



UVIC COMMUNICATIONS

Cougar tracker

A UVic project aims to reduce human-cougar conflict on Vancouver Island's west coast

Thompson

by Peigi McGillivray

Meeting a cougar is the last thing people want when they're out enjoying Vancouver Island's wilderness trails, campgrounds and beaches. But as humans have claimed more of the wilderness for recreation, development and forestry, the chance of encountering these reclusive predators has increased.

Minimizing human-cougar contact is the goal of Dani Thompson, a graduate student in the University of Victoria's biology department. She's spent the past five years studying cougars in two of Vancouver Island's protected areas—Pacific Rim National Park Reserve and Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve—focusing on the West Coast Trail and Long Beach.

Cougars are BC's largest wild cat, weighing between 50 and 100 kg and measuring up to 2.7 metres from nose to tail. For the most part, they live solitary, secretive lives, patrolling large territories and hunting a wide variety of prey, from mice and squirrels, to fish, otters, deer and even moose.

"I used wildlife sighting data from Parks Canada to see how cougars related to the habitat in my study area, and to establish where

interactions between people and cougars are most frequent," says Thompson. "The goal of my research was to examine non-invasive approaches to reduce human-cougar conflict in protected areas."

Thompson was looking for patterns in cougar behaviour. She located scat and paw prints, sometimes with the help of a tracking dog. DNA from scat provides information about the number and sex of cougars, identifies individual animals and shows stress levels and reproductive activity.

Thompson also placed scented "rub pads" on trees along known cougar corridors. These pads attract cougars with a specially formulated scent (which includes catnip!). Cougars rub and scratch themselves on the pads, leaving behind hairs—and DNA—for analysis. At some rub pad locations, Thompson took photos with infrared cameras triggered by the cougar's body heat.

"We estimate that there are only about 10 cougars in our study area," says Thompson. "And we found that the least used campsites report the most cougar sightings. That means the cougars are acting normally—they're trying to avoid people whenever they can."

Thompson's research indicates that cougars use logging roads and hiking trails as travel

corridors to patrol their territory and hunt. "They seem to come down toward the coast using logging roads, streams and hiking trails," says Thompson. "Hotspots for cougar sightings are often in places where human campsites are next to sources of fresh water, which cougars also need."

Although her research project is complete, Thompson continues to monitor the cougar population on the West Coast Trail as research manager and public safety specialist for Parks Canada. She's also developing public education programs about how to recognize signs of cougar activity, and what to do if you encounter one (see tips at right).

Thompson has been fascinated with cougars since she saw a cougar kitten on the West Coast Trail 17 years ago. But despite having hiked the same trail end-to-end multiple times during her research project, she hasn't seen one since. "That's what we want—for people and cougars to use the same environment without endangering each other," she says.

Thompson's research was funded by a scholarship from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust and the Pacific National Park Reserve of Canada.

EDGEwise

Conflict between cougars and humans is very rare. In the past 100 years, a total of five people have been killed by cougars in BC. All but one of these fatal attacks occurred on Vancouver Island.

How to avoid cougars: Hike in a group of two or more, and make enough noise that cougars will hear you coming. Keep children close and do not let them run ahead or linger behind.

What to do if you meet a cougar: Always leave the animal an avenue of escape, stay calm and don't run away or turn your back. Do everything you can to look big and dangerous.

If a cougar behaves aggressively: Speak loudly and firmly—convince the cougar that you are a threat, not prey. If a cougar attacks, don't cover your head and lie still. Fight back with anything you can reach, including rocks, backpacks, sticks and your bare hands.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.

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