

Aims to prove cougars still inhabit eastern U.S.

By SANDY ALEXANDER
SUN STAFF

John Lutz has spent 37 years looking for ghost cats.

Puma concolor is most often called a puma, cougar or mountain lion. But its more supernatural nickname seems fitting considering Lutz's quest: collecting evidence of the cats in the Eastern United States, from which they are believed to have vanished.

National and state wildlife officials say that native populations of cougars disappeared from the East because of hunting and development, except for a small number of Florida panthers, a subspecies. But Lutz has spent decades trying to prove otherwise.

"I'm convinced there are populations of Eastern cougars," says Lutz.

A slim, gray-haired man who oversees the truck section of the Baltimore Department of Transportation, Lutz, 61, has collected 5,300 reports of cougar sightings or tracks east of the Mississippi River since 1983. He fills out a form for each one and keeps them in two cabinets in his duplex in the Hamilton neighborhood of Baltimore. He also has more than a dozen binders full of news reports and a box of plaster paw-print casts.

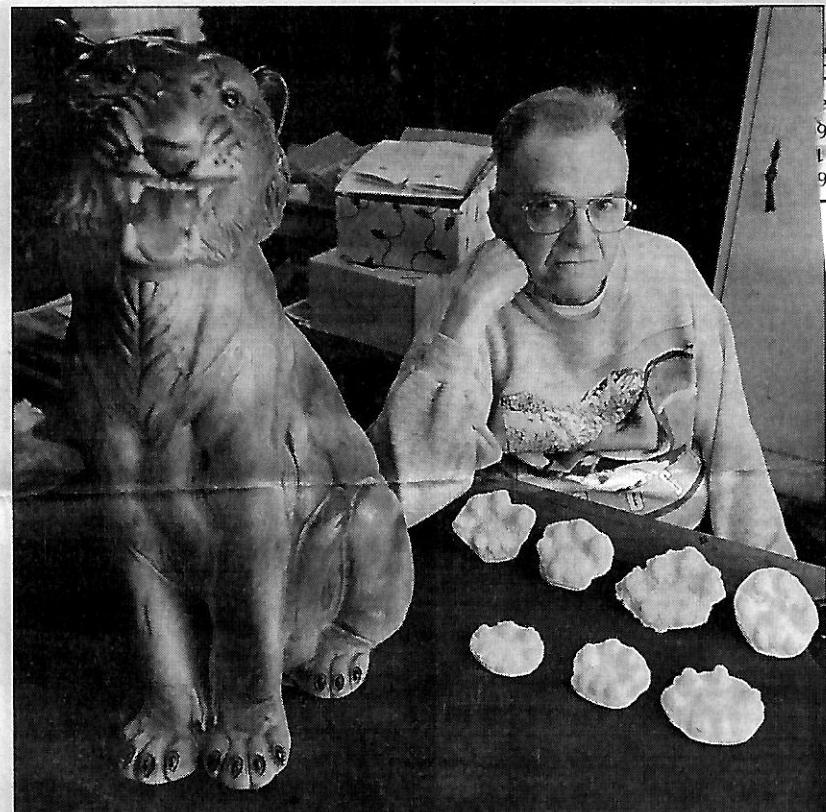
About 350 of the cougar reports are from Maryland, including 31 last year. Some are from areas around Loch Raven and Prettyboy reservoirs in Baltimore County, and more have originated in Garrett and Allegany counties.

Some people send photographs. A few catch the animals on videotape. Many claims lack hard evidence, but, Lutz says, when five or 10 sightings are reported within one or two square miles, "you can bet your bottom dollar there is a cougar inhabiting or roaming that area."

Still, Lutz says, state officials "are more or less at odds with us."

Cougars are essentially gone from Maryland and all of eastern North America, says Glenn Therres, associate director of the state Department of Natural Resources Wildlife and Heritage Service. "We have not been able to confirm a cougar ... since the end of the 1800s."

Therres says videotapes have been indistinct, and that people can be confused when catching a glimpse of an animal in the wild.



KARL MERTON FERRON: SUN STAFF

Quest: John Lutz's fascination with cougars began in 1965, when his first story as a reporter for a radio station was about a cougar sighting.

Also, his department hasn't found solid evidence, such as an actual animal.

"If we had a population of cougars, someone would have hit one with a vehicle," he says. It might be possible for someone to spot a released or escaped pet puma, Therres says, but he believes none are living here in the wild.

Undaunted, Lutz, with help from his wife, Linda, dedicates 20 hours a week to his pursuit. In 1983, the couple began the Eastern Puma Research Network. They have affiliated researchers in 17 states, publish a quarterly newsletter, and write reports and articles. They also go out in the field to investigate prints and sightings.

Most of their information has come from the 25,000 "wanted" posters they and their friends have distributed across the East. The posters request "information in cougar, mountain lion, puma, black panther sightings," and include a drawing that points out key puma features: a small head, rounded ears, steely gaze and long tail with a curling black tip.

Their pamphlet "All You Need to Know About the Eastern Cougar" says that cougars are 3 to 6 feet long, with a tail up to 5 feet long. They weigh 75 to 150 pounds, feed primarily on deer and vary in color from tawny to brown to

black. They are most active at night. They are not man-eaters, Lutz says.

"If they want to be seen, they will. If they don't, they won't," says Lutz. They avoid humans, although cougars in Western states have attacked livestock and pets.

Lutz's fascination with cougars began in 1965, when his first story as a reporter for radio station WFBR in Baltimore was about a cougar sighting on upper Gunpowder Falls. The animal was never found, but he asked state police and others to inform him of future sightings.

Lutz says he had seen live cougars twice. One sighting was while looking through a public telescope at the "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania," a 47-mile canyon on state parkland in Tioga County, and another was through binoculars in Carroll County.

He continues to be fascinated by the mysterious cats. He hopes people will continue to help him build his case by calling 410-254-2517 or sending e-mail to epuma@flash.net. When he retires, which he plans to do soon, he would like to write a book on the topic.

"They're sly, they're sure, they're the most adaptable animals on earth," says Lutz. "They're flesh and blood, and they do survive."