Three orphaned mountain lion cubs rescued in San Diego

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These three orphaned mountain lion cubs were rescued by wildlife veterinarians from UC Davis and partners in late November. They are now being raised at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. Credit: San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

Three orphaned mountain lion cubs were recently rescued by the University of California, Davis' Karen C. Drayer Wildlife Health Center, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The cubs—approximately six weeks old at the time of

their rescue—were found separately following an extensive search over the span of a week.

Each cub was treated in the field for dehydration before being taken to Paul Harter Veterinary Medical Center at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. Because the young lions were orphaned at an early age, they cannot be safely reintroduced into their native habitat. CDFW designated the San Diego Zoo Safari Park as a safe haven for the rescued cubs, offering them a second chance and lifelong care.

"Mountain lions are a keystone species right here in our own backyard," said Lisa Peterson, executive director of the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. "It's been a privilege to nurse these youngsters back to full health, and we now have the honor of caring for them long-term."

"While our research teams and our conservation partners continue their mountain lion work in the field, the Safari Park will be a refuge for these three cubs, offering them native landscapes and new opportunities to thrive while sharing the importance of coexistence among wildlife with our guests."

The search

A search party consisting of UC Davis, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, and the CDFW was assembled to find the cubs. They leveraged data from the GPS collar of the mother, designated F307 by the UC Davis mountain lion research team, to determine the search area in San Diego County.

On the first day of the search, UC Davis team members found the first cub hiding in a hole, and the second was wedged tightly between two rocks. Three days later, they found the third cub crouching in chaparral. The search continued for several more days, and remote trail cameras

found no evidence of other cubs. All three cubs were within 250 feet of each other.

Due to their young age, they likely would not have survived more than one week on their own. The trio were reunited at the Paul Harter Veterinary Medical Center and nursed back to full health.

"Our UC Davis mountain lion study team really appreciated the help from the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance and the Department of Fish and Wildlife in the effort to locate the cubs and the willingness of the San Diego Zoo Safari Park to give them excellent care long term," said Winston Vickers, director of the Southern California Mountain Lion Program at the Karen C. Drayer Wildlife Health Center, a program of the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

"As veterinarians, we use education and research to help people living in mountain lion habitat to protect their pets and livestock at night, assuring the health of both those animals and mountain lions."

Mountain lions at risk

Mountain lions—also known as cougars, pumas, or panthers—are a keystone species ranging from Canada to the tip of South America. They are extremely versatile and adaptable, surviving in a range of habitats, including high mountains, deserts, coastal areas, and even cities.

In Southern California, their proximity to people has put local mountain lions at risk of population decline and even extinction due to low annual survival rates. Ongoing and collaborative efforts between conservation partners like these, which have saved these orphaned cubs, help assure the long-term survival of this iconic species in Southern California.

Provided by UC Davis