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MNR has had 'unconfirmed' sightings

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has no confirmed evidence there are cougars in the Halton Hills area, but said there have been reports of sightings here.

Pisapio said there were a couple reports of cougar sightings in Halton Hills last year, but no confirmed evidence of an actual cougar, and over the last several years there have been reported cougar sightings in Halton Region.

Again, Pisapio stressed, none of those reports have been confirmed as cougars, but he said in the Ministry's Aurora District— which includes Halton Region the GTA and Peterborough— he said there is "some evidence of cougars in the Peterborough area."

"We believe they are zoo or pet animals that have escaped or been released," said Pisapio.

Pisapio said of the reported cougar sightings the MNR receives a percentage in the high 90s "are known to be misidentified" as dogs, deer and coyotes.

But a four-year study by the Ministry has put to rest all doubt that the big, reclusive cats prowl the province's wilderness.

"Cougars have been here all along... we are collecting additional information about them now," said Rick Rosatte, a senior research scientist in Peterborough. More than 30 pieces of evidence have been collected, including photos of tracks, DNA and scat (excrement) samples that verify the big cat's presence.

Of the roughly 2,000 reported sightings

in the province since 2002, very few have been confirmed by track marks or DNA. Ontario's original population was thought to have been hunted out of existence in the late 1800s. The last cougar shot here was found in 1884 near Creemore, south of Collingwood.

The Ministry study began in 2006 and had three phases— investigating potential sightings, examining tissue, scat, or DNA, and setting up cameras across the province including at Kenora, Lindsay, and Sault Ste. Marie, where the last confirmed sightings occurred.

"Were they always here? Are these native cougars? Are they coming from the west? Or are these released captive animals?" said Rosatte. "It's intriguing."

Rosatte interviews people who think they've spotted a cougar, and sets up cameras when it sounds promising. But there have been no photos yet.

Stuart Kenn, president of the Ontario Puma Foundation, which has been tracking the elusive animal for 30 years, estimates there are 550 cougars in Ontario. He said there appears to be a cougar corridor bordered by Ottawa, Peterborough and Owen Sound to the south and North Bay, Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie to the north.

Anyone who sees what they believe is a cougar is asked to report it to the MNR at 905-713-7402 and provide any photos of the animal's tracks, or the animal itself (if it's safe to get one).

—With files from Torstar News Service

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