

If you see a mountain lion, don't act like prey

BY GARY SKIBA

LA PLATA COUNTY LIVING WITH WILDLIFE BOARD

Got deer? Most of us do, and where there are deer, there are almost always mountain lions in the vicinity.

The majority of us never experience the thrill of seeing a mountain lion (or cougar, painter, panther, puma, etc.) in the wild, and maybe some of us don't want to. If you spend time outdoors in the Durango area, you may never see a lion, but it's likely they've seen you, and the low number of negative encounters with them shows that they generally avoid interacting with humans.

Exact numbers are difficult to obtain, but in the last 120 years, there are fewer than 25 known fatal attacks on humans. Despite that avoidance, it's a good idea to know how to react to a lion if you do run into one.

As a general rule, the best way to avoid problems with wildlife is prevention, and that's true with lions. When you're in lion country, be sure to make noise. A group hiking together generally is engaged in conversation, and that's an ideal way to prevent surprising a lion. Or, if you're alone, consider singing as you hike. If



Associated Press file photo

Mountain lion attacks in North America are rare, but when hiking in their habitat, it's a good idea to make your presence known by talking to others in your group or singing if you are alone.

you're in a group, keeping everyone together also will help.

It's particularly important to ensure that young children remain with one or more adults. Because of their small size, quick movements and high-pitched voices, children are more likely than adults to stimulate a predatory response from lions. Again, aggressive encounters are rare, but it's a good idea to help keep them rare by being sure that children stay close to adults.

If you do encounter a lion, it's important to not act like prey. That means never, never run from a lion, crouch down or turn your back on the animal. All of those actions mimic what prey animals do and could unwittingly stimulate a lion to attack.

Instead, do the opposite: Stand your ground; talk to the lion in a loud, firm voice; and make yourself look as large as possible by standing straight and holding your jacket open, and holding any objects you

have with you, (like a walking stick or a bicycle) in front of you so you appear larger. Be big and loud!

How do you know if a lion is preparing to attack? Think of how house cats get ready to pounce. They point their ears at the prey, gather their feet under them and fix the prey with a steady glare. If you see a lion performing similar behaviors, you should prepare for an attack and prepare to fight. People have stopped lion attacks by aggressively fighting back. If you have anything that can be used as a weapon, such as a ski pole, walking stick or bicycle, be prepared to use it. Continue to be big and loud, and an attack may be avoided.

Mountain lions are beautiful animals with superb hunting ability, and they are an important part of our native wildlife. Hopefully, we can enjoy them while avoiding any problem encounters.

Gary Skiba is a member of the La Plata County Living with Wildlife Advisory Board, which provides education and resources about wildlife to county residents. For more information, visit www.wildsmart.org.