



The Ferrum Nature Society Bulletin

Dedicated to the appreciation and conservation of our natural world

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Outings:

Moonlight hike

Sponsored by Ferrum Outdoors and led by Dr. Jim Bier. Night hike on Ferrum College Trails on Sunday, December 3. Meet at the Black and Gold Grill at 7:30 PM. Hot chocolate afterwards.

Winter bird count

Saturday, December 9. Help count birds in the morning as part of an annual survey. Lunch and bird netting afterwards. Meet at 9AM at Garber Hall Greenhouse.

Sky calendar:

Full moon December 4 is called the "Long Night Moon" or the "Moon Before Yule".

Planets - Jupiter, Mercury and Mars are clustered together before sunrise in the Southeast. Venus emerges in the Southwest later this month around sunset.

Summer solstice - The sun is furthest South this year at 7:22 PM on December 21.

Sirius - The dog star begins to climb in the sky this month. It is the brightest star in the winter sky, nipping the heels of Orion, the hunter.

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Make or break time for *Lycopodium* - ground pine

Seth Williamson, Slings Gap, Franklin Cty.

A week or so back, I saw a couple with plastic bags in a spot just off the Blue Ridge Parkway where I know there is a patch of *Lycopodium obscurum*, also known as ground pine or princess pine. At least, I think it is *L. obscurum* - there are several other species in that genus. Florists love this stuff and pay people to collect it. It is also sometimes used in Christmas decorations.

Ground pine is one of a number of creeping plant species that have adopted an interesting strategy to survive in the woods. Instead of investing heavily in wood for vertical trunks to get leaves as high as possible in the race for sunlight, *Lycopodium* and other similar species make do with low-light conditions in what would otherwise be the prime growing season, the summer. They have two main periods of heavy photosynthesis: in the spring, just before the trees leaf out, and in the autumn, just after the leaves have fallen.



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In both cases, the window of opportunity is brief. Photosynthesis, for practical purposes, ceases in winter, so *Lycopodium* needs: a) that brief period in early spring while the forest is still mostly bare but when it is warming up enough for a little photosynthesis, and b) the corresponding period in autumn when the leaves are down, but it is yet too cold. With the oncoming cold weather, I suspect the autumn window of opportunity will be closed before long.

Lycopodium reminds me of small-town retailers, for whom the entire year depends on the Christmas shopping season. Ground pine either makes and stores enough food during these two periods--or it doesn't. Because there is not a lot of photosynthesis going on when the trees are totally leafed out or in the dead of winter.

What's a Sauger? Corey Basham

Many fishermen, who often claim to be experienced and accomplished at the sport and hobby they so readily participate in, would be stumped when asked about the life history and feeding behaviors of the sauger (*Stizostedion canadense*). It can be assumed that many a fisherman has caught a sauger, sometimes known as a sand pike or jack salmon, and mistaken it for a young, skinny walleye due to its resemblance to this close relative of the

Sauger (*Stizostedion canadense*)



species. The sauger is a cylindrical-bodied fish that has two spiny dorsal fins with large black spots; this morphological feature being the best method of identification of the species. This fish is a native of southwestern Virginia and is most readily harvested in the Powell and Clinch rivers due to the sauger's preference for slow moving, cool riverine pools.

Mountain Cat Rising?

Ryan Cooper

The Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*) can be found from the Yukon Territory of Canada to the Southern Andes in South America. It has one of the largest ranges of any wild cat species. This is a cat with many names and is commonly called a Cougar, Panther, and Puma. Other less common names are Catamount, Painter, Deer Tiger, Ghost Cat, Mountain Screamer, Indian Devil, and King Cat, among others. The English language has over forty names for this cat alone.

Across its large range, the Mountain Lion has many different variations in color as well as size. The general color is tawny with black-tipped ears. Its sandy color seems to mock the deer that it preys upon. It is abnormal, but possible, to see a leucistic Mountain Lion. These animals are pale in color and sometimes even white, but are not considered albino. It is even more abnormal to see a dark brown puma with a pale underbelly. Interestingly, there has never been an account of a black, or melanistic, Mountain Lion, also known as a Black Panther; such a melanistic form occurs with the Jaguar of South America. In the northern parts of its range, the coat is usually thicker and slightly reddish-brown. In the southern regions, the coat has more of a bluish-gray coloring. The kittens usually have brown and black spots and rings around their tails that usually disappear within the first year.

The Mountain Lion is a solitary cat that generally preys upon a large range of other animals. Its primary food is deer, but it has been known to eat insects, mice, rabbits, and even some sheep and elk. An adult Mountain Lion can kill and drag prey up to seven times its own body weight. It tends to hunt alone and ambush prey from behind. The usual blow for the kill is a bite at the base of the skull to break the neck. After the kill, the Mountain Lion will bury or cover the carcass to protect it for a few days while it continues to linger in the area of the kill. Males will cover about one-hundred square miles when hunting while females only cover twenty to sixty square miles.

This animal is a secretive cat that tries its best to avoid humans. Many people consider Mountain Lions as pests and have driven them close to extinction in large parts of their former range. Recently, there have been attempts to save the Mountain Lion and their populations have rebounded almost everywhere. They are no longer a threatened or endangered species in many parts of their range. The places where they are still endangered include Florida and parts of the East Coast, including Virginia. Still, populations appear to be rebounding throughout the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia to Georgia. Sightings are increasing and the government is offering bounties for confirmed sightings.

Due to urbanization, the range of the Mountain Lion and humans is increasingly overlapping. It is even more noticeable in areas where there are many deer to be found. In more urban areas, Mountain Lions have been known to even prey on livestock, dogs, cats, and other pets that may be kept outside. The number of attacks on humans is also increasing.



Mountain lions can run as fast as forty-four miles per hour and jump about twenty feet horizontally or eight feet vertically from a standing position. They are even able to jump about twelve feet into a tree while carrying a deer. They have a very strong biting strength, much greater than any dog. They also have four toes and retractable claws like any other cat. North American Mountain Lions are larger and stronger than leopards but not quite as strong as a jaguar. The adult male can reach eight feet long and weigh one-hundred and fifty pounds. Females, on the other hand, reach about seven feet and usually do not weigh much more than seventy-five pounds. The closer a Mountain Lion is to the equator, the smaller it tends to be so the farther it gets north or south, they bigger to noticeably increase in size. The average lifespan is about ten years in the wild and it can grow to twenty-five years if in captivity.

To continue protecting these creatures, there are many laws regarding the hunting and killing of them. It is normally illegal to shoot a Mountain Lion except under special circumstances, such as in self defense. This magnificent animal is beginning to make a comeback in the areas it used to call home and government agencies and conservation groups are doing what they can to restore populations and remove them everywhere from the endangered species list.