

The big cat mystery

Could wild cats really be wandering in the Wolds or roaming the county's farmland

words and photographs: Adam Burrows



Descriptions from sightings indicate Lincolnshire's big cat could be a North American mountain lion



Tales of mysterious creatures living in the wild are told throughout the world and whether it be the North American 'Big-foot', the Scottish 'Loch Ness Monster' or the Himalayan 'Yeti', all these creatures are assumed to be just legends.

For decades that was also believed to be true of the stories told in the West Country about the 'beast of Bodmin Moor', which was described as a large, black cat-like creature. However, in the past couple of years, the whole of Britain has become awash with stories of large cats prowling the countryside. In fact, during 2003 the British Big Cat Society, a group set up to investigate these sightings, has revealed that more than 2,000 sightings of 'large, cat-like animals', were reported to them from all over the UK with more than eighty coming from Lincolnshire alone. This puts the county in ninth place for most big cat sightings across Britain. Neighbouring Yorkshire is in third place with a staggering 231 sightings.

So, can all these sightings be real. Does Lincolnshire really have its own mythical creature or are there really big cats at large in the countryside. If so, what are they, how did they get here and what needs to be done about them.

Actual physical proof of the existence of large cats living in Britain is very limited. The only time one was caught was in 1980 when a Scottish farmer managed to capture a puma which had escaped and survived, living wild, for a number of months. Since then, a few of the small species of wildcat have been shot on farmland throughout Britain but these have been species similar in size to the domestic cat, such as jungle cats and leopard cats and certainly not of the size that recent sightings have reported.

One of the most recent incidents in which there has been actual physical proof was in 1999 when vets were called out to a farm in West Wales to attend to a horse which had received a number of deep wounds to its neck and back after an attack by a large animal. After an



Other accounts indicate our big cat could be a black leopard

investigation, experts concluded that the wounds the horse received were consistent with an attack by a large feline and so indicated that at least one such cat must have been living wild in the area at the time.

Descriptions of these cats vary greatly right across the UK but it is unlikely they are lions or tigers. They are more probably the medium-sized big cats. In Lincolnshire the most common descriptions are of animals roughly four to six feet in length with a long, thick tail and with either a black or a tan coloured coat. These descriptions most closely resemble either a black leopard or a North American mountain lion. Both these species are solitary, nocturnal and are notoriously difficult to find in their native countries which could be one of the reasons why sightings of such animals have not been more common in Britain. Both species are extremely adaptable and opportunistic in their hunting behaviour and can survive on quite small amounts of food. The diets comprise largely small animals such as rodents and birds although, where available, larger animals such as deer are preyed upon. This diet makes them ideally suited to living in the British countryside and especially in Lincolnshire where the pattern of small woodlands and large tracts of farmland supports large populations of mice, rats and especially rabbits while also having a number of small deer populations.

If there are big cats living in Lincolnshire, and possibly right across the British Isles, then the question which needs answering is where did they come from. Over the years, many theories which could possibly explain the existence of these animals have been put forward. The two most plausible are the 'releases' theory and the 'escape' theory.

The 'releases' theory is based on the fashion in the 1960s and early 1970s for the rich and famous to keep large, exotic animals as pets. Large cats such as those now being described roaming the countryside were a particular favourite and could even be bought at top London stores. However, in 1976, when the Dangerous Wild Animals Act came into force, owners of these large cats were forced to buy licenses for their pets and undergo welfare and safety inspections. This would have forced owners to invest in expensive enclosures and pay large veterinary bills so the fashion for keeping these animals soon ended and most were either given to zoos or put to sleep. However, it is thought that some well-meaning but naive owners, released their pets into the countryside rather than have them destroyed or placed in a zoo. The theory goes that the cats seen roaming areas such as Lincolnshire today are the descendants of these released animals.

The other most likely possibility is the 'escapes' theory. From Roman times, right up to the early 1900s, large numbers of exotic animals were kept in small menageries and travelling circuses right across Britain and the animals could easily have escaped.

More recently, it has become apparent



If there are big cats at large red deer would be an important part of their diet

that the release of cats into the countryside for hunting has become increasingly popular among the criminal fraternity. The theory suggests that substantial numbers of these big cats could quite possibly have escaped and so formed breeding populations. The recent discovery by police of two lynxes being kept illegally on a farm near Leeds, which were believed to have been bred to be hunted, lends more weight to this theory and raises yet more concerns.

From a biological perspective, these cats are likely to benefit the environment. Britain was once home to the lynx and the European wolf, but these animals were hunted to extinction leaving us with no top predators. Any big cats surviving in the countryside would therefore fill this role and help to control populations of prey animals such as rabbits and deer which can, if their populations go unchecked, do a lot of damage to the environment.

From a safety aspect it would seem there is also little to worry about. Although all species of wildcat are potentially dangerous, actual instances of them coming into conflict with humans are very rare in countries where they occur naturally and in Britain there has never been an attack on a human. It is probably this very fact that has allowed these animals to go relatively unnoticed in Britain and not cause any widespread alarm about their existence.

The fact remains that the existence of any big cats roaming Britain has yet to be proved conclusively either one way or the other. Whilst there have been many accounts from people who think they have seen an animal they describe as a big cat, what is needed is physical proof. There have been a number of photographs and videos submitted in the past as yet further evidence, but even these have not proved conclusive as they are usually taken on low-quality home videos or from such great distances that formal identification of the animal has been impossible. So it seems that until such time one of these mysterious creatures is captured, or caught on high-quality film, the argument as to exactly what is out there will go on. □

If you would like more information on big cat sightings in Britain you can visit the British Big Cats Society's website at www.britisbbigcats.org