

# Are cougars alive in New England?

Mass Audubon talk follows in footsteps of elusive predators

By Carrie Saldo

Special to Berkshires Week

LENOX — Avid Berkshire County outdoorsman Rene Laubach has not seen an Eastern Cougar in the wild. However, the director of Mass Audubon's Berkshire Sanctuaries, said he has heard many reports from others who claim to have seen the tawny colored cat in the area.

"There have been sightings reported in the Berkshires," Laubach said during a telephone interview. "Not at Pleasant Valley [Wildlife Sanctuary in Lenox], but I have talked to others who have said they have seen them elsewhere in the area."

The nation's largest cat is also known as the ghost cat, catamount, puma, painter, panther or mountain lion, and is extinct east of the Mississippi River, according to the United States Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"Once the most widely distributed land mammal in the Western Hemisphere, cougars have been eliminated in most of their native habitat," reads the departments' website. "Only western cougars still live in large enough numbers to maintain breeding populations."

But it doesn't take much scratching around on the internet to learn one of the animals was struck and killed by a car in June, 2011 in Milford, Conn. The accident, and the controversy over whether cougars in the east are legend or legitimate, made national news.

"Claims of Mountain Lions Roaming in Connecticut Drew Groans ... Until Saturday," read a headline in the June 12, 2011, edition of the New York Times.

Writer Robert Tougas will explore the debate between those who believe cougars inhabit the east and those who don't in his book "The Quest for the Eastern Cougar. Extinction



Associated Press photos

There have been reported sightings of the Eastern cougar in the Berkshires.

## If you go ...

**What:** Talk by Robert Tougas, author of 'The Quest for the Eastern Cougar: Extinction or Survival'

**Where:** Pleasant Valley Sanctuary, 472 West Mountain Road, Lenox

**When:** Tonight at 7:30

**Information:** (413) 637-0320, [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org)

or Survival," and will speak on the topic at the Pleasant Valley, tonight at 7:30.

(Laubach said a misprint in its catalogue stated the discussion time was in the morning. "We won't be venturing out to search for cougars, but it is in the evening," he quipped.)

Male cougars are transient animals. Wildlife officials said the cougar killed in Connecticut originated in South Dakota and was on the prowl for a mate.

"This is something we thought would happen, but it just surprised us because we didn't think it would so soon," said Tougas in an e-mail exchange. "Cougars travel widely in search of females, which are philo-



patric, or faithful, to home birthing ranges; they don't disperse, and the males will keep going in search for them and

new territory."

DNA evidence taken from scat supports that provenance, he said.

"DNA from places such as New York's Lake George region and Michigan map out the route of the cougar on his way to Connecticut," he said. "These tested scats match with the cougar killed in Milford, or so they claim — but some skeptics have shown otherwise — both in inconsistencies in testing and in the improbability of the cougar's route."

There are a number of biologists and conservationists who disagree with the department's finding, according to Tougas, and it is a point he explores in his book.

He pointed out that members of the wildlife community in Greenwich, Conn., believe there is a "resident population of undetected cougars in the Northeast."

A photograph of a man with a dead cougar taken in Vermont in 1881 is the last documented killing of the animal in the east. The last cougar killed in Massachusetts was killed in 1858 on Mt. Tom in Easthampton, and that cat is on display at the Arcadia Sanctuary. But Tougas says it is likely the cat roamed into Hampshire County from Berkshire County.

While Tougas explained that he sides with the Department of Fish and Wildlife's finding, he does hold out "hope of potential recovery of the species" in the east.

"Cougars have been appearing further east each year," he said. "...Young males leave their birth sites, avoid other males, and search for females where they establish a home range overlapping with one or more female."

Given the differences of opinion over whether the cougar is extinct in the east, Laubach said he is eager to hear Tougas' presentation.

"I am looking forward to learning along with the crowd," he said.



Carrie Saldo can be reached via her website, [www.carriesaldo.com](http://www.carriesaldo.com)