

# Qualia

## Cougars re-establishing populations across the Midwest

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Cougars once roamed throughout most of the U.S. and Canada. Today they are slowly returning to their eastern habitat. (Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Cougars, also known as mountain lions, pumas, and catamounts, have not lived in Midwestern North America since the early 1900s. But now the big cats are returning to some of their former habitats, re-establishing populations in states like Oklahoma and Missouri and reversing 100 years of decline.

According to research published in *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, scientists have evidence that cougars have returned to the Midwest and can be found from Texas to the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Manitoba. Lead author Michelle LaRue from the University of Minnesota worked alongside scientists from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, The Cougar Network, and the Colorado Division of Parks & Wildlife to analyze cougar sightings from 1990 to 2008.

In addition to confirmed sightings, the team examined carcasses (usually animals killed by cars or hunters), tracks and scat, photos, video, and DNA evidence across the middle of North America. In total, LaRue and her fellow researchers counted 178 cougar confirmations in the Midwest during the study period. The number of confirmations increased steadily during this period, from two cats in 1990 to 34 in 2008.

Cougars once roamed throughout most of the U.S. and Canada; however, a number of factors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in the restriction of their population to largely wilderness areas in the American west. A combination of habitat destruction for agriculture and logging and the decimation of the cougar's prey species (mostly deer) led to the almost complete elimination of the cougar from the eastern U.S. The big cats were viewed as a threat to livestock and humans, and state-sponsored bounties led to dwindling numbers in the Midwest.

The tide changed for cougars in the 1960s and 1970s, when states began lifting the bounties and managing the cats as a game species. As their population grew, cougars spread out to new territory. The big cats are solitary and territorial. Young males usually disperse away from their

mother's territory when they mature, which prevents inbreeding and helps them avoid conflicts with older, territorial males. LaRue and her co-authors believe that with more cougars, there are fewer pockets of available territory in the West, so young cougars are branching eastward to find vacant territories to call their own.

Now that scientists have confirmed the return of cougars to their historical range, local governments, wildlife professionals, and the public will have to learn how to live alongside a large predator. The absence of such carnivores from well-populated areas in the Midwest and East for more than a century has left many communities unsure of how to respond to their new neighbors. Public awareness campaigns (such as the California Department of Fish and Game's [Keep Me Wild campaign](#)) and state conservation strategies will be necessary for protecting people and cougars.

## **Related Links:**

- ['Cougars are recolonizing the midwest' in \*The Journal of Wildlife Management\*](#)
- [The Cougar Network](#)