

Sharing Space Safely with Felines of the Forest

A.E. Lee

Mountain lion, cougar, puma, all names for revered apex predators of the western American states. Sightings and especially attacks are highly publicized and sensationalized. The names alone inject fear. But when they walk through your back yards and down your streets, how can you feel safe while still enjoying their mystery and prowess? Where is the line between safety and enjoying the majesty of the western mountains?

Those who reside in mountain towns may find the neighborhood lion napping on their porch or sauntering down their street one evening. The realization that they are closer than you think can be unsettling and cause you to struggle to understand the dos and don'ts of living in lion country. In a letter in 1817, Thomas Jefferson wrote "that knowledge is power, that knowledge is safety, and that knowledge is happiness." Therefore, the more you know, the better off you should be living amongst these majestic, if also, frightening creatures.

"The solitary and wide-ranging nature of the mountain lion makes it difficult to directly estimate populations," states the [Mountain Lion Foundation](#). Because of this, an accurate count is impossible and exact statistics cannot be found. According to the foundation, "Based on the best available data at this time the mountain lion population in the United States is unlikely to exceed 30,000." Mostly concentrated in the Rocky Mountain range from Arizona and New Mexico continuing north to Washington and Montana, there could be at least one mountain lion per every five square miles. Since this average does not take metropolitan areas into consideration, in the mountainous and less residential areas, the concentration is likely higher. Therefore, if you are in lion country, you have likely (and unbeknownst to you) been in the presence of a lion.

Does this mean a mountain lion is around every corner of the trail, ready to pounce and make you its next meal? Should you stay inside? Should you throw caution to the wind and venture to the trail alone?

The short answer is: no. You are not likely the next meal of a mountain lion. You should not stay indoors out of fear of an encounter. Though mountain lions abound, according to the Mountain Lion Foundation, "Human encounters with mountain lions are rare and the risk of an attack is infinitely small...If lions had any natural urge to hunt people, there would be attacks every single day. Instead, they avoid us." According to [a study](#) done in 2011 by David Mattson, Kenneth Logan, and Linda Sweanor, experts in wildlife sciences, "Relative to other large carnivores with a history of attacking humans, cougars are among the least lethal." The most recent statistics from state wildlife organizations still support the conclusion that attacks are rare and often non-fatal. "Since 1990," according to a 2023 Denver Gazette article, "[25 known attacks](#) by mountain lions on humans in Colorado have occurred, three of which resulted in human deaths." That is less than one attack per year. As of 2022, in California [21 attacks](#) have occurred since March 1989; only three were fatal. Again, less than one attack per year. Finally,

since 1890, there have been 27 known [fatal mountain lion attacks](#) in North America. On average, that is one fatal attack every five years.

Approximately 15 million people recreated [outdoors](#) in the Pacific and western mountain states in 2021. That means there is approximately a one in 15 million chance of an encounter, and an even less chance of a fatal encounter with a mountain lion. Referring back to Mattson, Logan, and Sweanor's study, "In recent decades cougars accounted for around one, on average, of the roughly 150 animal-caused deaths in the United States every year, most of which were caused by domesticated animals." This means a person is more likely to be killed by a pet dog than die by a mountain lion attack.

Because nature is unpredictable, preparedness is advisable. An encounter is possible even if improbable. If you are one of the few to meet a mountain lion, sources advise: do not run. Appear as large as possible. Be loud, sound aggressive and don't act like prey. Remain upright. If available, without bending or crouching, throw sticks, rocks, or anything at the lion to discourage an attack.

In conclusion, be knowledgeable and prepared when recreating outdoors as anything could happen. The statistical probability of even seeing a mountain lion, let alone of encountering one or being attacked is so low it should not be a reason to stay indoors or the cause of excessive worry. Explore the glorious world; bask in nature's beauty. Know that you can safely share space with the magnificent and majestic mountain lion in peace.