Mountain Lion Sighting Operating Procedure

204.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The San Mateo Police Department is occasionally called upon to respond to the report of a mountain lion. These sightings are common in urban neighborhoods that border heavily wooded or mountainous areas populated by deer, the common prey for mountain lions. Therein lays the inherent need for this agency to establish a protocol regarding our initial response to these incidents with the ultimate goal being to uphold the safety of the community through our efforts to mitigate a potentially dangerous situation. By establishing and following this protocol, our agency will aim first and foremost to ensure the safety of the general public as well as responding police personnel.

Additionally, this protocol will establish the manner in which our agency will work in cooperation with the City of San Mateo Communications Manager and the Department of Fish and Wildlife to keep the public informed of these incidents as needed and provide our citizens with the information they need to safeguard their homes and families from a potentially dangerous wild animal.

204.2 RESPONSE PROCEDURE

The following procedures are in place to guide SMPD responders during their INITIAL response to the report of a mountain lion.

The California Fish and Wildlife Code 4800 states that a mountain lion is a specially protected mammal under the laws of California and therefore, it is unlawful to take, kill, injure, possess, transport, import, or sell any mountain lion unless it can be determined that the killing, taking, or injuring of the animal was in self-defense or in the defense of others. In our response to these incidents, every reasonable precaution will be taken to prevent injury or death to the animal. Bear in mind, the mere presence of a mountain lion in an area frequented by humans does NOT make the mountain lion an immediate threat. However, nothing in this protocol shall preclude a member of this agency from using deadly force should they perceive that the mountain lion presented an immediate and imminent threat of great bodily injury or death to themselves or others.

(a) **Initial Response Considerations and Role of Police**

- Presume any sighting to be initially valid and coordinate police response by evaluating best course of action to best protect the public as first priority, as well as the health and wellbeing of the animal.
- Considerations include:
    - Time of day
    - Medical needs either reported or implied
    - Location and potential need for perimeter containment of the animal without undue risk to responding officers
    - Pedestrians, schools, or children in the vicinity
    - Consider need to immediately evacuate / lock down nearby facilities / residences

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department

- Evaluate immediate need for rapid notify / neighborhood alert for shelter in place
- Consider use of vehicle PA systems as means of immediate notification or door to door canvass of involved neighborhood
- Secure the area of the incident or encounter
- Ascertain potential for any existing or immediate threat

- Maintain perimeter of no less than one city block or larger depending on area and time frame until immediate threat is mitigated or resolved
- Notify Watch Commander
- Notify Department of Fish and Wildlife (DPW)
- Consider use of standard ICS depending on nature and complexity of the event, need for additional responding resources, and potential media response
- Consider and coordinate the need for air support, such as Air 1, CHP, etc.

(a) **If Animal is Still Present and Under Police Observation**

- Officer(s) with visual of animal shall keep officers on scene informed of animal's behavioral status to ascertain what if any immediate threat it represents to public and officers on scene.
- **IMMEDIATELY notify DFW via Dispatch to initiate their response to the scene and notify On Call Command Staff Member.**
  - **** If DFW response is delayed assistance from Palo Alto Animal Services may be possible dependent on permission from CDFW and an authorized P.A.A.S. Animal Control Officer is available to respond.**
- **Acceptable Behavior –** deemed as natural, no unprovoked aggression from animal towards humans
  - Retreats or startles at sight of humans
  - Appears curious but makes no physical advance towards humans
  - Appears to be trying to return to natural habitat
- **Unacceptable Behavior –** deemed as unnatural, unprovoked aggression or repetitive acts of nuisance or damage to personal property including domesticate animals.
  - Predatory behavior towards humans, stalking, aggressive posturing
  - Animal continues to disturb, raid, or investigate humans or their residences despite presence of humans
  - Animal displays lack of fear of humans by aggressively approaching or failing to retreat when humans make noise or take their own aggressive actions
- **Once the animal's behavioral status has been determined,** officers should endeavor to:
  - Maintain police control and security of the incident location until immediate threat is mitigated or resolved

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department

- Coordinate via PIO for potential need of a safe media staging area
- Evaluate potential need for SHELTER IN PLACE or similar notification to be done via Rapid Notify/Nixle in a minimum 1 mile radius, which MUST include Command Staff and City Officials if outside BOP. If not, notification shall be issued to Command Staff and City Officials as soon practical once BOP expires.

(a) **After Actions for Police on Scene**

- Gather and seize evidence needed to confirm or deny sighting
- Photograph any physical evidence (IE dead deer carcass, footprints, property damage, etc.)
- Collect all available witness statements
- Notify SMPD Press Information Officer
  - Notify Fish and Wildlife Bay/Delta Region 3 Information Officer
  - Notify San Mateo County Vector Control
- Coordinate with Fish & Wildlife, Park & Rec, Public Works, or additional related agencies regarding the potential need to close open spaces or post alert flyers in the area
- Follow up any prior Rapid Notify or similar neighborhood alert with informational "all clear" message to neighborhood
- A Nixle/Twitter City Wide Alert will be done as soon as practical and outside the BOP to notify the community and media of a **Confirmed Sighting**, **Human Encounter**, or **Mountain Lion Attack**, unless ACTIVE and ONGOING threat to human life exists to justify issuance of the alert within the BOP.

204.3 COMMUNITY AND MEDIA NOTIFICATIONS

For the purpose of this section, we will use four (4) different definitions to be used when classifying a mountain lion event in order to guide our after actions in regards to how and to what extent this agency will notify the community and the media AFTER our initial response and containment to a report of a mountain lion. Additionally those notifications should be coordinated with the City Communications Manager when possible.

For clarification, this protocol herein will refer to the "Blackout Period" (BOP) of 2300 to 0600 when unless exigent threat to life exists, NO social media, Nixle, or Rapid Notify messaging will be issued.

The 4 classifications to be considered following a mountain lion event are **Unconfirmed Sighting, Confirmed Sighting, Human Encounter,** and **Mountain Lion Attack.** Each situation creates their own challenges and considerations in regards to proper notifications.

In all the below circumstances, the PIO or their representative should immediately coordinate their potential release of information to the public with the **Fish & Wildlife Bay/Delta Region 3 Information Officer**, the **City of San Mateo Communications Manager**, and **San Mateo County**

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department

Vector Control. In all instances of Bear in mind in many of these incidents history has shown that Fish & Wildlife will often prefer to be the main point of contact for the media and thus, this agency's primary responsibility will be to notify the public in the form of an informational safety message. In addition, any press or public release of information by this agency should always include safety recommendations consistent with those that at www.dfg.ca.gov.

Lastly, given the location of our wooded areas, the PIO should also coordinate any release with neighboring police agencies if the need exists.

Nothing in this protocol should preclude this agency from determining the best course of action is not to alert the public or the media after consideration of the facts for any alleged mountain lion incident.

- **UNCONFIRMED SIGHTINGS**

These events are defined as reported mountain lion sightings that lack physical or circumstantial evidence and/or statements from witnesses that, when analyzed in their totality, do not allow this agency the reasonable ability to either confirm or deny the sighting. When considering the necessity and means chosen to alert the media and the public to these events, these incidents must be taken on a case by case basis. **Unconfirmed Sightings** should NOT be confused with those incidents whereby the totality of the evidence tends to indicate the reasonable likelihood that the sighting was NOT valid and thus, public notification is not necessary. However, when the evidence tends to indicate the reasonable likelihood that the sighting was valid, it should be the intent of this agency to err on the side of caution and instead treat the incident as a **Confirmed Sighting.** For **Unconfirmed Sightings**, the P.I.O. or their representative shall consider the following means of alerting the public, but should do so based on the circumstances of the alleged incident itself:

- **SMC Alert** in the specified neighborhood and a minimum ½ mile radius
- **Twitter**
- **Next Door** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area
- **Rapid Notify** or **Nixle 360** in specified neighborhood
- **Nixle** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area
- **City Website** posting coordinated with City Webmaster
- **SMPD Blog** at sanmateopd.org
- **Full Press Release** to local press contacts (Should only be considered in instance of Unconfirmed Sighting in area of prior Confirmed Sightings)
- **CONFIRMED SIGHTINGS**

These events are defined as reported mountain lion sightings whereby evidence or statements from witnesses indicate that there is a reasonable likelihood that the incident occurred. By nature these events represent the immediate need for this agency to alert the public with public safety as our first priority

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department

For **Confirmed Sightings**, the P.I.O. or their representative shall consider the following means of alerting the public and should complete any and all public and media alerts **on the day of or upon expiration of the BOP, to include any schools, dog parks, etc. within the immediate mile radius of the sighting.**

- **Notification of Command Staff and City Officials via Nixle**
- **SMC Alert** in the specified neighborhood and a minimum 1 mile radius
- **Twitter**
- **Next Door** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area
- **Rapid Notify** or **Nixle 360** in specified neighborhood
- **Nixle** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area
- **City Website** posting coordinated with City Webmaster
- **SMPD Blog** at sanmateopd.org
- **Full Press Release** to local press contacts as soon as practical.
- **HUMAN ENCOUNTER**

These events are defined as reported mountain lion sightings whereby the animal and a human had some form of direct interaction, typically including eye contact, whereby the animal displayed a visible physical reaction to the human in the form of either **acceptable** or **unacceptable behavior**, BUT NOT including human to animal physical contact. A human encounter incident is best defined as a **Confirmed Sighting** that included human-to-animal interaction. Given that mountain lions are naturally adverse to humans, this type of incident is elevated beyond that of a **Confirmed Sighting** in regards to the urgency for this agency to alert the public. Therein lays the more immediate need to release information regarding the event to the media and general public. That being said, the totality of the evidence for any reported **Human Encounter** should still meet the reasonable likelihood standard set forth in this protocol for a **Confirmed Sighting.**

For **Human Encounters**, the P.I.O. or their representative shall consider the following means of alerting the public and should complete any and all public and media alerts in the time frame specified below:

<u>To Be Done Immediately:</u>

- **Notification of Command Staff and City Officials via Nixle**
- **City Website** posting via City Webmaster
- **SMC Alert –** in the specified neighborhood and a minimum ½ mile radius
- **Next Door** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area
- **Rapid Notify** or **Nixle 360** in specified neighborhood
- **Nixle** in the specified neighborhood and surrounding area

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department

To Be Done Within 12 Hours:

- **Full Press Release** to local press contacts upon expiration of BOP
- **City Website** posting coordinated with City Webmaster
- **SMPD Blog** at sanmateopd.org
- **MOUNTAIN LION ATTACK**

Although proven to be rare, any incidents whereby a mountain lion has physically attacked a human being should be treated with the upmost priority after the fact in regards to our efforts to alert the media and general public. It is likely that Fish & Wildlife will take the lead as the point of contact for the media, but it is essential that the general public hear from its local police department as their first responders committed to public safety, especially given what will undoubtedly be an intense public response following an attack. That being said, this agency should exhaust any and all means of alerting the media and general public **as soon as possible** in the instance of a confirmed mountain lion attack.

A **Mountain Lion Attack** is best defined here as any instance that involves aggressive behavior on the part of the mountain lion during a **Confirmed Sighting** that included **physical contact** between the human and the animal, whether or not it led to injury of the human or the animal. That being said, the totality of the evidence for any reported Mountain Lion Attack should meet the reasonable likelihood standard set forth in this protocol for a **Confirmed Sighting.**

To Be Done Immediately:

- **Notification of Command Staff and City Officials via Nixle**
- **Immediate Full Press Release**
- **SMC Alert –** City Wide
- **Next Door –** City Wide
- **Immediate Rapid Notify** or **Nixle 360**
- **Nixle –** City Wide
- **Notification of City Communications Director**
- **City Website** posting coordinated with City Webmaster
- **SMPD Blog** at sanmateopd.org

Copyright Lexipol, LLC 2026/03/06, All Rights Reserved.
Published with permission by San Mateo Police Department