



## **Cougars in the Back Yard** by Kevin Harding

As a relatively new resident of Sedona I was amazed and pleased when a good friend showed me photographs of a cougar in his back yard! I wondered how many cougars could be in the area and how rare an event this might be.

Finding and counting wild animals that are secretive is not an easy task. All predators have home ranges and one can speculate about how many cougars there "should be," but the size of a cougar's home range can vary substantially, from five to twenty-five square miles, depending on the quality of the range. Male transients have been known to travel as much as five hundred miles. So there is really no way to ascertain exactly how many cougars are in the Sedona area.

There can be little doubt that the region provides a good habitat for cougars. The key element in habitat for a predator is adequate food. Cougars are carnivores and need substantial amounts of large game to be successful. The Sedona area provides deer, javelina, elk and smaller game in abundance as suggested by the many tracks of these animals.

While hiking I look carefully for cougar tracks and sign. Tracks are found with some frequency on trails that are not far from town. The tracks strongly suggest that washes and trails provide travel corridors for these animals. Sources of water also seem to be a critical factor in locating cougar tracks.

These extraordinary animals kill by ambushing their prey with a bite to the neck or throat. They can kill animals as large as an elk. Cougars are efficient predators with night vision six times better than humans. They run very fast over a short distance and leaps up to forty-five feet have been recorded. The organ meats are usually eaten first, with other choice portions of the kill taken next. A cougar can eat as much as ten pounds of meat in one sitting. After feeding, the cat often drags the remains into dense brush and covers it with debris.

If you wish to look for cougar tracks there are several basic guidelines. First, eliminate the other likely candidates: bobcat, dog, and coyote. Bobcat prints look like a small cougar, but have a heel pad under four centimeters wide. Dogs usually show large nail marks in front of all the toes and are sloppy walkers and cannot direct register (put a hind foot directly in the print made by the front foot). Of course coyotes are everywhere and their prints can sometimes be large enough to be confused with cougar. Coyotes often leave two nail marks in front of the lead toes. As with all canines a pyramid of dirt

or snow is left in front of the heel pad and the toes on the side are slightly pointed. The two lead toes of canines are of equal length.

A cougar print will show a large heel pad (4 to 7.3 centimeters wide) and the whole print will be on average 9 centimeters long and 9 centimeters wide. There are three distinct lobes in the heel pad (canines have two lobes) and in most cases no nail marks. There is no pyramid structure in front of the heel pad and the side toes are further forward relative to the heel pad than in a candid print. In addition, the inner lead toe extends a little beyond the outer lead toe much like the finger of your hand.

Scat is not a very reliable identification tool, but if you should find a scat that has no vegetable matter, is over an inch in diameter, is segmented, and does not stink like dog feces, it may well be cougar. Cats frequently leave scrape marks at the site of the scat, but this is not always true.

The good news is that there have been no reports of cougars bothering hikers in the Sedona area. In fact, since 1890 there have been only two nonfatal attacks on humans in the entire state. There are common sense guidelines for hiking in cougar country published by Arizona Fish and Game that include hiking in groups, making noise, supervising children, keeping pets on a leash, and not feeding wildlife. If you ever do encounter a cougar, Fish and Game suggests that you never approach, stay calm and speak loudly, do not run, raise your arms and stand tall, and slowly back away. Small children should of course be protected, and placed behind the adults or picked up. If the worst happens and you are attacked you should fight back.

Most importantly, you have a much better chance of being hurt by an insect, snake, dog, or lightning. So enjoy your hike and feel lucky if you should find a cougar track on the trail. And if you should have a cougar to photograph in the back yard you are indeed privileged.

Friends of the Forest is always looking for more volunteers. If you are interested in making a difference, consider joining the Sedona Friends of the Forest. For more information, visit [www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org](http://www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org) or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.

*Kevin Harding is an active member of the Friends of the Forest, participating in trail patrol, construction projects and other activities. A Friends of the Forest member writes the first Serving Sedona column each month.*