

Big Cats and Britain's Ecology

Notes from the discussion at the British Association of Nature Conservationists' (BANC) workshop held at the Oak Hall, Keynes Country Park, Cotswold Water Park, Glos. on 9th September 2006.

The following discussion points arose among the participants following a presentation from Jonathan McGowan on big cats in Dorset, plus briefer offerings from Chris Moiser (Scientific Adviser to the Big Cats in Britain Research Group), Frank Tunbridge (big cat investigator in Glos.) and Peter Taylor (*ECOS* correspondent on big cats).

As a follow-up to the event, Jonathan McGowan's perspective on wildlife effects of big cats in Dorset is published in *ECOS* volume 28.

Professor Jules Pretty OBE, Dept. of Biological Sciences, University of Essex, concluded the morning session with some reflections on key issues. These are summarised at the end of the notes below.

Discussion Points

European Wild-Cat

Chris Moiser raised the idea of re-introducing the European (a.k.a. Scottish) wild-cat in England and Wales before we contemplate the re-introduction of the lynx in Britain. If this is attempted, will it cross with breeds like the Chaussies, creating hybrids?

What would happen if there was a formal re-introduction of the wild cat in England and Wales? It was suggested that the European wild-cat may now be overcoming the challenge of hybridisation in Scotland.

Does the cat often labelled as the Kellas Cat have several types, rather than a single type, often described as the European wild-cat in black form?

Effects of Big Cats on Deer

Deer populations across Britain are increasing, although there are large regional differences. Generally, their numbers are at their highest for a thousand years. Defra is currently consulting on deer management and the possibility of reforming the close season for shooting deer.

Jonathan McGowan believes big cats are affecting deer populations (sika and roe) in some parts of Dorset, since numbers are declining slightly in areas without culling. He feels that this decline is not simply a result of poaching. In Dorset the roe deer population is very healthy – perhaps the sick ones are being taken by big cats.

It was reported that the deer population of Kent is rising rapidly, with deer spreading into gardens and roadsides – and in day time. Big cat sightings are also increasing, so there may be a connection.

One forester and hunter suggested that these assertions may be valid, but there must be other factors that influence changes in deer populations.

Is there an evidence gap in the relationships between big cats and deer?

Deer populations are growing at different rates. Is there a straightforward relationship: more prey → more predation?

It was noted that big cats follow the movement of deer, even into towns such as Gloucester and Bournemouth.

The Hideout Theory

The hideout theory: could some British big cats represent a relict population that never died out?

There is much folklore and many historical accounts concerning sightings of black creatures in Britain – and much legend surrounding 'the black dog'. Many descriptions of the black dog recall feline forms.

There were sightings long before any (possible) releases arising from the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act. Explanations for these earlier sightings include released/escaped puma mascots of American air force crew and escapees from travelling Victorian menageries.

It was suggested that a relict population of the European leopard is very unlikely.

Is there evidence from Exmoor of a relict cat population?

In Britain, wolves were eliminated by humans, suggesting that big cats would have suffered the same fate. Was there sufficient forest and deer across Britain for a relict population of big cats?

The European wild-cat remains in Scotland, but has largely disappeared from England and Wales, however occasional sightings have been made.

It was suggested that the degree of game-keeping, hunting and trapping across Britain in the past would have eradicated any remaining cat species. It was also suggested, however, that some private estates could have provided a refuge, as happened for roe deer.

Could a small-to-medium black cat of some type have persisted in Scotland? Why is such a cat depicted on the emblems of some clans?

Could lynx have survived for much longer in more remote parts/extreme environments of Britain? (We must at the same time recognise that places regarded as remote/extreme were in past times often inhabited and even the locations of primary industry.)

Viable Populations

What are the population estimates and what are viable populations of the main reported cats in Britain: melanistic leopard, puma and Eurasian lynx?

The late Quentin Rose was a renowned consultant, used by police and the MOD. In 2000 he estimated a population of 100 big cats across Great Britain and he predicted significant population increases over the next twenty years. This is endorsed by some big cat researchers and trackers, but disputed by others.

Territories of big cats in Britain are believed to vary among individual cats from a few square miles to covering several counties. Territories may depend on food availability and on the age and confidence of the individual cat. Puma can exist even in small parks in USA.

It was noted that re-introductions of lynx with small founding populations have failed across Europe.

How did the releases associated with the 1976 legislation become breeding – and possibly viable – populations? Do females and males travel far to mate, as they surely would if necessary, and does this mean that the current populations are still small?

Is a founder population of big cats, especially lynx, being topped up by more recent releases? There have been allegations of clandestine releases of lynx in recent years.

What is the evidence for current numbers? How do vegetation, forest cover and food availability affect numbers? Jonathan McGowan estimates the Dorset populations based on analysis of field evidence and on all sightings.

Where are Sightings of Big Cats Reported and Recorded?

There are several big cat groups with Web sites where sightings can be registered. The group with the most systematic and collaborative approach is the *Big Cats in Britain Research Group*, which publishes a compilation of reports and analysis in the annual *Big Cats Yearbook*.

There are many counties with County Recorders, who take witness statements, plot them to map the trends, and give advice and feedback to witnesses. Some of these network through the *Big Cats in Britain Research Group*. Sightings also get reported to police, local papers, the RSPCA and vets.

Irish military reports of big cats exist.

It is known that some farmers and private estates want the presence of big cats on their land to be kept quiet – at least two such estates in Glos. take this approach.

Several big cats are still kept in private ownership in Britain.

Freedom of Information requests on the ownership of big cats and on escapes and incidents have been made by the *Big Cats in Britain Research Group*, although it is recognised that the responses from different bodies and police is inconsistent.

Why are Government Bodies 'Agnostic' on Big Cats?

Why would police (and possibly Defra) do away with the evidence from a road kill – as has been alleged three times – including one 2004 road traffic accident in Gloucester involving a big black cat (admitted off-the-record by Glos. police)?

It was suggested the authorities don't realise that big cat populations are viable in Britain.

It was noted that, after the alleged attack of a big cat on a man in his garden in Siddenham two years ago, many local families kept their children off school for several days. Even though the Siddenham incident is doubted, this case shows that people will be afraid of big cats thought to be in their vicinity.

The Effects of Big Cats on Game

Some gamekeepers in Dorset say that they are unconcerned about big cats.

Perhaps those with an interest in big cats need to develop a dialogue with gamekeepers and to discover how gamekeepers perceive big cats and their potential prey activity.

Frank Tunbridge stated that, in his role in Glos., he often gets several calls a week about big cat sightings, from people including poachers, gamekeepers and motorists.

Which Cats are Present and How Do They Behave?

Before any re-introductions in Britain, such as lynx or European wild-cat, we should clarify as far as possible what we already have. We need a study, as rigorous as possible, perhaps with radio-tracking, etc.

It is important to discover the viable range of a family and what shelter, water and prey conditions they require, through analysis and study.

When tracking a big cat, it might be worth having two tracking parties, with the second group well behind, hopefully following a cat, since a big cat might be following the first group – this is characteristic behaviour for some cats, e.g. jaguar and leopard.

It is assumed that different species of big cat will mostly 'work around' each other, rather than get into conflict where their territories overlap; in other words different species won't want to risk a fight with each other. It is also assumed that the different species are not competing for food.

Do the different species have a pecking order? Do the older and more established and experienced big cats have territory and behaviour patterns that they won't adapt in the face of newcomers?

It is a difficult task to understand the movements and numbers of big cats: different areas will have different carrying capacities. Remote areas often associated with big cats, such as Bodmin Moor, won't necessarily have a good food supply.

Getting the Evidence of a Big Cat

It was thought that a carcass tied to a tree might provide a promising situation. Other known baits are bob-cat gland and essential oils.

It was noted that cats are suspicious of any situation uncommon to them and this may influence the best way to set out bait. Could a female cat be used to attract males as a bait?

Big cats' sense of smell may be not as good as many people realise – perhaps it is still reasonable, but not as acute as that of dogs.

The high numbers of mobile phone cameras may lead to more opportunistic photographs of big cats – one such picture was taken in the Forest of Dean in March 2006. However, even when equipped with a camera, getting a photo can be a real challenge, since the witness may be shocked/scared and often the sighting is too brief.

Public Safety

The chances of a big cat attack are remote, so the issue needs to be kept in perspective, nevertheless a small risk is present, perhaps from older and/or injured cats, or from any that show habituation close to residential areas and perhaps start taking domestic dogs as prey, then get more interested in patrolling residential areas.

There is a need to prevent people from 'offering' food that would attract a big cat in some situations, especially a dog off a lead within the cat's territory. Unrestrained dogs can worry wild boar, especially in chasing piglets which can then lead the dog to their mother and thus provoke an attack by the sow.

Signs alerting people to big cats could deter people from visiting places, while others might be attracted to the area to search for big cats for dubious reasons.

In some situations it might be unclear as to which organisation would have responsibility for displaying a sign alerting people to the possible presence of big cats.

Other Thoughts ...

It was felt unlikely that ground nesting birds would be widely predated by big cats.

Increasing numbers of people who work in nature conservation are aware of the evidence – they see big cats on nature reserves, woods, commons and elsewhere in the open countryside.

Tourism and Visitor Income

Lynx has been used to good effect to promote and brand the Harz mountains in Germany.

Big cat safaris have taken place on Exmoor, with signs in busier coastal towns advertising trips to see 'The Beast of Exmoor' and 'Exmoor's Big Cats'. It was noted that such 4WD safaris may be more difficult now with the new restrictions on using Roads Used as Public Paths (RUPPs).

There are T-shirts, cups and other souvenirs of 'The Beast of Bodmin' on sale in Cornwall and a Panther bitter has been produced by Rutland brewery to reflect the local panther sightings.

Tiger-viewing trips have a 1-in-5 chance of seeing a tiger, yet people are still keen to experience tiger territory and have the chance of a sighting.

It might be possible to encourage big cats to a prominent water source and to install a viewing hide.

Reflections from Professor Jules Pretty

Animals occupy real and imagined places in landscapes. There are real ecological interactions to discover, but there is also our imagination. Landscapes are partly imagined and partly real. We like mystery and, ironically, if evidence of big cats is confirmed, then some of the mystery will disappear.

There are lots of sightings of big cats, but are we seeing and reporting them more or are there actually more big cats?

Are they about to emerge? If they do, public attitudes to big cats will change. There will be excitement, interest, and fear. Calls to eliminate them will follow in due course, especially if one harms a child.