habitats including woodlands, mountains, grasslands, deserts, and even the everglades of Florida. The favourite food of the Cougar is deer, and there are few places it won't prowl if deer are present. Cougars are known to pass through towns and cities, including Saskatoon, in search of deer. However, as settlement proceeded the Cougar has been hunted and poisoned. Today the Cougar is a species at risk east of the Rocky Mountains.

With such a wide range it is no wonder the Cougar is known by many names. It is known as the Puma, Mountain Lion, Panther, Catamount and nearly 40 other English names. In Saskatchewan it is known locally as the Cougar or Mountain Lion.

The Cougar is the largest member of the cat family in North America (the other North American cats are the Bobcat and Lynx). Unlike our smaller cats, the Cougar has a long tail which is nearly a meter long. From the nose to the tip of the tail a male Cougar can be almost 3 meters long and weigh from 70 to 100 kg. Females are about 25% smaller and lighter than the males. The long tail is used to great advantage in balancing when running at full tilt or leaping from place to place while hunting.

Usually the Cougar is a solitary hunter. Males and females only come together for mating. Females reach sexual maturity at the age of 2 to 3 years and, unlike many mammals, can come into heat in any season. After a three month gestation period, one to five kittens are born. The kittens will stay with

their mother for up to two years to learn hunting and survival techniques. The Cougar's favourite food is deer and the young must learn how to avoid being kicked, gored, dragged, or thrown against trees by their fleeing prey.

Besides deer, Cougars will also hunt beavers, fish, mice, rabbits, baby Wapiti and Moose, and even Bobcat and Lynx. The Cougar usually stalks its prey and then quickly attacks. Typically they kill their prey by biting the underside of the neck and clamping the windpipe closed. It is fond of Porcupine which they attack by biting the face and holding the mouth and nose closed. The Porcupine dies of suffocation, not by biting the underside as some people believe.

Cougars were almost wiped out of Saskatchewan in the early years of settlement (1895-1920). The Cougar is now a protected species at risk in Saskatchewan. In the 1980s it was estimated that 100 Cougars called Saskatchewan home. With the exploding deer population, it is estimated the population now stands at about 500 animals. Cougars have been spotted throughout southern Saskatchewan including the Cypress Hills area, Moose Mountain, Porcupine Hills, Pasquia Hills, Prince Albert National Park, Qu'Appelle Valley, Assiniboine Valley, and the North and South Saskatchewan River valleys. Spotting a Cougar is rare due to their secretive nature and relative rarity. However if you do spot a Cougar you are advised to make yourself as big as possible and make lots of noise. Small children should be picked up in an adult's arms. Never run from a cougar. Remain facing the animal and back away carefully and slowly.



In August of 2007, the Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park and Zoo acquired two orphaned Cougars from the Calgary Zoo. Named Katie and Coffee-Tom, these cougars were born in November of 2006 in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta.

They were rescued as orphans by Alberta Fish and Wildlife officials and brought to the Calgary Zoo. In June of 2009 three orphan kittens arrived from the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park after Saskatchewan Conservation Officers shot the mother Cougar in a well used area of the park. The three orphans were named Jethro, Malcolm, and Pakito. Katie, Tom and Pakito were sold to zoos in Asia, while Jethro and Malcolm remained at the Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park and Zoo.

*A young Malcolm and Jethro explore their new home at the Saskatoon Forestry Farm in 2009. Cougars are elusive animals and difficult to spot, even at the zoo. The best time for cougar viewing is morning and evening. Winter is often the best time to see the cougars in their exhibit. Photo courtesy of Ernie Husulak.*

## Did you know?....

The Cougar has more names than any other mammal in the world. More than 40 of them are recognized in the English language. Cougar, Puma, Panther, Mountain Lion, Painter, Catamount, Mountain Screamer are just a few. To make things even more confusing there are also regional names, like Eastern Cougar, and there are also over 40 native names for the cat throughout the Americas. The word Cougar comes from the Tupi language of Brazil, while Puma comes from the Quechua language of Peru. Mispisew is the Cree word for this cat, which means "great lynx".