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Sport hunter cougar kills reach record

Nearly 39,000 tags sold in Oregon last year; most hunters 'stumble' upon cats

By Mark Freeman
Mail Tribune

Sport hunters killed a record 284 cougars in Oregon last year, helping lead to the highest total mortality of cougars ever logged in the state.

The increase in sport-hunting kills occurred despite the 1994 ban on hound-hunting — which once was the most common form of cougar hunting — in part because more hunters in the woods now carry cougar tags, biologists say.

The 38,719 cougar tags sold in 2006 also were a record, as were 442 documented cougar kills overall for damage and human safety and by other means, such as poaching or roadkills, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"Our stats go back into the '70s and these are the highest we're ever recorded," said Ron Anglin, the ODFW's Wildlife Division administrator.

The sport-hunting harvest has increased while damage kills have declined slightly and human-safety and other reasons for dead cougars have held steady or slightly declined.

"We have a large, healthy cougar population and 38,000 people with cougar tags in their pockets," Anglin said.

The numbers, finalized Friday by the ODFW, startled some wildlife advocates such as Brooks Fahy of Predator Defense, a vocal critic of the ODFW and its bear and cougar policies.

Fahy noted that the overall cougar deaths in 2006 more than doubled those killed in 1994 when voters passed Measure 18, which Fahy panned as worthless.

The increases come while the ODFW projects that the statewide cougar population has increased from about 3,500 animals to more than 5,100 since 1994.

"It's incredible, and it's upsetting," Fahy said of the dead cougars. "I'd hope

these numbers upset the public and show them that, once and for all, Measure 18 is meaningless."

Sally Mackler, wildlife chairwoman for the Oregon Chapter of the Sierra Club and one of Measure 18's sponsors, said she believes the increased cougar killing here stems not because of the measure but because of a "dramatic overreaction" by the ODFW.

"Nobody could foresee the extensive and radical management changes that have taken place," Mackler said.

Before Measure 18's hound-hunting ban, cougar tags were limited to fewer than 600 annually statewide, and almost all hunting was with the aid of tracking hounds.

But after the ban went into effect, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission dropped the tag price from \$50 to \$10 and removed the cap on tag numbers.

Tag sales have grown exponentially since then. Now, the majority of sport hunters who shoot cougars do so while hunting deer, elk or other species and stumbling upon a cougar, Anglin said.

"It's not inconsistent with what we hear from hunters," Anglin said. "They're seeing cats when they're out in the woods. Fifteen years ago, we didn't see or hear about that like we are today."

Also, more hunters in recent years have begun targeting cougars in winter, Anglin said. They look for cougar tracks in fresh snow, then use predator calls to lure the cougar into range, he said.

Duane Dungannon, secretary of the Medford-based Oregon Hunters Association, said he believes hunters are targeting cougars more now than ever as sport-hunting pursuits extend year-round.

"I think folks are more willing to go out and hunt cougars because of the burgeoning population we have," Dungannon said. "And if you're going cougar hunting, the tag costs less than the gas."