

# The Berkshire Eagle

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**Section:** Local

## **More cougar tales surface; new and old**

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Saturday, August 16 PITTSFIELD — Two same-day sightings of a big cat that eyewitnesses claim was a **mountain lion** — not the smaller bobcat common to these parts — has prompted people from Dalton to Lee to recall sighting tales, both old and new. Mark Matthews, a longtime hunter from Pittsfield, is convinced that mountain lions, also known as catamounts or cougars, still roam the remote sections of sprawling Berkshire County.

"I come from a hunting family," said Matthews. "They are here — and have been — but wildlife folks don't want people to panic."

Officials with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife say it's unlikely that two reported cat sightings last Saturday were mountain lions. If anything, the animals spotted in Pittsfield and Sheffield a few hours apart were likely bobcats, according to MassWildlife.

### **Close encounters**

An article published in The Eagle yesterday spurred many local residents to contact the newspaper with tales of their own close encounters with mountain lions, which have not inhabited Massachusetts since the mid-19th century, according to state records.

But that detail has not stopped people from coming forward, many of whom point out that they know the difference between a bobcat and a cougar.

Case in point: "I know what I saw. It was longer, bigger and leaner than a bobcat," said Lenox resident Nancy Barrett, who claims to have seen a cougar near her Hawthorne Street home last year.

"I couldn't believe what I saw," she said, adding that the first thing she noticed was the cat's long tail.

### **Long-time residents**

Bobcats, which can reach nearly 4 feet in length and weigh up to 35 pounds, have bobbed tails stretching to up to 7 1/2 inches. Mountain lions, which can weigh up to 200 pounds, have long, thick tails.

While bobcats, though elusive, are common throughout western Massachusetts, the last record of a **mountain lion** in the Bay State stretches back to roughly 1858, according to MassWildlife's State Mammal List.

Matthews claims that an effort to repopulate the commonwealth with mountain lions was launched in the early 1960s, with several cats released in the vicinity of Mount Greylock. That information could not immediately be verified with state wildlife officials.

The Eagle reported alleged catamount sightings in the vicinity of Monument Mountain in Great Barrington in September 1966, with at least one resident spotting a large cat and the discovery of tracks along the muddy banks of the Housatonic River.

In the four decades since then, Berkshire residents have sporadically reported big cat sightings, with a concentrated round of sightings reported in 2000. Now, with two sightings last Saturday, some people are wondering if cougars have

found their way back to the Berkshires.

Meanwhile, some longtime hunters, including Matthews, believe that the animals never left the area, although their numbers have dwindled steadily. MassWildlife officials say they have no tangible evidence that cougars, catamounts or mountain lions — as *Puma concolor* is alternatively called — survive in the Bay State today.

To that end, The Cougar Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to studying cougar-habitat relationships, reports that central and western Massachusetts and adjacent areas of Connecticut have had a large number of sighting reports, but no hard evidence.

Nonetheless, The Cougar Network, which a ranking MassWildlife official cited as a credible resource for information about the species, confirmed the discovery of cougar scat in 1997 in a northern section of the Quabbin Reservoir wilderness area, which borders Hampshire, Franklin and Worcester counties. A DNA analysis of the feces determined that it had come from a cougar.

Additionally, there was a beaver kill buried in leaves in typical cougar fashion. Mountain lions like to "cache" their food, which they bury then return to later, according to Andrew Madden, chief of MassWildlife's regional office in Pittsfield. Beaver DNA also was found in the scat, indicating that the cougar had eaten some of the beaver.

But whether the animal escaped from captivity or migrated to the remote Quabbin region remains a mystery.

Ann Kuni, who lives along a rural stretch of Kirchner Road in Dalton, thinks a big cat may have visited her property, which includes fields and woods. Two years ago, a family member installed a motion-sensitive digital camera to gauge the suitability of the land for hunting purposes.

In addition to capturing images of a large bear, the camera

snapped a shot of what appears to be a large cat moving through a clearing in the woods. Kuni held on to the photo, shot on Aug. 15, 2006, but never showed it to wildlife officials. Yesterday, however, officials at the Pittsfield Mass Wildlife office analyzed the animal captured in the photo, which an environmental police officer identified as a large bobcat. Kuni alerted The Eagle after reading yesterday's article about an alleged cougar sighting by a Pittsfield woman who lives less than 2 miles from her home. In that case, a Mountain Drive woman said a large cat slowly made its way across her backyard shortly before sundown last Saturday.

Kuni, whose yard is regularly visited by everything from wild turkeys to bears, still thinks the photo may show something other than a bobcat.

Lee resident Bill Basinait said he spotted a large cat in Lenox Dale after dark last week.

"A cougar walked — didn't run — but kind of leisurely walked across the road about 70 yards in front of me," said Basinait, who was driving along Housatonic Street at the time.

"Quite a sight," he said. "I wish I had a digital camera."

Matthews, the hunter from Pittsfield, said he spotted his first **mountain lion** about four years ago on Route 20 near Hancock Shaker Village. It was nighttime, he said, and he stopped to shine his lights on the animal.

"To see one," he said, pausing for a moment. "Fantastic."