

BEAR SPRAY SUCCESSFULLY DETERRED A MOUNTAIN LION

By Diane Tipton, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Statewide Information Officer

Bear spray may be an additional tool to use to deter an attacking lion, say two Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks mountain lion experts.

Bear spray is a one-to-two percent concentration of capsaicin and related capsaicinoids, produced when the burning substance that naturally occurs in hot red peppers is extracted. It causes the membranes of the eyes, nose and lungs to swell. The result is a temporary, but nearly total, loss of sight and a restriction in one's ability to breathe. The product is designed to turn back an attacking grizzly bear, or to shorten the length and severity of an attack. The EPA regulates bear sprays and requires that it be packaged in a minimum 7.9 ounce size can.

Until now, there was no evidence that bear spray might affect a mountain lion and whether it would diffuse a potentially dangerous situation.

DeSimone said bear spray would seem to be less suited to deter a mountain lion, a species known for its stealth and ability to pounce on prey rather than charge as a bear does. However, in his field research, bear spray was used to protect an experienced lion hound and to prevent two FWP lion researchers from attack by a 120-pound radio-collared female lion.

"A two-year old, adult female mountain lion, identified as F43 for research purposes, approached within five feet of me and research assistant Brian Shinn and was successfully turned away by using regulation, EPA approved bear spray," said DeSimone said. "The lion approached us and swiped at a lion-hunting dog we were using during an attempt to track and radio collar the female's kittens."

While regulation bear spray worked in this instance, no formal research has been done on its use with lions, how it might perform and how to best use it with lions.

However, other mountain lion experts, including Toni Ruth, mountain lion research scientist at the Selway Institute in Salmon, Idaho, say they encourage hikers and runners to carry bear spray in case they have a conflict with a mountain lion.