The Eastern Panther is Not Extinct
by W. Austin Squires

There are still panthers in New Brunswick. This was made public by the Hon. R. J. Gill, Minister of Lands and Mines, in January, 1948. Naturalists had previously agreed that, except for a small population of a southern subspecies in Florida, the eastern panther had been exterminated at least sixty years ago. The last ones in southern Ontario and Quebec were killed before 1847 so it is not surprising that Charles G. D. Roberts’ references to panthers in New Brunswick were considered pure fiction.

This big cat in several subspecies and under many names formerly ranged from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Alaska to Patagonia. In the eastern forest it was usually referred to as the panther, painter or catamount. In Alberta and British Columbia the western race is called cougar, puma or mountain lion. The eastern race was found originally throughout the eastern United States being very common in Pennsylvania and New York. Further northeast it was very rare in Maine but no naturalist, until very recently, ever risked his reputation by stating that it was or had been in New Brunswick.

Yet it was present all the time, had undoubtedly been in this province before the first white man arrived, and is still there, probably more abundant than ever before. The animal has been so elusive that no naturalist ever saw one and the New Brunswick woodsmen, who have seen them often, usually call them Indian Devils or catamounts. Whenever a naturalist heard about someone seeing an Indian Devil he marked it down as another Canada lynx or perhaps a wolverine both of which are referred to as Indian Devils. Incidentally both of these are now much rarer in New Brunswick than the panther, the wolverine being almost undoubtedly extinct there.

Much of the credit for producing scientific proof of the survival of the eastern panther must go to Mr. Bruce Wright, Director of the Northeastern Wildlife Station at Fredericton. In the 1980’s he became very much interested in the stories he heard of encounters with big cats and Indian Devils and was finally convinced that many woodsmen had actually seen the eastern panther. Zoologists at Ottawa and Washington were very sceptical of his reports. If a panther had been seen in New Brunswick it must have escaped from captivity. Finally, in May 1947, Mr. Robinson, a guide who had reported panthers to a skeptical Game Division many times, showed Mr. Wright the tracks of an adult male, a female, and one cub in a family party not far from the new Pundy National Park and he was able to photograph them. The forepaw of the male measured four and one-half by five inches and the marks where the long tails had dragged in the snow were clearly visible identifying the animals as panthers, the only long-tailed cats which ever occurred in eastern North America. It was the morning after a snowstorm and the tracks were not more than seven hours old. Tracks were also found in mud in July, 1947, and plaster casts made from these were identified at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. This evidence of its presence in New Brunswick is sufficient even though no specimen is yet to be found in any museum collection.

This does not mean that none of these cats has ever been killed. Dr. Abraham Gesner stated in his history of the province published in 1847 that “the Felis concolor, panther, painter, or catamount — better known in the province as the Indian Devil . . . are very rare, yet sometimes a single skin is brought into the market”. This is a very definite statement but it appeared in a rare book seldom seen by naturalists.

About 1895 Mr. Frank Gibson of Springhill, near Fredericton, set a bear trap and caught an “Indian Devil”. The skin was used as a mat for several years and a number of witnesses will still testify to its tan colour and two- to three-foot tail.

The Saint John Telegraph-Journal for November 24, 1923, recorded the shooting of a panther in Northumberland County the previous week. Mr. Collingwood Fraser, foreman on a lumbering operation at the headwaters of the Sevogle River, saw what he took to be a wildcat. He fired and wounded it. Immediately it charged and was stopped at less than five feet when killed by a second bullet. Witnesses said that the animal measured about four feet in length with a tail nearly as long.

Evidence that other panthers have been killed in New Brunswick during the last fifty years is not so definite but these accounts suggest that several have been.
It leapt across the brook and while they watched a large cat with a long tail stopped on the farther bank.

One evening in June, 1947, a Saint John man driving to his summer home rounded a turn about ten miles from the city on the main highway to Fredericton—and could scarcely believe his eyes. In the middle of the road walking slowly across was a big long-tailed cat—a panther; and actually in the midst of a summer colony.

A forest fire near Lepreau in October, 1947, drove several species of wild animals out of the woods, among them two panthers. Three men including a game warden were within one hundred yards and in a position where they were able to identify them easily.

Shortly after the Hon. Mr. Gill announced that there were panthers in the province a woman telephoned Mr. Wright from Maugeville to tell him that one was crossing an open field there at that instant. When he reached the scene the panther, of course, was gone but its tracks were in the snow very plain to see.

The writer also saw what must have been a panther near Maquapit Lake, Queens County, in August, 1936. A large cat walked out of the woods at a distance of about three hundred yards and lay down at the side of a meadow. After a few minutes, becoming uneasy at the sight and sound of people in the distance, it slunk back into the woods.

An especially well-substantiated sight record of a panther refers to one seen about fifteen miles from Fredericton on the road to Minto on July 15, 1948. It crossed ahead of a car driven by Dr. Butterwick, Provincial Veterinary Pathologist, accompanied by Dr. Barette, District Veterinarian, and stopped at the side of the road. They halted their automobile within thirty or forty feet whereupon the panther bounded up a cutbank and disappeared into the woods. The tail was reported nearly three feet long and of uniform size throughout its length, the ears short and rounded, and the whole body heavy set especially in the frontquarters.

These are just a few examples selected from a great many reports of encounters between game wardens, guides, trappers, hunters, and ordinary citizens and these big cats in the New Brunswick wilderness, in farm-communities, and close to residential districts—only circumstance evidence until Mr. Wright produced photographs and plaster casts officially identified as panther tracks.

Here in New Brunswick, possibly overflowing into Maine and Nova Scotia, is the only known surviving population of the eastern panther, Felis concolor cougar Kerr, or another unnamed subspecies. Among all the reports referring to this animal there are no well authenticated accounts of attacks on cattle, horses or sheep. Deer kills have been noted but with the large deer population now in New Brunswick the panthers may furnish just the necessary controlling factor to prevent a population explosion in our deer herds and the consequent damage to the forests such as has occurred in other parts of Canada and the United States.

The panther is a very curious animal and will follow hunters in the woods. Its tracks have also been found where it has circled farm buildings during the night. It is mostly this curiosity and an indifference to man bred from the absence of hunting pressure which has given rise to so many sight records in New Brunswick. In the west the cougar is seldom seen unless treed by dogs and on the whole it is also very secretive in the vast travelling over many roads and paths unsuspected by its human neighbours.

The eastern panther has never proved a dangerous animal in New Brunswick in the past and the mere publication of its presence will not make it any more dangerous in the future. In this part of Canada it should be viewed as a subject for conservation and study. Apparently the only really successful way to hunt the western race is with specially trained dogs. If the New Brunswick government does not give the panther complete protection, hunting with dogs should be forbidden so that this remnant of a noble race of predators may have at least a sporting chance for continued survival.


About 1904 two trappers caught an unfamiliar animal and sent the skin to a fur company where it was identified as a cub cougar or mountain lion.

A clergyman residing in Havelock is said to have shot a large cat about twenty years ago which he identified as a panther. The skin was later sold to two American hunters.

A resident of St. George recently reported having seen two large cat skins with long tails hanging in front of a fur dealer’s shop in that town in 1935. He also told about two hunters who when hunting in October, 1947, halted near a small stream to watch for deer when they heard one running towards them.

A western panther or mountain lion. A full grown adult will have a total length of 6 to 8 feet or more and weigh from 100 to 200 pounds.

National Parks Service