

Conn. cougar gives us hope in Del.

It wasn't that long ago when cougar (a.k.a. mountain lion) sightings and cougar-related news reports were big stories here in Delaware.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, reports of Delaware cougars frequently surfaced, with most sightings occurring in northern New Castle County.

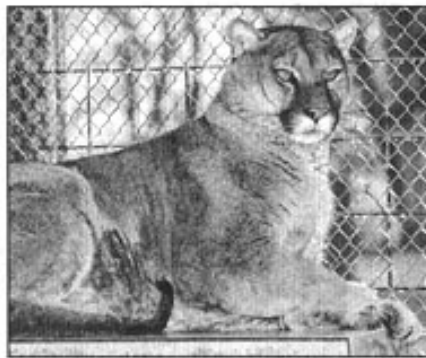
Videos, photos, tracks, prey kills and first-hand accounts from public employees provided direct evidence of at least one

cougar in Delaware, and as a result, the New Castle County Police assigned an officer to capture the cougar. After months of hunting, a cougar was never captured and a carcass was never found, but sightings persist.

As recently as last November, a cougar was reportedly seen in Pike Creek.

Theories indicate that at least one cougar that was illegally kept as pet in southeastern Pennsylvania escaped or was released in 1996 and traveled into northern Delaware to escape deer hunters. However, with the number of sightings that have been reported since then, and with recent news regarding a wild cougar found in Connecticut, I now question if Delaware could have a wild cougar or two.

Last week the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection presented genetic testing results that



The cougar sightings in Delaware may not be that far-fetched after experts discovered a cougar killed in Connecticut traveled from South Dakota. AP

showed the cougar killed in Connecticut actually traveled from the Black Hills region of South Dakota. The cougar's movements were tracked and recorded as it progressed through Minnesota and Wisconsin, and genetic tests showed that tissue from the Connecticut cougar matched the genetic structure of the mountain lion population in the Black Hills region. After further analysis, the United States Department of Agriculture's Forest Service Wildlife Genetics Laboratory matched the Connecticut cougar's DNA with DNA collected from the exact cougar whose movements were tracked in Minnesota and Wisconsin from late 2009 through early 2010.

According to Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Commissioner Daniel C. Esty, "The journey of this mountain lion is a testament to the wonders of nature and the tenacity and adaptability of this species. This mountain lion traveled a distance of more than 1,500 miles from its original home in South Dakota - representing one

of the longest movements ever recorded for a land mammal and nearly double the distance ever recorded for a dispersing mountain lion."

Now that science has proven that cougars are capable of traveling long distances, should we reconsider if Delaware could have wild cougars after all?

"Anything is possible," said Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife Game Mammal Biologist Joe Rogerson. But he is quick to point out that the odds don't favor wild cougars in Delaware. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the eastern cougar subspecies extinct [in March 2011], so any cougars that are around the East Coast are most likely released or escaped pets," says Rogerson. "Plus, the chances of something like that, with such a huge home range, not getting hit by a car, picked up by a trail camera, or shot by a hunter are slim."

As an optimist looking to encounter new things in the woods, I am holding out hope that cougars, more coyotes, and maybe even a black bear or two make their ways into our state. My wishes may seem far-fetched, but Rogerson added that he's received reports of sasquatch, African lion, hyena and chupacabra sightings in Delaware.

I guess we'll really never know everything that lurks in Delaware's forests and fields, but just in case, I'll keep my eyes open for a good sasquatch taxidermist.

Steven Kendus' Hunter's Journal appears monthly in The News Journal. Kendus is the author of "Hunting The First State: A Guide to Delaware Hunting." Follow his blog and podcast at www.HuntingTheFirstState.com. Contact him at skendus@HuntingTheFirstState.com.



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