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Study finds prairie mountain lions had not killed livestock

By Steve Miller, Journal staff | Wednesday, June 17, 2009

The Black Hills Mountain Lion Foundation believes that livestock losses due to mountain lions may be less than many people believe, based on a recent study. A study conducted by North Dakota wildlife officials examined the stomachs and intestinal tracts of 14 mountain lion carcasses to determine what they had been eating. None of the lions had consumed domestic animals except for house cats. They had also eaten deer and other wildlife. All the lions were killed on prairie or agricultural areas.

"I thought it was pretty remarkable that none of the animals had livestock remains, considering they're not in their natural habitat," said Judy Love, corresponding secretary of the foundation, who admitted that the study looked at only a small number of lions.

Mike Kintigh, regional supervisor for South Dakota Game Fish & Parks in Rapid City, said the study of only 14 carcasses isn't enough to draw definitive conclusions. One of the study's authors, Dr. Jonathan Jenks, also cautions against drawing conclusions beyond those of the study sample.

"We're not suggesting that we've got it all here," said Jenks, a distinguished professor in South Dakota State University's Wildlife and Fisheries Department. He and three others conducted the study.

But Jenks said the study provided some information on the diets of mountain lions in prairie habitats where they haven't been commonly found for about 100 years. He said very little information on such prairie lions has been available. The study also suggested the lack of livestock kills may have been due to lions avoiding domestic livestock because of animal husbandry techniques or the presence of humans. The study also speculated that mountain lions don't have much experience killing large domestic animals.

"We had a caveat for the livestock because we realize livestock have been taken on the prairies," Jenks said. "It just so happens that our sample size did not contain any."

"Nevertheless," the study states, "our results indicate that kills of domestic species likely represent rare events when cougars traverse prairie and agriculture terrain."

Kintigh said his own experience indicates that lion predation on livestock outside of the Black Hills area is relatively rare. "When we get a call that a lion has killed a calf, we send somebody out there. If it was in fact a lion, we try to kill the lion," Kintigh said. "But in more than half of those calls, a lion did not kill the calf. It was some other cause." But he said livestock kills do occur, especially in the immediate Black Hills area where the lion population is concentrated. To suggest that lions don't kill livestock is off base, Kintigh said.

Jenks said researchers are working on more studies on food habits of mountain lions, primarily in the Black Hills. Kintigh said the small study of prairie lions likely won't have any impact on GF&P staff proposals for the mountain lion season or other management procedures. "If they would expand this study out considerably, it might," he said.

The GF&P commission will decide on July 1 whether to allow hunters in the next mountain lion season to kill up to 25 female lions, an increase of 10 over the current limit.

Mountain lion study findings

Five of the 14 mountain lions had the remains of more than one prey species in their stomachs and intestinal tracts.

- Six had eaten deer.
- Others had eaten porcupine, badger, beaver, jackrabbit and other small animals, including house cats.
- Six lions were taken in North Dakota prairie areas.
- Eight lions were taken in South Dakota, three in Harding County, one in eastern Pennington County, two in Todd County and one in Miner county.
- The lions were killed by hunters, legal removal or natural causes. Two were killed by vehicles, one was killed illegally, one was electrocuted and one was taken in an incidental snare.
- The lions ranged from 1.5 to 4 years of age and averaged 2.42 years of age.
- To look at the study, go to <http://wfs.sdstate.edu/wfsdept/Publications/Jenks/514-W%20Thompson%20Fecske%20Jenks%20Jarding%20FoodHabits.pdf>

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