

Living with Large Predators

In New Mexico, cougars, black bears, bobcats and coyotes are found throughout the state. These large predators have lived here much longer than humans and play an important role, helping to maintain a balanced ecosystem. If you live near or enjoy the outdoors in habitats used by these predators, it is wise to learn about their behaviors to better avoid danger and safely coexist.

Predator Encounters

Though infrequent, predator–human interactions sometimes occur. Although most predators usually live in remote, rural country and are difficult to spot, a combination of factors can cause an encounter. A few examples of the causes include drought, which can pressure predators to expand their ranges; more people recreating and using hiking and biking trails in predator habitat; and more people residing in wild, mountainous or previously undeveloped areas.

Don't Encourage an Encounter

If you live in or visit predator country, be sure you aren't contributing to an encounter. Follow these precautions to reduce your risk:

- Avoid outdoor activities such as running or hiking at or around dawn and dusk, when predators are most active.
- Supervise children when they are outdoors and keep them close when hiking.
- Eliminate hiding places for predators. Remove enough vegetation to detect large predators in your yard and make it difficult for them to hide or approach unseen.
- Enclose open spaces below porches and decks.
- Install outside lighting (preferably motion sensors). Illuminate walking areas.
- Avoid non-native shrubs and plants. These can attract prey that predators may follow.
- A leash will help protect your pet and usually is required by law. Pets are easy prey. Bring pets inside at night. If they must stay outside, confine them in a kennel with a secure roof.

- Do not feed pets outside. Pet food can attract predators and prey.
- Store all garbage securely. Most predators will not cause damage and will move on if abundant food cannot be found.

If You Have an Encounter

When a predator detects your presence, it usually will leave the area before you know it's there. Attacks are rare, and each situation is different and will depend on the predator, the terrain and how the person(s) reacts. Though steadfast rules often don't apply, these suggestions will reduce the risk of attack:

- **If you see a predator that hasn't seen you,** remain calm and leave the area. Talk loudly as you move away to make your presence known.
- **Stop and back away slowly while facing the predator** if this can be done safely. Avoid direct eye contact. Do not run; this may stimulate the predator's instinct to chase and attack. Allow the predator as much room as possible for it to leave.
- **Appear as large as possible.** Raise your arms and if wearing a jacket open it. If with small children, pick them up to protect them and prevent panic and running.
- **Never approach a wild animal.** Predators are unpredictable, but will avoid confrontation unless forced.
- **Watch for young.** Coming between a female and her young is dangerous. If a predator's young are nearby, move away while remaining alert for other young and adults in the area.
- **Convince the predator you are not prey.** If a predator approaches or behaves aggressively, arm yourself with a large stick, throw rocks or sticks and speak loudly and firmly. Convince the predator that you are dominant and a danger to it.
- **Fight back** if a predator attacks. Fight aggressively and use any weapon available, such as rocks and sticks, a backpack, hat or jacket or your bare hands if necessary.



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations

Who Can You Call?

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish manages, conserves and protects wildlife within the state. Your concerns about wildlife are our concerns as well.

If you have a potentially life-threatening situation or suffer an injury from a large predator, please contact us. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. After hours, contact the New Mexico State Police or your local sheriff's department. Sightings or encounters with large predators are not uncommon, and you are not required to report them.

Headquarters

One Wildlife Way, Santa Fe, NM 87507
1-888-248-6866

Regional Offices

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3841 Midway Place NE, Albuquerque, NM 87109
(505) 222-4700

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2715 Northrise Drive, Las Cruces, NM 88011
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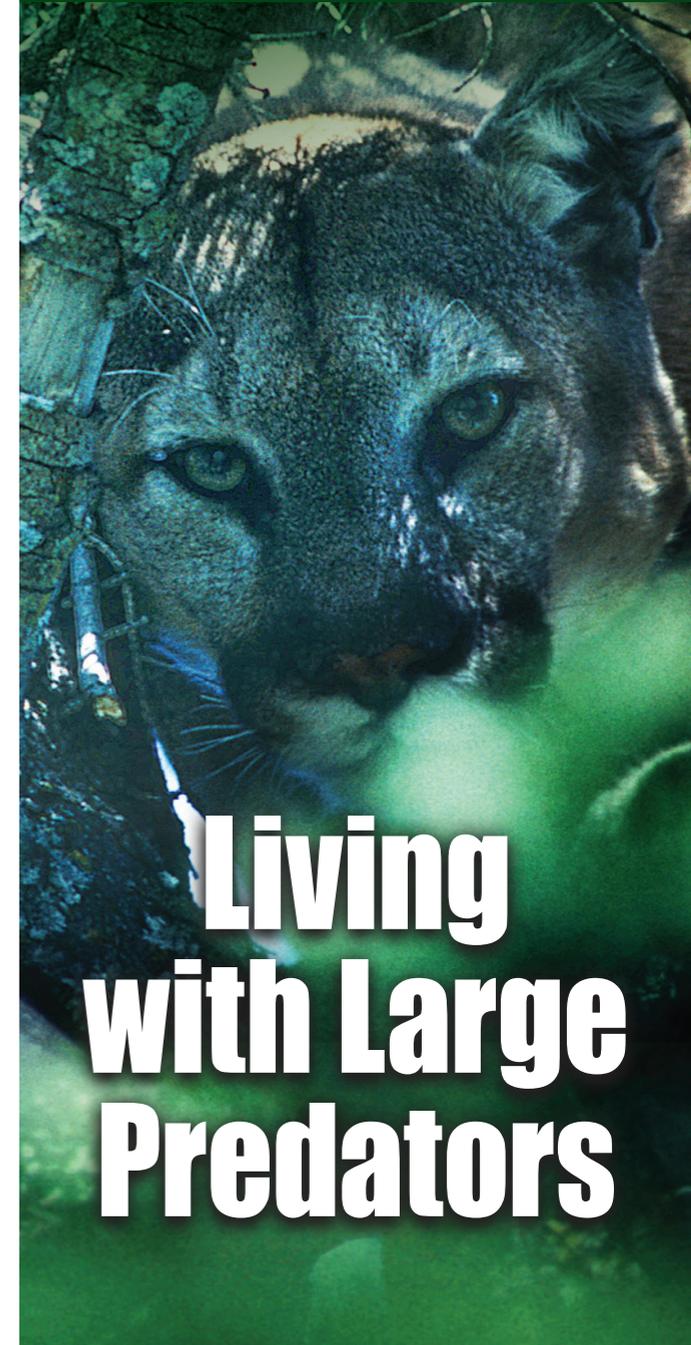
Northeast Office
215 York Canyon Road, Raton, NM 87740
(575) 445-2311

Southeast Office
1912 W. Second Street, Roswell, NM 88201
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Front paw prints of black bears typically measure 4 1/2 inches high. Hind prints can measure up to 7 1/2 inches high.

Black Bear

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are large, powerful and can weigh more than 200 pounds. The largest black bear recorded in New Mexico was nearly 600 pounds. Fur color of individuals can vary from dark black to cinnamon. Though unusual, blonde-colored bears sometimes occur.

Bears have pointed noses, high-set ears and short, sharp, curved claws that enable them to dig, overturn heavy rocks and debris and climb trees. Adult females normally give birth every other year. One to three cubs are born while the mother is in hibernation and weigh eight ounces. Cubs remain with the mother through the first full winter and disperse in the spring.

Lifespans of black bears in the wild average from 10 to 20 years, and in captivity bears have been known to live 35 years.

Hunting and Feeding

Omnivores (feeding on both plants and animals), black bears are opportunistic and will eat whatever is available seasonally or can be scavenged or caught. Bears eat mostly plants such as grasses, berries and fruit in the spring and acorns and piñon nuts in the fall. Bears will eat carrion (dead animals) where found and often overturn rocks and stumps while hunting insects or rodents. Research has shown bears can be efficient predators on large game, particularly young animals.

On rare occasions, when under environmental stress such as lack of food during drought, bears may kill livestock or break into beehives to feed on the honey and bees.

Habitat

Black bears commonly inhabit forested areas of New Mexico, but can be found from low-elevation desert to tundra areas above tree line. Bears prefer woodland cover and mixed forest with food-producing trees such as oak and piñon. Bears are attracted by water sources such as tanks, springs and creeks and may be attracted to mountain campgrounds or rural communities if human food sources are present.



Cougar front and hind paw prints measure approximately 3 inches high.

Cougar

Cougars (*Puma concolor*, translated "cat of one color") are a yellow-brown to light-cinnamon color with black-tipped ears and tail. Adults can weigh 80 to 150 pounds and measure eight feet long from nose to tail. Cougars, even young cats, are distinguished from other wild cats by the long tail. Fur is short and kept clean by grooming.

Females begin to reproduce at two years of age, bearing an average of two to three kittens. Newborns average 1 foot in length and 1 pound in weight, have spotted coats and nurse for one month before eating meat provided by the mother.

Hunting and Feeding

Most active at night from dusk to dawn, cougars sometimes hunt or travel during the day. Cougars prefer deer but also prey on elk and smaller mammals such as porcupines, rabbits and foxes. Cougars prefer to kill prey by ambush rather than pursuit, and use a powerful bite below the base of the skull to break the necks of prey. Given the opportunity, cougars will prey on livestock, domesticated animals or household pets.

An adult cougar can survive for a week on a single deer, covering the unconsumed carcass (cache) with dirt, leaves or snow and returning repeatedly to feed. A feeding cougar on its food cache is extremely dangerous and always should be avoided.

Habitat

Sometimes called mountain lions or pumas, cougars occupy all parts of New Mexico except the wide-open eastern plains. Cougars are found in piñon, juniper and ponderosa forest, mountain mahogany and desert, oak brush and subalpine meadows. Where prey are plentiful, cougars likely are nearby. An individual cougar's range can encompass 10 to approximately 300 square miles, depending on the terrain and available food. Their ability to feed on a wide variety of prey allows them to occupy many different habitat types. Females with young have smaller ranges and adult males the largest.



Coyote front paw prints measure approximately 2 1/2 inches high, and rear prints are slightly smaller.

Coyote

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are one of the most vocal North American canids, having a wide vocabulary of yips, barks and howls. Sometimes confused with wolves, coyotes can be distinguished by their smaller size, more elongated muzzle and more pointed and prominent ears.

The light-colored, thick fur of a coyote can mask its more delicate bone structure and sometimes give it an appearance of being larger than it actually is. Adults weigh 20 to 40 pounds, and males are slightly heavier than females. Overall body length varies between 48 and 60 inches, and the tail measures approximately 16 inches.

Coyotes are serial monogamists and pair for several years, though not necessarily for life. Females become fertile once each year in late winter to early spring. After mating, the pair construct a den, and approximately six pups are born about 63 days later. Young emerge from the den in about two weeks and remain with the parents for six to nine months, after which they disperse. Occasionally, young will remain with the parents and form a small group.

Hunting and Feeding

Most of a coyote's diet is other animals, including carrion and insects. Coyotes are opportunistic and will eat large quantities of fruit, seeds, berries and cultivated crops when available. Favoring rabbits, voles and mice, coyotes will prey on deer, usually first-year fawns or a feeble and infirm adult. Coyotes can be livestock predators and may target domestic pets, such as cats and dogs in urban areas.

Coyotes are less social than wolves or domestic dogs and often hunt alone or in mated pairs. Though a coyote cannot overtake a jackrabbit or a pronghorn fawn older than two weeks, a pair can use teamwork to catch and kill more difficult prey, running relays or waiting in ambush while one drives the prey toward the other.

Habitat

Coyotes inhabit most of New Mexico, including urban areas, and can be seen in almost every life zone, from high alpine meadows to lower deserts. Despite programs to reduce populations, coyotes are adaptable and remain common.



Bobcat front and hind paw prints measure approximately 1-7/8 inches high.

Bobcat

Bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), sometimes confused with the lynx, are smaller and more compact in appearance, similar to a large house cat. Though both the bobcat and lynx have erect, tufted ears, the lynx has longer tufts. Bobcats are a brownish color with black spotted flanks, belly and legs. Lynx are taller and longer in appearance and are generally a grayish color. Though both animals have short tails, the bobcat's tail has black bars on top, is white underneath and is white-tipped. The lynx's tail has a black tip and no white underneath. Bobcats have small, hairless feet (up to 2-1/2 inches wide) while lynx have larger, fur-covered feet (3-1/2 to 4-1/2 inches wide).

Bobcats usually mate from February to May, but can be active anytime of the year. Gestation lasts about 60 days, and litters average two to three kittens. Newborns open their eyes in 10 days and are weaned at two months. Kittens may remain with the female until the fall of the following year.

Hunting and Feeding Habits

Bobcats primarily are nocturnal hunters, but occasionally hunt during daylight. Bobcats are sight hunters, and in dim light the pupils of their eyes become large and round, aiding their ability to hunt at night.

Like most cats, bobcats hunt by stealth rather than pursuit and may patiently wait by a trail until prey passes nearby. Their diet consists of small and medium-sized prey such as rabbits and other rodents, birds, reptiles or even insects. House pets such as cats or small dogs can fall prey to these predators.

Habitat

Bobcats are found in every county in New Mexico. This highly adaptable member of the cat family can range from sandy deserts in the lower Sonoran zone to high mountains in the alpine. Though elusive and difficult to observe, the bobcat's habitat can include lightly populated urban areas.

Unlike far-ranging cougars, bobcats seldom travel more than a few miles from home and adapt more easily to areas settled by humans. Even a wooded lot in an agricultural area can sustain a pair of bobcats.