


THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA **Fortean Times** Fortean Times Subscriptions 

SEARCH GO HOME FORUM SUBSCRIBE MAGAZINE INFO CONTACT LOGIN REGISTER

BREAKING NEWS
IT HAPPENED TO ME!
EXCLUSIVES
ARTICLE ARCHIVE
COMPETITIONS
FORTMART
REVIEWS
LINKS
GALLERY




ALIEN BIG CATS IN BRITAIN

*Alien Big Cats (ABCs) have been stalking the nation – and our imagination – for 40 years. **PAUL SIEVEKING** recalls the big game hunts and puzzling evidence for these shadowy felids.*

The actress Sarah Miles had a memorable encounter near her house in West Sussex in 1994: "...a large jet black cat stood, posing almost, high on the bank. I stifled a gasp of wonder as the sun rippled its

early-morning light right across the sleek and glossy back. How bushy-tailed he was, positively shimmering with health! Roughly the size of Lovely [her Old English mastiff], but with enormous paws, quite out of proportion to the rest of him. His tail, longer than his own body length, was held straight out, with a little curl at the end. His face seemed square from his profile, with pointed, erect ears. Sadly, without turning once in my direction, the majestic animal clambered down the bank and loped across the lane, hips rolling with a loose-limbed, easy gait, before leaping effortlessly up the bank and out of sight."¹

Although there were sporadic earlier encounters with ABCs in the British countryside, it was in the early 1960s that they became a recognised Mystery, a major branch of forteana, just as flying saucers took on a public life in the 1940s, Bigfoot in the 1950s, and crop circles in the 1970s, though each had precedents. ABCs also appear in many other parts of the world, but there is no room to deal with them here.

While it is likely that breeding populations of ABCs have been established in the British Isles, there may be other dimensions to the mystery. Meeting the unruffled stare of an unknown large felid – as Trevor Bartle did near Falmouth on the night of 4 February 2000 [[FT146:16](#)] – can be a numinous experience, at odds with the animals' supposed retiring nature and reminiscent of encounters with 'black dogs' – known in different regions as Black Shuck, Pooka, Trash hound, Barguest, or Shriker – many of which might be feline rather than canine.

Could some of these big cats have been teleported from their natural habitat, as Charles Fort playfully suggested [see [Historical Precedents](#)] or do they exist in our physical world only fleetingly, as other denizens of the fortean menagerie seem to? It is certainly bizarre that numerous ABC hunts with state-of-the-art technology have always (with one or two exceptions) failed, while the majority of large felids that are known to have escaped from zoos are caught or killed. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, all but two of the 16

From FT 167
FEBRUARY 2003

IMAGES

BBCS
[Fortean Picture Library](#)

NOTES

- 1) Sarah Miles: account in *Daily Telegraph*, 26 Oct 1998, p.14.
- 2) Janet and Colin Bord: *Alien Animals* (1980).
- 3) Bob Rickard: "If you go down to the woods today..." *INFO Journal* 13, May 1974; plus *FT14:3-8*, Jan 1976.
- 4) William Cobbett: *Rural Rides* (1830), p.204 in 2001 Penguin edition.
- 5) Karl Shuker: *Mystery Cats of the World* (Robert Hale 1989).
- 6) Charles Fort: *Lo!* (1931), chapter seven.

LINKS

[FT's County-by-county guide to ABC sightings for 2001-2002](#)

BBCS

[Previous FT ABC roundups](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mystery Cats of the World by Karl Shuker (Hale 1989). ISBN 0-7090-3706-6
Mystery Cats of Devon and Cornwall by Chris Moiser (Bossiney Books 2001). ISBN 1-899583-46-8
Hunting Big Cats in Britain by Guy N Smith (Bulldog paperbacks 2000). ISBN 0-9532701-65
They Stalk by Night: the Big Cats of Exmoor and the South-West by Nigel Brierly (Yeo Valley Productions, Bishops Nympton, Devon 1989). ISBN 0-9515966-08
The Beast of Exmoor: Fact or Legend? By Trevor Beer (1983).
Cat Country by Di Francis (David and Charles 1983). ISBN 0-7153-8425-2
The Beast of Exmoor by Di Francis (Cape 1993). ISBN 0224-03665-3

THIS ISSUE



FT 204

The Rendlesham mystery 25 years on
 1940s Lantern scare
 Sceptics and Spectres United

big cats that escaped into the wild in the UK between 1977 and 1998 were recaptured within 24 hours. However, talk of phantoms and teleportation will not appeal to cryptozoologists or strict adherents of Occam's razor.

In the mid-Seventies, the naturalist Maurice Burton wrote to Bob Rickard about the Surrey Puma: "All the eye-witness accounts that I was able to investigate at first hand proved to be either otter, badger, fox, deer, or feral cats and dogs." One is left wondering how such identifications could be proved after the actual encounters.

This is not to deny that many supposed ABCs are misidentifications of indigenous animals; but over the years, the scepticism of the experts has been worn away by the many anecdotal reports from experienced observers, and the evidence from spoor, livestock depredation, video footage, and alien felids trapped or shot [see panel]. The orthodox explanation now invokes escapes from unspecified unlicensed private zoos or owners, and hypothetical overturned circus trailers.



Unidentified, possible ABC in an unknown location

THE SURREY PUMA AND FRIENDS

On 16 July 1962, water board official Ernie Jellett saw an animal "like a young lion cub" stalking a rabbit near Heathy Park Reservoir in Hampshire. It stood 18in (46cm) to 2ft (61cm) tall, with a flat face, large paws, and pale brown pelage. It was "definitely not a fox or a dog." A month later, it was seen again by Mr L Noble, another water board official. These first reports, and references to previous sightings and frightened cattle, were hidden away in the house journal of the Mid Wessex Water Company.

Not till the following summer did Britain's ABCs first hit the headlines. On 18 July 1963, David Back, driving through Shooters Hill in south-east London at 1am, saw what looked like an injured dog lying by the roadside. When he walked up to it, he realised it was a large cat with a long, upward curling tail. It ran off into Oxleas Wood. Very shortly afterwards, a "large golden animal" jumped over the bonnet of a police patrol car in the area. No zoo or circus had reported any escapes.

The subsequent big game hunt for 'the cheetah' covered 850 acres and involved 126 policemen with 21 dogs, 30 soldiers, ambulance men and RSPCA officials. No large cat was found, but there were some 7in (18cm)-wide spoor with claw marks, supporting the cheetah hypothesis. The cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) has permanently extruded claws, while the claws of other felids can be extended to maintain balance if the ground conditions so require. There were several more sightings and overheard snarls in the following week or so, and the press

said that "many local folk" had seen it earlier; then, like so many fortean phenomena, the beast vanished into the woodwork.²

In February 1964, 30 police with dogs searched in vain for a large cat after various people had reported seeing it on a railway embankment at East Runton near Cromer in Norfolk. The following August, there was a rash of ABC reports from the Farnham and Odiham areas on the Surrey/Hampshire border, and it transpired that there had been many unreported sightings in the region over the previous two years. Besides the Farnham lynx of the 1760s (see panel), puma sightings were reported from Surrey during World War II.

During the winter of 1962-63, cat-like beasts were seen repeatedly at Bushylease Farm, between Crondall and Ewshot in Surrey, accompanied by howling and a strong ammonia-like smell. Then on 30 August 1964, a bullock on the farm was discovered alive, but with severe lacerations to its flanks, shoulders and neck. Incidents of livestock found with deep claw wounds have occurred periodically all over Britain ever since, with some clawed horses in North Devon only three weeks ago as I write.

When a journalist coined the term 'Surrey Puma', the public's imagination was roused and the term was used to cover ABCs of all descriptions right across south-east England. Giving these creatures a name – like the Fen Tiger (1978) the Beast of Exmoor (1983), or the Beast of Bodmin (1992) – is a potent catalyst in the development of popular ABC mythology.

Bob Rickard³ has listed details of 32 British ABC reports in the 1960s, and 36 from 1970-73, from Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, London, Norfolk, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Surrey, Sussex, and Warwickshire – not to mention large feline spoor, droppings, hairs on fences, and livestock lacerations. Bob noted similarities with reports of ghosts and UFO sightings: "...the inconstant data from spontaneous events; the clashing of experts; 'flaps', hoaxes and 'discredited information'; the conviction of the witnesses and the subjective nature of some of their experiences."



Zoo puma print (right) compared to print found in Godalming, Surrey, 7 Sept 1964

Bob's data were largely limited to news clippings received and were only the tip of the ABC iceberg. The Day Book at the Godalming police station in Surrey, for instance, lists 362 reported sightings across Britain of alien animals provisionally identified as 'pumas' in the two years between September 1964 and August 1966. The Surrey police closed their ABC investigation in the summer of 1967, but sightings have continued in the area up to the present. Hair samples collected in August 1984 near Peaslake in Surrey were

identified as puma. (Hair gathered on Exmoor was also identified as puma in 1987.)

In June 1974, several 'panther' sightings in Ayrshire led to sharpshooters and police standing by. In April 1975, there was a huge search for a 'panther' in Willenhall in the heart of the industrial conurbation north-west of Birmingham. The killing of five geese near Renfrew, Scotland, in August 1976 was blamed on a 'puma' by the director of Calder Park Zoo, Glasgow. The police said they had recorded ABC sightings in the Renfrew/Ayrshire area from "hundreds of people including at least a score of policemen" in the previous three years.

There was another goose atrocity in Essex two decades later. Two geese found dead in North Weald in February 1998 had been killed by a bite to the neck. One carcass was sent to the Veterinary Laboratory Agency in Edinburgh, where the predator was identified as a large felid, probably the size of a lynx.

THE NOTTINGHAM LION

Early on the morning of 29 July 1976, two milkmen saw what they insisted was a lion with a bushy-tipped tail in a field at Tollerton near Nottingham airport, prompting a huge and fruitless big game hunt. Over the next eight days, there were 65 other reported 'lion' sightings and stories of restless pets and strange spoor. The police then announced that they no longer believed a lion was in the area, and that the sightings could have been misidentifications of large dogs or even of a large brown paper bag (a detail long treasured at Fortean Towers). Despite its debunking, the lion was seen three times in succeeding days before vanishing into limbo. 'Lionesses' were subsequently seen in Thorganby, Yorkshire, in August and the Upton district of Chester in October.

In September 1977, "a lioness and two cubs" was seen in a field 10 miles (16km) from Inverness. In late 1979, there was a flap of ABC sightings in many areas of Scotland; they were frequently said to be lionesses.

Around this time, the idea that some big cats had been released following the passing of the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act began to enter press reports. It was thought that many owners were loath to obtain the expensive licences required by the Act. However, I have yet to see any specific documentation for this. The nearest we get is a confession in 2000 by lion tamer Leslie Maiden that in 1974, two years before the Act, he had released a panther and a cougar in the Pennines and that someone else had released a panther in Nottinghamshire. What happened to those animals is unknown.

THE BEAST OF EXMOOR

ABCs were big news in 1983. In February, *The Archers*, the radio soap opera, introduced a "mystery big cat", variously identified as leopard, tiger or puma. Then on 19 April, 50 men, some mounted and most armed, supported by a police helicopter and the Torrington Foot Beagles, scoured Exmoor (in Devon and Somerset) all day for the so-called "Beast of Exmoor" without result. This was prompted by at least 30 sheep killings dating back to 1982, typically with skulls crushed and bodies eviscerated.

The hunt made the front page of the *North Devon Journal-Herald* on 21 April 1983, and featured in the national press

the next day. In the following weeks, there were many sightings of large, black/brown/fawn, cat-like animals almost on a daily basis – along with further sheep mutilations. On 2 May, 12 Marines with night-vision equipment began a week-long "Operation Beastie". By this time, the sheep death toll exceeded 80. The marines returned for another hunt on 17 May, but gave up in early July, having drawn a blank.

Exmoor sightings and sheep deaths continued throughout June. Perhaps jealous of the limelight, the Surrey Puma made three appearances in July and there were armed searches for "a lioness or puma" around Earlston in the Scottish Borders.

At the end of July, police chiefs from Devon, Cornwall, Avon and Somerset announced that the Exmoor Beast (or "dog", as they call it) had been shot by a farmer and crept off to die in secret. Some farmers strongly disagreed and *The Times* called it "wishful thinking". Sightings and depredations continued for months, though they tailed off (and/or the press lost interest). It was, wrote Bob Rickard, "a classic fortaean story complete with false endings, confusion and petering out into a mystery."

Also in 1983, ABCs roamed around Buckinghamshire, Essex and Inverness-shire, while widespread sheep deaths and ABC reports in Gwent gave birth to the legend of "the Beast of Brechfa". *FT*'s record of ABCs in Wales dates back to a lynx sighting in Powys in September 1980, but I've seen references to earlier encounters.

The Isle of Wight 'puma' appeared 23 times between May and October 1983, changing its coat from black to grey, sandy, silver and "reddish". By September 1985, there were said to have been more than 120 sightings on the island.

In 1984, there were many ABC reports from Surrey, Devon, Cornwall, Argyll and Sutherland; and some from Hampshire, Sussex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Lancashire, and Inverness-shire. Every subsequent year has seen scores of reports from all over England, Scotland and Wales, as tabulated in the annual ABC surveys published in *FT*.

From witness descriptions, the most common ABC approximates to a black panther (melanistic leopard/*Panthera pardus*); but the British countryside also seems to play host to lynx, puma, cheetah, serval, and maybe caracal, ocelot, lion, tiger.. The felids are black, grey, all shades of brown, and even white; they are striped, spotted, with long legs, short legs, long tails, short tails, with ear-tufts, without ear-tufts; they roar, they scream, and so on.

ABCs IN THE NINETIES

On the morning of the General Election, 9 April 1992, a golden-brown cat the size of a Labrador was seen next to the church in West End Lane, West Hampstead. Though this was in the heart of London, there were three railway lines nearby and plenty of rabbit warrens. In the following months there was a rash of urban ABC sightings – in Carlisle, Leatherhead, Guildford, Cowes and East Grinstead. In 1995 they were seen in Falmouth, Gloucester, Southampton, Scarborough, and Dundee; and subsequent years in Aberystwyth, Braintree, Cambridge, Chester, Colchester, Ely, Ipswich, Kidderminster, King's Lynn, Lincoln, Lyme Regis, Milton Keynes, Norwich, Nottingham, Southport, Stockport, Stratford-upon-Avon, Tewkesbury, Truro, and some London suburbs. Perhaps, like foxes, they are attracted by easy food sources.

In 1994 there was an enormous number of ABC reports from 30 English counties as well as from Northern Ireland, Mid-Wales, and across Scotland. The remains of sheep and calves, stripped clean to the bone, found in Cornwall and north-east Scotland in particular, were said not to be the work of dogs or foxes. Some of the Cornish cadavers showed claw marks on the neck, flank and belly, half an inch apart with a spread of three or four inches.

Between January and July 1995, MAFF (the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) conducted an official 'Beast of Bodmin' hunt in Cornwall with a budget of £8,200. A wildlife consultant and a mammal expert spent 26 working days examining the evidence and investigating the latest livestock depredations. While they found "no verifiable evidence" for the presence of ABCs, they admitted that they "could not prove that a 'big cat' is not present".

Beast of Bodmin press reports tailed off in 1996, perhaps because local journalists had ABC-fatigue, but other alliterative beasts made their appearance: the Beast of Bennachie in Scotland, the Beast of Broomhill in Yorkshire, the Beast of Bont in South Wales, and the Beast of Ballymeana in Northern Ireland.

North Cornwall MP Paul Tyler called for a re-opening of the MAFF enquiry in 1997, and two other MPs demanded the government investigate the ABC situation in their constituencies: Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion and Pembroke North) and Keith Simpson (Mid Norfolk). There had been scores of sheep depredations round Aberystwyth blamed on the Beast of Bont in the preceding couple of years, and some ABC-type livestock mutilations round Norwich; in December the local police said that the 'Norfolk Gnasher' had been seen at least 54 times since the previous July.

A sandy-coloured ABC with a black ring on the tip of its tail was seen twice on 25 September 1998 around South Mimms, Hertfordshire, near the junction of the A1 and the M25 motorway. There was the customary fruitless big game hunt. It was seen again the following day by two policemen and several others, both at South Mimms and in neighbouring Potters Bar. Large pawprints were found. The hunt resumed, backed up by helicopters with thermal-imaging cameras. In the next three days, there were at least 10 more reported sightings of 'The Beast of Barnet' or 'the Monster of the M25' before it made the customary exit into limbo.

Tigers were a memorable feature of the ABC menagerie in 1999. In April, Keith Baylis saw one as he rode his motorbike across Northchurch Common in Hertfordshire. Then on 16 June, one attacked a tractor being driven by Raymond Cibor at a farm in Armthorpe, South Yorkshire. A week later, it was seen again three miles (4.8km) away. Then in July, a lion was seen in Pembrokeshire, and several people thought they saw one in the Pennine foothills near Barnsley in South Yorkshire. However, this one was convincingly explained as misidentifications of Rocky, a Rottweiler-retriever cross with eczema, which had been shaved apart from around its head and the end of its tail. The *Daily Star's* banner headline was THE BEAST OF ECZEMA. Meanwhile, as always in recent years, convincing and gruesome evidence of ABC depredation continued in Wales.

A large black cat, identified by the RSPCA as 'puma' (surely they meant panther?), was filmed by CCTV in September

1999 at brickmakers at Telford in Shropshire. One precedent was an ABC caught on security video at a garden centre in Kettering in July 1998. A black ABC was filmed for 15 minutes near Swadlincote, Leicestershire, in September 2000. Judging by the distance between trees seen in the video, the curator of Twycross Zoo estimated that it was at least 3ft (90cm) long, not counting the tail.

NEW CENTURY BIG CATS

Despite the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001 closing much of the countryside, ABCs were reported in at least 38 English counties and across Scotland and Wales that year. *Fortean Times* received about 200 clippings reporting sightings in 2001, as usual mostly from the local press; but data-gathering groups and police have logged hundreds of incidents that never made it to the newspapers; and beyond that there are many who have kept their ABC sightings to themselves, fearing ridicule. Some naturalists now accept the presence of panther, puma, lynx, and jungle cat. Lionesses on the loose, however, are hard for zoologists to credit.

THE BEAST OF BLAGDON

On 17 August 2001, Susan Todd, 49, was waiting in a car outside the Rowberrow filling station just south of Churchill, Avon, on the A38 Bristol-to-Bridgwater road while her husband Ken was buying cigarettes. She was with her daughter Sally and granddaughter Shannon. Looking across a field, she saw a big cat climbing the hillside about 300 yards (274m) away. "It was... definitely a lioness," she said. "It was halfway up the field, but you could see its long tail and all the muscles on its back legs."

She ran inside the kiosk to report the extraordinary sight and sales assistant Karen Ritchings, 20, called the police. The Todds and Miss Ritchings went out to the forecourt where they were joined by a dozen drivers who had stopped to see what they were pointing at. Two men from a builder's truck went over the wall into the field and the animal ran up the hill and disappeared into woodland. Others are said to have taken photographs and camcorder footage. "It was definitely a lioness," said Sandra Redgers, 50, manager of the filling station. "It came up to here," said Miss Ritchings, indicating a height somewhere near the top of her thigh.

When everyone except Mrs Redgers and Miss Ritchings had gone, the giant felid walked back into view and lay in the grass, sunning itself; but it had gone by the time the police arrived. A search failed to find any clues, although a mutilated sheep turned up on Robert Harding's farm in nearby Winford on the same day. Mr Harding, a former butcher, had suffered three other sheep mutilations since October. This was not [the work of] a dog, a fox, or a badger," he said. "We are talking about throats, shoulders and ribs being ripped open. One of the ewes had her face skinned from her nose right across her head. It would have taken a very powerful animal to do that."

Terry Hooper, co-ordinator of the Exotic Animal Register, thought the animal – dubbed in alliterative tabloid tradition the Beast of Blagdon – was more likely to have been a puma, as there had been sightings of them in the area for years. However, witness Mr Todd, 51, who used to work as a security guard at Longleat Safari Park, insisted it was a lioness. "It was too big to be a puma," he said.

By a fine piece of lexilinking, the field where the lioness was seen belonged to a farmer called Jack Lyons. I am reminded

of the lioness seen by the Hutchinson family in the Yorkshire Wolds in 1994 – also on 17 August. It was outside the house they had just moved into in Ruston Parva, which just happened to have a stone lion in the garden [FT80:39].

CAT ATTACKS

About four days before the Rowberrow sighting, a 10-year-old chestnut mare called Gert was found in Holbeton, Devon, with four deep parallel scratches on her right flank. There were also cuts and puncture wounds to her chest, front legs, and stomach. According to Chris Moiser, a zoologist at Plymouth College of Further Education and advisor to the British Big Cat Society, the wounds were "not inconsistent with an immature puma attack... I don't think it could have been a person because the horse would not have stood there and allowed itself to be scratched in so many places. We can rule out a dog because their claws are not sharp enough to cause these injuries."

In June 2002, a horse in Rhydcymerau, Dyfed, was found with scratches on its back and neck, suggestive of an ABC attack. Then on 2 August, a pony at Vicarage Farm, Ivinghoe, Bedfordshire, was found with bite and claw wounds on her head, legs and belly, said by a vet to have been caused by a large cat. Two horses were also slightly injured. In the following days, a further three horses in the area suffered similar injuries. All the animals in Whipsnade Wild Animal Park, nearby, were accounted for.

On 19 October 2002, a two-year-old Arab filly called Jessica in the Shebbear area of North Devon was found with deep wounds the size of fists on either side of her neck, and deep scratches of her shoulders and hind quarters. Two other horses in the same field suffered wounds, as did a horse five miles (8km) away around the same time. There had been a rash of large black cat sightings in the area.

A sheep carcass was found 18ft (5.4m) up a tree in Great Dalby, Leicestershire, in September 2001. There were claw marks on the bark. This was regarded as convincing evidence of an ABC (possibly a leopard), as no native predator would haul prey into a tree.

On the afternoon of 17 October 2001, a farm worker (who has declined to be named) was clearing undergrowth on Newick Hill in East Sussex when a large cat with pointed ears, three times the size of a domestic cat, leapt on him. He grabbed it by the neck and attempted to hold it at arm's length to stop its back legs from digging into him. Its long fangs nearly pierced the industrial-thickness leather gloves he was wearing and left him with marks on his hands. He threw the creature on the ground where it let out a "petrifying scream" and ran off into the woods. Its pointed ears suggested it was a lynx. He was surprised by the sheer strength of the animal as he was sturdily built and had handled pigs, sheep and even bulls. Eleven days after this attack, a motorist saw a lynx run across the road in Newick.

The year 2002 has seen two notable ABC attacks. On 9 January Mick Cole, a 43-year-old optician, was parking outside his house in Barr Road, Gravesend, Kent, when he saw what he thought was a fox prowling along the side of a garage with a rabbit in its mouth. Attempting to get it to release its prey, he moved towards it waving his hands. The animal, which by then he took to be lynx, slashed at his outstretched hand, leaving him with three long, deep gashes

(below).



On 11 January, Doris Moore, 52, of Craigieford, near Inch, Glens of Foudland, Aberdeenshire, went out to check on her horses with her friend Wilfred Simpson, 81. Shortly after 7pm, she walked carefully along the 20 yards of icy track in the dark to her car while Mr Simpson locked up the stables. He had difficulty closing the padlock and hit it hard, making quite a loud noise. Mrs Moore felt something tugging on the strap of her ski pants. Thinking she had snagged on something, she tried to pull free, but without success. She turned to see a large animal.

"I didn't hear a growl or anything," she said. "It was all very quick, like the sound of the wind, as it lunged towards me. It was jet black and was scrabbling with its paw at my trouser leg. It then sunk its teeth into the top of my thigh and I screamed. I was trying to get into the car but it was tugging at my leg. I tried to break free by banging my keys down on its neck two or three times... Its coat was rough fur, but it was too muscular for a dog. It finally fled, but I lost my keys."

Hearing his friend's cries, Mr Simpson ran up and saw what he later described as "a sleek, black beastie" the size of a Labrador with the motion of a cat. It had a long thin body about 3ft (91cm) long without the tail, standing 2.5ft to 3ft (76-91cm) tall. "It was definitely a large cat," he said. "I'm a retired sheep farmer and I've never seen anything like it."



He took Mrs Moore to Inverurie Hospital. She suffered severe bruising and three puncture wounds along her thigh where her trousers were ripped (left). The wounds were 1.5in (4cm) and 2.8in (7cm) apart. One was 4in (10cm) long, and Mrs Moore is convinced her attacker was larger than a **Kellas cat**. The flattened hay in an open steading adjacent to the stables suggested that the animal had been sleeping there. It had probably been startled by the noise of Mr Simpson banging the padlock.

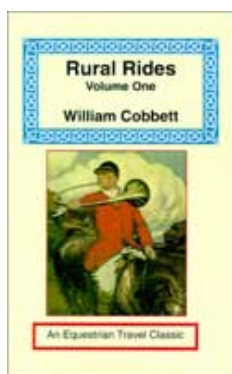
The attack prompted the SNP MSP for north-east Scotland, Richard Lohead, to request an investigation into Scottish big cats by the rural development minister, Ross Finnie. A similar request was made in 1997 to Sir Michael Forsyth, then Secretary of State for Scotland, by

SNP leader Alex Salmond.

AND IN WALES...

At 8.30am on 3 September 2002, Peter Beese was on his balcony watching a kingfisher with a massive eel at the back of his garden in Shirebrook, near Goldcliff, Gwent, when through his binoculars he saw a large black cat. He had seen similar animals about 10 times in the previous three years. He called the police and PCs Mark Jones and Jodie Warren turned up. "We saw the black head of a feline animal," said PC Jones. "We believed it to be domestic, but then the animal broke cover and through binoculars we could clearly see that it was far too large. It was about 2ft 6in [75cm] tall with a quite strikingly long tail, slightly bigger than an Alsatian dog but more powerfully and sleekly built." After 15 minutes they spotted another cat about half the size of the first, which they were certain wasn't domestic either. After a few minutes they saw the larger animal again.

PC Jones said: "It came across the farmyard and passed between a trailer and a tractor, and as it did so it blacked out one of the tractor tyres completely... it's quite easy to disbelieve reports like this, but I'm convinced now." The larger ABC was reckoned to be 4ft (122cm) long with a 3ft (91cm) tail. A search of the area, assisted by two helicopters using thermal imaging equipment, failed to find the animals. Mike Mazzoleni, an estate manager for the Countryside Council for Wales, who looks after the nearby Gwent Levels Wetlands, said he had seen something resembling a panther three or four times in the previous six months.



HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

The great English radical William Cobbett recalled in his *Rural Rides* that, as a small boy in the 1760s, he had seen a cat "as big as a middle-sized Spaniel dog" climb into a hollow elm tree in the grounds of the ruined Waverley Abbey near Farnham in Surrey. Later, in New Brunswick, he saw a 'lucifée' (North American lynx – *Felis lynx canadensis*) "and it seemed to me to be just such a cat as I had seen at Waverley."⁴

The 'Ennerdale Dog' or 'Girt Dog' shot dead in Cumberland on 12 September 1810 after a wave of sheep deaths might possibly have been a lion-like big cat; Will Rotherby, who was knocked over by the creature as it escaped from a hunting party, was certainly convinced that it was.⁵

The Daily Express (14 Jan 1927) reported that, following a series of sheep deaths in Inverness-shire in 1926, a farmer trapped a "large fierce yellow animal" and sent it to London Zoo, where it was identified as a lynx. Two other lynxes had earlier been shot in the same area. Charles Fort mused that they might have been teleported "from somewhere in the Carpathians"⁶. A puzzling footnote is that London Zoo has no record of having received such a creature at that time.

ABC reports on the Isle of Wight go back to 1895. In January 1940, livestock and rabbits were reported missing on the island, and a creature with the head of a lion and the body of a dog was seen. It was dubbed the Vectis Monster.

BODIES OF EVIDENCE

Alien felids shot, run over, or caught in traps obviously provide the best evidence for British ABCs. Unless otherwise stated, the provenance of these animals is unknown. I would like to thank Dr Karl Shuker, from whose article in Fortean Studies vol 2 (1995) the majority of the data below are summarised.

LEOPARD CAT (*Felis begalensis*), a widespread golden-brown Asian felid slightly larger than a domestic cat. Too small to account for sheep mutilations.

Nov 1981: shot at Crewood Hall Farm, Kingsley, Cheshire.

1987: snared and shot near Yaverland Manor, Sandown, Isle of Wight. Photographed and secretly buried.

Feb 1988: shot near Jedburgh in the Scottish borders. 3ft (90cm) long. Had escaped from a private collector in Cumbria the previous autumn.

15 April 1988: shot on Dartmoor near Widecombe. Less than a year old.

Aug 1990: 3.5ft (107cm) long male discovered dead near a lake in Berwickshire. It had been killed by blow to the head.

JUNGLE CAT (*Felis chaus*), also called swamp cat or reed cat, a brown, lynx-like species three times the size of domestic cat. Long, faintly striped limbs, tufted ears, short ringed tail with tufted tip. Found in Asia, especially India, the Middle East, and Egypt.

26 July 1988: adult female killed by a car on Hayling Island, Hampshire. This cat (or a similar one) had been seen in the Havant area for at least a week before its death, but similar reports continued for a long time afterwards. No jungle cats had escaped from any English zoo.

3 Feb 1989: emaciated male, about five years old, found dead at Richards Castle, Ludlow, Shropshire. Remarkably similar to this animal was a local one-year-old domestic cat, twice normal size, called Jasper. Its mother was a lynx-like feral cat, possibly offspring from a jungle cat. There are verified jungle-domestic hybrids from various zoological collections, some of which have proven fertile.

Summer 1996: run over in Warminster, Wiltshire, and taken to Paignton Zoo. It was stuffed and can be seen in the museum in Westbury, Wiltshire.

OTHER BIG CATS

5 Jan 1975: black panther cub (*Panthera pardus*) caught on bank of Medway, East Peckham, Kent. It turned out that a black panther cub had been stolen the day before from Colchester Zoo, 50 miles (80km) away; if it was the same one, it was a mystery how it ended up wandering in Kent.

4 Aug 1975: leopard cub (*Panthera pardus*) with blue collar wandered inside house at Fallowfield, Manchester.

31 Mar 1976: clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) from the humid jungles of south-east Asia, shot at Elsted, near Canterbury in Kent. It was one of two that had escaped from Howletts Zoo, Kent, seven months earlier in August 1975.

Late 1970s: puma (*Felis concolor*) caught near the Civic Centre in Barnstaple, Devon.

20 May 1980: dead lioness (*Panthera leo*) found in a lake near a disused railway quarry in St Helens, Lancashire.

29 Oct 1980: female puma (*Felis concolor*), about six years old, trapped in Cannich, near Inverness by farmer Ted Noble. He had been on the look-out since 27 October 1979, when he saw a 'lioness' stalking ponies at his farm. The puma, dubbed Felicity, was rheumatoid in one leg, well groomed, overweight

and tame – although analysis of her droppings showed that she had been living in the wild. 'Puma' sightings and sheep depredations in the area continued after her capture. Taken to the Highland Wildlife Park near Aviemore, she died of old age in 1985. She was stuffed and put on permanent display at the entrance to Inverness museum.



1991: Northern lynx (*Felis lynx*, above) shot near Beccles, Suffolk, after it killed about 15 sheep over a two-week period. The police and the Home Office were informed at the time and asked the farmer to destroy the body and any photos. However, it was put into a freezer for a few days before being sold on to a local game dealer, who had it stuffed and sold it to a local collector, who now has it in his hall. It was almost 11 years before the story and photo surfaced.

17 Feb 1997: African caracal (*Felis caracal*) with a collar shot in Fintona, Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland.

4 May 2001: female Northern lynx (*Felis lynx*), aged about 18 months, slightly lame in left hind leg, spotted on a garden fence in Cricklewood, north London. Tranquillised after a six-hour hunt and taken to London Zoo.

KELLAS CATS

Kellas cats are distinct from the Scottish wildcats (*Felis silvestris grampia*), whose home region this is. They have shortish tails, very large fangs, and black bristly pelage sprinkled with long white primary guard hairs. They are probably either melanistic wildcats or a cross between domestic feral cats and wildcats; but the large size and long legs remain a puzzle.

January 1983: Black cat, 42in (107cm) from nose to tail, shot in Kellas, West Moray, Scottish Highlands.

June 1984: A beast similar to the Kellas cat, 43in (109cm) from nose to tail, snared at Revack Lodge near Grantown-on-Spey, 15 miles (24km) to the south.

April 1985: A similar cat shot at Advie, north of Grantown.

Oct 1985: A fourth shot near Dallas, near Kellas.

Spring 1986: Kellas cat trapped near Dallas and taken to the Highland Wildlife Park in Kincaig. Four further Kellas cat specimens were obtained in the late 1980s.

WOLVERINES (*Gulo gulo*)

Admittedly not of the cat family, but possibly responsible for some livestock depredation in ABC areas. This fearsome mustelid, a relative of the badger and otter, is normally confined to North America and parts of northern Europe.

1994: found dead beside a road at Wembworthy, Devon. (In early December 1985, a mystery animal left clear four-clawed tracks when it stole some tripe from Brenda Cornish's farm near Minehead in Somerset. 'Experts' identified them as wolverine. Mrs Cornish had earlier heard hideous screaming in the surrounding woods. In 1994 there were wolverine

sightings near Bodmin in Cornwall, near South Moulton on the edge of Dartmoor, in Somerset's Quantock Hills and in Pembroke National Park.)

SKULLS

Jan 1988: leopard skull, wrapped inside a plastic bag (!), found behind a hedge in Lustleigh on Dartmoor. The back of the skull bore notches suggesting it had come from a leopard skin rug.

Late Aug/early Sept 1993: skull from a mounted tiger head found near Brendon, Exmoor.

24 July 1995: male leopard skull, later shown to be from a rug or trophy, found in River Fowey near Golitha Falls on the southern edge of Bodmin Moor.



ABC HUNT CENTRAL

Daniel Bamping, founder of the British Big Cats Society, describes the aims of the BBCS and the progress made in researching these elusive felids.

The BBCS was founded in the Spring of 2001 to identify, quantify, protect and catalogue the Big Cats at large in the British countryside. It now has more than 600 UK members, and is raising funds for such projects as trigger cameras and hair traps in an attempt to identify the species, the numbers of animals, and assess risk to livestock or humans. It wishes to see the ABC population regarded as a (collective) protected species and safeguarded from the gun, as far as is reasonably practicable.

The Society collects data from – and distributes it to – its members, and assists the relevant authorities such as the police, DEFRA and wildlife organisations, in dealing with sightings, evidence and situations as they arise. During the 18 months from March 2001 to August 2002, we received over 1,000 ABC reports – over 500 alone for 2001. We are seeking funding, sponsorship and donations and hope in the near future to become a registered charity and start to develop some serious scientific research.

In September 2002 we held our annual Big Cat weekend at Dartmoor Wildlife Park, Sparkhill, Devon, where we now have our HQ. We presented new video footage and pictures, and data on sheep kills, paw prints, hair samples and the ABC encounters by Mick Cole and Doris Moore. Our website www.britishbigcats.org has certainly boosted the number of people coming forward – over 27,000 hits so far!

Two naturalists based in north Devon have made significant contributions to our understanding of Britain's ABCs. Trevor Beer MBE – illustrator, conservationist, and author of *The Beast of Exmoor: Fact or Legend?* (1983) – has been investigating ABC activities since the 1960s, and has collected evidence in support of a seasonal ABC migratory passage across Exmoor, following the game. This year in the Western Morning News he highlighted the data collected over a four-month period, combining it with his other data since 2000 and information sent in by WMN readers to produce a detailed map of sightings across the Westcountry (WMN 13 Nov 2002). The BBCS plans to make use of this data to focus on the Westcountry as a test area for trigger cameras.

Nigel Brierly, author of *They Stalk by Night* (1989), has been following the story since 1983, and has collected a huge amount of data. He maintains that the use of trigger cameras is far more likely to capture ABCs on film than trying to track them down in the wild.

In October we were sorry to hear of the death of Quentin Rose, a big game hunter who had followed the ABC story around the country for over 20 years and became a prominent spokesman on the subject in the media, including at least three TV documentaries. He lectured various police forces on big cats and what to do should they be faced with one. He made a substantial contribution to raising the profile of the ABC issue and I'm sure he will be missed.

Last February, Scottish "rural guerrillas" associated with the Wild Beasts Trust announced that if the Scottish Parliament outlawed foxhunting they would release three European lynx in the Borders, three in Galloway and six near Mohammed Fayed's estate in Easter Ross. The Scottish Parliament went ahead and banned foxhunting with dogs and there was a subsequent claim that lynx had been released. Lothian and Borders police said they had no evidence of this, but admitted that such a release would amount to a criminal offence under Section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). The Wild Beasts Trust conceded that the lynx could be a threat to livestock, but claimed that wild lynx in France and Spain choose foxes, rabbits and voles as prey.

On the morning of 26 November, it was discovered that a lynx had escaped from Kirkcudbright Wildlife Park, Dumfries and Galloway, south-west Scotland. Experts believed it would have headed for the nearby Galloway Forest. It was still at large at the time of going to press.

Chris Moiser, zoologist and adviser to the BBCS, said: "While reintroducing lynx might be a criminal offence, it is not necessarily a bad idea. Most biologists, including at least one professor, believe that our populations of grazing animals (the deer and rabbits) do not have enough natural predators to keep their numbers under control. The re-introduction of the lynx might, if handled correctly, help to balance this situation. With an increased wariness of, and tightening of controls on, firearms and the increasing unacceptability of hunting with dogs, the return of one of our long-lost predators might give hope to farmers and landowners."



© Copyright Fortean Times. All rights reserved.