

Officials say cougar shot, killed near Wrangell

WRANGELL (AP) — A trapper shot and killed a cougar near Wrangell in what state officials say may be the first confirmed sighting of a mountain lion in Alaska.

Trapper Paul Matteoni said he thought he was shooting at a deer or wolf when he fired at the animal with green eyes peering at him in the dark outside his cabin last weekend.

"I just figured it's either venison or a wolf and shot it," Matteoni said. "I wasn't going to go chase it that night. I wasn't at all sure what I saw."

The next morning, Sunday, he found the carcass about 50 yards from the cabin on the nearby beach. He cleaned the animal and reported the kill to state game officials in town.

"He wanted to know if a varmint was shot if he could keep it," said Randy Timothy, a state

biologist in Wrangell. "He figured he'd skin it out and eat it."

But officials were unsure if that was legal. Bears shot out of season must be turned over to the state, but cougars are not listed in the state's game regulations, Timothy said Tuesday.

Matteoni voluntarily brought the carcass to town, and on Tuesday it remained in a freezer while officials tried to decide what to do with it. Timothy said members of two service clubs asked if it could be donated and stuffed for local display.

"Someone in Juneau a lot higher up than I am is going to have to make that decision," Timothy said.

The cougar, a female, weighed about 125 pounds gutted and measured 6 feet 9 inches from nose to the tip of its tale. Timothy said it was of normal size.

"It looked very healthy. It had a fair amount of fat on it and its teeth were in good shape," he said.

How it got to Wrangell Island is a mystery. There have been occasional sightings of mountain lions near Prince Rupert, British Columbia, about 220 miles south of Wrangell, Timothy said.

"There have been rumors of sightings. People thought they might have seen one a few years ago near Ketchikan. But apparently this is the only one that's been physically caught."

The cat could have come down the Stikine River from the mainland or crossed Wrangell Narrows in pursuit of a deer or moose. Coyotes and lynx have come to the island that way, he said.

Timothy doubts the animal was a pet. It lacked any identifying tattoo, had its claws and ap-

peared to be surviving well in the wild.

"Wrangell's so small that if someone had it as a pet everyone would have known about it," he said.

A week ago two teen-age boys reported to Timothy's office that they saw a cougar, but the report was not taken very seriously.

"We didn't leave the office and run right out and look," he said. "I guess it was the real thing."

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