

## Watchable Wildlife -- Mountain Lions and Bobcats

By Bob Garrison

Catching a glimpse of a mountain lion or bobcat in the wild can be one of the most memorable wildlife viewing experiences of your life. For me, it is the sheer rarity of seeing a wildcat that gives the experience its appeal. Truth be known, I have never seen a mountain lion in the wilds and chances are I never will see one. But that doesn't stop me from hoping for that rare glimpse, and finding a fresh mountain lion track makes the search even more exciting.

Mountain lions and bobcats are an elite group. At the top of the food chain, these predators have huge home ranges to provide them with enough prey throughout the year. In California, a male mountain lion requires an amazing home range averaging over 90 square miles. Though mountain lion home ranges overlap and females have a range averaging 40 square miles, your chances of seeing one of these beautiful animals is rare indeed. Bobcats require a much smaller home range of about 10 miles so you have a much better chance at spotting one.

California's wildcats are also the most illusive of predators. By their very nature, they rely on stealth and surprise to capture their prey. To be an effective hunter, they must be able to blend into the background and quietly wait for their chance to attack. With colors that help them hide, both mountain lions and bobcats probably rate as the least seen of our large mammals. This ability to hide and pounce also makes the mountain lion one of the most dangerous animals to humans. The real danger comes from the lions you don't see, not the ones you do. However, if you are hiking in mountain lion country, you should know and follow the steps below if you encounter a lion.

### Viewing Tips

-- Habitat First -- Bobcats are found in all parts of California, but mountain lions avoid open grasslands and deserts, preferring brushy and forested areas where deer live.

-- Watch for Tracks -- muddy or dusty trails and roads are good spots to look for animal tracks. Unlike coyote or bear, bobcats and mountain lions retract their claws so their prints will not show claw marks. Carry a ruler to measure the print; lions span 3 to 3 1/2 inches in width, bobcats 1 3/4 inches.

-- Use Peripheral Vision -- your peripheral or side vision is good for detecting movement. If you do spot a lion or bobcat, chances are it will be moving away from you so constantly scan the horizon and watch for movement.

-- Use Binoculars -- if a lion or bobcat lets you get close, either something is wrong with the animal or you may look like dinner. Keep your distance and use binoculars for a close-up view.

## Face to Face With a Lion

The following suggestions are based on studies of mountain lion behavior and analysis of attacks by mountain lions, tigers and leopards:

- Do not hike alone.
  - Keep children in your sight at all times.
  - Do not approach a lion; give it plenty of room to escape.
  - Do not run from a lion. Stand and face the animal, make eye contact and pick up your child so they don't panic and run. Wait for the lion to retreat.
  - Do not crouch or bend over, even to pick up your child.
  - Do all you can to appear larger by raising your arms, opening your jacket and talking in a loud voice.
  - Fight back if attacked. Since a lion normally tries to bite the head or neck, remain standing and face the attacking animal.
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