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## Cougar expert gives talk at Hal Holmes

By MATT CARSTENS staff writer  
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Carnivore research scientist Brian Kertson gave a presentation at Hal Holmes Center about his studies on cougars in Western Washington.

University of Washington

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife carnivore research scientist Brian Kertson isn't one of those spreadsheet biologists — he likes to get his boots dirty.

So for most of the year, you can find him on the western slopes of the Washington Cascades, capturing, tagging and tracking his favorite big cats — cougars.

At the moment, Kertson is in the second phase of a cougar tracking study. He's tracking where cougars live, where they go and whatever demographic information he can get his hands on. He said he is particularly interested in the how the carnivores interact with the Wildland Urban Interface — or WUI.

He spoke at a Kittitas County Field and Stream Club on Monday at the Hal Holmes Center.

Kertson showed maps with a line tracing the border of where wildland bumps up against residential development, and overlaid yellow dots where cougars with GPS tracking collars had checked in.

"These collars are fantastic when they work," Kertson said with a laugh. "When they work, all the mysteries of the universe are revealed to you — it is glorious and magical and wonderful — but they fail a lot, and at \$3,500 a pop, it's more than a little bit maddening."

Despite some issues he has, Kertson said he usually gets a lot of useful data, though as a scientist, he said it could always be better.

Kertson showed the packed audience at Hal Holmes a series of maps overlaid with cougar locations, from more vegetative places like North Bend and Duvall, as well as much more urban environments like the city limits of Issaquah.

When cougars come into environments like that, they tend to only move long distances through neighborhoods and streets at night, despite not being nocturnal animals by nature. Kertson showed how the patterns on one map helped him find a mother cougar's den. The clumps of yellow dots tend to be kill sites, he explained, where a cougar will find its prey and then stay there to eat.

When a female gives birth to a litter, the land she roams shrinks drastically, and the map showed how the cougar would only venture out a mile or two to hunt, and then return frequently to the den to nurse her young.

## **Interactions**

The bulk of Kertson's research revolves around gathering population and interaction data, and figuring out how to use that information for the game management plan moving forward. When a cougar sighting is reported, Kertson goes out to investigate, but said it can be anything from a golden retriever to a cow. To date, it is an actual cougar about 14 percent of the time.

Kertson's findings show that younger cats tend to use residential areas more than older cats, but all in all, cougars only spend around 16 percent of their time in areas with some amount of residential development.

"It's extremely variable," Kertson said. "Some cats use them a lot, some don't use them at all."

Kertson said his research asks how humans can manage cougar populations to meet objectives and minimize interactions, but at the same time let cats be cats.

"I'm not ready to answer that question here tonight," Kertson said.

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**Matt Carstens**