

Viktor Contemplates the Mountain Lion

By Penny Randell

Good day. Viktor the elk here and once again I have volunteered to present the facts concerning the critters that share our treasured lands. It is only prudent to take a closer look at the big pussycats called mountain lions, for we have reached the time of year when those capacious stalkers come down from their secluded perches for the hunt. No, I don't mean a hunt for humans, but for us hoofed stock and smaller animals. Still, understanding this beast could prove beneficial should you ever accidentally stumble across one.

Recent sightings of mountain lions in and around our neighborhoods beg the simple question: "Why?" Well, the answer is equally simple: "People." People mean trash and trash attracts wildlife. Because of this, all refuse should only be placed at the roadside in the morning just before pickup. Second, your dogs make for tasty treats when it comes to the mountain lion. Those critters are particularly alert and are acutely aware of the doggies that impact their territory. Owners returning from the day's activities usually let their dogs out the same time each evening. Just remember, someone could be watching.

The third reason for alarming activity from a mountain lion is the very space that surrounds us. Evergreen has areas of expansive territory throughout the community that serve as a refuge for us elk, and of course for those pesky little deer. This provides a greater food base than high in the mountains. Sportsmen have a saying: "If you have deer and elk, you have lions." As a matter of fact, it's common to find bones from such a kill and that should be an indication to keep an eye out at all times, especially dawn and dusk. Again, just because you don't see them doesn't mean they don't see you.

Sadly, these animals are considered in peril and threatened with extinction. This majestic one is hunted and killed for recreation, sport, trophies, when a rancher attributes a death among livestock to him, when dogs disappear, and when people are simply frightened. This is understandable when you take into account the stealth, grace, independence, and wilderness spirit of this feline and the myths that surround him. Too, solitary existence plays a part. It's understandable to fear something you have never seen, especially when you garnish it with folklore and mystery.

Scientifically speaking, this American lion is referred to as *Puma concolor*, as well as "the cat with many names" and "the cat of one color." This list of names includes cougar...no, not the human female type, panther, puma, painter, el león, and catamount. Today mountain lions are accounted for in dictionaries under more names than any other animal in the world. Now isn't that something. I'm unambiguously just called an elk.

But the truth remains: this critter of many names has no desire to interact with people. In the history of Colorado there have only been two recorded attacks on humans. Why, we elk have a much worse track record than that, I'm sorry to say. Anyway, that's good news for you, as this Spartan cat can leap 15 feet straight up into a tree, run steadily at 10 miles per hour, and sprint up to 50 miles per hour for a short distance. Like us, these felines are savvy and know how to manipulate their habitat. They slink about at a slow pace

conserving energy and bask in the sun atop outcroppings, remaining aloof until it's time to hunt.

All cats are anatomically same. Take notice of any type of cat and then superimpose the image of a mountain lion and it's just another kitty; well, sorta. In fact, study a domestic cat and just imagine the same behavior with these monster boys. Unlike other cats though, all mountain lions display a uniform tan color, which allows them to blend with their surroundings. Their eyes are green or amber and positioned in the front of their head, allowing extremely accurate vision. They have a weak sense of smell, and longer rear limbs than forelimbs for horizontal and vertical pouncing. Their snake-like, elongated tail gives them another advantage, as it is used to counterbalance.

These lions may all look alike, but the males and females lead different lives. Mom, who experiences eight days of estrus every 23 days, has complete responsibility for all offspring. She takes this job most seriously and will fight to the death when it comes to protecting her own. This female can have up to six babies at one time, but typically she will only have one or two. Kittens are born blind and are weaned at three months, beginning their hunt for food at six months. Successful as this lion may seem, survival rates of babies wouldn't prove it. With just over one survivor per litter average, it's easy to see why this animal is endangered.

All these facts are relevant, but it's the diet that has me a bit overwrought. A recent study in Yellowstone National Park claimed elk to be the number one food choice for a lion. YIKES! Here they prefer deer; especially mule deer. These tenacious meat-eaters consume one deer or elk about every 10 days. They won't mess with jaguars or bears, and often hide their meals in what is called a cache.

And so, my Evergreen friends do not fret. Be wise, alert and informed. However, Colorado foothills are the perfect lion habitat, so should you encounter one of these daunting animals, be sure to give it plenty of room to pass. Face the lion and stand firm, or back away slowly. Talk to him loudly and let him know you mean business. Wave your arms, throw rocks or whatever you can, but don't run. If you are attacked, fight back. Studies reveal that a lion will usually give up if engaged in a fight with a human.

This is Viktor, signing off from another news bulletin. Be safe, enjoy our wonderful outdoors, and don't let your dogs nip at our heels. I'll be back again with more facts regarding the land we love and the creatures that live within it.