

Tracking Mountain Lions:

*Wildlife Photographer
Kevin Dietrich*

By Jill Bergman

Dressed for winter and with his camera strap around his neck, Kevin Dietrich hikes quietly through new snow around the wild places near Steamboat Springs, Colorado. He is looking for mountain lion tracks. Early morning or late afternoon when the light casts long shadows across the snowy landscape, he's often out checking the likely places. Kevin pays attention to the deer and elk movements also. In deep winter when the Yampa Valley fills with snow, the grazers need to migrate to places with more to eat, and the mountain lions go where they go. But there are places, and times of day, and seasons when a quiet observer might see a mountain lion.

Photo provided by Kevin Dietrich



Kevin is comfortable in the wilderness. He grew up in Buffalo, New York, spending time along the shores of Lake Erie exploring with his father. During long sunny days they would hike and fish along streams, searching for crayfish, snakes, and turtles. Sometimes they would take an old wooden boat on the lake to fish and then cook their catches on the shore. Looking for more distant landscapes, the family vacationed at State Parks, camped, and searched for wildlife. On a family trip to Steamboat Springs, Colorado as a teenager, Kevin decided that he would move there as soon as he could. In 2002, Kevin drove across the country to make Steamboat his home.

The Colorado mountains and rolling foothills of the western continental divide lead to the beautiful Yampa Valley. Here, the Yampa River flows from the Flat Tops Wilderness, through Steamboat Springs, and onto drier lands to the west. Formerly the home of the Utes, and then early fur trappers and settlers, the Yampa Valley has kept its ranching heritage strong even after the Steamboat Ski Resort opened in 1963. Now, the resort draws visitors from all

over the world. The skiing originally drew Kevin's family to visit, and access to wild places made it perfect for him as an adult. As he began to see and photograph the moose, elk, black bears, foxes, deer and Sandhill Cranes that call the Yampa Valley home, wildlife photography took on an important role in his life.

More than any other animals though, Kevin wanted to see a mountain lion. He knew patience was key. For example, it took about 40 trips to a likely pond before he saw a moose. Most of the time, he would hike, search, wait, go back, hope for something exciting, and then do it all again the next day.

To find a mountain lion was going to take even more patience.

For years, Kevin would track in new snow where there were deer or a past lion sighting. Finally, there was a day he found mountain lion tracks heading onto private property and a rocky area that looked like a good den site. He went back again and again. There were more prints each time, but no big cats in sight.

One afternoon it stopped snowing and Kevin went out in the early evening. There were two sets of mountain lion tracks in the fresh snow walking along a path. He measured them against his hand thinking they were a little small. Because it had just snowed, they had certainly passed by recently, so he set out to follow.

Kevin walked a long way, imagining that the tracks would vanish without a sighting again. He trailed the prints around a bend in the creek, and there they were, two kits about two years old. They were off the main path and plowing through deep snow. With shaking hands, he lifted his camera. He only had about five seconds to take photos. It was getting dark, and the mountain lions were heading toward aspen trees away from him. Most animals turn to look at you one last time to be sure you aren't following them. Kevin was hoping these cats would look back, and they did. They both turned and looked right at him before vanishing into the aspen grove.



06

07

The two mountain lions were probably in their last year with their mother, who was likely nearby. Kevin learned later that they were traveling back and forth from a deer carcass. Newborn kittens are completely reliant on their mothers until they are about six months old and sometimes longer. When the kittens are between one and two years old, they start to become independent, learn to hunt, and are called 'subadults.' Sometime soon, the two lions that Kevin saw would leave to find a new area of their own.

Mountain lions have very large ranges, especially in drier areas. They are obligate carnivores, meaning they eat only meat. They will eat many different animals, but are very reliant on deer. Where the landscape is arid and can't support many deer, the lions need large ranges to find enough to eat. Where the landscape is lush with plants, there are bigger deer populations, more mountain lions, and smaller home ranges for the cats. This is important to understand because of the way our world is changing.

Global warming leads to more drought which changes the vegetation, the deer population that it supports, and the mountain lions that prey upon them. There is a growing tendency for deer to linger in agricultural and urban areas because people water and create greener landscapes. This encourages mountain lions to overcome their reluctance to be near humans. Where the deer go, the predators follow, and there are more conflicts between the big cats and people.

Mountain lions used to live in a wide range of habitats all over the western hemisphere. As settlers arrived in the New World and the human populations grew, mountain lions were pushed west in America and now live in about half of their historic range.

Mountain lions are ambush hunters. They stalk and hide in cover, and then chase their prey in open areas. These powerful animals can reach speeds of 50 mph, and can leap 40 feet. After killing an animal, they will move it to a safe place, eat their fill, and then bury the uneaten portion under leaves, sticks, plants or

snow. They return to this cache to eat for several days.

As a top predator, mountain lions help regulate their environment. They keep deer populations in control so that they don't overfeed, allowing more cottonwoods, cattails and wildflowers to grow along streams and rivers. This supports a biodiversity of pollinators, birds, and amphibians. They also tend to keep disease down in deer and elk populations. Those animals are easier to catch, so mountain lions hunt the weak, sick animals and the herd is healthier. The carrion they leave feeds scavengers like bears, coyotes and raptors. Protecting mountain lions and their wild ranges can help protect many other species of plants and animals and keep the whole system healthy.

After his first sighting of the young mountain lions, Kevin saw two more over the next couple of years. One lion was protecting a recent cache of food- an elk kill along the Yampa River. Kevin and his friend were exploring on a winter day, looking for eagles

who nest in the area. They noticed a lumpy pile of snow mixed with fur and settled on a high shelf across the river to watch and wait. After about 30 minutes, a large male mountain lion came strolling out from the brush to the buried carcass. It was about 10 feet long and 150 pounds.

Kevin was far away from this big cat and doesn't get close to the wild animals he photographs. Emphasizing the distance and story behind an image helps educate the public about safety around wildlife. Kevin also doesn't put out bait to attract wildlife, draw their attention to face the camera, or interfere with their activities. Some photographers aren't as ethical. There is a long tradition of hunting mountain lions with packs of hounds. These chases can go for 10 or more miles and be exhausting and dangerous for the lion and the dogs. Eventually the dogs chase the mountain lion up a tree to be photographed or shot by the hunter. When photographers share images of mountain lions snarling from trees, they were chased there by dogs.

While Kevin sat across the river watching the lion feeding over four days, the cat wasn't aware of him until a moment at the very end. Kevin had gotten closer after that first sighting, but was still on the other side of the river from the mountain lion. He watched it chase away birds and coyotes without ever going far from his meal. As evening approached, Kevin was laying in the snow taking photos. His hand shook the camera a bit, and light reflected off the lens. Right then, the mountain lion turned and looked directly at the camera. As soon as the sun set, Kevin packed up quickly and moved out, looking over his shoulder countless times.



River's Treasure by Kevin Dietrich

Mountain lions live in the Yampa Valley and all over western North America but are rarely seen. With motion activated wildlife cameras at people's homes and online sharing, we are getting more used to seeing these big predators pass by in the night. It's exciting to catch a glimpse of them living their lives alongside ours. Photographers like Kevin Dietrich who document their activities with respect are important to help us understand and appreciate these wild predators.

References and Further Reading:

About Mountain Lions, Mountain Lion Foundation

Colorado West Slope Mountain Lion Management Plan, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, 9/2/2020

Dietrich, Kevin, personal interview conducted with Jennie Lay and Jill Bergman, 6/29/2021 and personal email, 11/11/2021

Dietrich, Kevin, Natural Exposure website

Lion Country Part 1: When Mountain Lions Meet People, Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Lion Country Part 2: What We Know about Mountain Lions, Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Russell, John F., Local Photographer's Vision Captured in New Gallery, Steamboat Pilot and Today, 1/26/2021

State of the Mountain Lion, The Humane Society, 2018

Stoner, David, Mountain Lions in an Era of Rapid Climate and Land-use Change, Mountain Lion Foundation, recorded webinar, 11/18/2021

Studying Lions from Space as Climate Changes, UCAR Center for Science Education