

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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Looking for Evidence of Cougars

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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



*Cougar tracks in mud. The track is three to four inches in diameter. Notice the absence of claw marks, a characteristic of cat tracks. (Photo by Tina Nelson)*

Recently this headline appeared on the Gowanda Pennysaver News editorial page: “Reader asks for help in collecting evidence.” This was no crime investigation. The reader wanted to “coordinate any evidence... that there are [cougars] in this area.” The concept that there may be cougars lurking in the woods is intriguing. However, the reason the presence of cougars remains enigmatic is that, like most wild mammals, these big cats prefer to be inconspicuous. They usually venture out only at night and are very careful to avoid humans. The focus of this article is on the word evidence. The word’s definition is “a thing helpful in forming a conclusion.” While we are unlikely to see more than glimpses of these elusive creatures, we might, with a little awareness, education and practice, find evidence that helps us form the conclusion that cougars are in this area.

Evidence of the presence of wild animals may be found in the form of tracks and what trackers call “sign”. Sign includes “leftovers” from a meal, scat (feces), territorial markings, trails and bedding areas.

Think habitat when looking for evidence of an animal. Habitat is the place where animals live and obtain food, shelter and water. Cougars are adamant about their privacy. Their tracks and sign will be in remote, relatively inaccessible places. Their primary prey is white tail deer so the deer habitat and cougar habitat are the same: open areas with an abundance of edges (shrubby areas between the open area and a forest), marshes, beaver meadows, swamps and clearings in hardwood forests.

Finding a specific animal track is not always easy. More often you come upon them by chance but you can increase your chances by knowing where to look. Be aware of both habitat and surface. An animal will only leave a mold of its foot in soft material – mud or snow. Occasionally you might see muddy footprints across a hard surface like those muddy footprints crossing your clean kitchen floor. If you do find tracks they are often indistinct which muddies positive identification. Look for some general characteristics. If looking at a set of tracks check the pattern. The pattern is an illustration of the animal’s gait. The typical gait of cats, including cougars, is a fast walk or trot. The gait pattern appears as an almost straight line of tracks. A cougar is a big cat so the spaces between tracks, indicative of stride length, are, on average, a little over three feet long. Plus the tracks will be big – three to four inches in diameter. If you do find a well-defined track notice the absence of claw prints. Other clawed mammals, like dogs, leave claw marks. Cats can retract their claws, other mammals cannot. Also notice that the heel pad looks large compared to the four somewhat narrow toes, giving the track an asymmetrical circular shape.

Since cougars prey primarily on white tail deer their leftovers are, of course, deer carcasses. Look for deep claw marks in the neck, shoulders and flanks and canine teeth marks one to two inches apart on the back of the neck of a deer carcass. Cougars pounce onto their prey’s back, grasping the neck and shoulders with their front claws and digging their hind claws into its flanks as they bite the back of the neck with scissor-like canines and snap the spinal cord. Once the prey is down the cougar drags the carcass to a sheltered place to consume it. It begins by opening the abdominal cavity just behind the rib cage and eating the organs. This helps distinguish a cougar kill from a wolf or coyote kill where the opening is under the carcass’s tail.

Cougar scat is the same cylindrical shape as what you find in the litter box, except much larger – four to six inches, and contains a lot of deer hair. Cougars sometime cover their scat, like Tabby, but more often they leave it partially exposed as a scent post. Individual cougars claim an area as their own. They mark the boundaries of their territory with mounds of dirt, pine needles and other forest litter soaked in urine or scat, analogous to putting up a Keep Out sign for other cougars. You, too, may smell these Keep Out signs and recognize their cat-like odor.

In maintaining territory and establishing regular hunting routines a cougar may develop a regular noticeable trail that is somewhat trough-shaped and between ten and twelve inches wide; the gentle way grasses or other plants are pressed down in the trail reflects the cat's very light tread as opposed to the high impact trails of deer.

Are you the wildlife detective that will follow the trail and help compile the evidence that there are cougars in the area? Even you don't find the cougar you will have a lot of fun looking.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. For more information, or to support these efforts, please call 716-664-2166 or go to [www.chautauquawatershed.org](http://www.chautauquawatershed.org).