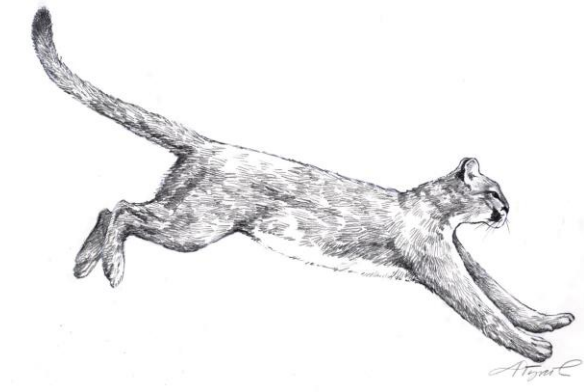


# The Outside Story



## Have You Seen a Mountain Lion?

**By: Madeline Bodin**

In the photo, the mountain lion lies on its side on the shoulder of a Connecticut parkway. Tail lights shine in the distance. A Connecticut state trooper snapped the photo after a motorist had struck and killed the animal on a June night in 2011.

Wildlife biologists quickly confirmed this mountain lion was the one photographed days before in front of an elementary school in Greenwich, Connecticut, about 40 miles west. (School was cancelled.) Within months, DNA evidence revealed that this animal was the same one seen in the backyard of a retired game warden in Lake George, New York the previous December, and tracked in Wisconsin and Minnesota in 2009 and 2010.

DNA testing also showed that the mountain lion came from the Black Hills of South Dakota, the nation's eastern-most confirmed breeding population. This young male had walked an astonishing 1,500 miles.

This, said Vermont Fish and Wildlife fur-bearer project leader Chris Bernier, is why he takes reports of mountain lion sightings seriously. Although the US Fish and Wildlife Service declared the breeding population of wild mountain lions east of the Mississippi extinct in March 2011, and biologists are confident there is no wild, breeding population in the Northeast, that doesn't mean a mountain lion couldn't show up in the Northeast because, well, one did.

The last known wild mountain lion in the Northeast died in Maine in 1938. The last wild mountain lion in New Hampshire may have been killed in the White Mountains in 1885. In Vermont, it was 1881.

Since then, there have been a handful of confirmed mountain lion sightings in the Northeast, although most have been thought to be escaped captive animals.

There are also many unconfirmed sightings. Bernier gets more than 50 reports of mountain lions a year. Patrick Tate, New Hampshire Fish and Game's fur-bearer project leader, receives about 20. There is no physical evidence for most sightings in the two states, and when there has been physical evidence, it has been at best inconclusive.

The Connecticut mountain lion left tracks, scat, fur and game camera photos in four states. Mountain lions may be stealthy, but they do leave a trace.

Sometimes physical evidence shows the sighting was of some other animal, including dogs, cats, fishers, coyotes, bears and bobcats. Mountain lion sightings in New Hampshire have increased along with the bobcat population, said Tate.

You might think that it would be easy to tell the two cat species apart. Mountain lions weigh 105 to 140 pounds and can be up to eight feet long from the nose to the tip of the tail. Bobcats top out at about 40 pounds (most are much lighter than that) and are only about three feet long. Mountain lions have long, heavy tails, while bobcats have stumpy ones. But people mistake them all the time.

"I have plenty of bobcat photos from remote cameras where it's a sideways view of the face, the torso is turned just so, hiding the tail, and it looks like a mountain lion," said Susan Morse, a naturalist and educator based in Huntington, Vermont, who has studied mountain lions throughout her career. "I often use those photos in my presentations to show how easy it is to confuse things."

On a research trip to Arizona, where there is a confirmed breeding population, a biologist told Morse that 90 percent of the mountain lion sightings he receives turn out to be bobcats. "And that's in a place where there is a known mountain lion population," she said.

If and when another mountain lion sighting is confirmed in New England, it will almost certainly be a male. Male mountain lions travel much farther than females to find a territory of their own. Morse says they are looking – or smelling, really – for a place with females, prey, and no other males. Males from known western populations have turned up in Minnesota, Missouri, Louisiana, and elsewhere. Morse is confident that there are other male mountain lions wandering in the East.

But a breeding population requires females, and Morse is not optimistic that female

mountain lions will make it into to the East on their own, both because they tend not to travel as far as males, and because of intense hunting pressure.

In Vermont, says Bernier, "People want to see them, because they want to believe that they live in this rural, wild place." For now, however, we'll have to accept that these residents of the wild West are as rare in our own neighborhoods as true wilderness.

*Madeline Bodine is a writer living in Andover, Vermont. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [wellborn@nhcf.org](mailto:wellborn@nhcf.org)*

**Northern  
Woodlands**  
PO Box 471, Corinth, Vermont 05039  
Tel. 802.439.6292 Fax 802.439.6296  
[www.northernwoodlands.org](http://www.northernwoodlands.org)

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