

# Bobcats, Mountain Lions and Lynx



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF COLORADO'S WILD FELINE POPULATION



Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) ©VIC SCHENDEL/CPW



Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*) ©VIC SCHENDEL/CPW



Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) ©JOE LEWANDOWSKI/CPW

## Background information for mountain lions, bobcats and lynx:

### How much do we know about lion and bobcat populations in Colorado?

In Colorado, the projected statewide population size of independent lions (not including kittens) is around 3,800-4,400. Based on a preponderance of evidence, lion populations have grown in Colorado since 1965 when they were classified as a big game species. Once considered big game, mountain lions have benefited from regulations on take and management actions that have resulted in increasing populations.

Lions mainly live west of I-25 and in parts of SE Colorado. Lions living west of the Continental Divide in Colorado benefit from large areas of high-quality lion habitat that are not hunted due to severely limited accessibility.

All harvested lions must be checked by CPW staff. CPW compares harvest and all human-caused mortalities like roadkill every year against population thresholds and sustainable objectives to make sure lion populations continue to be strong statewide.

Bobcats are widespread across Colorado. CPW assesses 5 different metrics each year to make sure bobcat populations are stable and healthy. For more information on harvest reports and harvest survey results, visit CPW's Furbearer [webpage](#). These guidelines suggest Colorado's bobcat populations are stable and may be increasing in some areas. Colorado's bobcat season timing and length, limitations on methods of take, and the annual data collected from mandatory check of every harvested bobcat are the basis for present management.

### Are mountain lion or bobcat populations threatened in any way in Colorado or the West?

Mountain lion populations are not biologically threatened. Mountain lions range from Northern Canada to the southern extent of South America. This represents the largest latitudinal range of any mammal in the Western Hemisphere. Both informal and recently collected empirical data suggest Colorado's lion population is strong and lions are abundant in appropriate habitat. Further proof of a growing western lion population is the natural reestablishment of populations in the Dakotas and Nebraska over the past few decades, an expansion from source states.

Bobcats are not biologically threatened. Bobcats are the most common North American wild cat species and are widespread across the U.S. The minimum U.S. range-wide population estimate is between 1.4 and 2.6 million bobcats.

### What about Canada lynx?

Colorado is proud of its efforts to reintroduce Canada lynx to the state. Prior to the lynx reintroduction effort that began in 1999, the species was extirpated in the state. Lynx are currently listed as endangered in Colorado and federally listed as threatened. However, Colorado now has a secure lynx population that exhibits both ecological and social benefits. Lynx are protected by both state and federal law, with hunting and trapping prohibited. No lynx in Colorado has ever been reported as incidentally trapped by bobcat fur harvesters.

# Managing mountain lion, bobcat and lynx in Colorado:

## Why do we manage wildlife populations like lions and bobcats?

Colorado now has 5.8 million human residents and while we still have many wild areas, our human footprint in wildlife habitat cannot be overstated. Such a footprint has and continues to alter ecosystems carrying capacities and various wildlife species that have evolved together through millennia thus creating imbalances and requiring management to restore or mimic balances.

Therefore, CPW believes that managing lions and bobcats with harvest is a tool to maintain more stable populations compared to more widely fluctuating populations that would likely occur without hunting.

## How does CPW know how many lions and bobcats are harvested?

All harvested lions and bobcats must be physically checked by trained CPW staff. These mandatory checks allow us to collect important biological and law enforcement data, as well as place a seal on each animal to make possession legal.

## How many mountain lions and bobcats are harvested each year?

- ▶ Annual statewide mountain lion harvest has averaged 505 lions in the most recent 3 years ('20-'21, '21-'22, '22-'23).
- ▶ Annual statewide bobcat harvest has averaged 880 bobcats in the most recent 3 years ('20-'21, '21-'22, '22-'23).

## Are harvest rates impacting these populations?

There is no evidence to suggest statewide lion or bobcat populations are decreasing under current sustainable management. In fact, a number of current studies and projects underway on both species in Colorado suggests that the actual densities of both species are at, or above levels needed to maintain current population sizes. Limits on lion harvest, season length and harvest methods are all set to make sure Colorado's lion and bobcat numbers are not decreasing.

## What about the ecological services that lions and bobcats provide?

Healthy and robust lion and bobcat populations, which Colorado's current management is designed to maintain, are important to functioning ecosystems. CPW values carnivores and their prominent role in our landscapes, and harvesting a sustainable number of carnivores each year doesn't reduce the ecosystem services provided by the larger population.

CPW's demonstrated track record of promoting and protecting strong mountain lion, bobcat and lynx populations across the state supports our mission of conserving wildlife and providing sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities that educate and inspire current and future generations to serve as active stewards of Colorado's natural resources.

## What scientific research and data has CPW collected on the current status of mountain lion and bobcat populations in the state?



In 2020, CPW recognized its previous management scales didn't align well with the movement of lions on the landscape, which is why CPW researchers and biologists made some changes in management practices in the [West Slope Mountain Lion Plan](#). In this plan, CPW enacted two independent thresholds on the West Slope that keep lion populations from decreasing.

One limit is a cap on the total amount of human-caused mortality allowed each year; this includes all recorded mortalities like roadkill or agricultural conflicts and not just hunter harvest. Present levels of human-caused mortality under the West Slope plan are commonly cited as being sustainable and below levels believed by some to cause social disruption.

The other independent plan threshold governs harvest composition (proportion of adult females in harvest) to make sure the population isn't decreasing. With the West Slope plan well underway, CPW will soon be developing a similar plan for the eastern half of the state.

CPW's Mountain Lion Management webpage has more information: [cpw.state.co.us/learn/Pages/Con-Mountain-Lion-Management.aspx](http://cpw.state.co.us/learn/Pages/Con-Mountain-Lion-Management.aspx)



Bobcats are adaptable carnivores and are widespread across the state. CPW initiated a long-term study of bobcat density, harvest effects, prey selection and development of monitoring techniques in 2022 to further develop the agency's research base on the species specifically in Colorado.

## What studies are currently being done on lions and bobcats in Colorado?

CPW has committed to a long-term plan of measuring lion density in two study areas per year across the West Slope for life of the West Slope plan; we are already moving on to our 3rd study area in January 2024.

Additionally, CPW has a decade-long lion research project underway in the Upper Arkansas River drainage, testing to see if there is a relationship between human-lion conflict and changes in hunter harvest levels.

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# Human-wildlife conflicts and Public Safety:

## **Does hunting lions mean more or fewer conflicts with people?**

The science on this is undecided. A few correlative studies claim to show a counter-intuitive increase in human-lion conflicts under high harvest scenarios. Very few places in Colorado have high harvest levels, but our human-lion incidents data doesn't show more conflicts in areas of harvest.

In fact, some of our higher conflict areas (Glenwood/Roaring Fork, Durango, Front Range) have relatively low harvest. To answer this question, CPW Mammal's Research is in the final 3 years of a decade-long study in the Arkansas River designed to look at human-lion conflicts under different hunter harvest levels. CPW recently examined the last 4 years of statewide lion harvest and human-lion conflict data by GMU and found no evidence that high harvest correlated with high human-conflict levels.

## **How is livestock and game damage from bobcats and lions handled?**

Under current laws and regulations, lions are managed as big game, just like elk or deer and CPW is responsible for using agency funds to reimburse landowners for documented game damage. This could be livestock including sheep, horse, cattle, llamas and other animals. Annual statewide calendar year lion damage payments averaged around \$50,000 the last 3 years

## **Other common questions:**

### **Is lion meat required to be prepared for human consumption, just like deer, elk and all big game?**

By law, under Title 33 C.R.S, hunters are required to prepare lion (big game) for human consumption, and hunters and trappers are required to present the head and hide of lions and the hide of bobcats for mandatory checks. Colorado Parks and Wildlife Regulations in Chapter W-3, Article II provide the full requirements for mandatory checks and seals.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Regulations, Ch. W-0, Article XI mandate that for any wildlife taken under the authority of §33-6-119, C.R.S., all edible portions of game wildlife taken under the authority of a license shall be properly prepared to provide for human consumption. This applies to all big game species, including mountain lions. While this regulation is not specifically applicable to furbearers, many hunters do also prepare and consume bobcat meat.

Colorado statute §33-6-119 also prohibits any person from "failing to reasonably attempt to dress or care for and provide for human consumption the edible portions of game wildlife," including mountain lions. Misdemeanor charges may result in fines and license suspension points.

Colorado law also currently prohibits any person from committing "wanton waste." of game per § 33-6-117 C.R.S.:

### **It is unlawful for a person:**

- ▶ (I) To hunt or take, or to solicit another person to hunt or take, wildlife and detach or remove, with the intent to abandon the carcass or body, only the head, hide, claws, teeth, antlers, horns, internal organs, or feathers or any or all of such parts;
- ▶ (II) To intentionally abandon the carcass or body of taken wildlife; or
- ▶ (III) To take and intentionally abandon wildlife.

### **Why is hound hunting for lions used as a management tool?**

Lion hunting with hounds is far more selective of gender than other encounter methods employed in states that have banned hounds. Statewide annual harvest proportion of females in Colorado is generally at or under 40%, whereas in states that have banned hound hunting, it can approach 60%. This difference indicates that Colorado hound hunters are selecting to pursue or harvest female lions at a much lower rate than they are encountered in the population. Lions regularly evade hound pursuit, but if treed, this data comparison also shows that a significant proportion of lions are selectively not harvested and are allowed to escape.

CPW regularly considers methods of hunting such as population objectives, previous year's harvest, equipment types, season length, based on the best available science.

### **How are female lions protected in Colorado?**

Colorado's lion seasons and regulations are designed to limit harvest of female lions. Lion kittens and females with kittens are protected from harvest. Unlike longer or year-round seasons in some states, Colorado's lion winter season timing are a further protection to females with young. Since lions are almost always hunted in the snow, the killing of adult female lions accompanied by kittens is prohibited, hound hunters do not typically pursue lions associated with multiple sets of tracks, as those are likely females and kittens.

As noted above, hound pursuit also allows hunters to release lions, often single female lions. These steps all protect breeding adult females, the engine driving lion populations. Lower female harvest rates are part of CPW's strategy for stable lion population management.

If adult female lion thresholds were ever surpassed, CPW would take steps to reduce overall harvest limits the following years to further decrease harvest through its annual review process.