

In My Backyard Mountain Lions Majestic Desert Cat



Lion taken in the Davis Mountains in the 1920s by long-time government trapper W. M. "Bill" Smith of Marathon, Texas.

When I was just a young boy living at Marathon, I would be invited to go with a friend's family to Horse Canyon down in the Big Bend so the adults could fish (yeah, right, they never wet a hook) and we would spend the day exploring and playing in the river and hunting arrowheads in the huge Indian camp on which their clubhouse was built. We came in about dark and didn't go out after that because Horse Canyon was a wild place and we found animal sign up by the house every morning. We would have been a tender morsel for some big, hungry animal.

One night as we were preparing for bed (the electricity was by generator and they shut it down early to conserve gas,) there was a blood-curdling scream from some poor woman in distress. She screamed repeatedly and then trailed off into the wilderness. Let me tell you there were two little white kids who turned about five shades whiter with each scream!



Trapper Bill Smith and his hunting dogs, Old Buck and Banjo.

Of course, the adults knew that it was just a mountain lion, but it sounded just like a frightened woman screaming her head off. I knew what a woman's scream sounded like after watching Friday midnight horror films on our spanking new first TV set, and I just knew that's what I heard at Horse Canyon. It took a lot of talking to convince me otherwise.

Mountain lions have prowled West Texas for eons. When the first Paleo-Indians arrived thousands of years ago mountain lions were already present and some of the oldest predators in the land. Mountain lions, bears and gray wolves were at the top of the food chain in the Trans-Pecos, the ultimate predators. The second tier of predators were the red wolves, coyotes, eagles, bobcats and smaller cats. Way down at the bottom was man.

When men first began to settle the Terrell County/Trans-Pecos area, huge numbers of sheep and cattle were brought onto the new, unfenced ranches. One ranch at Dryden had over 90,000 sheep and ranches with 40,000 or 50,000 sheep were common. Add to that the droves of cattle and goats and you had a regular smorgasbord for the top predators.

Almost in biblical terms, there were giants in the earth in those days. The accompanying photo shows a 250+ pound monster trapped by my grandfather Bill Smith in the Davis Mountains in the 1920s. Through his efforts as a government trapper, along with an army of other trappers, the area was finally cleared of gray wolves. The red wolves were trapped, but they bred themselves out of existence by mating with coyotes, producing a "super" coyote in appearance and coloration, but much heavier and larger than a

pure-bred coyote.

But, the other predators proved to be problematic. Mountain lions and coyotes were prolific with their offspring and the battle was fought hard to bring them under control. The drought in the 1950s decimated wildlife in general and reduced the predator population as well, but once the rains returned, so did the predators. Today they are as big a problem as they once were, and ranchers and trappers are trying hard to get the upper hand.

Of the top predators, bears are making a comeback, but the numbers are small compared to original populations. They occasionally stroll through Sanderson, stay a few days (if not trapped and removed,) and then pass on to greener pastures. A few years ago, a 400-pound black bear was killed on West Highway 90 in the edge of town. Another took up residence in a north Sanderson backyard but ambled on into the desert, unharmed.

Gray wolves are being proposed for re-entry into Big Bend National Park, much to the astonishment of Trans-Pecos ranchers. They are certain to wander off the federal grounds and onto area ranches. Whether they are under protected status or not, they will most certainly be trapped or killed by protective ranchers...it is just human nature to protect your livestock and loved ones.

The mountain lion, however, is still holding sway in the Big Bend. Bounties are paid for their elimination and several methods are used to obtain the goal. Aerial control by helicopter is being used to hunt the mountain lions. An army of trappers is at work with regular steel traps and traditional methods, and even some use of "gitters," poison bait shot into the predator's mouth from a firearm device mounted on the ground. Gitters are more often used for coyotes and smaller cats, however. But still, the predators come...it is an unending battle.

The mountain lion is a large animal and very intelligent. According to Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD), mountain lions have been reported in all 254 counties of the state, but some of those reports are unconfirmed. A mortality report confirms that mountain lions have been killed in 67 counties, mostly in the west, central and south, during the period from 1983 to 2005. According to their map, Terrell County is in the heart of that area.

Mountain lions are large cats with a rather smallish head, seemingly too small for its body. Although they regularly are seen in their tawny, light brown coloration, they have also been seen in gray and almost black hues. True black panthers are not native to Texas or the U. S., but have been reported frequently in the press and in folktales through the ages. Even the Little House on the Prairie books by Laura Ingalls Wilder have a tale of a black panther that chased Paw through the Big Woods of Wisconsin. But, in Texas, there have never been any black panthers reported killed or captured, according to the TPWD.

Although reports of mountain lions in the early days included heavy-weights, today's mature male mountain lions generally weigh between 100 and 150 pounds, with females coming in at 45 to 96 pounds, according to TPWD records. They can live up to ten or eleven years in the wild, and even longer in captivity.

In our area and most of Texas, mountain lions feed on mule deer, white tails, javelina, feral hogs, big horned sheep, antelope, rabbits, raccoons, coyotes and whatever other small animals they can catch. And, of course, young horses, young cattle, sheep, goats and domestic pigs. Once a domestic animal reaches a weight of 500 pounds or more, they become too big for a mature male to bring down. But, try and tell the mountain lion that! Locally, there have been reports of attacks on larger animals.



Photo: Terrell County News Leader

Young Mountain Lion in a tree.

Mountain lions, which are also known as panthers, cougars, catamounts (an old term seen in 19th Century newspaper articles) and puma. But, locally, we call them mountain lions or panthers, a term used more often in my hometown of Marathon 54 miles to the west of Sanderson. Mountain lions are prolific in their habitat. Although they generally are "lone wolves" in their everyday existence, at breeding time they will congregate. That period is only about 3 to 5 days, but it can happen at any time of the year. Kittens are born in litters of two or three, usually during the summer and fall. They stay with their mother until they reach 11 to 24 months, then strike out on their own.

Depending on how much prey is available, the lay of the land and the presence of competitors, the range of a male can vary from 80 to 200 square miles, and can include the range of several females. Males will not encroach on the range of other males except under unusual circumstances. The range of females is smaller, 20 to 100 square miles.

Although the press has sensationalized mountain lion attacks, actual attacks are few and far between. From 1890 to 2001, the TWPD reports that a total of 98 attacks occurred in the U. S. and Canada, with 17 fatalities. But, attacks do occur, usually without deaths. Only a few years ago a mountain lion in Big Bend National Park snatched a ten-year-old from the trail as his family was hiking and drug him off into the brush. Adults managed to chase him off before much damage was done, but the child did suffer puncture wounds on his head from being grabbed and dragged. Attacks usually involve children and small adults, prey small enough for a hungry lion to take.

And, living in town is not much better than hiking in the wilderness. Several years ago, the principal at the old Sanderson Elementary building was walking in during the lunch hour. The children were all on the playground having a ball and raising quite a ruckus. As he glanced at the steep hill behind the building, he saw a mountain lion sprawled on a flat, fallen boulder high up on the side of the hill, watching the children play. One can only surmise that it was licking its chops, trying to pick out its best chance for a good meal. After all, it is the top predator in our area.

And, what's in your backyard?