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## Cat trackers sniff out the truth

By Michael Booth



A mountain lion that was part of the Colorado Division of Wildlife study is pictured within the study area, which spanned from Lyons south to Evergreen. (Colorado Division of Wildlife)

For Colorado mountain lion AM06, every day is like "The Truman Show" for felines — the authorities are always watching. A satellite signal snaps his exact location every three hours as he wanders his 230-square-mile territory from Nederland to Lyons. If he stalks cattle or a beloved pet in the exurban foothills above Boulder, he may be lured, trapped and shot with high-velocity beanbags to scare him away for good. DNA samples of AM06 sit on file in a state Division of Wildlife building, and if AM06 becomes a proud father, wildlife agents will probably tag and follow the scampering kittens.

Halfway through a six-year study of cougars in the suburbs — the elk-eating kind, not the bar-hopping divorcees — AM06 is a well-known quantity. At any given moment, researcher Mat Alldredge can print out a terrain map showing the prowling puma's every move for an entire month. What they've learned is that most lions are not long for this world. "We have an incredibly low survival rate," Alldredge said.

Of 40 lions captured and tagged in the study so far, only 18 are alive and on-line. A few may have shed their tags, but most died from car hits, homeowner shootings or starvation. Researchers also have disproved the myth of tamer and tamer lions taking up permanent residence near suburban backyards, for easy pet or livestock pickings. Satellite tracking combined with landowner reports show that Front Range lions might swoop in for one opportunistic kill but then move away again to wilder haunts.

The most recent mountain-lion scare, a starving Salida-area cougar entering a home to attack pets while a family cowered in a bedroom, is an exception proving the rule, wildlife officials say. The cougar was so hungry, it was no longer acting like a normal cougar. Safety officers killed it with tranquilizers.

Each cougar's case file is different, and researchers such as Alldredge consult with wildlife-safety officers to be judge and jury for each animal. Two years ago, a cat killed a llama on U.S. Forest Service land. It later killed a miniature horse and then a colt, but the division couldn't get the animal to enter a cage trap. "But then for the last two years, it's done nothing other than killing elk, which is what it's supposed to do," Alldredge said. "That's the biggest message we can get out. We've never seen a lion keyed in on livestock, or pets, or cities," he said. "My guess is they pass up a lot of livestock."

Lack of a threatening pattern among most Front Range lions has actually made it more difficult to test other tools in the study. The original study proposed altering behavior of lions too habituated to urban contact by capturing them, then letting them go under the duress of bean-bag gunshots, pepper spray or dog chases, to discourage them from coming back. "It's a mixed bag whether that's working at all," Alldredge said, because fewer lions have prompted the "treatment."

In the meantime, GPS collars have tracked subject lions foraging as far north as Casper and east into Kansas. The cougar population in Colorado is in overall good health — despite the occasional starving puma and a high mortality rate — and hunting quotas are in place for most regions. One remaining goal for Alldredge is to put an overall number to those wandering lions. The Division of Wildlife knows it can allow just under one lion a year to be hunted and killed in the Boulder region without disturbing the population. But just how many kittens and parents are stalking the Front Range is a tougher question. "Nobody in 50 years has been able to estimate populations," Alldredge said. "We're working on methods, but we're not there yet."