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African Lion Spotted Along Alaska Roads

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HOMER (AP) — The moose and grizzlies at Denali National Park were definite highlights of Chris Winans' vacation to Alaska. But the animal he'll remember best is the lion that crossed the road last Friday in Cooper Landing.

The Kenai Peninsula is way, way north of the known range of mountain lions. But so what? Winans doesn't think it was a mountain lion, anyway. He's pretty sure he had a close encounter of the African kind.

"It really took my breath away," said Winans, 44, an Asbury, N.J., editor of an insurance industry newsletter. "I saw the whole thing in clear profile for two or three seconds. My first reaction was that it looks like a female African lion. My next thought was, that can't be up here.

"It's got to be a cougar or a lynx. But it was way too big."

Winans said the animal he saw crossing Snug Harbor Road on the south side of Kenai Lake was bigger than a Great Dane. He said it had an S-shaped tail, powerful rear legs and a small, catlike head. But he began to doubt his own memory when nobody believed him.

"It was like seeing a UFO," he said. "It definitely wasn't a moose."

OK, you're thinking, New Jersey. Great Danes, UFOs.

But the Department of Fish and Game is very interested.

It turns out that 10 days earlier, at least four other people reported seeing a lion along the Sterling Highway on the north side of Kenai Lake, not far from the Sunrise Inn in Cooper Landing. It was about noon; they were about 100 yards away. They, too, insisted they'd seen an African lion.

A state Fish and Wildlife Protection officer drove through the area after the July 11 report and saw nothing. End of subject — until Winans' report came in.

"With the second report, we began to think maybe there is a critter running around out there with a long tail," said Gino Del Frate, a Homer Fish and Game biologist. "We're not organizing a frontal assault at this

point. With the way summer vegetation is, we could spend days out there and never see anything. "The only thing we've done is look up in a book how much drugs it would take to immobilize such a cat."

There are inconsistencies. The first group reported a lion with a mane, while Winans said he thought he saw a female. But the observers agreed that the animal was on the wrong continent.

All of which means that, in addition to the usual bear jitters, Kenai Peninsula campers may soon fear getting eaten by a lion. But rumors of a big cat have yet to sweep through the mountain hamlet of Cooper Landing.

Speaking over the phone, local miner and sawmill operator Red Smith asked his family if they'd heard anything about a lion in the area.

"They're all shaking their heads and smiling," he reported. "We've seen some strange sights cross the road down here, though. My wife saw something she thought was a polar bear, and it turned out to be a great big wolf with a collar on it."

Mountain lions normally range as far north as the interior of British Columbia. The only cat native to the Kenai Peninsula is the lynx.

The only mountain lion ever confirmed in Alaska was shot and killed in the Southeast town of Wrangell in 1989. Biologists said it could have been an escaped pet, but more likely had wandered down the Stikine River from its normal range inland.

Three unconfirmed mountain lion sightings have been reported near Yakutat in recent years. One was reported near Haines in 1991, and last year a mountain lion was reported hunting caribou near the Beaufort Sea in the Canadian Arctic. About 1988, a tourist reported seeing a mountain lion on near Jean Lake west of Cooper Landing, said Fish and Wildlife Protection Sgt. Jim Cockrell.

North American lion populations have grown in the Lower 48 in recent years, and it's possible a young male has pushed as far north as the Kenai Peninsula, Del Frate said. If so, it would probably be a one-time occurrence rather than a range extension, biologists said.

Accounting for the presence of an out-of-Africa lion would be a little more difficult.

"Let's put it this way: If it's an African lion, it's not a range extension," said Bruce Dinnelford, a wildlife biologist for Fish and Game in Southeast Alaska.

A big male mountain lion could weigh as much as 200 pounds, while a female African lion would range from 330 pounds to 550 pounds, Dinnelford said.


An African lion — or even a mountain lion — could have escaped from captivity or been set free, biologists said.

"It could be somebody's pet who grew up on them," Del Frate said. "We deal a lot with animals released along the roadside by somebody who says, 'Here, now you're Born Free.' Though this would certainly be one of the more unusual cases."

Fish and Game is waiting to hear more reports of the "alleged cat." If there's an animal out there, biologists may make an effort to live-trap it as winter closes in, Del Frate said.

Winans, preparing to return to New Jersey this weekend, said he was just happy to hear that somebody else saw a lion in Alaska, too.

"It made me think I wasn't totally nuts," he said.



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