

Peak Panthers

This article provides an account of big cat sightings in north-east Derbyshire and the eastern Peak District. All instances are based on first hand testimonies.

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A shadow on the moor

My interest in big cats started in 2003 on a July day stuck in a traffic jam caused by resurfacing work on the A6. I had been inching towards the Firth Rixon factory and now had the offending traffic lights in sight. To combat the boredom I was admiring the view across a field, the Peak Rail tracks and the distant rise of the watch tower on Stanton Moor. Whilst I watched, what I took to be a large black tom cat appeared, it seemed, from out of the ground over by the stark white concrete posts of the railway. It busied itself rubbing and marking several of the fence-posts and as I watched I realised that there was something wrong about its shape, the body seemed more low slung, the head too small with ears that looked more rounded than the points I associated with your standard moggy. It also seemed to have an exceptionally long tail held in a graceful

Clues to a large feline predator? The landowner, who wanted the location kept unknown, discovered this roe deer carcass freshly despatched and clinically consumed overnight. A black panther type cat was seen at the location several weeks before this find. The puncture marks at the windpipe suggest canines 4cms apart.



arc. What eventually set alarm bells ringing was when it lifted slightly off its front paws to rub its head on the top of the post and the true scale of the animal became apparent. As it moved along I estimated its size using the gaps between the fence posts behind it. Then with the traffic edging forward the cement tanker behind me sounded his horn. I had to move on and was denied further study of the animal.

I was sufficiently intrigued that I returned some days later and walked to the exact spot of the strange sighting. There was a deep ditch along which the animal must have been travelling and measuring the gaps between the fence posts gave a nose to end-of-tail estimation of no less than 5 feet in length. Although I could find no physical evidence a couple of the posts had a dark, slightly greasy deposit near the top although there was no distinctive odour I could detect. I considered informing the authorities but with images of idiots with guns hunting the Beast of Bodmin I decided to keep quiet on the matter.

The adapting lynx

A couple of years later I was returning to Chesterfield with a friend over Leash Fen close to the top of Pudding Pie Hill. Turning a steep bend I was confronted by a largish animal in the road. Slamming on the brakes I narrowly missed running the animal down. Trapped between the car and a steep bank it leapt at and rebounded from the car to land full in the headlights. No doubting whatsoever, the creature was a lynx with distinctive red brown and grey fur with black patterning. Although the ears were back the tufts at their tips were visible. It crouched low and spat defiance at us before running past into the darkness. I had sufficient presence of mind to engage reverse gear so the lights at the back offered some illumination. We were just in time to see it disappearing up an old blocked off lane to the old quarries used in the construction of the Linacre Reservoirs.

We were rattled enough that we pulled over to discuss what we had seen and agreed entirely on the details, it had even left a slight dent in the offside front door! I had seen lynxes several years previously as nearby the zoo at Riber Castle estate had been a breeding centre for the species. One slight difference I had noticed was the thickness of the fur in this instance, the tail in particular had looked rather like the padded end of a bell rope. Perhaps this was an adaptation to winter weather, especially in this high part of the country.

I teach photography and one of my students mentioned that she had worked in a summer job at Riber Castle estate. Obviously I mentioned my sighting and she related an incident I had forgotten about. Some years previously, animal rights activists released all the lynxes from the zoo at the castle estate and although for public consumption it was declared that all animals were recaptured, in reality several were never accounted for. She explained that some weeks later a lynx was killed in a road traffic accident on the A6 but it was reported to the police and the body collected quickly by the zoo. Given a mixed population of around 6 feral animals it would allow for a life span of around 40 years before inbreeding introduced fatal weaknesses or sterility killing decedents off, so lynxes could be dispersed around this area for a decade or so yet. It therefore makes me smile when people debate bringing back the lynx - too late in this part of England!

Close encounters

Over the years I have spoken to several people who claim to have had close encounters with large cats. One colleague worked at the former Coalite plant near Bolsover and remained there until full closure some 15 or so years ago. As staff numbers dwindled everyone had to lend a hand in emergencies and so when security reported seeing movement in the sidings it was all hands on deck as metal thieves were suspected. The sidings were floodlit but with the rows of wagons this just created areas of intense shadow. Walking up the edge of the property my colleague heard a strange low snarl he described as being somewhat like a huge Siamese cat's meow, just before he was bowled onto his back by a blow to the chest. He remembers seeing this large black shape sailing over his head as he fell backwards and his friends saw the animal running down the railway track and reported it as a black panther. Fortunately he was wearing a tough nylon jacket which had torn but not been punctured. He reported the smell from the area of the impact as like the scenting from a tom-cat but "far more powerful and fruity".

I also attended a lecture based on a two-year photographic survey of the wildlife in a Derbyshire drift lead mine. It was in itself most absorbing running from cave spiders to parasitic moulds and fungi. In the final comments the speaker mentioned meeting a large black leopard-like animal one day when entering the mine to take photographs. The animal emerged from the mine entrance and he backed slowly up the drift to a point where the cat could leap up and get away. On entering the mine he found a partially consumed and freshly killed fox carcass.

I also spoke to a train driver who reported seeing lynx-like cats running across the Derby-Matlock line on several occasions. This was backed up by several reports in the local papers of big cat sightings in the Whatstandwell area, which is an intermediate station on the line. There were also reports of a large black cat that had a fondness for attacking dogs in the Carsington-Hopton area.

Feral survivors

The release of lynxes from Riber Castle is recorded fact, as is the admission of a Sheffield scrap merchant who kept several black leopards he released into the Peak District at various points. See the new book on big cats for these and other examples.¹

That exotic species can comfortably survive is illustrated by the red-necked wallabies that lived, and some claim may still be living, at the Roaches for well over half a century. Around 50 animals were released from a private menagerie in the grounds of Roaches Hall near Leek at the outset of the Second World War by the eccentric Captain Courtney Brocklehurst. This population thrived until inbreeding and accidents reduced and weakened the breeding stock.

Manchester University undertook several surveys of these animals and autopsies of road-kill specimens showed distinct evidence of differences and specialisation occurring quite rapidly. Especially noted were adaptations to diet, body fat and bone density. It was also noted that the Derbyshire wallabies had noticeably thicker fur. By the final generation studied in the early 1990s it was argued that they

qualified as a distinct sub-species. However as the population was virtually extinct this contentious claim was never fully investigated.

Adaptation amongst feral big cats – has it begun?

Given 30 years since the likely original releases of big cats such as black leopards, and a dynamic and demanding environment it is not beyond the realms of possibility that a big cat species could show similar adaptations. We must also bear in mind that the original animals were more acclimatised to living around humans, which is a trait they may pass on to their offspring. This would mean that they would more readily exploit the advantages of living in our shadow rather in the manner of urban-adapting species such as foxes and badgers.

It has been argued that evolutionary processes cannot work this rapidly but even Darwin postulated that given specific circumstances specialisation and adaptation could appear within a few generations. One need not look any further than our own native badger to see a prime example of this. Throughout Europe the exact same species is noted as aggressive. In the UK where population per area is far greater and therefore human interaction more common, the badger is a retiring and relatively benign animal. We should not therefore judge our big cats with sole references to

A naturalising cat? The puma, also called cougar and mountain lion, in its native North America. (Photo taken in a habitat enclosure). In the UK, witnesses report a large cat resembling this animal, with descriptions including "a rope like tail" and a creamy muzzle. The distinctive scream of a puma is also reported. Based on both national and locally kept sightings-figures, around a quarter of witness reports each year suggest a puma-type cat.

Photo: Patty & Jerry Corbin



their wild equivalents elsewhere in the world as they may be very different creatures indeed. A frequent phenomenon is that of people reporting stalking behaviour, which I believe may be misunderstood. Bear in mind these animals are, or have bred from animals that experienced close contact with humans and some seem to prefer living on the edges of habitation rather than remote from it.

It is also argued that Britain is too densely populated for such animals to live without more frequent observation, and that predation would give ample proof of their existence. Certainly the Peak District is well visited but this is combined with vast tracts of land that are little visited and lost to mind, countless old quarries and barren stretches of moorland. Most of the area formed part of the ancient Royal Forest which in this context means scattered stands of trees with large tracts of open ground in between. If you view the area from the air you will see that this is still largely true.

The high moors are also managed, one might be tempted to say over-managed, for the shooting fraternity. Grouse and especially pheasant numbers are at almost nuisance levels and the rabbit and hare population are also very healthy. One only has to drive the lanes to see road-kill every few yards. Bear in mind that there are also wild and semi wild herds of roe-deer in the Peak and the issue of food source for a big cat population is easily resolved. Farmers themselves may not be entirely hostile to the idea either as big cats such as black leopards and lynx would on balance kill more animals that are deemed to be a problem to the farm, and occasional livestock loss may be tolerated.

The Peak District of Derbyshire could easily support a far larger population of big cats without any visible signs of their presence apart from the odd chance encounter. And whilst scientific orthodoxy is based on evidential proof there comes a time when healthy cynicism becomes a stubborn refusal to accept facts. Although there is no official stance on big cats in Derbyshire, reports are so frequent that both the police authorities and some wildlife practitioners have acknowledged the possibility of their existence.

Reference

1. Minter R (2011) *Big Cats, Facing Britain's Wild Predators*, Whittles Publishing

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