

Cougars : a mystery of nature

BY J.A. (SANDY) BURNETT

(Ed. Note - although we don't have eastern cougars on P.E.I., I recently spoke with a woman from Cape Breton who told me of seeing one very close up near her home. As they are unmistakable and believed she knew what she spoke of, I became more interested. The following article was written under the sponsorship of the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada by Mr. Burnett, a freelance writer and naturalist.)

Everyone loves a mystery. Unusual events whet our curiosity. And if we don't find rational answers, well..., ever since people first gathered round a campfire tall tales have been a favourite way of explaining the unexplainable.

Few mysteries of nature have mixed fact and fiction more thoroughly than the riddle of the eastern cougar. The last of the predatory cats officially recorded in the region was killed near the Quebec-maine border in 1938 - fifty years ago. For many wildlife biologists, that fact is proof of one harsh, inescapable conclusion: in eastern Canada, the cougar is extinct. And yet...

The eastern cougar is listed by the Committee on Endangered Species of Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as endangered, not extinct. At the Canadian Wildlife Service office in Sackville, New Brunswick, biologists Gerry Parker and Bruce Johnson keep a file of reported cougar sightings. They have received hundreds of eyewitness reports - 50 in the past two years.

No land mammal in the Americas is found over a wider range than the cougar. It occurs from the Yukon border to southernmost Argentina. The rich diversity of names by which it is known - cougar, mountain lion, devil cat, panther, catamount, puma - indicates its widespread presence. In times past, there is no doubt that the eastern race of the great cats roamed the forests of the Maritimes. Are any left today?

The late Bruce S. Wright, for years head of the Northeastern Wildlife Station at the University of New Brunswick, was convinced that cougars survived in central New Brunswick and northern Nova Scotia. He even proposed that the ghost story of the Dungarvon Whooper, a phantom whose hair-raising night-shrieks used to terrify Miramichi lumberjacks, was inspired by the screams of a cougar.

An adult cougar can measure two metres (6 feet) or more from its nose to the tip of its long, up-curving tail. Its coat of short, sleek fur is frequently a tawny colour with white under parts. Black individuals are rare in North America. The heaviest specimen on record weighed 100 kg (227 pounds) but the average seems to be about half that weight.

Like all members of the cat family, cougars are formidable hunters. While analysis of dropping has shown that squirrel, hare, beaver, mice and even porcupine figure in the diet of the cougar, deer are the preferred prey species.

Many reports in the C.W.S. files refer to "tawny", "golden", or

