

With Cougar Sightings Galore, Has The Cat Come Back?

by Nathaniel H. Axtell

John Eaton knows what he saw last November near the banks of the Buffalo River, but he's somewhat reluctant to let the cat out of the bag.

"I haven't told many people about it," he admits. "It's like saying you saw an alien." Eaton is among hundreds of credible people who firmly believe they saw a cougar in our mountains, even though wildlife professionals generally consider the big cats to be extinct in the Southern Appalachians.

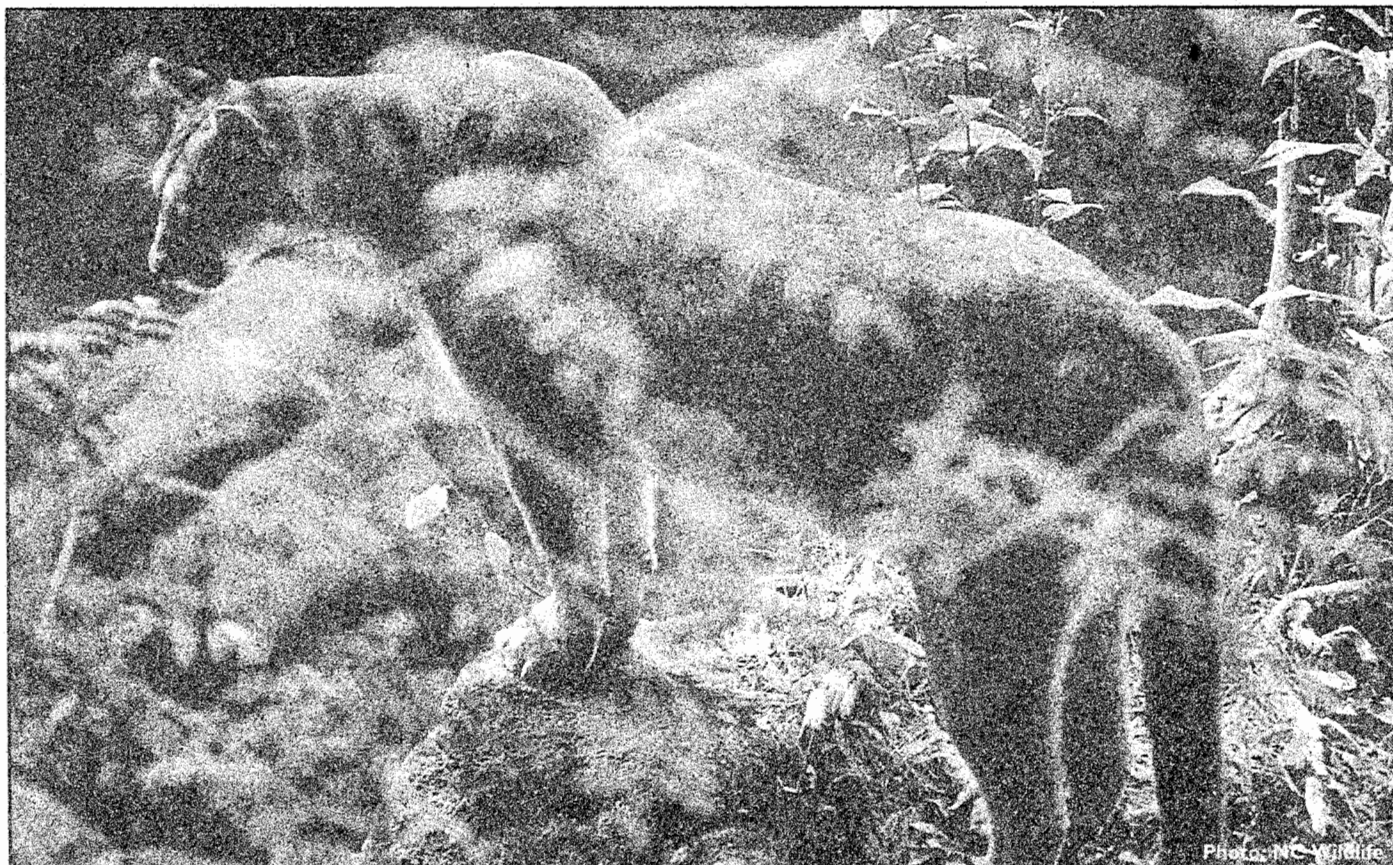
Cougars, known also as mountain lions or panthers, once roamed the mountains in great numbers. They kept deer populations healthy by culling the old and weak. But by the early 1900s, cougars had been hunted and trapped to near extinction, their habitat ravaged by timber companies, their main prey overhunted by humans. The last known Virginia cougar was killed in Washington County in 1882. The Smokies of North Carolina held its last "painter" until 1920, when a young lion was shot near Fontana Village.

However, sightings of cougars have persisted since the 1960s, with multiple reports stemming from southwest Virginia, western North Carolina and West Virginia. Dr. Donald Linzey, a wildlife biologist at Wytheville Community College, has recorded about 300 reports in Virginia since 1978. About 140 of those were deemed credible, with clusters of sightings in Craig, Giles, and Montgomery counties. In North Carolina, reports of cougars continue to accumulate in the areas of Cataloochee, Greenbrier, and Cosby in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The sheer number of sightings has led some to re-think the cougar's extinct status. A newly published "Guide to Endangered and Threatened Species in Virginia" lists the cougar as endangered, saying "The mountain lion possibly could live today in Virginia in extensive mountain hardwood forest or mixed forest with rock outcrops, ledges and thickets of mountain laurel, rhododendron and greenbrier."

John Eaton saw his cougar while bow hunting on a private, 500-acre farm in Nelson County, Va., just upstream from where the Buffalo and Tye rivers converge. The veteran hunter was sitting in a tree stand when something "grayish brown" loped into the clearing below him. "When I saw it, my first thought was that it wasn't a deer," he recalled. "It was too close to the ground. I started going through the key characteristics for dogs, and it wasn't a dog."

The big feline below him was about 80 pounds, too big for a bob-



cat, and it had "stocky legs and pads. It was stone-quiet. Didn't make a sound going through the woods." From roughly 35 yards away, Eaton was able to study the cat for about 30 seconds before it disappeared into the brush. "The last thing I saw was its long tail," he said. "As it went away from me, its tail had a dark streak down the back of it. I've seen a lot of animals in the woods, but I've never seen one of those before."

Reports from people like Eaton, a Virginia Tech dean who began his career as a wildlife biologist, lends credence to cougar believers. But wildlife officials who have scoured the mountains looking for cats believe that any cougars living in Appalachia are exotic pets that have been released or escaped. If a wild, self-sustaining population of cougars existed, they say, there would be ample signs such as tracks, scat and deer kills. At least a couple cats would be killed by a car, as regularly happens with the Florida panther.

"We've never found any proof that one existed at all, although there were some things that were very interesting," said Robert Downing, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist. In the 1970s, after the eastern cougar was added to the Endangered Species Act, Downing was assigned to determine if there were any remaining mountain lions in the Southern Appalachians. He tracked when it snowed. He crawled into potential lion dens, and when he couldn't fit, he sent in his wife, Pat. He followed up on dozens of reports of killed cougars. "These things sounded

good, but they just evaporated."

Even so, Downing found tantalizing clues to support the possibility of cougars in the southern highlands. Alerted by a report on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina, Downing and his wife found what appeared to be cat prints in the snow along a wooden guardrail. The tracks had been filled in with snow, but "in one case they leaped six feet from one log to another without missing a step. I followed the thing for three-quarters of a mile and came back many, many times. The length of the step was longer than a bobcat is supposed to take, but if it was a cougar, it never came back."

The Downings also found four deer kills that had been dragged a good distance, then covered with dirt and leaf litter as cats are prone to do. "Large cats just stand on the animal and reach out as far as they can [to gather litter]," he said. "And these were reaching out four feet or so, which is too long for a bobcat." But given that bobcats have killed deer weighing 200 pounds, and lacking any tracks, Downing couldn't definitively call these cougar kills. At the end of five years, he was forced to report that he was "unable to confirm self-sustaining populations of cougars."

Dr. Don Linzey, who's spent 18 years searching for Virginia's cougars, has had similar problems documenting their existence. "For all the times I've been looking for them, we've yet to get indisputable evidence," he said. "It's real frustrating at times. Cougars don't flock or herd together, so you're dealing with solitary animals.

They're primarily nocturnal and they don't like people. It makes them very hard to find."

Still, Linzey has accumulated some intriguing evidence. He's

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Cougar

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examined several deer kills covered up with dirt and litter. Another time, a neighbor in Montgomery County told Linzey that a cougar had crossed his path. Returning to the site, Linzey found some hair caught in barbed wire and sent it to the Smithsonian Institution's lab. It came back as cat hair, but the technician couldn't narrow it down further. Someone sent Linzey a photo taken in the 1970s off the Blue Ridge Parkway. It shows a cat-like animal with a long tail, but the picture quality is too poor to say for sure.

Perhaps the most compelling report Linzey received came from a Forest Service technician. While marking a wilderness boundary on a steep, rocky hillside above Natural Bridge, the technician spotted an adult cougar sunning itself on a boulder. "He saw some movement and noticed that there were two young ones nearby," Linzey said. "He watched them for some time. When he lost sight of the mother, he decided to get going." Linzey and the technician returned to the spot, but the cougar family never reappeared.

Despite the growing number of sightings and signs, federal and state agencies in the Southern Appalachians will continue to operate as if cougars are function-

ally extinct until a wild breeding pair is found. These agencies haven't exactly been beating the bushes looking for cougars because large tracts of public land would have to be closed to logging, hunting, and ATV use. In fact, the national parks and national forest system are the most likely places a wild population of cougars would live, according to Linzey. "There's ample area for them to live in and plenty of deer," he said.

Downing suspects that the only cougars in the mountains today are introduced pets, but he says that could change. "Even if we could say definitively that there are no eastern cougar today, tomorrow one could track in from Florida or Minnesota."

Chestnut

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which hosts multiple deadly strains.

Another unanswered question is, how will scientists go about the daunting task of recolonizing millions of acres of forest with American chestnut once a blight-resistant tree is developed? "No one has studied the culture of chestnut, other than planting nut trees in an orchard setting," MacDonald said. "No one has studied the silviculture of chestnut trees, so we don't exactly know how we'll go about replacing them in the forest." Fortunately, the chestnut is an aggressive tree, so they may recolonize on their own.



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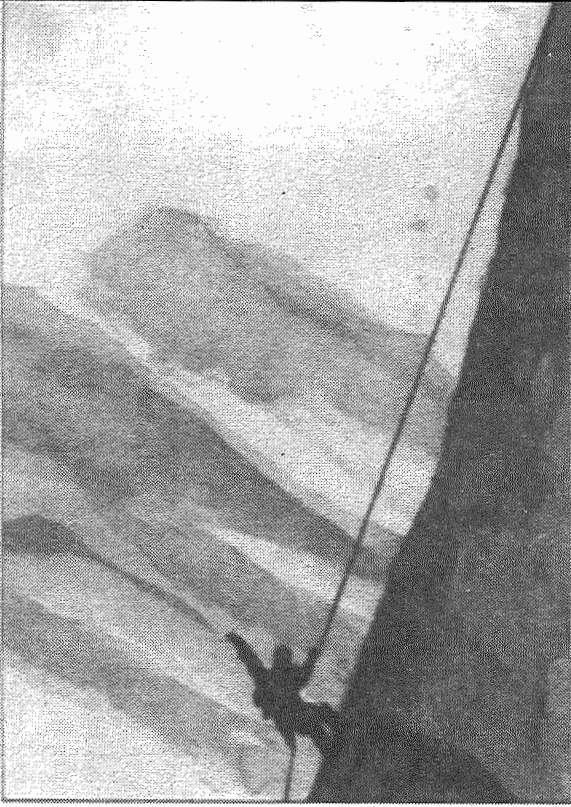
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