

Mountain lion sightings rise; numbers may be up

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SANTA CRUZ — The grizzly bear is long gone, and even hedgehogs are rarely seen anymore, but mountain lions seem to be making a comeback in the hills and mountains of Santa Cruz, local biologists say.

The big cats are extremely alert and rarely seen by humans, but a growing number of hikers and equestrians have found tracks, droppings and kills that indicate lions are ranging on land close to Santa Cruz's urban borders.

"I know there's one very big lion working the western portion of the Grey Whale Ranch area," said Bob Curry, professor of environmental studies

at UC Santa Cruz. The 2,400-acre ranch is near UCSC off Empire Grade Road.

In May, Curry and a group of students came across a freshly killed deer that Curry believes was the work of a mountain lion. The deer had been neatly killed, gutted and carried up a cliff.

"The lion makes one clean incision and guts its prey, leaving the intestines in a neat pile," Curry said. "It then picks up the carcass, or drags it if it's large, and puts it up somewhere to drain, maybe in a tree. They're very methodical."

Curry believes the lion in question is large because the deer carcass was large and it was carried, not dragged, up the cliff.

Curry has also gathered scat, or feces, which have

been positively identified as a mountain lion's. Because cats groom themselves by licking their fur, mountain lion scat contains lots of short, blond fur, which can be positively identified under a microscope.

Armand Gonzales, a wildlife biologist for the state Department of Fish and Game, says lions have been spotted in the Boulder Creek area, and one was even seen in the Soquel Cemetery close to downtown Soquel two years ago. While Gonzales has never seen a lion on the Grey Whale Ranch, he sees no reason why they wouldn't range there.

"It's a suitable habitat, and there's plenty of prey for a lion," he said. "They're known to have a range of 10 miles, and will move almost constantly