



**GRACEFUL HUNTER:** Cougars are one of the largest cats in the Americas, second only to jaguars.



# COUGAR TR

## Teens team up with wildlife biologists to learn about their wild cat neighbors

**A** cougar nicknamed Jane lies sedated on the snow-covered ground while biologists, middle and high school students, and community volunteers crouch beside her. The 41 kilogram (90 pound) cat has led the group on a wild chase through rough backcountry. After tracking it for miles while

lugging heavy packs of equipment, the students get down to business replacing Jane's old radio collar with a new one and collecting data on her physical condition. "To have a cougar lying right in front of you is so unreal. They are so pretty and intimidating at the same time. But when you touch their fur it's kind of like petting a big housecat," says 14-year-old Lizz Stewart.

Most people never have the chance to get up close and personal with

these wild animals. But for the last eight years, kids like Lizz who live in Cle Elum, Washington, have gotten to do just that as part of Project Cougars and Teaching (Project CAT).

Just an hour-and-a-half drive east of Seattle, the small town of Cle Elum has been swept up in a rapid urban expansion. "The area was suddenly discovered as a little wild haven and a big 6,000-acre destination resort moved in. That planted the seed for



**PAW PRINT:**  
This student has learned to identify cougar tracks—the first step to finding the cats.



**OUT ON A LIMB:**  
Cougars are great climbers. Researchers use this to their advantage to corner the cats in a tree.

# HACKERS

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For more information on Project CAT, check out this Web site developed by students from the Cle Elum-Roslyn School District: [www.projectcat.net](http://www.projectcat.net)

all sorts of new developments,” says Gary Koehler, a wildlife biologist at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife who helped launch Project CAT with the local school district. With students’ help, researchers hope to find out how cougars have been affected by this growth.

## ON THE PROWL

Cougars are found throughout the Western United States. The animals rely on stealth to hunt prey, like deer and elk. “Cougars are a stalking predator. They make their living by being secretive,” says Ben Maletzke, a graduate student at Washington

State University who assists in leading cougar captures.

To find the elusive cats, students and researchers pile into trucks or hop on snowmobiles and scout for fresh cougar tracks. Once they find them, they unleash dogs trained to sniff out a cat’s trail. The dogs pursue the cougar until it’s cornered in a tree, where biologists immobilize it with a tranquilizer dart. That gives the group about an hour to work before the groggy cat wakes up.

Under the guidance of Koehler and Maletzke, students determine whether the cougar is a male or a female and give it a name. They heft

the feline up to be weighed, collect blood and tissue samples, and record its length and *girth*, or the measure around its belly. Wielding a pincher-like tool called a *caliper*, the teens open the cougar’s mouth and measure the cat’s *gum recession*, or distance its gums have receded from the top of its sharp canine teeth. The size of the space between the teeth and gums helps determine the cat’s age—the larger the distance, the older the cougar. The final task is to outfit the cougar with a *Global Positioning System* (GPS) collar. The collar transmits a signal of the animal’s location every four hours.



**COLLARED:** Researcher Gary Koehler poses with a group he's led on a cougar capture.



**COLLECTING DATA:** Student Ruben MacKenzie (second from left) helps measure a sedated cougar.

## COMMON GROUND

The information and GPS data the kids and researchers collect reveal a lot about the lives of Cle Elum's cougars. By plotting the cougars' movements on computer-generated maps, students learn which areas the animals have staked out as their home turf and where the animals live in relation to humans. "You see that just about everywhere is some cougar's *territory*," says Lizz's classmate, 15-year-old Ruben MacKenzie. "Cougars walk right through peoples' backyards and [the residents] don't even realize it."

As urban areas expand, people and cougars are forced to share more and more of the same space. "In the West, there is a real concern about cougars and increased confrontation with humans," says Koehler.

Compared with other parts of the state, Cle Elum's cougars and humans have so far managed to get along without much conflict. Koehler believes that has to do with the fact that little hunting has left Cle Elum with a well-established cougar population. The older cats defend their terrain and prevent any new youngsters from moving in. These inexperienced juveniles are the ones that most often get in trouble with humans by nabbing pets or attacking livestock.

## LIVING TOGETHER

Through Project CAT, kids in Cle Elum now have a better understanding of the animals in their own backyards. Students have shared what they've learned from the cougar study at scientific conferences around the country. They've also presented their findings at school functions, to local civic organizations, and to homeowners at the new resort. "The students were the perfect ambassadors to educate their community about how to be good neighbors with wildlife," says Koehler.

Over the lifetime of Project CAT, nearly 50 cougars have been collared and monitored. Although the final cat

capture took place last summer, the program has paved the way for similar programs in other parts of Washington, says Koehler.

The project has left its mark on students too: Some have decided to pursue careers in biology and wildlife management. It has gotten others interested in becoming teachers and writers. Lizz says, "To me science meant you'd be shut up in a lab, but I discovered that being out in the woods is fun and you actually get to talk to a lot of people." Ruben adds, "It was a cool experience. It's amazing that scientists get to do this for a living." ❁

—Cody Crane

## it's your choice

**1.** Project CAT seeks to answer which of the following research questions?

- (A) How do cougars respond to expanding human development?
- (B) Why are cougars becoming endangered?
- (C) Is hunting the best way to manage cougar populations?
- (D) Are human-cougar conflicts on the rise?

**2.** GPS stands for \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) Ground Point Sensor
- (B) Global Positioning System
- (C) Grid Pattern Scale
- (D) Geographic Pocket Scanner

**3.** Cougars stake out an area of land to defend as their \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) ecosystem
- (B) biome
- (C) habitat
- (D) territory