

# Alabama Cougars: Sorting Fact From Fiction



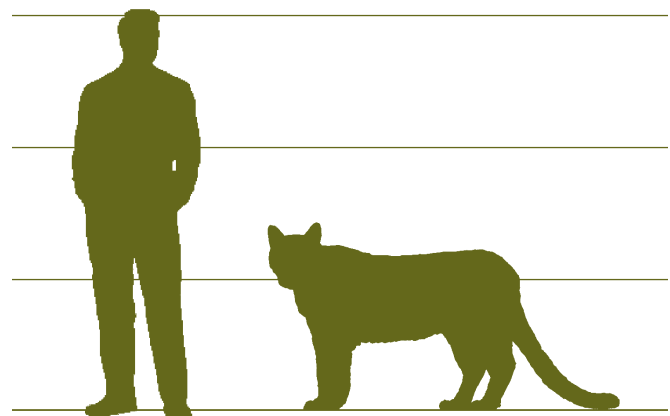
Cougars weigh between 65 and 265 pounds, are sandy brown to tawny gray in color, and do not have stripes or spots.

Across the eastern United States, there are frequently reports of cougar sightings in areas where the big cat is thought to no longer exist. Alabama is no different, and wildlife officials regularly receive calls and e-mails about cougars seen in the state. However, there has not been a reliable, verified sighting in Alabama in over 50 years. Is there really a population of these big cats roaming the wilderness of Alabama, or is it all just a myth?

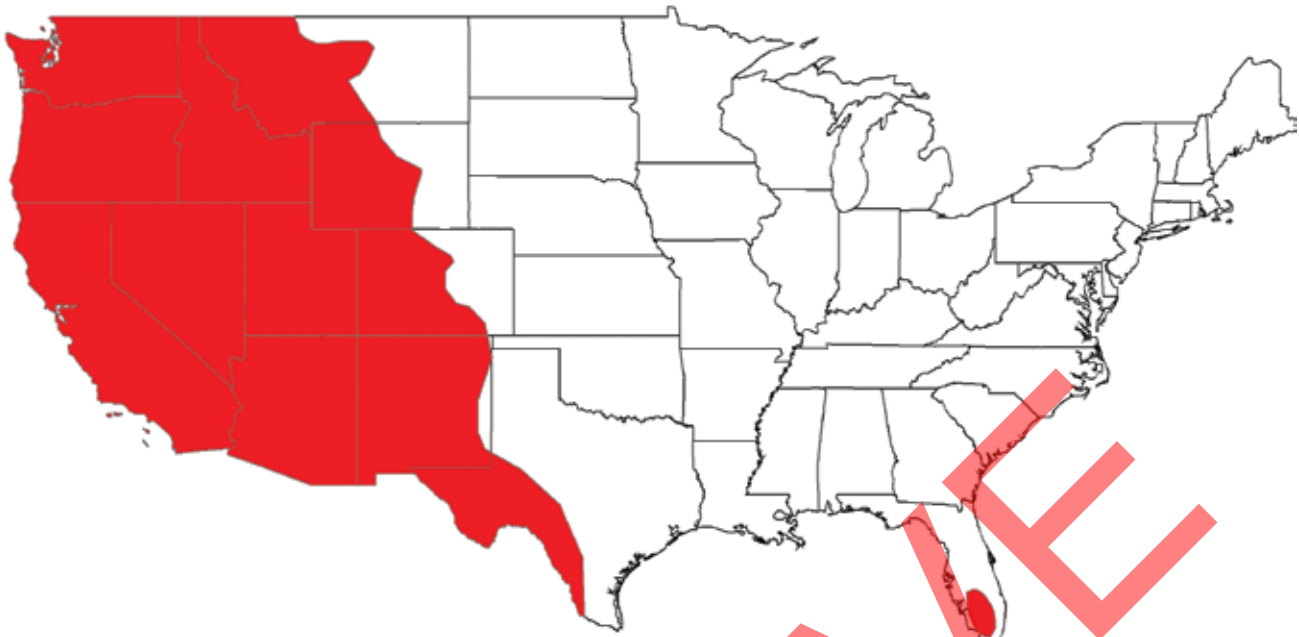
## What Is a Cougar?

Cougar, panther, Florida panther, puma, mountain lion, Mexican lion, lion, catamount, king cat, deer cat, mountain devil, mountain screamer, and painter are some of the names commonly used to refer to the same animal (scientific name *Puma concolor*). This big cat is the second-largest felid in North America, weighing from 65 to 265 pounds (for comparison, the average German shepherd weighs about 75 pounds). The length

from head to rump of adult cougars is between 3 and 5 feet, with an additional 2 to 3 ½ feet of tail. From foot to shoulder, the cougar stands approximately 2 ½ feet—about mid-thigh on the average adult man. The adult cougar is sandy brown to tawny gray with a whitish belly. Cougars do not have spots or stripes. The head is relatively small with small, rounded ears, and the tail is long, thick, and often ends with a black tip.



An average adult cougar comes up to approximately mid-thigh on an average person.



Cougars range over much of the western United States, except for a small population in extreme southwest Florida.

### Where Do Cougars Live Today?

The cougar once roamed across most of the western hemisphere from the upper reaches of Canada's boreal forests, throughout the United States, and all the way to its southern limits at the tip of South America. Loss of suitable habitat coupled with decades of unregulated hunting and trapping and eradication programs have significantly reduced the cougar's range. Today, the cat's range within the United States is restricted to regions around the Rocky Mountains of the West. The cat is presumed to be extinct east of the Mississippi River, except for a small protected population in the extreme southwestern portion of Florida

(the Florida panther). Although there are reports of sightings outside of the cougar's current known range, rarely are such sightings verifiable. Those that are verified usually include released or escaped individuals previously kept as pets or in zoos.

### Are Cougars in Alabama?

The closest known cougar populations to Alabama exist in western Texas and southwestern Florida. Dispersing wild cougars have been identified as near as Louisiana and Arkansas, but none have been sighted east of the Mississippi outside of Florida. The last confirmed cougar in Alabama was killed in 1956 in Tuscaloosa

County. Since then, Alabama wildlife officials have not been able to confirm any of the frequent reports of cougar sightings. As recently as 2008, a cougar was shot by a hunter in Georgia, and upon further investigation, the cat was determined to be a descendant from the small southwest Florida population. Although many people hate to admit it, the Alabama cougar is likely more a myth than a reality.



Bobcats are often misidentified as cougars. Bobcats are much smaller than cougars and have a proportionately shorter tail.



In some parts of Alabama, black bears may be mistaken as cougars.



Abundant throughout Alabama, coyotes are commonly mistaken as cougars, especially in low-light conditions.

### If Not a Cougar, What Is It?

If all these reports of cougars in Alabama are not really cougars, then what are they? Many of the sightings come from people who are unfamiliar with cougars, especially since they are not likely to have seen one in the wild before. Oftentimes, other animals are misidentified as cougars. Bobcats occur in large numbers throughout Alabama and the southeastern United States. A bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) is a different species than a cougar; it is much smaller, weighing between 15 and 35 pounds and has a short 4- to 8-inch tail and spotted coat. Since these animals tend to avoid humans, it may be difficult to tell the difference between cougars and bobcats in the brief glimpse a person may get. Feral cats, domestic cats that now run wild, may also be the culprit behind many reported cougar sightings. A uniform brown feral cat looks similar to the cougar, except it is much smaller. In fact, many photographs and videos of supposed cougar sightings found on the Internet turn out to be feral cats (once the size of the animal is compared to other inanimate objects in the background). Some domestic dogs and even coyotes can be mistaken for a cougar if seen at the right angle or under poor lighting conditions. Although dogs may be of similar size, they have shorter tails and a snout and ears that are much more pointed than those of a cougar. Even deer, with a similar coat color, have been misidentified as cougars.

Interestingly, many of the reports of cougar sightings from Alabama and across the Southeast are of a “black panther.” Since an all-black cougar has never been

recorded, it is doubtful such sightings are reliable. Both jaguars (*Felis onca*) and jaguarundi (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*) are capable of existing in all-black color phases, but the range of both of these species makes them even less likely than a cougar to be seen in Alabama. Mexico is the northern extent of the range for these two species. There is also a small black bear population in southwestern Alabama, and male bears sometimes disperse to other regions of the state. Although the near lack of a tail and larger body size does distinguish a bear from a “black panther,” at first glance, confusion may be possible. The most sensible explanation seems to be that black feral cats or dogs are being mistaken for “black panthers.”

There are a few rare cases where sightings in Alabama may truly be cougars (although none have been verified in over 50 years). There is always the possibility that Alabama cougar sightings are of released or escaped cougars. Some people obtain cougar kittens as pets but soon realize they cannot handle an adult cat and release them into the wild. There are also private zoos and facilities that house cougars, and escapes can occur. Lastly, wild male cougars will travel long distances in search of a mate and resources. Although it is possible for a cougar from the Florida population to make a trek to Alabama, it is highly unlikely as the distance is over 500 miles. Since the females do not make such movements, any roaming male would not be able to reproduce, and, therefore, no wild population could be established.

## Tips for Those Who Think They Saw a Cougar

### *In the woods:*

- Before thinking cougar, think of all the other species discussed here to be sure it was not one of those instead. Even if cougars do exist in Alabama, they would be extremely rare. It is likely something else.
- Identify something in the scene, other than the animal, to compare the size of the animal. Remember, the average height of a cougar is 2 ½ feet or mid-thigh on an adult man.
- Notice the length of the tail. Cougars have long, thick tails that make them distinct from bobcats and most dogs.
- Be sure of the color. Adult cougars are solid in color (no stripes or spots) and are usually sandy brown to grayish brown.
- Remember, a cougar is a big animal, weighing twice as much as the average German shepherd. Don't be fooled into thinking that a feral cat is the same size as a cougar.
- Cougars are not black! If you think you are looking at a black panther, look harder.

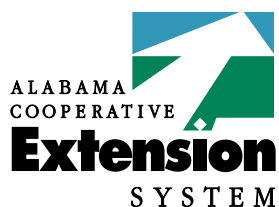
### *In a photo or video:*

- Look at the vegetation. Are the trees and plants actually found in Alabama, or was the photograph taken somewhere else where cougars are more common?
- Scale is essential; find something in the scene other than the animal that can be used to judge the size of the animal.
- Don't be fooled by Photoshop! Everyone likes to cut and paste, and some people are really good at it!

### *If you still think it is a cougar:*

- Get away and contact the closest wildlife official or local law enforcement agency. Whether a released pet or wild animal, cougars are potentially very dangerous.

ARCHIVE



**ANR-1358**

**Jesse Boulerice**, Graduate Student, **Mark D. Smith**, *Extension Specialist* and Assistant Professor, and **Stephen S. Ditchkoff**, Associate Professor, all in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University

**For more information**, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

**Revised May 2013**, ANR-1358