

## Kitty caught loitering

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**By Eric Barker of the Tribune**

**Game officials are able to tranquilize, remove adult cougar that was hanging around Safeway parking lot**



Idaho Fish and Game officer Mark Hill loads a tranquilized cougar into a transport box after the cat...



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A young adult cougar was safely captured in the parking lot of the Lewiston Safeway store after a wildlife biologist shot the 80- to 100-pound male with a tranquilizer dart Wednesday.

Officials from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game are now seeking a zoo or research facility that is willing to take the animal.

"By policy, once they have been exposed to people that is really the only option to euthanasia," said Jay Crenshaw, regional wildlife manager for the department at Lewiston.

The animal was spotted hiding behind landscaping bushes on the west side of the parking lot around 3:30 p.m. Fred Coates, a Safeway employee, said someone working on a landscaping crew asked him if there were any animals living in the bushes because there was a long tail sticking out of one. He went to investigate and saw the cougar.

"I looked down and sure enough he's a mountain lion," said Coates. "His paws were huge."

Coates returned to the store and phoned authorities.

Chantel Kuntz, who also works at the store, went to take a look as word was circulating about the big cat's presence. It was well hidden and Kuntz got closer than she wanted.

"I was probably 5 feet away from it. It was crouched down," she said.

Lewiston police officers arrived a short time later, followed by officers from Fish and Game. They worked to keep people away from the cougar while formulating a plan to remove the wayward animal. For about two hours, the cat stayed crouched behind two small bushes and with its back against a fence that runs along a ledge on the west side of the parking lot. Some shoppers exited the store and got in their vehicles seemingly unaware there was a cougar less than 70 feet away.

As time passed, a small crowd gathered to watch but the cougar remained still and nearly invisible. The white around its nose could be seen between the bushes but its body remained hidden.

Crenshaw and wildlife biologist Clay Hickey soon arrived with a dart gun and tranquilizing drugs. Hickey approached the animal from behind and shot it in the rump. The cat jumped to its feet but didn't run. It slowly settled down and went to sleep.

After about five minutes Hickey moved in to investigate and signaled to other Fish and Game officers it was safe to approach.

"Pretty cool, nice job, well done," said Crenshaw.

As they lifted the animal from the bushes, exposing it for the first time, onlookers began to clap. Once the animal was placed in a transport box, the crowd quickly dissipated. Crenshaw said the capture operation worked perfectly.

"Things went very smoothly. It was hit the first time, it was anesthetized and on the ground in five minutes."

Senior Conservation officer Mark Hill said it is rare for cougars to be in town. He estimated they are found in Lewiston every four or five years on average. A woman reported seeing one walking late at night in the Reno Addition about three weeks ago. Hill said there is no way to know if it is the same animal.

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