

The wildwood – giving up its secrets?

Two children, two landowners and two zoologists were amongst visitors to the big cats stand at the 2012 Stroud Festival of Nature. Their comments and questions, summarised here, reflect different views on the parallel universe presented by big cats in Britain's landscape.

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A realisation?

"We've got big cats in the woods where I live" announced a young girl. She was entering my Big Cats stall in Stroud during the town's September nature festival. Charming and confident in her manner, I guessed she was 11 at most. I asked whereabouts the woods were and from her response knew she was talking of a hot-spot for sightings and suspicious deer kills. "Yes - I go there sometimes in case there might be things to look for" I said with a calm voice. The wood in question is a wildlife-rich forest, as highly labelled as you can get in conservation terms. It snakes through remote Cotswolds valleys, well known to locals but otherwise not well trammelled. I joined in a dawn chorus walk there when I first moved to Gloucestershire. It seemed wild and mysterious on that Beltane morning, but it has taken on other dimensions now.

As I awaited the arrival of her parents I asked how she felt about big cats being about. "It's okay" she said in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt she was anything but freaked out at the thought of local panthers. We discussed how often a big cat might visit that area, and we wondered how many people realised that such animals were really around. She suggested her neighbours knew but kept it to themselves. She drifted out as gracefully as she'd arrived. No parents came along, and I wondered if my words were adequate. Maybe it didn't much matter, so long as I'd been responsible and allowed her a voice. The five minute conversation seemed more awkward for me than for her. I'd been wondering what balance to strike, while she'd simply come to tell of a roaming panther in her corner of Gloucestershire. That was all. Big cats were part of the scene, in people's minds at least, where she was growing up.

Another visitor to the stall, a young lad deep in concentration, was of the same age I thought. He was equally composed. In three separate visits he studied all the items, props and publications spread across the tables around the stall. With colourful activities on offer throughout the park, I was flattered to see him spend over an hour at my stand. He was good company, biding his time to ask questions in the lulls amongst the flow of people. Eventually his mother came along. She confirmed his opening query. Could there be a big cat in this park, in this neighbourhood, on the edge of Stroud? Their whole family was curious because the dad, just a few days previously had opened the front door where they lived, right next to the park and

gasped. He claimed he'd seen a cat in the front garden "as big as a Labrador dog". I played it down. I recalled two sightings in a field near the park in the past. These were close-up reports that witnesses were rock-solid about. Leopards and pumas can be night-time shadows in the towns of their native lands, and we get plausible reports of such cats around the edge of both Gloucester and Cheltenham. Here the scrubby hillsides blend with the suburbs. A large carnivore might well patrol the grazing deer along these slopes. I'd have liked to take the father in Stroud through a checklist, to clarify how sure he'd been. But overall, it was pleasing that the boy seemed so genuinely curious. If this one visit to my stall, and the incident in his garden, real or not, had nudged him towards a lasting interest in big cats or in any wildlife, any part of the natural world, that was good. It made my efforts all worthwhile.

A transition?

I am intrigued as people study the items, photos and material at the stall. It is a rare thing to watch youngsters and teenagers focus for several minutes, thinking quietly, forgetting their phones and gadgets. The big cats stall can be a place of deep concentration on people's faces. There is puzzlement and wonder as visitors consider possible large predators in their own district, and realise that it actually may not be a myth. And there are conversations, many polite, some earnest, and others light-hearted and scoffing, amongst friends and within families, as different beliefs are aired and evidence sifted.

My reward comes from seeing this interaction and togetherness, from helping to start the conversation, and beat away the taboo about unofficial big cats. Ok, so a landowner that day gave me a pretty good picture of a panther in his woodland. That's a good reward too. Not often do we see the actual animals caught on camera. He'd looked at another landowner's photo which I had displayed at the stall, and which people were asked to judge. By the end of the day, the sticky-dot votes on the big board showed that most people thought the animal, slightly blurred as the camera caught it mid-stride, was feline of some sort, and just over half viewed it as a genuine big cat. I liked the photo. It seemed the best 'likely' big cat snapped to date on a trip camera, and it was from the Stroud valleys. The anonymous landowner had provided it for education and awareness, but he wanted the location to remain vague, to avoid hassle and invasion, for him and the presumed cat. For me this photograph serves a bigger purpose. It allows a transition in our minds. Each of us can look with our own bias. For some with open minds the picture helps big cats become clearer - to move from 'possible' to 'probable'. For outright believers it confirms the animal can at last be captured on film. But for those who dismiss big cats, the picture is inevitably a dog. Nothing large and feline is in the realms of possibility.

The visiting landowner I got chatting to was not from the area. He'd not seen the tantalising photo on display, but he wasn't too impressed for a wholly different reason. "Mines better than that" he casually announced. "What?" I uttered. I wondered if this guy, who appeared wise and experienced, was an example of people who have the actual evidence but prefer not to suggest that big cats are about, especially on their own land. "Yes - I've a better one, I'll send it if you like" he remarked. I stressed I'd keep it to myself, and would be pleased to see it. As

good as his word, the photo was in my email box that evening. My son grasped my mobile phone when it arrived, studying the picture at all angles. "The sceptic might say it's a large feral", he declared, in a grown-up reaction to what he knew seemed a good picture of a dark leopard-like cat, stationed in a southern England copse. So yes, there are other rewards from having conversations about mystery cats. New friends and contacts can emerge, and the chance to share their closely guarded secret.

A challenge?

Finally, a note about two more visitors during the day, and a reminder that people vary even in the same professional camp. Two zoologists announced themselves at different times. Number one entered amidst the mid-morning buzz. He listened with respect. His family bought my book, and he used his knowledge to cautiously add to my own. I mentioned a tree scratch spotted by a farmer friend. We thought it might be cat related – raking of the claws on a tree as an indication of the predator's territory. The scores through the bark matched claw spacing across two paws. We tried to reproduce the cuts with our own knife in the next tree, but completely failed with our own jittery slots. The marks didn't seem human ones or from the fraying of antlers, which would be a more conventional explanation. But the overall pattern seemed a might too big for a black leopard or a puma, which are our candidate cats. The scale was "scary" according to my son. The zoologist explained how the splay and deep grooving of a leopard or puma's striation could seem enlarged from the actual paws, so it was worth considering, he suggested. Here was a scientist happy to build the conversation, and keep the learning process going. He agreed that it was no great shock to have feral pumas and leopards. They are the great survivors and the adapters amongst bigger cats across the world.

Zoologist number two caught me unawares. I was flagging late in the afternoon, describing to a curious visitor how some people even claim to hear the call of pumas as well as describe the animal. "Foxes - they'll be foxes that people are hearing" came an assertive voice behind me. I recognised it as the grudging tone of a sceptic. I politely stated that people do make mistakes, including on noises, and yes, fox calls could be tangled with puma sounds, but a puma scream is distinct and is well described by people. The man before me now stated his credentials. It mattered that he was a "professional zoologist". After ignoring my confidence on pumas, he wanted to pick me up on adaptation. He'd heard my thoughts about some big cats possibly adapting in form, due to their situation in Britain. He sought an explanation. I stated that many reports fitted a text book black leopard or a conventional puma, albeit that individuals differ. But I stressed that some descriptions suggest a higher looking, longer legged cat, and that this was enough to get people wondering – was some kind of adaptation occurring? "No" was his emphatic response. "Not in such quick time". He may be right, but I'd prefer to give it consideration rather than close down debate, and some ecologists do take the opposite view. After all, the former Peak District wallabies were exhibiting traits of their own in their feral freedom, over just a few generations. In addition, evolution under duress may happen faster than we think, and if a successful hybridisation is present amongst some of these larger cats, that may be a relatively quick process to show effects.



Tooth pit study at the Royal Agricultural College led by Dr Andrew Hemmings. Dental putty is applied to tooth marks on skeletal samples, and the results matched against different scales of carnivore dentition.

The zoologist had a simple explanation for the 'upright panther' sightings: "Dogs! Wouldn't you say they are pretty good descriptions of dogs?" he remarked with a sense of despair at how I was missing the obvious. In fact, people are adamant their sightings are nothing like a dog, often because of the fluid and stealthy movement as well as the feline form. And the nervous reactions of some people's own dogs, and sometimes horses, reinforce the possibility of a large predator in view. I declined his challenge and let him stride off. His body language suggested he felt I was a fraud. Never mind I'd spent five years buried away preparing a book on the topic, and turning every stone.¹ It is tempting to let such people know that secrets are held in various quarters, and there is more than can be told. But with the subject seen as a Pandora's Box, it might be best for evidence and awareness of big cats to emerge gradually, along with discussion on the various implications.

Beyond the evidence kept under wraps, the police have already declared breeding big cats in both Gloucestershire and the Thames Valley area. The known primary



Suspected tree raking from a leopard-like cat. These markings ranged from three feet to nine feet high on the trunk, appearing overnight in Gloucestershire in November 2012 on land where black panthers have been reported in autumn-winter 2011 and 2012.

evidence starts in 2003 in Lincolnshire, when a black hair sample registered positive for leopard DNA. In 2011 some black hair from a north Devon hotspot also proved positive for leopard. The Home Office verified the cast of a puma print taken by Thames Valley police in 2011, and a previous puma result came from a south Wales hair sample in 2005. Also in south Wales, tooth-pit analysis concluded leopard impressions on skeletal remains of sheep found in the early 90s.² A new phase of tooth-pit study is currently underway in Gloucestershire, and along with other tests going on, including on a putative large felid skull recently discovered, will be reported in 2013.³

The brush with the second zoologist served a purpose. A reminder that big cats living wild, naturalising even, in our own familiar countryside present a deep challenge, culturally and scientifically, to us all, but maybe to some more than others. I can only hope that he and his peers stumble upon things for themselves – perhaps notice rake-like markings down a tree, or see an interesting mammal that might not be a dog or may not sound like a fox, so that the discovery and the wonder is more widely shared. Meanwhile, there is a conversation going on about Panther Britannica, in all its guises, and anyone willing is welcome to join in.

References

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