

Rare Carnivore Observations 2014

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Abstract

In 2014, three reports of possible wolverines, and no reports of possible Canada lynx were received. Sixty-six reports of confirmed, probable, and possible cougars were received. Five verified and probable reports may represent a single cougar. For 56 reports where photo or field evidence was available, 3 (5%) were verified as cougar, 1 (2%) was considered probable cougar, and 52 (93%) were determined to be something other than cougar.

Methods

Observations of large carnivores, including timber wolf (*Canis lupus*), wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), and cougar (*Puma concolor*) were collected from WDNR personnel, other natural resource agency personnel, and members of the general public in 2014.

Observations of rare carnivores were mostly reported via the WDNR large mammal website (<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/mammalobsform.asp>), or were reported less formally via e-mail, phone call, or office visit. All observations were classified as "verified", "probable", "possible", or "not likely". These classifications were made by the reporting biologists or by the authors, based on field evidence when available, level of documentation presented by the observer, or presence of additional evidence. Animals were classified as adults if they appeared to be ≥ 1 year old, but among carnivores, could include younger animals because adult size was achieved by 6 to 9 months. Animals less than 1 year old were classified as juveniles.

This report does not include tracks of rare carnivores found on winter furbearer transects which are reported in the August issue of Wisconsin Wildlife Surveys (Dhuey 2014). Wolf observations are not included in this report, and are published along with other wolf monitoring data.

Results & Discussion

Wolverine – We received 11 reports of wolverine observations in 2014, compared to 6 reports in 2013 (Wiedenhoeft et al. 2014). Photos were submitted with one report (9%). The photos were not of sufficient quality to positively identify the species of animal in the photos, but based on what could be seen, the animal was not likely a wolverine. Descriptions provided were inconsistent with wolverine for 7 additional reports (64%). Fisher or woodchuck are suspected for these reports. For the remaining 3 reports (27%), descriptions provided were inadequate to either conclude that a wolverine was likely seen or to discount wolverine. These reports were considered possible wolverine observations (Table 1, Figure 1), but most, or all, are likely misidentifications of fisher, badger, and woodchuck.

Aubrey et.al (2007) found 12 documented records of wolverine occurrence in Wisconsin in the 1800's, 2 documented occurrences from 1900 to 1930, and no documented occurrences of wild wolverines since then. The most recent verifiable occurrence of wolverine in Wisconsin was bones found by Hartley Jackson in a cave in Richland County in 1920 (Jackson 1961). It's likely the bones had been there some time before being discovered by him. The most recent documented but unverifiable occurrence reported by Jackson was an account of a wolverine

trapped in Sawyer County in 1922. A wolverine escaped from a game farm in Marquette County in 2001 and the same animal was likely killed in a vehicle collision in Rock County later that year. Since this was an escaped game farm animal, it is not considered a documented record of a wild wolverine. Wisconsin DNR considers wolverine to be an extirpated species in Wisconsin (Watermolen 2011).

Lynx – Seven reports of lynx observations and 1 report of lynx vocalizations were received in 2014, compared to 9 reports received in 2013 (Wiedenhoeft et al. 2014). One report (12%) was verified as a bobcat based on photo evidence. Descriptions provided were inconsistent with lynx for the other 7 reports (88%). Most were likely bobcats, though some may have been housecats.

Cougar – A total of 285 reports of cougar observations, tracks, or other sign, with adequate location and date information, were received in 2014. In 2013, 240 reports were recorded (Wiedenhoeft et al. 2014). Additional reports lacked adequate information and were not cougar, based on submitted evidence (usually photos), so no further follow up was done. Those reports are not included here. Local DNR personnel are encouraged to conduct field checks when cougar reports are received in a timely manner, appear credible, and evidence is likely to still be present. We kept record of field checks when notified of them, but probably many more are done than those that are reported to us.

In 2014, 5 reports of cougar observations and tracks (2%) were verified or considered probable. Reports were verified by field checks to either locate tracks or verify location of photos. Reports where evidence was inadequate to verify as cougar but the description and evidence were most consistent with a cougar, were considered probable (Table 2, Figure 1).

A WDNR warden photographed cougar tracks in Bayfield County on January 1. This was likely the same animal that had been photographed in Bayfield County in late 2013.

In early September, a citizen visiting his recreational property in Lincoln County discovered a very clear photo of a cougar on his trail camera on the property. The photo had been taken July 30. A WDNR biologist conducted a site visit and verified the photo and the location. The location was about 125 miles southeast of the tracks in Bayfield County 7 months earlier.

Two Menominee Tribal Enterprise Forestry technicians reported observing a cougar on August 12 as they were working on the reservation. No physical evidence could be found to verify the observation, but based on their description and proximity to the animal, this is considered a probable cougar observation. The location was about 67 miles east-southeast of the Lincoln County photo taken 12 days earlier.

A hunter captured a photo of a cougar on a trail camera in Marinette County on September 1. A WDNR warden conducted a site visit and verified the photo and the location a few days later. The location was about 37 miles northeast of the Menominee County observation that occurred 19 days earlier.

A video trail camera captured video of a probable cougar on November 7 in Oneida County. The dark, night time video showed the animal briefly as it walked away from the camera and into brush. The video was not clear enough to positively confirm the animal was a cougar, but the long tail, size of the animal, and movement were all consistent with it being a cougar. The location was about 83 miles west-northwest of the Marinette County photo taken 67 days earlier.

No biological samples were available for genetic analysis from the above investigations. Considering the distances and time lapses between the probable and verified observations, it's possible just one cougar traveled through north central and northeast Wisconsin during 2014.

Sixty-one reports (21%) lacked adequate descriptions or evidence to determine species or rule out cougar, and were considered possible cougar (Table 3, Figure 1). Most probably represent misidentifications, but some possibly are cougar. Two of these reports could not be mapped due to lack of adequate location information but are included in the table. Lowest reporting rates were from the winter months, January through March. Reports were received from 37 counties with the highest number of reports from Bayfield and Marinette counties with 4 each. Photos were requested, but not received for 2 cases.

Two hundred nineteen reports (77%) were classified as not likely cougar. Field checks were conducted for at least 5 of these reports. Field checks revealed no evidence at one location, and verified large dogs, dog tracks, a housecat, and a cardboard box at the other locations. An additional 49 reports indicated photos were taken, and we requested the photos. Photos revealed 16 bobcats, 11 housecats, 6 cases of dog tracks, 4 dogs, 2 deer, 2 bear, and 1 each of bobcat tracks, coyote, fisher, bear tracks, and canid tracks. One photo was too unclear to positively identify but was not consistent with it being a cougar. Photos were not received for 2 of the requests, and descriptions were inconsistent with cougar. For 165 reports, no evidence was available, but descriptions provided were inconsistent with cougar.

Literature Cited

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Table 1. *Possible reports of wolverine in Wisconsin in 2014.*

Date	Number seen	Number tracks	Sec	Township	Range	County	Nearest Town	Agency¹
05/07/14	1		35	40N	8E	Vilas	St. Germain	Private
08/12/14	1		21	4N	16E	Walworth	Whitewater	Private
10/11/14	1		6	37N	13W	Washburn	Shell Lake	Private

¹Agency for whom observer works

Table 2. *Probable and verified reports of cougars in Wisconsin in 2014.*

Date	Number Seen	Number Tracks	Sec	Township	Range	County	Nearest Town	Agency¹
01/01/14		1*	19	50N	5W	Bayfield	Cornucopia	WDNR
07/30/14	1*		23	31N	4E	Lincoln	Merrill	Private
08/12/14	1		31	30N	18E	Menominee	Keshena	Menominee Forestry Dept.
09/01/14	1*		30	33N	21E	Marinette	Middle Inlet	Private
11/07/14	1		27	36N	7E	Oneida	Rhinelanders	Private

¹Agency for whom observer works

*Verified report

Table 3. *Possible reports of cougars in Wisconsin in 2014, by quarter.*

County	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Total
Adams	1	0	0	0	1
Bayfield	0	0	2	2	4
Brown	0	0	1	0	1
Clark	0	1	0	0	1
Columbia	0	0	0	1	1
Crawford	0	0	0	1	1
Dane	0	0	0	2	2
Douglas	0	2	1	0	3
Fond du Lac	0	1	0	0	1
Forest	0	1	0	0	1
Iowa	0	0	2	0	2
Iron	0	0	1	0	1
La Crosse	1	1	0	0	2
Langlade	0	0	0	1	1
Lincoln	0	1	1	0	2
Marathon	0	0	0	1	1
Marinette	1	1	2	0	4
Marquette	0	0	1	0	1
Monroe	0	0	0	1	1
Oconto	0	0	0	2	2
Oneida	0	0	2	0	2
Outagamie	0	0	0	1	1
Portage	1	0	0	2	3
Price	0	0	1	0	1
Richland	0	0	1	0	1
Rock	2	0	0	1	3
St. Croix	0	1	0	1	2
Sauk	2	0	0	0	2
Sawyer	0	1	0	0	1
Shawano	0	0	0	1	1
Taylor	0	1	0	0	1
Vilas	0	0	1	0	1
Washburn	0	1	2	0	3
Washington	0	0	0	1	1
Waukesha	0	0	0	1	1
Waushara	1	1	0	0	2
Wood	0	0	1	1	2
TOTAL	9	13	19	20	61

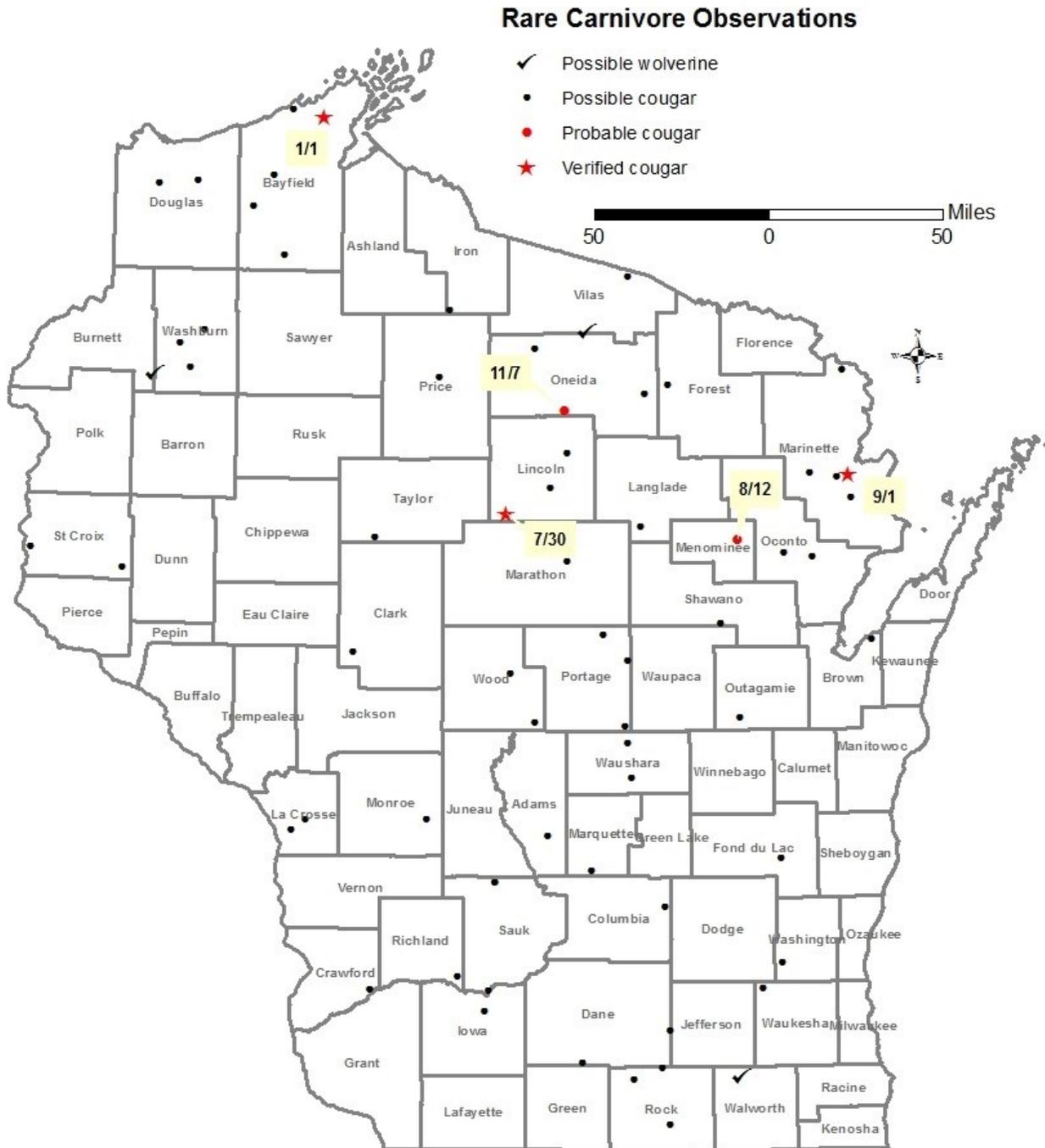


Figure 1. Reported possible, probable, and verified rare carnivore observations in Wisconsin during 2014.