

# The Berkshire Eagle

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**Section:** Top Story

## Locals report big cat sighting

*Conor Berry, Berkshire Eagle Staff*

Friday, August 15 PITTSFIELD — The lanky cat slowly made its way across the Pittsfield woman's backyard, hanging low to the ground as if it were stalking prey. "I saw it cutting through my yard into my neighbor's yard," said Martha Pope, a resident of Mountain Drive, which runs along the city's rural eastern edge near Washington Mountain.

Pope said she regularly sees deer and fox in her backyard. And, she added, "A big bear cuts through sometimes."

But she has never seen a large cat resembling a **mountain lion** use her yard as a cut-through.

"I thought it's got to be a deer, or a big dog, but then I realized it had a really long tail," said Pope, who initially thought the animal was a bobcat.

But the sinewy cat she spied shortly before sundown Saturday was bigger than a bobcat, she said, and certainly larger than her family's yellow labrador retriever.

Pope, who works at the Berkshire County Courthouse, said she immediately called her husband, but not the police.

However, a woman in Sheffield, a good 45-minute drive south of Pittsfield, did contact the authorities earlier that day after spotting what she claimed was **mountain lion** in her backyard.

Two purported big cat sightings on the same day in opposite ends of the county: Coincidence?

An official with the Berkshire County Sheriff's Communication Center, which dispatches emergency calls countywide, confirmed Saturday's report of a "cougar sighting," but he referred all inquiries to the Sheffield Police Department. A phone message left on the department's answering machine last night was not immediately returned.

Even though state wildlife officials say it's highly unlikely Berkshire County is suddenly home to a burgeoning **mountain lion** population — the big cats were last known to roam these parts in the mid-19th century — this is not the first time the county has caught cougar fever.

The last flurry of reported sightings occurred in 2000, with the bulk of calls coming from South County residents, including Georgiana C. O'Connell, a former Monterey selectwoman.

O'Connell, in a January 2000 interview with *The Eagle*, said she witnessed "a powerful, large cat with a tawny coat, a long tail and muscles" casually walk into a Monterey field that winter.

She was one of dozens of South County residents who reported seeing mountain lions — also known as cougars, catamounts, panthers or pumas, depending on what part of the world you live in — roaming the byways of Berkshire County in the late-1990s through 2000, according to law-enforcement and wildlife officials, who still receive occasional reports.

Although footprints said to resemble those of a **mountain lion** were reportedly discovered in Beartown State Forest in 2000, Massachusetts Department of Fisheries & Wildlife officials remain confident that most of the reports they receive are either cases of mistaken identity or possible sightings of creatures that escaped captivity, such as cats that had been kept as so-called exotic pets. "We get a fair number of **mountain lion**/cougar reports each year, including a couple this month," said Andrew Madden, district

manager of MassWildlife's Regional District Office on Hubbard Avenue in Pittsfield.

Madden said that in many instances people are simply mistaking a bobcat — a smaller cat with a smaller tail — for a **mountain lion**, which can grow to 7 feet in length from nose to tail.

"People almost always overestimate the size (of the animal)," he said, noting that MassWildlife biologists have not seen any tangible evidence of a **mountain lion** population in the Bay State.

"It would be a long leap from a scientific standpoint," said Madden, noting that the nearest known cougar population is in Wisconsin, several states away with large developed and industrialized areas in between.

The cats mainly survive in the western United States, particularly in the Rockies, with populations scattered throughout the Dakotas and into the upper Midwest, Madden said.

The bobcat, which is found throughout rural sections of western, central and northeastern Massachusetts, has a short tail "that can be extended out behind" the animal when it hunts, according to Madden, while the cougar's thick, ropelike tail can be nearly as long as the animal itself.

If the commonwealth had a cougar population, scientists would have detected its presence by now, according to Madden. Such indicators might include "credible" tracks, road kill discovered along rural byways, or signs of food "caching," in which the cat stashes food for future eating, Madden said.

Dalton Animal Control Officer Mike McClay said he has received a few sighting reports in recent years, including one last year. But, he noted, "Until somebody actually gets a picture of one in their backyard, it's just going to be an unconfirmed sighting."

MassWildlife occasionally reviews photographs purportedly depicting large cats in the Berkshires. But most of the images tend to be fuzzy or show animals that are not cougars, according to Madden.

A Stockbridge woman recently reported seeing a **mountain lion** in Goshen, Conn., about an hour south of the Berkshires in nearby Litchfield County, while some old-time Berkshire hunters claim the big cats never left the region.

For those who believe the county's **mountain lion** population is on the rebound, according to MassWildlife officials, the last confirmed cougar sighting was in 1858, in neighboring Hampshire County. The wildlife agency's official State Mammal List indicates that recent sightings are either "suspicious or unverified."

For Pope, the Pittsfield woman who claims she spotted a **mountain lion** over the weekend, the presence of a big cat in her backyard was "definitely a shock."

"It moved slowly, kind of like it was slinking through the yard, sort of looking side to side," said Pope. "It had to have come down from (nearby) Washington Mountain."

Accounts of cougars in Massachusetts are not unique to the Berkshires. Supposed sightings were reported in 2003 and 2004 in sections of Acton, Beverly and Manchester-by-the-Sea, according to published reports in the Boston Globe.

### **Big cats at a glance**

In the United States, the **mountain lion**, whose scientific name is *Puma concolor*, is found mainly in western states, with smaller populations extending into the midwest. The species has the widest distribution of any animal in the Western Hemisphere, from Alaska to Argentina.

The last known record of one in Massachusetts was in Hampshire County, circa 1858.

Mountain lions are also known as catamounts, cougars, pumas or panthers.

They can grow up to 7 feet in length, from nose to tail, and weigh up to 200 pounds.

Their favorite food is deer, which they track and kill.

In Massachusetts, many people mistake the bobcat, or *Lynx rufus*, for the **mountain lion**. Bobcats are smaller than mountain lions with shorter tails, and found primarily in western, central and northeastern Massachusetts.

— Sources: Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife and [www.cougarnet.org](http://www.cougarnet.org).

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