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YET MORE SIGHTINGS OF BIG CATS IN THE UK

This paper first appeared in the Autumn 2018 issue of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer' p 2.

It is four years since I last sat down at my laptop and wrote on the subject of big cat sightings in the UK for 'From the ASKE Chair' (see *Skeptical Intelligencer*, **17(4)**, 2014). Prior to that I wrote a piece on the same topic for the Autumn 2008 issue of *Skeptical Adversaria*. The impetus for writing the former piece was reports of the sighting of a tiger near the Disneyland theme park near Paris. After a couple of days of panic, the hunt for the creature was scaled down and it was concluded that it was either a European wildcat or a large domestic cat.

As I wrote at the time, 'For years now there have been regular reports that large cats such as lynxes, pumas, panthers, leopards and even lions have been spotted in the British countryside, occasionally making excursions into towns and cities'. Once again the stimulus for me to revisit this phenomenon is a newspaper report of such a sighting on 26.8.18, this one being 'a huge puma' in Bolsterstone, Sheffield, several miles from where I live. There was just one eyewitness and no other evidence of the beast's presence.

As it happens, our two moggies Alice and Sammy are currently being put about by visitations in our garden and even our home of a huge cat. It is in fact a Maine Coon, one of the largest breeds of domestic cat – a beautiful specimen in this case, and very friendly. A Maine Coon by the name of Teddy Bear turned out to be the identity of the notorious 'Essex lion', spotted and photographed by a couple in August 2012 in a field near Clacton-on-Sea. Before its true identity had been announced someone else had come forward to say that he had heard 'the roar of a lion' that evening.

Has there been any progress in confirming the existence or otherwise of these creatures? No, but as they say, 'This one will run and run'. However, two recent happenings do not sit easily with the idea that there are such animals in the wild. The first is the tracking down and shooting of a Eurasian lynx that escaped from a Welsh zoo in November 2017 (*note 1*), demonstrating that it's not so difficult to obtain a specimen if there is one known for sure to be at large. The second development is the proposed introduction of wild lynx into certain areas of the country, one such location being Kielder Forest in Northumberland (*note 2*). Such a move is strongly opposed by farmers who fear that the lynx will kill their sheep. Nobody has been seriously arguing, 'They are already there'.

A cat mystery solved

Since 2014 hundreds of mutilated corpses of domestic cats in and around Croydon, south London, and later across England, have been reported to the police. It was believed that the killings and mutilations, including decapitations, were at least initially perpetrated by one person in south London but that the cases reported in localities other than the Croydon area could be the work of (human) 'copycats'. A description of the alleged killer was released by a local animal charity, South Norwood Animal Rescue and Liberty (Snarl). The suspect was described as being a white man in his 40s with acne scars, dark clothes and short brown hair, who may be wearing a headlamp or carrying a torch (*note 3*). Criminological experts have been quoted in the media describing the likely personal characteristics of the offender(s) and the motives behind his or their gruesome activities. Alarm has been expressed about the possibility that humans may be the next victims; in fact animals other than cats have been included in the litany of deaths. It is reported that the police have spent half a million pounds in their 3-year investigation (*note 4*).

During this time a number of voices have been heard suggesting that the whole affair may be akin to a 'moral panic' and that in the vast majority of cases the deaths of the animals have a more prosaic explanation. In fact something similar happened in the 1990s with dozens of cat killings being reported in Greater London. The Metropolitan Police began an investigation in 1998 but dropped it a year later after consulting Stephen Harris, professor of environmental sciences at the University of Bristol. He concluded that the cats had been killed by cars, then mutilated and even decapitated by foxes, something that had long been known to happen. Concerning the current investigation, in July 2018 in *New Scientist* he wrote that the pattern of blunt-force trauma followed by removal of the head and tail once the blood has congealed is consistent with road traffic accidents, then scavenging by foxes (*note 5*).

In September the Metropolitan Police announced the closure of their investigation into the Croydon Cat Killer (later dubbed ‘the M25 cat [or animal] killer’), concluding that the evidence is consistent with the above explanation. Somewhat predictably this has been greeted with fury and dismay by owners of the deceased pets, likewise the organisers of Snarl who have devoted much time, effort and publicity to mapping and investigating hundreds of reported killings. They remain stubbornly committed to the cat-killer theory, as do some experts who have previously publicly opined in its favour (*note 5*). Accusations of a cover-up are sure to follow. Like big cat sighting, I fear this one will run and run (*and run – Ed*).

Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/y797dhca>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/ybhro4ny>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/yczdlt3f>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/yarhjhf2>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/y9tfnhjr>