

Cougars What is Real and What is Not Real in the East

We have a migration going on at this moment. It has been happening for some time now, picking up in the 90s. It has not touched Pennsylvania yet, but there are some other possibilities in the region.

Cougars are leaving their known range in the west as territories fill there and are heading across the prairies, especially through river valleys and other corridors of habitat, cover, and food.

The kill line is presently the Mississippi River with every state from Louisiana to Minnesota on the west side now admitting road kill, gun kill, or even train kill. In three places in Illinois (that we are aware of) they have gotten across the big river and have been killed on the eastern side, one by car, one by train and another by police in Chicago.



As well, there is some pretty good DNA evidence in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan as well as parts of Ontario and Quebec. This does not mean a population is present in those locations. It does mean that there are some passing through.

Cougar killed in Iowa

Of course there is a small population of somewhere between 80 and 100 in Florida recently bolstered by Texan genes. There have been at least 50 of these cats killed on Florida roads since 1990, at least 8 in 06 and at least 15 so far in 07.

Let me explain a bit here. The big cat is not like the canines. He does not mate and stay with that mate. In fact, he may kill that mate in some situations and kill the kittens in many if he has the chance. He will also kill or drive out any young males in his home territory...and he is extremely territorial, possibly even more than the human species.

So...those cats that are coming across the prairie and being killed near the Mississippi...they are almost all young males, specifically young, immature males. Most are too young to mate. Frankly, most are wandering, looking for a safe home. Most of them do stupid things. Things a mature male would not do in most situations.

In the Dakotas, in an isolated population there, one young male made it to Oklahoma, over 700 miles away and was killed there. Another made it to Manitoba before the signals from his collar ended.

In fact, we have only one situation in the Midwest, east of the Mississippi River, in Kentucky specifically, where we've recorded a young cat that was still in the kitten stage. It was hit by a trucker. He said he saw an older one as well as another young one with it. One of our board members, a geneticist, did the DNA. One of its parents had North American ancestry and one had South American ancestry. They may have reproduced in the wild. They may not have.

So, where does that leave us in the Northeast? Well, there is some evidence here and there. A skull in one place, some tracks in another. There is no evidence of a wild population, **none**. There is also no hard and fast rule as to how many cougars it takes to make a self-sustaining population. That is an open question. Quite frankly, the best evidence of a population at this point is road kill. It happens all over the known range in the West, even in fairly remote areas, much more remote than here in the East. Road kill of wild cougars is not happening here in the east...yet...except Southern Florida. There is also some pretty good DNA evidence in Eastern Canada as well as a few road-killed cats.

There are also some who believe that there are remnants from the original population that have survived these past several hundred years in remote areas. We have no proof of that although it is a possibility but not likely, especially in more remote areas, like the Smokys and perhaps portions of the North East and parts of eastern Canada.

There is something else happening in the East. It is also happening in other parts of the U.S., but it may be more noticeable in the East.

An example of this is the man in my county in north central PA who, several years ago, had four cougars, four Amur tigers (the largest some 600-800 lbs), a Bengal tiger, an African lion, bobcats, black bears, and wolves. He had 21 animals at that time and was feeding over 300 lbs of meat/week. Yes, the PA Game Commission checks on his animals. He has a permit.

People buy the young from many species. What happens to them? I have a friend who recently said he had a cougar in his front yard. Then he showed me a picture of a 30 lb. cougar...on a leash. It was staying at his home with a friend.

A cougar staying in a home in PA



Obviously there are some situations in many states, perhaps all states where the laws are not followed, situations in which the big cats either escape or are released.

For example, I was hunting turkey in a swamp in the back country to the west of us last fall and found a wallow that would have usually meant black bear. There were no bear tracks. None. Sod was picked up and turned over all through the swamp. I realized what it had to be, but we didn't have them in northern PA...or did we? A friend who is a state forester had a motion cam picture from one ridge over. It was a wild boar, tusks and all...an escapee from a local game farm perhaps.

Eight miles to the east of my home, during the fall buck season, a red deer buck was killed while chasing a whitetail doe. This from another game farm. Last fall a bull elk was killed in the field across from my field. It was from a game farm near us. The list goes on.

There are several other things you may be aware of. The first is what I call the “true believers or cougar cult”. These folks generally believe there are lots of cougars (they equate sightings with cougars on the ground) around and sometimes also believe that various State and Federal Agencies are in collusion, attempting to reintroduce them. In Pa, many of these folks believe the Game Commission has introduced them to bring down the deer herd. In short, they believe in sightings (without physical evidence that is verifiable) and in some instances, conspiracy theories as well. Some suggest that eastern cougars have developed in ways so as to completely avoid being hit on roads (as they are in all other known populations in the lower 48).

Also, some of these folks fabricate evidence. We have caught them in several instances.

So, what is real and what is not real, here in the East? Well, at this point, we think that they are not coming into the eastern states from those migrating from the West...not yet. We also think they are not coming from areas of northeastern Canada...yet. Although that may be much closer in time as wolves have already crossed. We know that has happened.

It is all about time, habitat, and our eastern human population’s willingness to allow them to come. Given all three, they will be here. It just might take a while.

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Kerry has had experience in the American West with the big cat both in tracking and identification of kills.

For many years he has also taken and investigated “sightings” in the East. Years ago he lived among the cougar’s large cousin in the Asian jungle.

He is also an author of many works including one novel (TROPHIES), various outdoor sports articles, and occasional political commentary.

Kerry lives in his own forest in north central PA with his wife Janet.

He has also kayaked Northern Norway, the Yukon, South East Alaska, Coastal British Columbia, Vancouver Island, all of the Great Lakes, and many eastern rivers.