

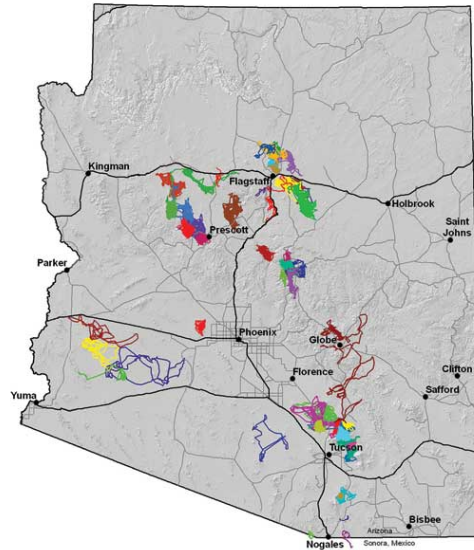
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Prescott's lion finally loses to urban perils

By Joanna Dodder Nellans

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PRESCOTT - A radio-collared mountain lion that was remarkably adept at living in west Prescott finally ran out of luck this past week, apparently a victim of a vehicle collision in Prescott.



Prescott resident Suzanne Hollack captured this photo of the city's resident collared lion in her yard in November 2008. Three adult coyotes had treed the lion. Arizona Game and Fish/Courtesy image
The colored spots and lines show the 2005-2008 movement of about 20 individual mountain lions wearing GPS collars in three separate studies.

The female lion had provided a wealth of information about how predators live in urban areas since 2006, when Arizona Game and Fish Department wildlife managers put a collar on her that had a GPS tracking unit. "She was probably the most interesting mountain lion anybody (in the U.S.) studied in that detail," said Ron Thompson, a big game habitat and large carnivore biologist with the Game and Fish Department. "She was really a spectacular animal."

The lion lived about 90 percent of the time in the urbanized area of west Prescott near the base of Thumb Butte, which is classic mountain lion terrain. "She provided us with some valuable data on how lions live," agreed Zen Mocarski, a Game and Fish information and education officer. The catamount made an important contribution to the agency's policies on how to deal with lions sighted in urban areas, Thompson said. By proving that a lion could live in an urban area without becoming aggressive toward humans, she led the agency to decide not to use urban location as a sole reason to kill a lion. "She validated our mountain lion protocol that defined unacceptable behavior," Thompson said.

The agency got a chance to collar the lion in April 2006 as part of a multi-year lion study. While wildlife managers usually had to track other lions for miles through rugged terrain, this one trapped herself in a cage in a backyard in west Prescott after going in to prey on a house cat. Since then, Game and Fish heard of about a dozen sightings of the wild cat but never about another pet killing. This lion lived to about

11 years of age, longer than 99 percent of wild lions, Thompson said.

Lions will eat other animals as well as pet food. So residents who were feeding other wildlife also attracted lions in more ways than one. Her home range was noticeably smaller than lions living in the wilds. "I have a feeling that living within a city like that allowed her to live that long," Thompson said. "She had a grocery store right next door."

The lion died this past Wednesday. The Arizona Game and Fish Department received a call Wednesday night about an injured lion at Flinn Park at the corner of Josephine and Linwood streets. When Game and Fish wildlife managers arrived, the lion stood up but quickly dropped back to the ground, Mocarski related. Wildlife managers tranquilized her and found that her leg injuries were too severe to rehabilitate her, so they took her to a vet to be euthanized. Her injuries led the wildlife managers to conclude she had been hit by a vehicle, and her location and description led them to believe she was the same lion they had tracked for years with a radio collar fitted with a GPS tracking unit, even though the collar was gone, Mocarski said. Lions are highly territorial so it's unlikely another female adult would be hanging out in that area.

The vehicle accident could have detached the collar, Thompson said. The collar signals were coming in strongly until just recently. The collar contains valuable information about the lion's whereabouts whenever satellites couldn't get reception, so Thompson hopes anyone who might have found it will return it to Game and Fish. If it's laying on the open ground somewhere, wildlife managers will be able to track it down.

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Now that this lion is gone, it's likely that another adult lion will move in, Mocarski said. But who knows whether the city environment will get it in the end, too. "Animals can live in an urban interface, but there are always inherent dangers living around people," Mocarski said.