

Big cat ^{animals} sighted in area

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SANTA CRUZ — A big cat, possibly a black mountain lion, was seen Monday morning in the foothills above Santa Cruz.

It marks another in a handful of recently reported mountain lion sightings. And stories have persisted for decades of an obsidian-colored cougar roaming the mountains.

Some wildlife officials speculate the sightings may be a single mountain lion, ranging the county.

Hans Mellberg, who lives on Old Ranch Road off Glen Canyon Drive, said he was awakened about 5 a.m. by his Siberian husky, who was racing back and forth on the deck of their home. Mellberg shone his flashlight into the darkness, and then heard something large, crashing down.

"All of a sudden I saw this very, very big cat, 35 to 40 pounds worth, with a very long tail. It was a least a mountain lion or bigger, pure black ... solid black. It made three big leaps and disappeared into the far corner of the property," said Mellberg.

In those three bounds, each spanning 10 feet, the large animal leaped over a bench and flower

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planter, then landed in the Mellberg's garden before disappearing into the darkness. "One, two, three and it was gone," said Mellberg.

Mellberg said he's uncertain whether what he saw was a mountain lion, about the size of his dog, or somebody's pet panther that had escaped. But he is certain it was no ordinary domestic cat. The crash he heard turned out to be redwood lattice dividers around the garden; an ineffective deterrent to the deer who are regular customers in his garden but too large to be knocked over by a house cat.

If the early morning visitor was a mountain lion, Mellberg may have sighted a genetic rarity: a black cougar rumored to live in the Santa Cruz Mountains, according to Fish and Game Lt. Dennis Baldwin.

"We've had reports that go back to 1979, rumors clear back then of a black mountain lion," said Baldwin. Despite the lack of confirmation, "the story keeps perpetuating itself," he said.

Black mountain lions have been found in South America, according to Michael Kutilek, a San Jose State University biologist who headed a 10-year study of mountain lions in Mount Hamilton area. But no hard evidence has been found of one in North America, he said.

Most of the suspected dark mountain lions turn out to normally colored mountains lions seen "in a certain light," he said. "You would expect that with all the reports over the years, someone would have shot one, trapped one, captured one. There would be a hide somewhere."

The normally shy and elusive mountain lions are also known as cougars, pumas and panthers.

Mellberg's sighting is more likely a case of mistaken identity — either a large domestic cat or a tawny-colored mountain lion that appeared black because of the lighting, said Kutilek.

Only one big black cat is licensed by Fish and Game to be kept in the county — a black leopard that lives at American Wildlife Rescue in Felton. That animal was safely caged Monday, according to Jeanne Milewski, director of the rescue.

Whether Mellberg's big cat is a black or a normal-colored cougar, it is still an unusual sight, yet one that's become more common in the past few months.

• A mountain lion was reported Sept. 22 at UC Santa Cruz by maintenance workers who said the animal was in the meadow behind the college in the early afternoon.

• A cougar was reported in late September near the Casa Del Rio apartments on Blaine Street in Santa Cruz, near the San Lorenzo River behind the Water Street Jail. The mountain lion was seen about dawn "just walking around," said Doris King, who issued a warning

to tenants this week. "It wasn't chasing anything or doing anything special," but did leave behind big paw prints in the moist ground, she said.

• A mountain lion was reported two weeks ago in Boulder Creek, according to Milewski, of the American Wildlife Rescue. Milewski said residents of Rebecca Drive said they heard a growl, which sounded like a big cat, and then saw what they thought was a deer being dragged off.

• Last February, a deer carcass on UCSC near the health center appeared to have been killed by a lion. The doe had been bitten at the base of the skull, its stomach torn open and its organs eaten — signs of a lion kill.

According to Kutilek, the increase in sightings may be because cougars are moving into populated areas following their favorite food group — black-tailed deer. As their food in the wild dries up, the deer seek green vegetation to browse on, often in mountain residents' backyard gardens.

The mountain lions may simply be following them down, he said.

The cougars might also be seen more frequently as humans inhabit their territory, he said.

Despite the reported sightings, cougars are slowly disappearing from the Santa Cruz Mountains and will be gone within a few decades, Kutilek said.

It's more likely that the same cougar is being seen, ranging all over the county.

At one time, there were mountain lion "corridors" that connected the big Santa Cruz cats with populations to the south and east, including those in the Mount Hamilton range in Santa Clara County, said Kutilek.

Most of those cat corridors have "been cut off by freeways, development and road building," isolating the Santa Cruz mountain lions.

In a 10-year study of Mount Hamilton mountain lions, none were tracked moving between the Mount Hamilton and Santa Cruz mountain ranges, he said.

Even in "good" mountain lion turf, with no human intrusion, there would be no more than 5 to 7 animals within 100 square miles, Kutilek said.

To have several mountain lions living in Santa Cruz County isn't likely. "I wouldn't say it would be impossible but it's unlikely you have three separate adults, particularly with a population that seems to be going down as it is over there."

Wildlife officials say they've long

known Santa Cruz County was home to at least one mountain lion.

"Over the last five years, we've had sightings all along Empire Grade, into Davenport, into Lone Star, and ranging down to the university," said Baldwin.

But they haven't been able to figure out whether it's the same animal. "They can look a different color depending on where you see them and what time of year," said Baldwin. Those who have spotted the elusive animals don't see them long enough, or see several at a time, to give a positive ID, he said.

No matter what the experts say, Mellberg says he what he saw was a big black cat, about the size of his dog.

"It moved like a cat, a big cat. There was no doubt in my mind."

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