

BY DR. JAY TISCHENDORF

Known to the Cherokee as Klandaghi, “Lord of the Forest,” the cougar, like the Appalachian Trail itself, is an iconic symbol of eastern wilderness. Once ranging coast to coast and across a vast 100 degrees of latitude, from northern treelines to the tip of South America, this secretive, long-tailed cat was perhaps the most widespread terrestrial mammal of the New World. Indeed, town and village names along the A.T. such as Panthersville, in Georgia, attest to the historic presence of this species here in the eastern United States.

Adapted to habitats ranging from montane to coastal swamp, and seemingly everything in between, the cougar (also known as mountain lion, panther, puma, and catamount) is a large, tawny cat with pronounced crepuscular activity patterns. Adult females weigh roughly 100 lbs, males upwards of 180 lbs. Mostly solitary, cougars come together briefly to mate. Litter size ranges from, typically, one to three kittens. Kittens are spotted for the first 8–10 months of their lives, and gain independence from their mothers at about 12–15 months of age. The principal prey of the cougar is the wild ungulate, which includes deer, elk, and wild sheep. Territory size varies from 30 to 400 square miles and is probably a function of both prey densities and social structure.

Due to a combination of pioneers pushing westward, associated predator persecution, and habitat loss, the cougar was effectively exterminated from eastern and central North America by the early 1900s (an exception is Florida, where the endangered Florida panther, estimated at approximately 100 individuals, survives). Despite a long tradition of cougar sighting reports since that time, the lack of substantial, verified, hard evidence of the species over the past century is enough to convince even the most diehard believer that the eastern cougar, aside from a few wandering western cats or escaped or released former captives, is sadly, no longer extant in the eastern U.S. wild.

This can be contrasted with the central U.S., particularly Nebraska, Missouri, and Minnesota

where, after a 100 year absence, over the past decade confirmation of free-ranging wild cougars has almost become routine. These include dozens of cougars captured on automatic cameras, hit by cars, shot by hunters or landowners, or even killed in collisions with locomotives. Based on radio-telemetry and/or blood and genetic analysis, these prairie panthers and midwest mountain lions are largely dispersing from populations in the Rocky Mountains. Given the distance and gauntlet of obstacles that lie between the Rockies and the eastern U.S., it will be a long time before those hiking the A.T. can hope to see naturally recovered, self-sustaining breeding populations of this lithe and agile carnivore.

This leaves sanctioned restoration or reintroduction as the most viable cougar recovery strategy. With past successes in predator recovery, from peregrine falcons to red and gray wolves, swift foxes, and black-footed ferrets, there are numerous precedents for proactive cougar restoration. Such an effort would return a native predator to many of its historic haunts, reinvigorating an ecosystem that truly is ecologically bereft without it. While ample natural habitat for the great cat still exists, such an effort will require potentially more challenging social and political habitat to become reality. Along with advocacy groups like the Eastern Cougar Foundation, those who hike and enjoy the A.T., sensing the void of a cougar-less experience in the eastern U.S., are the very ones who—through social and political activism—can help bring this legendary cat back.

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For more information visit:

www.easterncougar.org



Eastern Cougar
Puma Concolor

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