

All cougars confirmed in Michigan have been male: Why we don't see females, kittens

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Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The number of cougars spotted in Michigan's Upper Peninsula has risen over the years. But barriers to the big cats' eastern migration have so far kept them from establishing reproducing populations here.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources has confirmed 11 sightings of cougars in the U.P. so far this year, slightly down from the high of 15 sightings last year, the most since the state began looking in 2008. Multiple sightings were likely of the same few western U.P. cats, said Cody Norton, large carnivore specialist for the DNR based in

Marquette.

All told, 75 cougar sightings have occurred since 2008.

"The numbers have definitely been going up," Norton said.

Once a [native species](#) in Michigan, cougars were hunted to extinction as the state was settled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Now wildlife managers are monitoring the first inroads of the [big cats](#) back into the Great Lakes State—and while not assisting a potential repopulation here, are allowing nature to take its course.

Modern technology is aiding cougar identification, Norton said. Not long ago, a person seeing a potential track would have to call a DNR official to come examine it, and hope wind or rain didn't wash it away first. Now, a person carries a camera with them on their smartphone, and can take a photo of the track in the moment, he said. And photos from motion-triggered trail cameras make up the majority of confirmed cougar sightings.

"We're definitely getting a lot better at being able to confirm these, and document them when they happen," Norton said.

A study published earlier this year authored by Mariella Gantchoff, ecologist at the State University of New York Department of Environmental and Forest Biology, examined the quality and connectivity of suitable habitat for cougars in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. It found "high regional connectivity in a generally west-east direction"—significant because that's the direction from which stable, reproducing populations of cougars are found in the Black Hills region of Wyoming, Nebraska and North and South Dakota.

To date, researchers have only confirmed lone male cougars in

Michigan. That includes the recovery of two poached cougar carcasses and DNA samples that staff were able to take in the wild, said Norton, who worked with Gantchoff on her study. The poached cougars were related genetically to a population in South Dakota, Norton said.

"As of right now, we've never been able to document a female, or kittens, or any sort of reproduction" in Michigan, he said.

Young male cougars often leave groups when they are out-competed. "In general, it's a lot harder to get a mate when there's a bigger, badder male in the area," Norton said. But females don't typically disperse as far or as often as males.

"That's kind of a limiting factor," he said. "Is a female going to make its way over here, where a population could actually get established? Or are we just going to continue to see these lone males out looking for a female and never having any luck?"

And those lonely male cats are known to make a major effort to find a mate. One radio-collared, male cougar out of South Dakota in 2010 was tracked moving through Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The radio collar ultimately stopped providing a signal, but the cougar is presumed to have moved into Ontario eastward, then down into Connecticut, where it was hit by a car and killed—about 2,000 miles of travel from its original home.

Habitat conducive to cougars includes rugged terrain with hills and elevation changes, as well as densely forested areas with tree falls.

"Cougars are ambush predators," Norton said. "If you have blow-downs, if you have a lot of thick cover areas and elevation where they can ambush and attack a deer or whatever prey source, they are going to generally do better there."

Connectivity of their range is also important. "For them to move between these high-quality patches of habitat, if you have too many roadways or other physical barriers, that's going to make it hard for them to move around," Norton said.

Although cougars are associated with mountains, they were actually the most widely distributed land mammal in the Americas before European colonization, Norton said—found throughout North America, including deserts and areas of Florida (the famous Florida panthers are a type of cougar), Central America and South America, he said.

"They are super-adaptable," he said.

Given cougars' adaptability, and the suitability of the habitat in Michigan, why aren't greater numbers of cougars being seen here? The answer likely lies in the Midwest's "bread basket," Norton said.

Areas west of the Dakotas are "all agriculture," he said. "That might be OK habitat when corn is up, when those crops aren't harvested. But in the winter, when those get harvested, it's a pretty open, flat-as-a-pancake landscape.

"In western and southwestern Minnesota, where we don't have forested areas, where it's more of that agriculture, you can see those (cougar) sightings show up right along river corridors. They are using river corridors as an area to travel and try to keep moving. And some of them head east and end up in Michigan."

Norton said there's a hope that research similar to Gantchoff's study will be done in North and South Dakota, to better understand cougar movements and limitations from the easternmost sustained population of the cats in the U.S.

Of the 75 confirmed cougar sightings in Michigan, 74 have occurred in the Upper Peninsula. Only one confirmed cougar sighting has happened in the Lower Peninsula, in Clinton County's Bath Township, about 20 miles northeast of Lansing, in 2017, where a resident photographed the big cat as it crossed a road. That one still puzzles wildlife managers.

"We don't have genetic material or anything from that animal to verify it's a wild animal versus maybe a captive that could have escaped temporarily," Norton said.

While cougars have a route of suitable habitat eastward through Minnesota and Wisconsin into the Upper Peninsula, for a cat to make it into the Lower Peninsula would require either crossing miles of frozen Great Lakes ice from the U.P., or coming around the barriers of Lake Michigan and heavily populated areas around Chicago and northern Indiana.

"For it to not show up anywhere else, coming to that location or leaving that location ... you would sure think it would be spotted; other people would get pictures; we'd get flooded with other reports, given how many people live in that area," Norton said. "It leaves us kind of scratching our heads for how that cat got there."

The DNR has no management plan for cougars like it does for wolves or other species with more abundant populations in the state. But cougars are an endangered species in Michigan, and thus protected, he said.

"There are no plans to pick any up, bring them here and help them get established," Norton said with a chuckle. "But if a female did show up, or if we did see reproduction, we would not try to deter that from happening. We would allow natural recolonization to happen."

Although the prospects of a potentially deadly apex predator lurking in

Michigan's woods might be disconcerting to some, conflicts between humans and cougars are exceedingly rare, and typically only occur in high-density cougar populations in the west, Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain states, Norton said.

"If we had a population, they do occasionally have conflicts with people as well as livestock. So that would be something we'd have to be mindful about and monitoring, and trying to give good information to the public. But it's extremely, extremely rare and probably not too much cause for concern."

"Of the 11 sightings this year, 10 came from the public; one from DNR staff," Norton said. "The public is our way of monitoring when these animals show up. It's a huge help for us."

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