Cougar Safety

Cougar attacks on humans are extremely rare. However, it is always wise to take precautions when in cougar country and be prepared in case you encounter a cougar. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife provides the following recommendations on its website that reflect the collective experience and wisdom of cougar experts around the country:

If you see or encounter a cougar:

- Never approach the cougar or offer it food.
- Stop, pick up small children immediately, and don’t run. Running and rapid movements may trigger an attack. Remember, at close range, a cougar’s instinct is to chase.
- Face the cougar. Talk to it firmly while slowly backing away. Always leave the animal an escape route.
- Try to appear larger than the cougar. Get above it (e.g., step up onto a rock or stump). If wearing a jacket, hold it open to further increase your apparent size. If you are in a group, stand shoulder-to-shoulder to appear intimidating.
- Do not take your eyes off the cougar or turn your back. Do not crouch down or try to hide.
- If the cougar does not flee, be more assertive. If it shows signs of aggression (crouches with ears back, teeth bared, hissing, tail twitching, and hind feet pumping in preparation to jump), shout, wave your arms and throw anything you have available (water bottle, book, backpack). The idea is to convince the cougar that you are not prey, but a potential danger.
- If the cougar attacks, fight back. Be aggressive and try to stay on your feet. Cougars have been driven away by people who have fought back using anything within reach, including sticks, rocks, shovels, backpacks, and clothing – even bare hands. If you are aggressive enough, a cougar will flee, realizing it has made a mistake. Pepper spray in the cougar’s face is also effective in the extreme unlikelihood of a close encounter with a cougar.

What to do if you see or have an encounter with a cougar:

1. Sighting:

A sighting occurs in the cougar’s natural environment, a sighting is a view from a distance where the cougar may have noticed you (or not) and continued on its way. Cougars may move through areas to more remote areas using washes or forested corridors.

Response: It is not necessary to report a sighting. Cougars are rarely aggressive toward humans. They are secretive, and usually avoid contact with people whenever possible.
Absent evidence of a cougar’s aggressiveness or unacceptable willingness to be near people, it is not necessary to respond to sightings.

2. Encounter:

An encounter occurs when a close interaction takes place with a cougar, and it did not immediately leave the area. An encounter can entail: a brief stare at a closer distance than is described in “sighting” above; the cat took a step or two forward before it left the area (note that this behavior may be due to the cat’s curiosity, and thus may not be exhibiting aggressive behavior); the cat gives a warning “hiss” or, the cat didn’t leave the area until you threw something at it.

Response: call Idaho Fish and Game Department

3. Attack:

An attack occurs when a cougar makes physical contact with humans, pets, or livestock.

Response: Call 911 immediately. Quick response is crucial even for pets and livestock.

If people are seeing a cougar in a particular area regularly, it may warrant a call to Idaho Fish and Game.

To prevent further problems:

- Close or patch-up any potential cougar shelter (i.e. under porches).
- Do not feed deer or any other wildlife that cougar may prey upon.
- Try using outdoor lighting and/or motion activated lights to repel cougars. Sprinklers and commercial motion-activated inflatable scarecrows startle animals when activated.
- Always work with your neighbors for a consistent solution.

Adapted from www.westernwildlife.org/cougar-outreach-project/cougar-safety. Please see the website for the full text.