

Puma concolor



Cougar

Conservation status



Scientific classification

Domain: Eukaryota
Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Suborder: Feliformia
Family: Felidae
Subfamily: Felinae
Genus: Puma
Species: P. concolor

Binomial Name

Puma concolor

(Linnaeus, 1771)

The puma (as it is called in Spanish) inhabits every mainland country in Central and South America. This makes it the most widely distributed large, wild, terrestrial mammal in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the most widespread on planet Earth. It is an adaptable, generalist species, occurring in most of the American continent habitat types.

Several studies show that they prefer habitats with dense underbrush and rocky areas for stalking but they can also live in open areas.

It is also called lean, leon de montana (Spanish); leon sabanero (Colombia); tig rouge (French Guiana); guasura, yagu-pyt (Guarani); cabcob (Mayan); leopardo (Mexico); reditigri (Suriname).⁶

The puma is an exceptionally successful generalist predator and its adaptability probably helped it survive the late Pleistocene extinctions of the other large North American felids. Although it is a big cat, it is believed to be more closely related to the small cats, lacking the elastic hyoid and enlarged vocal folds of the Pantherines. While it cannot roar, it is capable of a variety of vocalizations, and both sexes have a distinctive call, likened to a woman's scream, which is probably associated with courtship. Average weights range from 53-72 kg for adult males and 34-48 kg for adult females (Anderson 1983, Pall et al. 1988), and males have exceptionally weighed up to 120 kg.⁶

Behaviour

Like almost all cats, the cougar is a mostly solitary animal. Only mothers and kittens live in groups, with adults meeting rarely. While generally loners, cougars will reciprocally share kills with one another and seem to organize themselves into small communities defined by the territories of dominant males. Cats within these areas socialize more frequently with each other than with outsiders.⁷ Radiotelemetry studies in North America and southern Chile have found pumas to be primarily nocturnal and crepuscular, with activity peaks at dusk and dawn, and limited diurnal activity. Males make scrapes in prominent locations, and especially along boundaries of home ranges. This behavior apparently advertises temporal presence.⁶

Diet

The known prey of pumas ranges from insects, birds, and mice up to porcupine, capybara, pronghorn, wapiti, bighorn sheep, and moose. However, in the southern parts of puma range, and particularly in the tropics, small to medium-sized prey appear to be more important. Although the studies on which this conclusion is based suffer from extremely small sample sizes.⁶

Myths

The grace and power of the cougar have been widely admired in the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The Inca city of Cusco is reported to have been designed in the shape of a cougar, and the animal also gave its name to both Inca regions and people. The Moche people often represented the cougar in their ceramics. The sky and thunder god of the Inca, Viracocha, has also been associated with the animal.^{8,9}