

Cougar 'possible', says MNR

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fore," said Bourgeois, who thought it was great he had the chance to see the cat.

"He wasn't threatening at all," he said. The sighting was reported to the Ministry of Natural Resources.

The most recent sighting of a cougar is the third *The Independent & Free Press* is aware of in Halton Hills in about 15 months.

On March 28 Georgetown resident David Wright had to slam on the brakes in his SUV when a big cat, he said was either a cougar or puma, ran across Ninth Line about a kilometre north of Steeles Ave. Back in February 2011 Tom Prong of Georgetown saw a big cat that looked a lot like a cougar running across the road in the same area on Ninth Line.

The May sighting wasn't the first time employees at Sheridan have seen a cougar in the area. They thought they may have photographed cougar tracks in April in the same field where Bourgeois saw the cougar and another employee believes he saw a cougar last summer.

However, John Pisapio, wildlife biologist with the MNR, has seen the photos of the paw prints and says they "definitely are not cougar prints." He said they are tracks of either a dog or coyote.

Pisapio said the MNR has received a "number of reports" of cougar sightings in Halton Hills in the past year, "mostly around Norval."

"There has been no confirmation of a cougar or hard evidence of a cougar in this area," said Pisapio. But he added a couple of the sightings in the area are convincing, and its "entirely possible" there could be a cougar.

"When we get a cluster of reports that indicates some elevated probability there might be a cougar around," said Pisapio.

Based on what the MNR knows from other areas of Ontario where there is evidence confirming a cougar, Pisapio said it "often includes the determination it's an escaped or released animal" which could also be the case here.

If the MNR had some of the animal's scat (feces) or hair it could be analyzed to determine if it's of South American origin, indicating it's not a native Eastern cougar.

Pisapio said there have been confirmed



Chris Bourgeois who works at Sheridan Nurseries in Norval is convinced he saw a cougar at the farm last month. Paw prints (inset) found in the same area are not those of a cougar according to an MNR official.

Top photo by Ted Brown



sightings of native cougars in Minnesota and other mid-western states so it's also possible they could be found in Ontario, or there could also be a genetic mixture of South American and Eastern cougars in the province.

Ontario's original cougar population was thought to have been hunted out of existence in the late 1800s.

Pisapio said the majority of cases of cougar sightings are actually misidentifications of deer, coyote, dogs and even house cats.

He said if anyone comes across a cougar they should never run because that could elicit the animal's chase response. He said the person should stand their ground and do whatever they can to let the animal know an approach isn't welcome, then back away slowly.

The MNR is investigating for the presence of cougars in Ontario. Pisapio said there is evidence of cougars in northwest Ontario and in Manitoba there is a viable population—the closest known Canadian source of cougars that could migrate to Ontario.

He said the MNR is interested in hearing from people who believe they've seen a cougar and "it's very helpful if the reports are as immediate as possible."

Anyone who sees a cougar is asked to call the MNR at 905-713-7402.

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