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The history of cougars in Yellowstone National Park

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Abstract.—We synthesize reports of cougar (*Puma concolor*) killings, sightings, and related information in Yellowstone National Park from the early 1900s through the 1970s. Cougars were common before the park was established in 1872 but were heavily persecuted in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the park attempted extirpation. Despite being greatly reduced, cougars may have persisted, at least intermittently, in the park and vicinity at low levels from the 1920s through the 1950s, at numbers that were likely functionally irrelevant from an ecological perspective. More recently, in field studies conducted during periods between 1987 and 2017, cougar population densities were estimated at a robust ~2 cougars per 100 km^2. Today, a relatively high density of cougars suggests that they are an active component of the Yellowstone ecosystem.

Resumen.—Sintetizamos los reportes de caza, avistamientos e información relacionada con la presencia de pumas (*Puma concolor*), en el Parque Nacional de Yellowstone desde principios de 1900 hasta la década de 1970. Antes de que se estableciera el parque en 1872, los pumas eran comunes. Sin embargo, fueron fuertemente perseguidos a finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX, cuando el parque intentó su extirpación. A pesar de haber sido reducidos en gran medida, los pumas pueden haber persistido, al menos de forma intermitente, en el parque y sus alrededores a niveles bajos desde la década de 1920 hasta la de 1950, en números que probablemente no eran funcionalmente relevantes desde una perspectiva ecológica. Más recientemente, en los estudios de campo realizados durante los períodos comprendidos entre 1987 y 2017, la densidad poblacional de pumas se estimó robustamente en alrededor de 2 pumas/100 km^2. En la actualidad, la densidad relativamente alta de pumas sugiere que son un componente activo del ecosistema de Yellowstone.

We were unaware of any comprehensive historical account of cougar (*Puma concolor*) populations over the last century in Yellowstone National Park. Therefore, we examined available records, especially those from the National Park Service archives, and produced this brief report for anyone interested in this aspect of Yellowstone's natural history.

1830s to the 1910s

Historically, cougars were commonly found in what is now Yellowstone National Park (YNP). Whittlesey et al. (2019) compiled 75 first-hand accounts of cougar in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem showing that they were relatively common during the period 1835–1881, though at the low densities typical of a top predator. The first park naturalist, Milton P. Skinner (Skinner 1927:200) stated, "The very first animal records we have of the park speak of the presence of cougars. So numerous are the records that we must conclude that the animals were rather common; that is for this species."

During the early decades of the park, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a major government campaign to kill large mammalian predators, including cougars. Park officials at that time considered large predators to be vermin and were concerned about the welfare of their prey, mainly native ungulates. The National Park Service owned and used trained hounds to find, chase, and tree cougars, greatly aiding in their population reduction (Skinner 1927). The main cougar culling began in 1904 and continued to 1908, during which 63 cougars were killed (Skinner 1927). In a 1908 letter to the YNP superintendent, President Theodore Roosevelt described cougars as valuable wild animals and said that the slaughter of these animals in the park should stop (Fig. 1)—an unusual point of view

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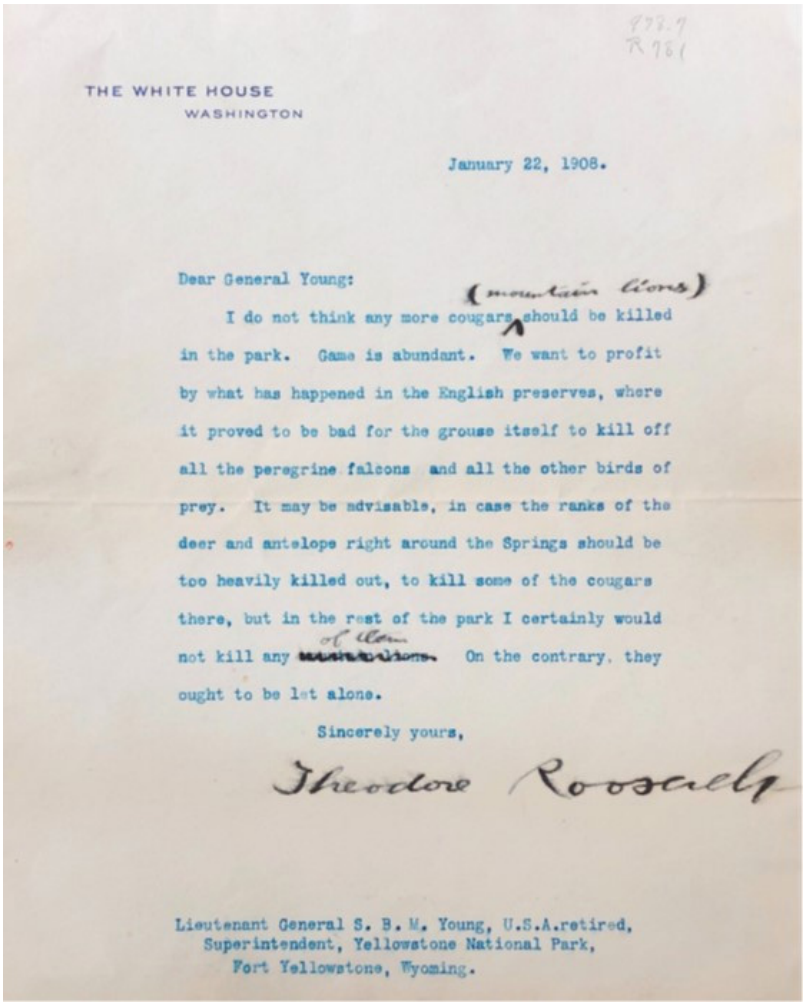

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

January 22, 1908.

Dear General Young:

I do not think any more cougars (mountain lions) should be killed in the park. Game is abundant. We want to profit by what has happened in the English preserves, where it proved to be bad for the grouse itself to kill off all the peregrine falcons and all the other birds of prey. It may be advisable, in case the ranks of the deer and antelope right around the Springs should be too heavily killed out, to kill some of the cougars there, but in the rest of the park I certainly would not kill any ~~mountain lions~~ of them. On the contrary, they ought to be let alone.

Sincerely yours,

Theodore Roosevelt

Lieutenant General S. B. M. Young, U.S.A.retired,
Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park,
Fort Yellowstone, Wyoming.

Fig. 1. Letter of 22 January 1908 from President Theodore Roosevelt requesting that the killing of cougars be stopped in Yellowstone National Park. Source: Archives, courtesy of the National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park.

in 1908! Despite this attempted presidential intervention, the killings continued, and by 1919 an additional 57 cougars had been culled (Skinner 1927).

1920s to the 1950s

No cougars were taken between 1920 and 1924, but in 1925 a single cougar was killed, and this specimen was placed on display in the Yellowstone Museum in Mammoth, where it is still available for viewing today (Fig. 2). Cougars are elusive and secretive animals, and some apparently survived the extended period of persecution. In 1927, Milton Skinner estimated a remnant population of 12 individuals within the park. He founded this estimate on 12 years of field surveys of fur-bearing animals recorded in "a mass of field notes gathered from 1914 to 1925 inclusive, except for a short period during the war" (Skinner 1927:180). He wrote,

> I traveled Yellowstone National Park from end to end on foot, on horseback, and by automobile, and much of it was covered in winter when deep snow permitted only travel on skis. Whenever I saw an animal or a track, I noted it down in my notebook at once and later plotted it on a map, or rather a series of maps. These maps soon showed where these animals lived and how many, approximately to each "township" area. After

Fig. 2. The last cougar known to be killed in Yellowstone National Park, in 1925. The specimen is currently on display at the Yellowstone Museum in Mammoth, Wyoming. Photo source: Yellowstone National Park.

> these figures had been secured for each township, it was easy to add them together to get the whole predatory population. . . . [T]welve such years checked one against the others has given a result that should be approximately correct, although subject to fluctuations from year to year. (Skinner 1927:180)

He went on to say,

> But they [cougars] have been so hunted and harried by rangers that comparatively few remain—not more than a dozen at the present time. They range throughout all parts of the park, especially where the animals they prey on are to be found. In winter they are more numerous in the northern section than elsewhere. (Skinner 1927:200)

Biologist Adolph Murie wrote, "The last cougar was killed in 1925. Since that time definite authentic park records of cougar[s] have not come to my attention" (Murie 1940). Murie may not have been aware of Skinner's study and other reports of cougars in the park, or perhaps he was simply stating the fact that none had been killed after 1925 and he wasn't aware of official records of cougars since then. Nevertheless, accounts of cougars in Yellowstone continued. Meagher indicated that "periodic sightings of both species [cougar and wolverine] since this era [post-1925] occur in park records, suggesting that remnant populations persisted in the Yellowstone area" (Meagher 1986:1). Sporadic cougar sightings were recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s and documented in Yellowstone's *Nature Notes* publication series (Fig. 3, Appendix 1). On 2 occasions in the 1930s and 1950s, several cubs were reportedly seen with adult cougars in the park, which suggests that local home ranges and at least one breeding pair were then present (see Appendix 1). During this time, some cougars could have found refuge in the park or in remote sites immediately adjacent to the park. However, the sporadic nature of the sightings suggests that any cougars ranging in

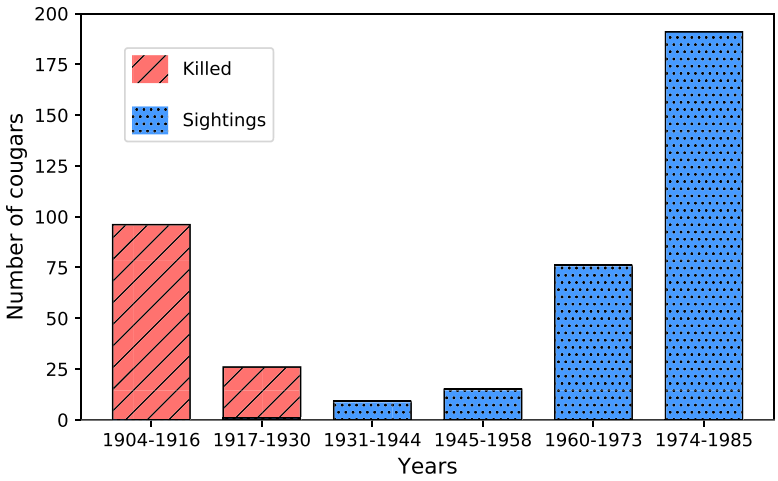

Fig. 3. Number of cougars killed and number of credible sightings of individual cougars for the period 1904–1985. The class interval is 14 years except for the first and last periods, which are 13 and 12 years, respectively; no data were available for 1959. Cougar mortality data are from Skinner (1927), 1920–1958 sightings are from Yellowstone Nature Notes (1926–1956), and 1960–1985 sightings are from Meagher (1986).

the park vicinity were at low numbers. Attempts to eradicate cougars outside the park continued; for example, the state of Montana paid a bounty for cougars until 1963 (MFWP 2019).

1960s to the 1980s

Cougar sightings increased in the 1960s and, from 1960 through 1973, seventy-six reliable sightings of cougars were collected by park officials (Houston 1978; Fig. 3). All sightings were screened for authenticity by park staff and "reports were considered reliable when made by National Park Service employees or longtime residents of the Yellowstone area. Reports by park visitors were accepted only when interrogation convinced us that the individual was familiar with the species" (Houston 1978:1). An increase in park efforts to monitor cougars began in 1972 and, from 1974 through 1985, 191 reliable sightings of cougars were reported (Meagher 1986; Fig. 3). Meagher (1986:1) noted that "The increased number of sightings undoubtedly reflects monitoring efforts (begun 1 July 1972) and the presence of more park visitors. However, the increase may also reflect more cougars utilizing the park and adjacent areas." In addition, there were reliable reports of 20 sets of cougar tracks between 1960 and 1973, as well as 48 sets of tracks between 1974 and 1985 (Meagher 1986). Reflecting changing management practices in western states in the 1970s, the state of Montana reclassified cougars as game animals in 1971, implementing new restrictions on take. New protections provided by these management changes outside the park likely contributed to the subsequent increase in cougars in the park (MFWP 2019).

Adult cougars with young were seen on the northern range in the 1970s by Douglas B. Houston, a park wildlife biologist. Houston (1978:187) wrote, "I regularly observed lion tracks and the 'scrapes' or scent stations made by resident males in the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone River during winter–spring from 1972 to 1978. Lions and their kills (mostly elk) also were observed occasionally. Sightings with tracks showed that females with young occurred in the area in 1972, 1974, 1975, and 1978, indicating a resident population was present rather than just transient lions." Consistent with Houston's multiple reports of breeding cougars in the park, a total of 17 cougars were killed by hunters between 1971 and 1979 along the Yellowstone River north of the park boundary (Koehler and Hornocker 1986). Furthermore, in the winter of 1986, a preliminary survey of cougars on the park's northern range found 13 sets of cougar tracks widely spaced along the Gardner, Yellowstone, and Lamar Rivers (Koehler and Hornocker 1986).

In summary, cougars were common before YNP was established, heavily persecuted in the early 1900s, but sighted sporadically in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. That pattern changed with increased cougar sightings in the 1960s and even more in the 1970s and early 1980s (Fig. 3). As a caveat, we note that some of the first-person accounts may be invalid despite the claim that reports were only included if deemed reliable. Furthermore, cougars can travel long distances, so some of the recorded sightings may have represented transient rather than resident cougars. Also, missing in the historical record are demographic parameters that could help to evaluate cougar status, such as number of individuals, age structure, immigration, dispersal, and sex ratios. Nevertheless, based on records from multiple sources, it appears that cougars were not extirpated, but low numbers from the 1930s to the 1960s likely resulted in a population that was not functionally relevant from an ecological standpoint (i.e., unable to significantly limit prey populations). This conclusion is supported by the fact that increasing elk numbers in the 1930s led park biologists to initiate a culling program to prevent range damage from high elk densities, and culling increased through the 1950s and 1960s (Houston 1982). After culling ended in 1968, elk numbers rapidly increased, reaching record highs in the 1980s and 1990s (Eberhardt et al. 2007) despite an apparent increase in cougar numbers during this same period.

1990s to the Present

Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) were reintroduced into YNP in 1995–1996, just after one cougar population study was completed and before 2 others began. During 1987–1993 in the years prior to wolf reintroduction, the park's northern range of approximately 1000 km^2 was occupied year-round by an estimated 1.1–2.1 cougars/100 km^2 (Murphy 1998). After the return of wolves, there were an estimated 1.5–2.5 cougars/100 km^2 during the period 1998–2005 (Ruth et al. 2019) and 2.0–2.5 cougars/100 km^2 for the years 2014–2017 (Coby Anton, cougar researcher, personal communication). The results from these 3 studies suggest that cougar abundance may have been greater after wolf reintroduction compared to before wolf restoration; but it should be noted that the study areas in these projects were not identical and that the estimate intervals overlap.

Established cougar and grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) populations of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s did not significantly limit elk (*Cervus canadensis*) populations in northern Yellowstone (Singer et al. 1997), despite hunting of elk that migrated outside the park. Consequently, there were no recorded trophic cascades onto plants before the 1995/1996 reintroduction of wolves. It was only after wolves joined bears, cougars, (and human hunters), thus completing the park's large predator guild, that researchers documented a sustained decrease in elk population density (Eberhardt et al. 2007, Barber-Meyer et al. 2008). With lower elk densities and altered elk behavior, trophic cascades followed, through a spatially variable release of woody species from suppression by herbivory (Ripple and Beschta 2012, Beschta and Ripple 2016, Peterson et al. 2020). The combined effects of wolves, bears, and cougars have maintained a lower elk density that has persisted for nearly 2 decades (Painter et al. 2018). Thus, YNP continues to provide a living laboratory, where researchers can study the interactions and combined ecological effects of large mammalian predators upon their prey and the ecosystem as a whole.

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APPENDIX 1. Cougar information extracted as exact quotes from *Nature Notes* (1926–1956), a Yellowstone National Park newsletter. Source: Archives, courtesy of the National Park Service, Yellowstone National Park.

Nature Notes, 1926, Vol. 3, No. 6, page 7

The animals that do the most damage in the park are wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions. They are to be greatly reduced, particularly in the areas where they would be apt to do the most damage. . . . The mountain lion and the lynx are found inside of the boundaries and both are noted for their destructive habits. The former kills all but the largest of the larger mammals and the latter lives largely on the snowshoe rabbits of the wooded districts. The very fine mounted specimen of a mountain lion in the Museum at Mammoth Hot Springs is an animal which was caught in the winter of 1924–25 by Chief Ranger Woodring and others.

Nature Notes, July 1926, Vol. 3, No. 7, page 4

The appearance of a mountain lion on the bank of the Yellowstone River near Camp Roosevelt aroused much interest. A tourist fishing on the west bank of the Yellowstone at the site of the old Barronette bridge, hearing a slight sound behind him, turned to see a large mountain lion crouched on a rock and lashing its tail. Much frightened, the man dropped his rod and ran half a mile to the present Yellowstone bridge and down the other side to his guide, the night watchman of Camp Roosevelt. The latter also sighed [*sic*] the lion.

Nature Notes, September 1931, Vol. 7, No. 9

That there are still a few mountain lions in the Park is shown by the finding of tracks on the shore of the old, deserted beaver pond at the head of Clematis Creek on Sepulcher Mountain. The big cat probably came to the pond to drink, as the tracks which measured nearly four inches across showed that it had walked along the muddy shore for a few yards. When seen on August 8 the tracks were probably not more than a day or two old.

Ranger Naturalist P.H. Pope

Appendix 1. Continued.

Nature Notes, July–August 1938, Vol. 15, No. 7–8

July 29: About 10:00 A.M., L.L. Carver of Darby, Montana, reported seeing two mature mountain lions and four cubs at the six mile post on the Tower Falls road.

George Walker

Nature Notes, March–April 1940, Vol. 17, No. 3–4

Mountain lions are occasionally reported, but wolves have not been seen for several years. Coyotes are thriving under protection and have become so common that their plaintive wails may well be subbed [*sic*] "The Song of the Yellowstone."

Nature Notes, September–October 1940, Vol. 17, No. 9–10

John Mackey, fire guard stationed at Pelican Cabin, reported seeing a mountain lion (*Felis concolor hippolestes*) on Pelican Creek about one and one half miles above Fern Lake Cabin on August 30. He described the animal as being light brown, about four and one half feet long, and with a long drooping tail. What was undoubtedly the same animal was sighted a second time by Kent McKnight, bus boy at Fishing Bridge Cafeteria, just south of Tern Lake on September 1. Editor's Note: Robert Gates, who was with a party of geologists working in the Garner [*sic*] Hole this season was reported seeing a mountain lion on the flank of horse show hill.

Nature Notes, January–February 1949, vol. 23, No. 1

Marrguerite and Ben Arnold have written in telling of a very interesting series of observations at the East Entrance made on December 13 and later in the month.

On December 13 as they were returning to the East Entrance Ranger Station from Cody, Wyoming, they were following the Wyoming snowplows and the driver of the first snowplow, Mr. Dean H. Pond had the unusual thrill of seeing a large Mountain lion sitting on the road shoulder only about 50 feet from the front of the snowplow. This was at a distance of about 200 yards east of the park boundary. The occupants of the cars following the snowplows were not fortunate enough to see the lion, but did see his tracks in the snow where he had bounded away.

Marguerite has this to say about further evidence of this Mountain lion ranging in the vicinity of the East Entrance Ranger Station:

> Later in the month Ben discovered his trail across Middle Creek and had a good look at it. . . . [T]he next day he took me with him and inspected it, but there had been a three or four inch snow fall during the night and the toe marks were obliterated. However, even then, there was no doubting the kind of trail it was, round tracks and about 18 inch stride. It followed in close under low hanging branches of trees where a rabbit or grouse might be sheltered and when the lion crossed down trees his body made a slot 14 inches or so wide. The outstanding feature of this trail was not apparent except on close examination. We thought at first one "cat" had used it once, but found it had been used by one or more lions traveling in both directions and the pad marks, about 6 inches or 8 inches deep, were so hard and icy we had trouble breaking through them with the top ends of our ski poles. We followed the trail for about a mile up the creek and only found one place where there was a double track, where the lion had deviated from the main trail for a distance of about 15 feet. We thought it quite a remarkable "sidewalk" and could tell that the last trip had been made down country for the tracks were round on the western end and slide marks of the hind feet were visible on the eastern end of the tracks. The trapper from Pahaska, Harry Johnson, reported a lion track up Jones Creek before the hunting season closed.

This interesting observation of the presence of cougar in Yellowstone is encouraging to those who are interested in knowing that representatives of most large mammals are still found roaming in the wilderness areas.

David de L. Condon – Chief Park Naturalist

Nature Notes, September–October 1950, vol. 24, No. 05

But when the animal moved we changed our conclusions because the animal's tail was as long as its body. The tail was thick and heavy with a bulb shape on the terminal end. When the animal walked it definitely did not have a dog family walk but had a walk similar to the cat family. Instead of walking from rock to rock it leaped from rock to rock in a cat fashion. Its head was short in the side view and wide in the front

APPENDIX 1. Continued.

view. As soon as the animal spotted us it disappeared among the rocks. We observers returned to the fire lookout tower because of rain. In making a further observation from the lookout tower we discovered that the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep were over the ridge to the south of the position where we spotted the lion. The ridge from where the lion was seen was about ¾ mile east of Mt. Washburn.

Nature Notes, July–August 1951, Vol. 25, No. 4

On June 19, 1951, at approximately 4:00 p.m., a tourist, Edward Dwyer, . . . reported to me that he had seen an animal he believed to be a mountain lion. . . . Mr. Dwyer stated that he was familiar with the physical characteristics of a mountain lion and that the animal he had seen had such characteristics. . . . Mr. Dwyer was positive and deliberate in his description.

Nature Notes, 1952, Vol. 26, No. 1

I followed the track for some distance until I found a distinct print in the shallower snow under a tree and promptly decided that the trail was left by a lion. The individual print measured four and a quarter inches from middle toe to heel and four inches across.

Tom Ela – District Park Ranger

Nature Notes, July–August 1954, Vol. 28, No. 4

Mr. and Mrs. R.P. Brettel observed a mountain lion late afternoon on July 1, 1950. The observation was made 6.1 miles north of Fishing Bridge on the highway between Fishing Bridge and Canyon. . . . The description given by them check [*sic*] accurately in detail with the pictures and literature available here at the Old Faithful Museum.

On August 28, 1952, Mrs. Theresa Torgerson of Etheridge, Montana, reported to District Ranger Lee Coleman at the Canyon Ranger Station, that on the 28th at about 10:30 A.M. she and her party watched a female lion with three cubs planning [*sic*] in the prairie area near Soda Butte. Mrs. Torgerson reported they watched the animals for some time with binoculars and she was positive that they were a family of mountain lions.

On April 26, 1954, Mr. Oscar Mathis, a truck driver on the road maintenance crew for the National Park Service, was driving along the road near Oxbow Creek between Mammoth and Tower Fall when he saw a mountain lion cross the highway and disappear into the Douglas fir.

The most recent report received on the mountain lion was made by Julius Lippa who is employed by the Yellowstone Park Company as a bus driver. Mr. Lippa reported that he and a companion had been fishing on Lava Creek on June 13 [1954] . . . a large lion came out of the brush over the trail ahead of [*sic*] and went over the hill about 75 yards in advance of him.

Nature Notes, September–October 1954, Vol. 28, No. 5

On September 2 [1954] park visitors reported to Park naturalist W. Verde Watson that they had seen a mountain lion come out of the trees near Dunraven pass [sic] and cross the road just behind their car. The animal was bounding and they described it as being of the same appearance as the mountain lion in the museum at Mammoth, but not nearly so large.

On at least two occasions people reported to the Old Faithful information desk the sighting of a mountain lion in the Lower Geyser Basin area near the lower end of Fountain Flats. Both of these parties were very emphatic in their declaration that the animal they had seen was a mountain lion. One man and his wife reported that the animal bounded across the road and then stopped on the hillside just above Nez Perce Creek where it watched them slowly drive by in their car.

On September 4 [1954] Lowell Biddulph reported that Mr. Girard Tesman reported at the Fishing Bridge museum he had seen a mountain lion in the hay meadows near the Lamar Unit. Mr. Tesman is a western man, knows coyotes and says there was no mistaking the animal he had seen for other than a cat.

Nature Notes, July–August 1956, Vol. 30, No. 3–4

On June 13th [1956] an observation of mountain lion was made at a distance of less than fifty yards, from the road near the Mud Volcano. Mr. William C. Regan of 605 38th S.W. Seattle, Washington made the report at Canyon. In talking to Mr. Regan we learned that he is familiar with mountain lions and was quite positive of the identification.