

# Kansas and Missouri: Where the mountain lion sleeps tonight

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There has been a growing number of mountain lions spotted in the U.S. Midwest. Photo: Pixabay

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Mountain lions used to roam most of the mainland United States. They covered a broader territory than any other mammal in North America and were known by a wide range of names, including puma, cougar, painter and catamount.

Then in the early 1900s, the mountain lion population dropped dramatically due to hunting and a lack of prey.

But now, roughly a century later, researchers say mountain lions are showing up in the Midwest again.

## **These Tourists Are Lonely Lion Kings**

In the last decade, reports of confirmed sightings in Missouri and Kansas have increased. In May, a male mountain lion had to be put to sleep after being struck by a vehicle on a Missouri highway.

DNA samples collected from animals in both states lead back to mountain lion groups in western South Dakota and northwestern Nebraska.

Still, mountain lions do not appear to be reproducing in Missouri or Kansas. For now, they are simply visitors from the West - and they are almost all male.

“It would be a long shot for a female to wander this far,” said Matt Peek, a biologist at the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.

## **A Wildlife Conservation Success Story**

Experts say the Midwest's growing number of mountain lions is the result of conservation and modern management.

In Missouri, mountain lions remain protected under the Wildlife Code. Hunting is prohibited, but residents are allowed to kill animals that threaten lives or property.

A similar code applies in Kansas, where far fewer mountain lions have been spotted. Missouri has had more than 50 confirmed sightings since 1994, according to the Missouri Department of Conservation. Kansas reports 10 for the same period.

Peek said the difference can be explained by the roaming mountain lions' route.

Many mountain lions are coming from the Black Hills region, which is near the border of South Dakota and Wyoming.

“They're more likely to come across Nebraska from west to east following the river, which leads them to Missouri,” Peek said.

## **Mountain Lions Fare Better In Missouri**

Peek said that while Kansas has enough prey for the mountain lions to eat, its landscape is not ideal.

“They need wide open spaces,” Peek said. “In the places where the land might be right, there would be too many people.”

Scientist Jeff Beringer of the Missouri Department of Conservation said that Missouri's 2.9 million acres of forested ground makes for a good mountain lion habitat. It has a rich supply of raccoons, possums and armadillos - animals small enough to qualify as the right portion size for a mountain lion's diet.

But even in Missouri, there is no evidence of breeding — only a surge in the number of males passing through from the West.

Missouri's mountain lion response team has identified only one female, killed in 1994.

## **For Lion Queens, Mother Knows Best**

Clay Nielsen is the director of scientific research for the Cougar Network, a nonprofit research group. Nielsen says male mountain lions spread out to avoid other young males and reduce the likelihood of inbreeding.

In 2011, one male lion from the Black Hills traveled more than 1,800 miles through Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York. He was then killed by a vehicle in Connecticut.

Nielsen said females typically move less often and travel shorter distances.

“It’s in their nature to stay close to their mother,” he said. “And it’s the best strategy because they know the resources are best in their area.”

## **Successful Comeback Could Backfire**

While mountain lion supporters consider this comeback a success, it is also a source of concern — after all, they are predators.

Nielsen said that many Western states still allow hunting.

Nebraska classifies mountain lions as game animals even though it has only had a reproducing population since the mid-2000s. Due to a high number of lion deaths in 2014, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has decided not to allow mountain lion hunting this season.

Beringer believes Missouri might allow mountain lion hunting in the future. Peek can picture lion hunting in Kansas, too. He does not think a growing lion population would sit very well with residents there.

Nielsen says that people in the Midwest are generally very supportive of the mountain lions' presence in the region, but there is some lingering fear.

“Attacks are very, very rare,” he said. “Still, livestock is hugely important in the Midwest.”

Nielsen says a growing lion population could change residents' positive attitudes toward mountain lions.

There are no confirmed cases of mountain lion attacks on livestock, pets or people in Kansas or Missouri.