



The cougars that roam

DNR: state has seen more cougars this year but the raw number doesn't tell us everything

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When a cougar was found dead at the interchange of I-494 and 35W in Bloomington earlier this fall, it raised a few eyebrows: a cougar? Here? Really?

Cougar sightings in Minnesota remain rare. The state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has recorded just 50 sightings of the big cats in our state since 2004.

But the number of cougar sightings in Minnesota has also shown a slight upward trend. The DNR recorded just one cougar sighting in 2004, then two in 2007 and six in 2010. There was then a slow decline in sightings before a sharp jump to seven in 2018 and now 12 this year.

But John Erb, a research scientist with the DNR, said the cougar picture here in Minnesota can't be explained by the numbers alone. "You can't look at the absolute number because it's confounded by our inability to always say this cat's different from that

one."

Erb said it's likely that a single cat in the Grand Rapids area accounted for as many as half of this year's sightings, noting the limited geographic area where multiple sightings were reported as well as the relatively short length of time between those sightings.

Likewise, the cat found in Bloomington was probably the same one that had appeared on a resident's home security system a few days prior, said Erb—and likely, too, that it was responsible for a

OSSEO HOUSE ACCOUNT
Small Business Saturday--
1093297
6 x 3 in

LAKE SARAH DENTAL
Small Business Saturday
1091264
2 x 2 in

BUILDERS CARPET
Small Business Saturday
1091261
2 x 2 in

LIVE, LAUGH & BLOOM
Small Business Saturday-S
1091233
2 x 2 in

ONCE UPON A CHILD
Small Business Saturday
1089497
2 x 2 in

AMERICAN FAMILY BRANDON A
Small Business Saturday
1089533
2 x 2 in

VON HANSONS MEATS
Small Business Saturday
1093740
2 x 2 in

ST MICHAEL BOUTIQUE
Small Business Saturday
1092697
2 x 2 in

MANHATTAN TRANSFER INC.
Small Business Saturday
1092840
2 x 2 in

HARDWARE HANK
Small Business Saturday
1093049
2 x 2 in

AST SPORTS
Small Business Saturday
1092467
2 x 4 in

DJS HEATING & AIR COND IN
Shop Local
1091005
2 x 4 in

COLONIAL JEWELERS
Small Business Saturday
1092400
2 x 2.5 in



Would you know a cougar if you saw one in the wild?

couple other southwest metro sightings this year. Erb estimated that the 12 sightings this year could represent just five or six cats, which would put this year more in line with the 2010-2013 period during which conservationists verified just four to six cougar sightings for each of those years.

Large shifts in the state's cougar population is also unlikely, at least in the near future, because the cat isn't suspected to be breeding here currently, said Erb. Instead, evidence gathered over the past 30 years has pointed to the cats in Minnesota being transient animals—what Erb calls dispersers: males not alpha enough to gain a foothold amid larger populations and who were pushed out for territorial reasons.

That the cats sighted in Minnesota have predominantly been male is the first clue that these are wandering animals and not members of a settled population. The few females that have been spotted here had shown signs of being previously captive animals: they're declawed or display abnormal behavior that one in the wild is unlikely to show, he said.

"We do occasionally, like this one in Grand Rapids this year, see a cat that seems to have been detected in the same area over several months and think maybe it's settling in an area, but oftentimes they then just disappear and we don't really know: did it take off? Was it illegally killed by somebody?"

Cougars are by nature solitary animals and can wander alone, uninhibited, across large tracts of land. Erb said that a DNA sample taken from the bloody tracks left by one car in the Twin Cities area was then replicated six months later in Connecti-

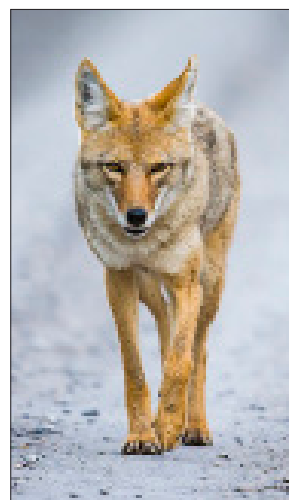
cut when conservationists there found the same cat struck by a car.

Cougars are a protected species in Minnesota, but that isn't the case in every state, even in those states that have seen the cat's near extirpation. South Dakota established an annual harvest season for cougars beginning in 2005, but prior to that the state had listed the cougar as a threatened species.

Much of the cougar population in South Dakota claims the area around the Black Hills and the Badlands as its territory, and it's from this region that Minnesota conservationists say the disperser cats have originated. Those pockets of the cat that re-established in South Dakota likely grew from what, at one point, was the disperser population of larger grouping out west, said Erb, and the potential for a similar occurrence here is possible, though very small.

"We have no evidence of breeding, but sooner or later that's entirely possible. Time will tell. We have the potential to have some [breeding populations]," said Erb, but "I think it's going to be an up-and-down kind of process if we do. It takes what I believe to be a pretty random event, all the stars lining up."

Those stars include not just a dispersing male and female but also their finding each other after getting here and then surviving long enough to produce a litter. "This is, to a degree, a very random chance of events and low probability," he said, also noting that any cougars trying to stay here long would end up vying for the same territory already claimed by Minnesota's wolves. "I don't think we'll see any rapid change in anything."



Coyote



Cougar



Bobcat

HOUSE ADS FOR CONTESTS
Online Pet Contest
1089624
6 x 6 in



HIRSHFIELDS DECORATING CE
Small Business Saturday
1093990
3 x 5 in

SEW GOOD SEWING CENTER LL
Small Business Saturday-s
1091721
3 x 2.25 in

SCHULTE'S GREENHOUSE & NU
Small Business Saturday
1092477
4 x 4 in

ALL 4 KIDS
Small Business Saturday
1093186
2 x 4 in