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SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

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Three mountain lion kittens born in the Santa Monica Mountains; new male lion collared in the Santa Susana Mountains


(Thousand Oaks, CA) Three mountain lion kittens were born last month in the Santa Monica Mountains. The only previous documented litter of mountain lion kittens was born in the summer of 2004. The kittens were found on May 26th by National Park Service researchers just south of Peter Strauss Ranch off of Mulholland Highway. Kittens P17 and P19 are females, and P18 is a male (P stands for Puma, another name for mountain lion, which is also the species' genus – *Puma concolor*).

Wildlife researchers intensively monitored P13, the kittens' mother, throughout the spring, after GPS tracking revealed that she and P12, a collared male mountain lion, spent several days in close proximity in late January. Adult mountain lions rarely interact with each other except to mate and during conflicts over territory.

Each mountain lion kitten has been implanted with a tracking device that will allow researchers to follow the kittens' movement. This is the first urban mountain lion study that has had the opportunity to track mountain lion kittens from such a young age.

National Park Service researchers will study the new litter to see if the male mountain lion kitten will attempt to disperse to more expansive habitat when he matures, and if the females will have litters of their own in the future. The litter of kittens is significant in other ways as well. P12, the unconfirmed father of the kittens, is genetically different from the other mountain lions in the Santa Monica Mountains. He made the only documented successful mountain lion crossing across Highway 101 in spring of 2009 to enter the mountains, and it is possible he came from another region, bringing new genetic material with him.

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The kittens will face many challenges as they mature. The habitat in the Santa Monica Mountains is robust, and suitable for hunting and reproduction. However, the limited amount of open space, and lack of wildlife crossings that allow for safe passage to other wild areas to the north and west can create conflicts over territory and result in inbreeding within the confined mountain lion population.

In another important development in the mountain lion study, P16 was also added to the research study in May. P16 lives in the Santa Susana Mountains off of I-5. The study hasn't followed any mountain lions in the Santa Susana Mountains in six years.

P16's movements will be studied to see if he stays in his current location, or attempts to cross a number of the major and minor highways to move north into national forest land, or south into the Santa Monica Mountains. Researchers will be particularly interested in a potential crossing of the Santa Clara river valley and Highway 126, potentially less of a barrier to wildlife than freeways like 101 and 118. This connection across Highway 126 is a critical step between the Santa Monica Mountains to the south, and large, healthy mountain lion populations to the north in Los Padres National Forest.

Research in the Santa Monica Mountains reveals that the male mountain lions frequently travel the entire length and breadth of the Santa Monica Mountains from I-405 at the east end of the park, to the agricultural areas in Camarillo to the west, and from the Pacific Ocean and Malibu to the south to the 101 freeway to the north, which acts as a barrier to further travel. From these borders created by roads or development, they often turn around and head back into the mountains, unwilling to attempt a crossing to other wildlands in the Simi Hills, Santa Susana Mountains, and ultimately in Angeles and Los Padres National Forests.

The National Park Service mountain lion study started eight years ago in July, 2002 with the initial collaring of P1. Since then, researchers have tracked 19 mountain lions. Currently, the study monitors six working GPS collars on adult mountain lions, as well as the three new kittens that are monitored by vehicle or on foot using VHF transmitters. This is the largest number of mountain lions ever followed at one point in time during the study. The study data has also informed project proposals currently in progress to establish a safe and effective wildlife crossing point under Highway 101 in the wildlife corridor near Liberty Canyon road in Agoura Hills.

The study has received a variety of federal, state, grant, and donation funding over the past eight years. It last received funding in 2008, and the National Park Service and its partners are actively working to secure additional funding to keep the project going past 2010.

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