

NEWS RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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SABINO CANYON RECREATION AREA TO CLOSE AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT

TUCSON, AZ (March 9, 2004)— Coronado National Forest officials are temporarily closing the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area at midnight tonight, Tuesday, March 9, to allow professional animal trackers adequate access to search for mountain lions that have lost their fear of humans.

“I have decided to instill the closure to aid the Arizona Game and Fish Department in their search for mountain lions that pose a potentially lethal threat to people in the canyon,” said Larry Raley, Santa Catalina District Ranger in charge of the popular national forest recreation area northeast of Tucson.

Raley said that the canyon could remain closed up to two weeks, based on trackers’ success, but the situation will be evaluated daily. The temporary closure is likely to inconvenience visitors, he said, but reiterated that public safety is his first priority.

“We will reopen the area as soon as there is adequate information to ensure the risk has been reduced,” Raley said.

The closed area is bounded by the Forest Service boundary on the southern end of the Santa Catalina Ranger District; Ventana Canyon Trail on the western side; the West Fork and East Forks of Sabino Creek on the northern side; and the Mt. Lemmon Highway on the east side. Signs will be posted to advise visitors of the closure.

Raley said that closing the area will allow scent trails created by hundreds of visitors daily to dissipate, making it more feasible for trackers to find mountain lions that have been habituated to the presence of humans. Normally, mountain lions are secretive and shy from humans; however, recent reports indicate that some cats seen in Sabino and Bear Canyons, and near Sabino Dam have not exhibited fear of people and may not discriminate between animals and humans as prey.

Since February 2004, professional trackers have discovered the presence of at least three and perhaps four mountain lions in the area that receives more than one million visitors each year. The height of the visitor season is January through April when it is not uncommon for more than 2000 people to visit Sabino and Bear Canyons daily.

Raley said that visitors should modify their routines to avoid the area but stressed that people be aware of their surroundings as sightings of mountain lions in nearby residential neighborhoods have been reported. Mountain lion sightings should be reported immediately to the Arizona Game and Fish Department at (520) 628-5376 or to the Forest Service at (520) 749-7703. Include date, time, location, physical description and actions of animals.