

THE PATH OF THE PANTHER

Northumbrian Big Cat Diaries

By

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www.bigcatsinbritain.org

Dedication

To my Dad, Alan Bond, for all those trips to the zoo.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has been in touch with me to pass on their own report or to tell me of reports that they have heard of. Some have gone out of their way to track down reports in their area and I would like to thank George Howe, Jack Smurthwaite, Alistair McLee and Kevin Bulmer for all the leads they have given me over the years.

The very noticeable increase in reports that I have received in recent years is due mainly to the work of the Big Cats in Britain organisation and I would especially like to thank Mark Fraser who keeps the group together, an exercise in herding cats if ever there was one.

Foreword

Hidden deep inside my heart is the desire to believe that “big cats” roam the countryside, slinking through wood and dale, with only occasional tantalising glimpses to whet the imagination of a nation hungry for mystery.

Meanwhile, the scientific bits of my brain yell ‘Evidence?’

Good old proof, a corpse or a scat, something real to demonstrate irrefutably that the stories contained within these pages are solid gold fact, rather than another example of human incapacity to determine size or distance as accurately as we think we can. After all, we demand proof of ourselves when proving the presence of a native species in an area (such as pine marten in Northumberland). Surely it’s the least we can do in the case of ‘alien’ species.

Yet the stories are compelling, even if the evidence isn’t quite....yet! Perhaps the reason for the regularity or reports is because we WANT to BELIEVE?

Personally, this is a fence I am sitting firmly in the middle of – looking both ways, eyes peeled for authentication but with an imagination full of possibilities.

Steve Lowe

**Conservation Manager
Northumberland Wildlife Trust
November 2010**

The Path of the Panther.

Introduction

In the current climate of big cat reports, where it seems that every little town beginning with B has its “Beast of B...” and every town starting with C has “The C... Cat,” Durham was in the action early with reports of the so-called Durham Puma. However even back in the 1980s, when it first came to prominence, it was soon clear that at least three types of big cats were being reported and in addition to pumas there were reports of lynx and of large, black cats, which were presumed to be melanistic leopards, or to give them their popular name, panthers. Not only that, but sightings also came in from the neighbouring counties of Northumberland and Cleveland.

I read the reports in the local papers with fascination but without much analysis and got the impression that there were a great many such reports. It wasn't until recently when Bob Wilkin and Chris Hall (BCIB) loaned me their extensive collections of local news cuttings on big cats that it occurred to me that many of these were the same few reports being recycled. In a sense thought that doesn't matter; that was then, and this is now, and cats, no matter how large, or how many lives, only live 10-15 years. A friend of mine, who knows some of the gamekeepers in Teesdale, asked them if they thought there were big cats roaming around their patches. They replied to the effect that it might have been the case in the eighties but certainly not recently. This book is about the picture over the past ten years, i.e. roughly from the year 2000.

The miscellany of reports of big cats that made up the Durham Puma story was actively researched and spell-bindingly told by Eddie Bell. However while I was enthralled listening to his talk some years back we have never actually met to compare notes. It is likely that he will receive a number of reports that I don't get and vice versa. No doubt there will also be a good number of people who see what they are sure is a big cat but don't report it to anybody. This book is not the whole story then, rather it's just the parts that I am aware of.

This book is in two parts. The bulk of it is taken up with the ‘Northumbria Big Cat Diaries.’ The Diaries feature in the quarterly newsletter of Northumbria Mammal Group and I have left them more or less as originally written. For a variety of reasons there are no entries for some quarters and in one case for an entire year but there were few quarters where I didn't receive even one report. I also write a sister column, ‘Droppings’, for the newsletter, which is a collection of small bits of information about mammals. There is often a bit of cross-referencing between the two and occasionally a creature mentioned in the Diaries may be made even more cryptic in this collection by the lack of ‘Droppings’ (a problem both literary and literally in the physical hunt for big cats in Britain).

The Northumbria Big Cat Diaries came about as a result of a typically facetious comment of mine about wanting to collate reports of big cat sightings. A well-respected North East naturalist took me seriously and told me of his compelling

report. At his request I have never published his report though it remains one of the best both in terms of the sighting and the resulting story but it unquestionably set the ball off and rolling. The 'Diaries' kicked off in the Winter 2000 edition of the newsletter but I have also included an earlier big cat report from the newsletter, which seems to indicate that I was initially a little sceptical.

The second part of this book comprises a series of distribution maps and a discussion of what all these reports might be telling us about big cats in the North East. I have used the term 'big cat' in the popular sense of being any type of cat that is bigger than a domestic cat or its feral equivalent; certain species such as lynx or serval are at best medium sized. As they just cover the past ten years or so, the reports that I have collated have the benefit that they are therefore within the potential life span of an individual cat. This allows the opportunity for some analysis of patterns of big cat sightings based on the assumption that the reports are actually of big cats living in the North East and behaving as big cats might be expected to. Allowance, of course, must be made for the fact that the behaviour of such cats on a densely populated island with a temperate climate may be a little different to that which they exhibit in their native habitats. I attempted a short analysis of the 65 reports that I had received up to that point in an article entitled 'The Path of the Panther' for the 2007 Year Book of the Big Cats in Britain organisation. I've plagiarised that article quite extensively in this section as, although the number of reports that I have received has more than doubled in the past three years, the picture of big cats in the North East hasn't changed significantly to my mind.



Ian Bond at the 2009 Teesside Big Cats in Britain Conference standing on the bus featured in the ITV hit series Heartbeat. Also note the cameo appearance of Di Francis, the first lady of British Big Cats. (Cheryl Hudson ©).

The Northumbrian Big Cat Diaries

The Missing Lynx. (Summer 2000 pre-BCD)

There has been a report of a black cat, described as a possible lynx, at Hexham Riverside Park. I suspect that this will turn out to be a case of mistaken identity. If there's one thing more unlikely than a lynx at Hexham Riverside Park it's a black lynx anywhere! If the cat was black then it was either a panther, in which case its eating the equivalent of an Alsatian every other day, or it's a moggy. The former would be quite a discovery; the latter are known to be quite common in the North East and are thought not to present much of a threat to Alsatians. A third alternative is that the report was not of a feline at all but a Mackem who got the wrong Riverside for the away match with Middlesbrough.

Winter 2000

Welcome to what I hope will be a regular feature in the newsletter. It occurred to me, that if Eddie Bell has amassed scores, if not hundreds of reports of big cats in this region since the 1980s (and I know for certain that there are others that Eddie doesn't know about), then there must be quite a number of encounters of the feline kind each year. So, not to be outdone by those suntanned, whispering BBC people, I thought that we would start our own Big Cat Diary. With a bit of luck we will be able to publish a big cat report in each edition of the newsletter; until such time as its existence is proven beyond doubt at which point we'll apply for funding for a project officer. Our first report is fresh in more than one sense and comes from our very own Kevin O'Hara, a man who is neither suntanned nor given to whispering.

"Prior to the purchase of NWT's new reserve in deepest Hexhamshire, the members of staff felt that a site visit was in order. In other words, we needed a jolly in the countryside in order to convince ourselves that it still existed after the recent floods. "We were destined for an area of oak woodland, semi-ancient you might call it as it had been tampered with in parts.

"An assortment of skills were encompassed in the group, all the major species groups were represented, not least my own dear self-interest in what mammals may lie within the cover of those ancient oaks; as we entered the woods, jays chucked their warnings through the treetops. It was immediately discovered that both badger and roe deer frequented the area, as it was criss-crossed by their trails. A little further on we discovered their sett entrances and the levels of use, and then disturbed a dozing roe deer from the fern cover. Man's all too apparent influence became clear as I retrieved the mummified skull of a stoat from the barbed wire fence, impaled above the entrance to an outlying sett. A pheasant strutted nearby, so I could see why it had met its fate.

"It was shortly after this that the discovery of the day came to light. Crossing a fallen boundary wall, I noticed a large scat deposited behind and under a large spreading oak. It was placed right where a trail both entered and left the wood across some open grassland. Very fox-like, but there was a very distinct difference, the size! Now I

must have seen thousands of fox scats in my time, as many badger, millions of otters, dogs; just about every creature on the planet has tested my olfactory sense, one way or another. There was something different about this one. Although the scent was quite acrid, it smelt like my old tomcat and not my wellie socks. Blunt at both ends, made up of mammal hair, grey in colour and with a smell that kept tapping at my distant past.

“Many years ago, I was fortunate to work for a short period of time in a zoo and it was this that was coming to the fore. It was the smell of cat! Big Cat!! We needed some assistance on this matter, so we collected the offending article and placed it in a sandwich bag. A call to Sgt. Eddie Bell, Durham’s answer to Daktari, and the scat was collected the next day by a very excited Eddie who informed us of other recent sightings in this particular area of a large puma-like cat. Forensic tests may be able to identify the species from hair samples on a barbed wire fence at the other side of the trail. Eddie’s experienced eye suggested it to be either lynx or puma sized pussycats that were the culprits. As the hair samples were black, well who knows what it was, but suffice to say I am pretty convinced now of a new addition to our fauna.”

Spring 2001

In the last edition of the newsletter, I said that we would try for a regular item on evidence of big cats in our area. This did generate another report and, whilst the details are confidential, the report itself was very significant given the qualifications and experience of the observer. It would seem that we now have good sightings, by people who know what they are looking at, of three species of large cat in the north-east: lynx, puma and a melanistic, pantherine species. That being the case, we are going to collate sightings or other evidence of big cats in the region. It is possible that the ranges of the three species might not overlap, due to competition or direct predation; so who knows, maybe some patterns will emerge. Whilst I would love to publish all reports in the newsletter, they will be treated with strict confidentiality were requested. Having said that, I am also quite happy to publish articles that take a more sceptical view. Its not that long ago that I read an article by a scientist who was researching the status of alien mammals for MAFF (now DEFRA) and who took the line that there was no good evidence for big cats in the British countryside. There would seem therefore to be plenty of room for healthy debate.

As I don’t have any recent reports that I’m at liberty to publish, I thought that I would relate some close encounters of the feline kind that occurred about 18 months ago at Castle Eden Walkway, where I work. Whilst at least one of the sightings seemed genuine enough, we were sure that there was no big cat resident in our woods and so we played down the incident so as not to cause undue alarm or encourage the macho element. Nevertheless, the resulting public and press interest was most instructive regarding human perception and imagination. The following account summarises what happened and, I swear, every word is true!

The initial sighting was by a middle-aged couple who walk their Dalmatian at the Walkway, early every morning. They were rather embarrassed about it, as good “strange sighting” witnesses are meant to be. Only the husband had seen it and there was no way he wanted to speak to the press about it. What had happened was that as they were walking along the main track, a large sandy, coloured animal had walked down through the trees on one side of the embankment, about 30 metres in front of

him. He immediately thought “golden retriever,” until it appeared on the track in front of him. It had a long tail which swept down to the ground and back up again and it was definitely a cat! Needless to say, the ‘golden retriever’ didn’t trot up to them to sniff the Dalmatian’s rear end. Instead it disappeared in a flash up the other embankment and into the wood. Knowing this chap as we do pretty much ruled out a hoax and, given his description, there wasn’t much doubt that he’d seen a puma, (interestingly, as we found out later, there had been a sighting of a similar creature a few days earlier, about ten miles down the road in Yarm).

Needless to say, over the next few weeks we had a bestiary of ‘big cat’ sightings. We had a tortoiseshell big cat, a big cat that was fox-sized and brown with pointed ears and a long, bushy tail (I kid you not!) and the inevitable big, black cat. As *Felis chamaeleonensis* has yet to be described to science, we took the details with liberal seasoning. Until, that is, one Sunday afternoon when another middle-aged couple came into the visitor centre to report a big cat behind a bush. They explained that they had been going for a walk along with their West Highland terrier when they met a rather anxious young lady heading in the opposite direction. She told them that her Doberman had charged into a bush after something; the something had growled very loudly and the Doberman had shot out again, terrified. Curious as to what it could be, the couple sent their Westie in to investigate. Another loud growl and the Westie came scampering out again. Perplexed they continued on their way in ‘did that really happen?’ mode, until they passed the same bush on the way back. Just to check, in went the Westie again; a loud growl and once again the Westie beat a hasty retreat. At this point they thought that they’d better tell someone, marked a cross on the cinder track beside the bush and headed back to the visitor centre.



The animal trail where the puma crossed the Castle Eden Walkway. (Ian Bond ©).

I had to investigate; a platoon of one hundred sponsored walkers had set off in that direction five minutes previously. I grabbed a radio and cast around for something to protect myself with, should I need it. Our tool cupboard is a bit like the props department for a gladiator movie. We have bill hooks, sickles, forks and big serrated blades on long poles. I grabbed my aluminium litter picker so as not to alarm the public, and set off to find the bush. On the way I repeated to myself what I'd read about pumas being shy, people friendly, cats; "I'amigo del christiano" according to South American legend. I'd been to a carol service last Christmas, I hoped that the puma would realise. The sponsored walkers had obliterated any sign of a cross on the ground and so I had quite a few bushes to choose from. Each was gingerly inspected with litter picker held at arm's length. After prodding numerous bushes, none of which growled at me, I was just getting to the point of thinking 'sucker', when a noise from the top of the embankment made the hairs on my arms stand up. I thought I knew roughly what a puma growling would sound like; but this was much deeper and more alarming than I'd anticipated. I stood for a while, my turn to wonder if I'd really heard it. Then it came again, this time further away. Unfortunately, or was that fortunately, the embankment between me and the sound was matted with blackthorn and dog rose. I'd look like I'd been attacked by a puma by the time I'd fought my way through that lot. There was nothing I could do, it was just one more report to add to the list and, as it transpired, the last report we received. There haven't been any other reports in the last 18 months, but talking to some of our older volunteers, there have been a couple of other fairly convincing sightings over the years. So, who knows, maybe it will pass this way again sometime.

Summer 2001

There seems to have been a lot of interest in big cats recently. The first seminar on Big Cats in Britain, hosted by the recently formed British Big Cat Society took place in Devon earlier this month. There was also a Channel 4 documentary in which two big cat trappers from Canada dismissed much of the evidence that had been gathered on big cats in Britain and did a fairly convincing job of demonstrating that there was unlikely to be any big cats in the particular area where they had been searching. To cap that, June's edition of British Wildlife arrived through my letterbox this morning and the mammal reports section was devoted to the debate on big cats in Britain. In it, Gordon Woodruffe restated the argument outlined by Simon Baker of the FRCA, who has been investigating big cat reports, which basically states that it is unlikely that there would be big cats at large in the British countryside. It seems that there are only five pumas and one leopard kept under licence by private individuals and so there is not much scope for escapes to give rise to big cat reports. Added to that, if there were breeding populations resulting from surreptitious releases in the 1970s, then we should have had concrete evidence of them by now. Gordon then went on to suggest that some of the sightings in Yorkshire might have actually been of otters. This could certainly have been the case with the two vague sightings near rivers that he lists, but would probably not account for the report of the freshly killed roe deer with scratch marks on it and the panther-like creature sat nearby, that he mentions at the beginning of the article.

As it turned out, the above items were pre-empted somewhat by the solid evidence that everyone has been asking for. The Beast of Cricklewood, as The Telegraph dubbed it, was caught in the suburbs of London in May. This young female lynx, as it

turned out to be, was first spotted sat on someone's fence. It remained in their garden for some time and was photographed several times, before eventually being tranquillised a few gardens away. The lynx was then taken to London Zoo whilst efforts were made to try and work out where it had come from. The relative ease with which the lynx was caught would seem to suggest that it had not been long out of captivity. If this was the case, it raises the interesting point that, unlikely as it seems, it might be possible for someone to keep (and lose!) a big cat without anyone knowing about it. If so, then maybe there have been a number of escapes over the years. This would, in my view, be more likely to give the patchy record of sightings, in space and time, than an established breeding population.

Things have been quite busy in our own patch as well. If the report in the last edition was a little strange, this one is downright bizarre. The sighting was by someone connected with the Cleveland Hunt. He was out exercising horses near Roseberry when he saw a large, black animal running through a field with something in its mouth. Hot on its heels was the farmer's wife, who was shouting at it. The animal dropped what it was carrying, which happened to be a farm cat. Although the man didn't get a good look at the big animal, he felt that it ran more like a cat than a dog (or presumably an otter?). The farmer's wife was in no doubt that it was a big cat. Not long after, the same man was riding in the woods near Guisborough when he got a clear view of a large black panther-like cat sat in one of the forest rides. These sightings took place in late 2000, shortly after rumours that a similar animal had been seen regularly crossing the Newport Bridge that links Middlesbrough's riverside with Stockton. Not a good place to be at night, even if you are a black panther.

The next report is a bit more, dare I say, normal. A man was walking with his dog along a road near the village of Stillington in Stockton. The dog reacted to something behind them and he turned to see a black panther in the road less than a hundred metres away from them. The cat immediately disappeared into the hedge-back and out of sight. This sighting was also late last year and interestingly only about two miles away from the puma sighting reported in the last edition of the newsletter. What is also interesting is that the last three reports I've had have been of big black cats whereas I'd always presumed that we were looking for the Durham Puma.

Autumn 2001

When we decided to run a run the Big Cat Diary, my initial thought was that I was being a bit on the optimistic side, trying to have a report each quarter. As it turned out, it seems that quite a lot of people have been seeing what they describe as big cats and I have received several reports, though not all of them recent.

Having reported on large black cats in Cleveland in the last edition, this edition sees us back in Northumberland. Again it's a report of a black cat and again it's from someone who is used to observing mammals. The report comes from Dr. Jane Young, who is a very experienced, professional ecologist. Jane was surveying Fontburn Reservoir near Rothbury for Northumbrian Water when she saw a large black cat some 40 metres away. The cat was apparently hunting in some marshy ground. She got a good view of it and so was in no doubt that it was a cat. She described the animal as about four times the size of a domestic cat in terms of its bulk, rather than its linear dimensions, or perhaps the size of a small Labrador. Jane also found a large, greenish dropping, unlike anything she'd seen before. (It's worth pointing out that,

after years of doing mammal surveys, Jane has got to be something of an authority on droppings). A likely explanation was that it might have come from the cat, which could have been preying on the frogs that are very abundant at the reservoir. The sighting is a little puzzling in that the animal wasn't big enough to be an adult panther, but at the same time was too big to be an outsized moggy. A plausible explanation might be that it was a young, recently independent panther. Such an animal might well take to eating frogs while it honed its hunting skills. But, of course, that would mean that panthers have bred in Northumberland.

Jane pointed out that there had been reports of black cats in the local newspapers over the past year. In particular the Hexham Courant, which reported a big, black cat in the Bellingham area. I also got a phone call from Tony Henderson, environment editor of the Journal after he had had a good report of a large black cat bounding across a road in Northumberland in front of two startled motorists. If any members in these far-flung parts of the region come across similar articles in local newspapers, please could you cut them out and send them to me or pass on the relevant details.

Speaking of which, my thanks to Steve Lowe for sending me a series of newspaper reports from the mid-90s of big cat sightings in Northumberland. These were all from around the Otterburn, Woodburn, Kirkwhelpington triangle. Most referred to panther sized, black cats, with one report of a spotted cat, size not stated and one of a cat unlike any known to science. Just to prove that we don't necessarily believe every report that we get, Kevin O'Hara investigated two reports of big cats recently. The first, on examining the footprints, proved to be a large dog. The second turned out to be an otter (that'll teach me to take the mick out of Gordon Woodroffe). Finally Steve also sent me a report of what could prove to be a fourth species of alien cat in the region; but I'm saving that for the next edition.

Winter 2001

Did I speak to soon about the number of big cat sightings in our region? As it turns out I haven't had any reports sent to me since the last newsletter. Having said that, I understand that there may have been some more reports in that period; I shall just have to lean harder on my informants! Even including any records that haven't filtered their way down to me, we are still a long way off matching some other counties in terms of big cat reports. A visit to the website of Rutland and Leicestershire Panther Watch (sounds like a Monty Python sketch) reveals that there have been 45 reports of big cats, mostly black panthers, from January to October 2001. These have included one that jumped up in front of a police wildlife liaison officer and another report of dead sheep remains up a tree.

Fortunately, I do have a rather intriguing North East report, albeit six years old, from Stanton in Northumberland. The report was from Duncan Hutt, Conservation Manager for Northumberland Wildlife Trust, and concerned a cat, a little larger than a feral tom, but much heavier built. Interestingly the cat had no markings on it such as spots or stripes but was just a sandy-grey colour. The most noticeable features were the heavy limbs and its long, thin tail, which had a rounded rather than tapered end. The animal was viewed from about twenty metres as it crossed a road and ran along a hedge and then from a distance of about five metres through the hedge. Plain sandy-grey is actually rather an unusual colour for domestic cats. I can't say I've ever seen one, and, I believe, it is only found in one pedigree breed, the Abyssinian. However

there is a species of wild cat that fits part of this description quite well. Jungle cats, *Felis chaus*, are only slightly bigger than domestic cats, but are much heavier built, being 20-30lb, as opposed to 10-12lb for a good sized tom. They are also a plain sandy-grey colour! I have read that a total of nine jungle cats have been shot or picked up as road casualties in Britain in the second half of the nineties (or was it the same one using up all its lives). In fact, one of these road casualties has been stuffed and resides at the home of leading cryptozoologist, (and 'Who wants to be a millionaire' winner) Karl Shuker. Their name is a little misleading as they are found in a variety of habitats, as far north as Afghanistan, so shouldn't have a problem surviving in Britain. The fact that they are not a big cat and are only slightly larger than a domestic cat would mean that they might well be overlooked by all but the more astute observers. So could this be what Duncan saw?

It appears that I did speak too soon? From my own patch we now have reports of the Stockton Lynx. A woman out bird watching in Quarry Wood in Preston Park was startled to come face to face with what she described as a lynx. I haven't had chance to speak to the lady concerned but the report that I received from the warden was that it was a greyish-white colour with tufted ears. The animal stood up with its paws on a fence and looked at her, at which the woman beat a hasty retreat and was so shocked that she refuses to go back into Quarry Wood.

At around the same time, early December, the Evening Gazette carried a picture of paw prints in the snow at Billingham Beck. This is another nature reserve site managed by Stockton's countryside team, but one that is bounded on one side by the A19 and on the other by the housing estates of Billingham. The two prints shown in the Gazette consisted of a large circular rear pad with four quite small prints in a straight line in front; a lot like someone's hand would make if they were messing around trying to make prints in the snow. They were described, rather appropriately, as being the size of someone's palm. Nobody from the Gazette thought to contact the countryside rangers at the site for their opinion, though I did toy with the idea of ringing them up to say that they looked more like the prints of a small bear! A further article some days later stated that an "expert" (who remained nameless) had confirmed that the prints were lynx but reassured the public that they weren't dangerous!

Spring 2002

There are a number of factors that contribute to the authenticity that is attached to any big cat report. For me, one of the most important is the experience of the person making the report. There won't be too many people with more experience of wildlife than our next witness, Ian Armstrong, who is honorary secretary of Northumberland Wildlife Trust and formerly worked for the RSPB. Ian was driving along the Broom Lee Dene Road near Stocksfield and Riding Mill at 8am in December of last year. At one section, opposite Bywell Hall, the narrow road goes through woodland. As he was driving through this woodland a largish animal ran across the road about 50 yards in front of him. The details didn't register at first but as the animal started to disappear around a corner it stopped and Ian saw most of the body except the head. As he drew alongside it the animal bounded up the bank and disappeared over the top. The narrowness of the road meant that it took a little while to turn the car round and when Ian got to the top of the bank the animal had disappeared into the bracken. He

described the animal as being dark grey, not quite black, about the height of an Alsatian and its long thin tail was carried in a curve. This was certainly not any native British mammal and Ian was equally certain that it wasn't a dog. Whilst he didn't get a look at the head, from what Ian did see I can't think of any candidates other than a big cat!

Ian also recounted a sighting made by his local policeman about two years ago. The officer had been called out to a possible disturbance at the Mithraic Temple on the Roman Wall, four miles past Chollerford towards Housteads. As it turned out there was no disturbance but, as he stopped in the car park, a large animal bounded onto the wall, ran along it and down again. It appeared pale-coloured in his headlights but other than that no details were given except that the policeman, who was apparently quite knowledgeable on wildlife, was sure that it wasn't any native mammal. Whilst this isn't a definite big cat sighting again it is difficult to think of an alternative explanation.

Our final report is of giant footprints at Thrunton Woods near Whittingham. A Mr Clarke had found large footprints in the woods several years ago whilst out walking with friends. He pointed them out to the group as remarkably large dog footprints but was corrected by someone who owned a retriever who was adamant that they weren't dog prints. For a start they were much larger than the retriever's prints but were also more elongated with claw marks showing on the front two pads. Last November he was doing the same walk with a different group and was telling them about the prints when someone said "you mean like those." On looking at the ground he discovered another similar set of tracks. There happened to be someone coming in the opposite direction with a couple of retrievers so they were able to make a direct comparison. The mystery prints were again much larger than the retriever's in fact they were bigger than the palm of Mr Clarke's hand. Unfortunately they didn't get a photo so we can't really analyse the evidence. However the general rule is that cat prints don't show claw marks and their prints are also more rounded in outline than dogs, rather than the other way round. So does the Hound of the Baskervilles haunt Thrunton Woods or is there another explanation?

Summer 2002

After a run of big, black cats in Northumberland and assorted lynx, it is with great pleasure that I can announce the return of the Durham Puma. According to the Northern Echo, who ran the story in July, two boys out walking their dog at Scar Top, Barnard Castle, had a brief sighting of an animal, which they described as the size of a big cat such as a puma. They only caught a glimpse of it before it ran off into woodland. No further details were mentioned, so there was nothing to say that it actually was a puma (except that it was in Durham so it must be, mustn't it?). Judging by the response in the letters page of the Echo, people would have been more inclined to believe the Return of the Pink Panther.

I've had two other big cat reports recently, one of them in response to an earlier article, which I've reproduced verbatim below.

"I was interested to read about a dark grey animal sighted near Stocksfield in the spring newsletter. I think that I may have seen a similar animal between Hexham and

Haydon Bridge at ~7.30am on 23rd February this year. I was travelling on the train to Carlisle and caught a glimpse of a uniform grey animal less than twenty metres away. At the speed of the train I only saw it for a couple of seconds but against the lying snow it was clearly grey, larger than a typical domestic cat and with a thick coat. It was looking straight at the train and it looked like a cats face and it was definitely not a dog. As soon as it was gone something told me that I hadn't seen anything like it before and I could not classify it. Alas no photos!

Jonathan Vetterlein

Department of Agricultural and Environmental Science

University of Newcastle

“Back in November 1999, acting on a phone call made to the Hancock Museum, I went up into the wilds of Meldon, looking for evidence of a large, tawny/grey feline. “Needless to say there were no sightings of this ‘Morpeth Moggie’, but a good look around over several days turned up a large, round footprint with no visible claw marks, although the print was in soft mud. Whilst it is true that one footprint doesn’t make a big cat, the print was definitely not dog shaped, but no other evidence could be found. Has any one else heard of big cats in this area?”

Tina Wiffen

Gateshead Countryside Ranger

Stop press: Just this last week I have heard a rumour of a big cat being found dead by the side of a road in North Yorkshire and being spirited away by a government department. (Cryptozoologists with black suits and shades perhaps?).

Autumn 2002

Just the one report has come in to me this quarter but it makes up for that in terms of its oddness. In late July a man was driving up Medomsley Bank in the dark when he claims to have seen a large striped cat cross the road in front of his car. This cat was the size of a Labrador dog and was seen at close quarters; in fact almost run over. As always happens when one story becomes well known, this led to other sightings and rumours reported in the press. Another of the reports mentioned a striped cat but though I don’t have details for the other sightings, the general consensus that was reported seems to be that the cat was a lynx, not a tiger, presumably as the striped cats were described as “not tiger-coloured.” However lynx don’t have stripes.

Spring 2003

It would seem that for once, I have no reports for this quarter’s diary. That’s not to say that there haven’t been any sightings, but my general impression is that we aren’t overrun with these creature and not many people know to pass them on to me. As I’ve said before, we still lag somewhat behind the Rutland & Leicestershire Panther Watch, which seems to get more call outs than Durham Bat Group. *(I wonder if their health and safety guidelines are anything like the bat groups? “Wear gloves at all times and don’t pick the animal up unless absolutely essential, if bitten seek medical attention?”)*

They do seem well organised with referrals made to them by the police, RSPCA etc. Their caseload is also impressive with several very convincing reports each month, all

documented on their website. Most of the cases refer to big black cats, and by big, most of the witnesses use terms such as bigger than a Labrador/Alsatian, or the length of the car bonnet. There are also a few puma and lynx reports and my only criticism is that, in the remarks that the group make on each sighting, several of the sightings are classified as being hybrids between the species. As the three species are often classified as separate genera, let alone species, I would think that this is unlikely to be the case.

A recent report from September 2002 that caught my attention was made by a keeper from Twycross Zoo. She was out walking her dog when she came across a large black cat, some twenty feet away. The cat was about two and a half to feet tall with rounded ears. You can't help but think that she would be likely to know what she was talking about! Not so my most recent would-be big cat reporter.

One of my assistant rangers was out doing a litter pick at Stillington Forest Park when she rang in to say, "I think I've just seen the beast of Stillington." "What do you mean," I said, trying not to sound too excited. "Well I've just seen this big, black cat in the Forest Park." "How big" I asked, while frantically trying to remember if we had a film for the site camera. "Bigger than a fox" came the reply. A slight surge of adrenalin pulsed through me; was that my nervous twitch that I could feel coming back? "But it was wearing a red collar!" Bummer!

Spring 2004

It must be a year now since this newsletter has had news for the Big Cat Diary. Whether that reflects a decrease in big cat activity or just a decrease in people passing on sightings I'm not sure. Anyway, I'm pleased to say that it's back and what's more, close to home in my beloved Stillington. The Northern Echo on December 13th reported simply that a black panther-like animal had been spotted as it leapt from behind a fence. This is the second sighting of a black panther-like animal from Stillington (not including my colleague's big black cat with a red collar). There have been a number of big cat sightings from this area in the past, particularly at the nearby Castle Eden Walkway (now Wynyard Woodland Park), with another two of the big black sort and three of pumas. There were also the remains of a sheep carcass under a hedge, though I'm not ruling out poachers on that one.

This area is becoming something of a cryptozoological corner, what with the muntjac carcass, red-eared terrapins and rumours of goshawk. The strangest rumour was when we found a "lost" notice on the entrance to Thorpe Wood, offering a reward for the return of someone's pet racoon. It was actually April 1st when I found the notice so I was a bit circumspect. However a few days later someone told me about a strange, unidentified creature they had seen at Stillington Forest Park. Needless to say the animal would have fitted the description of a racoon. I never heard if it was found; I suspect the panther will have eaten it by now.

Scanning the archives of the Northern Echo, I found that a black cat, the size of a large dog, had been seen by two men working on the nature reserve at Bishop Middleham. The sighting was in late October and Bishop Middleham is no distance at all from Stillington; so possibly the same animal if both sightings were reliable.

Another big black cat was seen by a train driver on wasteland next to the railway line near Darlington in August. It was described as too big to be a domestic cat (but was it big enough to be a panther, I ask myself?). Another record was of a brown puma in a rural area near Durham City in May. I like reports of brown pumas. They have a ring of genuineness, because the public expect their big cats to be black (including pumas, which are never black). I once had to try to explain to a confused public relations person in Stockton Council the difference between pumas and panthers and that the report by a member of the public that she was dealing with was of a puma because it was of a sandy brown animal. I think I actually confused her more in the end (and I didn't get as far as whether the hyoid bone was ossified or not).

Finally just one from the hundreds reported nationally (actually over 1000 big cat reports nationally in 2002). A dentist in Gravesend bent down to investigate what he thought was a fox in the border of his garden. It turned out to be a lynx, which lashed out and slashed his hand. Apparently he has considerable scars to prove its existence.

Autumn 2004

There have been a number of reports of big cats lately. I have still got to chase up the details on some of them, but they all help piece together the picture that we are trying to obtain of the status of alien felines in the north east. I was looking at the first edition of the Big Cat Diary the other day and noted that I launched it in the hope that we would get enough evidence to establish that they did exist. Whilst not everyone will be convinced without hard evidence, personally I have no doubt that there are at least two or three big cats out there, and possibly some small and medium sized alien moggies as well. For me the question is what is their current status and what part, if any, are they likely to play in our future fauna. Of course not every report of a big cat actually is of a big cat and consequently not everything that is reported in this column is necessarily a valid big cat sighting. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find an alternative explanation for some of the reports and taken together they will hopefully form a pattern.

The first two reports are first hand and I've left them just as they were reported to me.

"I saw a black cat about the size of a small Labrador dog on the 18th of January at about 7:15am. It was a very frosty morning and the field was white with frost. At first I thought it was a fox as I have seen a fox regularly in this area, but when I looked again I saw the tail was thin and it was completely black and moved like a cat. It turned to look at me and my German shepherd dog and made off towards the trees in the corner of the field. I was walking along a railway line that runs from Seghill to Backworth and the animal was in a field beyond a pond on the west side of the railway about a hundred yards from me, Grid Ref (NZ 27/37). To be honest I was a bit frightened to tell anybody it case they thought I was mad, but I am sure it was a large cat."

Bill Thompson

"At the end of last year, I was travelling on the Newcastle-Hartlepool railway line. Looking out of the window of the train I spotted a creature slowly moving in front of a line of shrubbery with its head down to the ground. It was the traditional "black" colour and the size of a big cat, i.e. larger than an Alsatian, and longer too, tail curving off the floor. I was stunned, as you don't expect to see such things. I had to

react quickly because I was on a moving train, so I first tried to gauge the reaction of other wildlife to its presence. There were horses in the same field and they were all at the opposite end (i.e. against the railway line and our train) although they didn't appear to be panic stricken. So my second reaction was to have it confirmed by someone else. Unfortunately my daughter was looking in the other direction and I wouldn't have had time to explain it to her before we had passed the field. So I had no other witnesses and I didn't discuss it with anyone, as they'd have thought I was a nutter. I did consider contacting an urban farm that was just to the south of the field but thought better of it.

"I don't know if this comes under Tyne & Wear or County Durham as its an area I am not familiar with. I should also add that I couldn't see eyes or ears although it was in profile. (Hope you don't think I'm making this up)"

Iris Ryder

I was contacted recently by Georgina Kiedrowski, a producer from ITV, who is considering making a short documentary on big cats in the north-east. This follows on from her own sighting, in April this year, of a big, blackish cat, seen from the A1 a little north of Darlington. This puts it within big cat range of Bishop Middleham where a similar creature was sighted last October. She was sure that other people must have seen it, but no-one else seems to have reported it (at least not to Eddie Bell according to Georgina and certainly not to me).

The most recent report again comes from my trusty correspondent, Kevin Bulmer and is again based around the Guisborough area (I'm so pleased NMG covers Guisborough, there's some fascinating mammal stuff down there and not just big cat reports). He was walking his dogs in Guisborough Woods where he met a family who had just been out walking in the woods, when what should cross their path but a big black cat. No doubt fearing a colossal amount of bad luck, they turned round and headed home. They had a couple of Labradors with them and described the cat as being the size of the Labradors. This confirms one pattern that I was suspecting, lots of reports of big cats seem to mention Labradors. (One day I must work out whether this is statistically significant).

Finally, my usual plea for people to send in any information they have on big cat sightings (with or without Labradors). Who knows, they might even feature it on the telly!

Winter 2004.

The Black Labrador (sorry Big Cat) Diaries.

This edition, I fear I am in danger of breaching the credibility barrier. Having had big cat records at Castle Eden Walkway and Stillington where I previously worked, they now seem to have followed me to my new job as an ecologist in Hartlepool; it is getting a bit embarrassing. This latest record is also significant for another reason; it is the first report that I have come across which indicates breeding, which in turn involves more than one big cat in the area.

The sighting was on 11th August, by Jack Smurthwaite, a knowledgeable countryman who has wandered the lanes around the north of Hartlepool for some seven decades. Jack was taking the local farmer's children for a walk alongside the woodland that borders the farm and was sneaking up to a rise in the ground alongside the wood in order to try and show the children some rabbits. As they got to the top of the rise they



Guisborough Woods from Hanging Stone: In spite of extensive harvesting in recent years there are still huge areas of woodland fringing the North York Moors. (Ian Bond ©).

saw a large black animal (about the size of a Labrador!) with a long tail, get up and slip into the wood. It was followed by a small, black animal, the size of a domestic cat. He was sure that both animals were cats. I later paced the distance out from where Jack was stood to where the cats were and it was no more than 40 metres. We searched for signs but there were few opportunities for leaving footprints and the barbed wire on the fence was high up and so hadn't snagged any fur. Within the wood, there was an interesting footprint which had a suitably broad heel pad and which showed no claw marks, but it was obscured by another footprint and so was inconclusive. The only livestock in this area is dairy cattle and wild prey would be fairly limited as it is only a smallish wood, so I would anticipate that they would move on once the cub was more mobile.

Another sighting occurred in early September, about three miles further south near the extensive woodlands at Wynyard. A walker had been very shaken up when he came across a large black cat, which he described as four feet long and the height of an Alsatian, (I'm sure he meant Labrador). The cat was crossing a cereal field only 20-30 metres away from him as he stood on a bridge across the Castle Eden Walkway and was walking away from him (or he'd have been even more shook up) and heading for one of the large blocks of woodland.

I'm also told (admittedly third hand) that there's a farmer on the nearby A689 who has been losing lambs unaccountably and finding sheep up trees. He may just have

very athletic sheep with a poor sense of direction, but I can think of another explanation.

Finally, just to round up other bits and pieces of records, I'm told that keepers in the Thimbleby area of North Yorkshire have seen a large black cat on several occasions and that a farmer's wife from there had a close encounter with the same (and yes, she had a couple of Labradors with her at the time). Also Kevin O'Hara tells me that there is a very, very large black domestic cat roaming the Seghill area, which might account for one of the potential big cat sightings in the last edition. Still, with Kevin being a Sunderland supporter, there is at least one genuine big, black cat roaming around up there.

Spring 2005

The sighting of a big black cat and cub in the north of Hartlepool, mentioned in the last edition of the Big Cat Diary, was picked up by the Hartlepool Mail which ran an article entitled "The Big Cat's Lair – what experts say on trio's sighting." Jack was quoted as saying "the adult cat was completely black and slightly bigger than a Labrador dog but much longer" and "they were definitely pumas because they had really long tails and moved like cats." You may recall that they saw the animals in the open from less than 40 metres. It then quotes Eddie Bell, police wildlife liaison officer and long-term big cat investigator in the following extract: "Animal expert Eddie Bell doubted the trio's suggestions that the creatures could be pumas. He said 'Because of the size and colour of the cats they could not be pumas. Pumas are brown in colour and the animals are too small in size to be leopards or panthers. They are likely to be feral cats, which can grow to the size of Labradors. It's always possible that they have seen a muntjac deer, which would not look like anything they have experienced before. These deer are moving into our area and have been described as looking like dogs, pigs and cats. They are brown in colour and could appear black in bushes. But it is more likely they have seen a big black feral cat'".

The article prompted a number of people to come forward with other, earlier sightings. The best of these was a letter to the Mail from Dirk van der Werff about an incident 18 years previously, when he was a young press photographer with the Mail. He was travelling from Trimdon to Elwick when a huge black cat walked quickly across the road in front of him. Certain that it was a panther he stopped the car hoping to see it going across the field. As he couldn't see it he got out and ran across the road for a better look. After watching for about a minute, he was just turning back to the car when he glanced down and saw that the big cat was laid in the ditch right next to where he was stood. Dirk gradually backed off and slowly got back into his car. As he had only been a matter of feet from the cat, he was sure it was a panther and not anything else. When he told his story at the time he was ribbed by colleagues, particularly because as a press photographer he had been too shocked to take a photo. Interestingly Dirk also mentioned that at that time there had been a spate of incidents involving mysterious black cats in that area.

I was also told, by Hartlepool countryside warden Robert Smith, that about five years ago there was a cluster of big cat reports around the nearby village of Hart. At around this time a local farmer saw a large black cat, bigger than a Labrador, eating cat food just outside his window. Earlier in the day his dog had ran into the yard, as it did out

of habit every day, only this time it came racing back with a cut across its nose. The farmer hadn't thought much of this until his encounter with the big cat that night.

A more recent sighting, Spring 2004, was made by a countryside warden on the Seal Sands road, just south of Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park at Billingham. This is still only about five kilometres due south of Elwick. Driving along the road at 7.30am, a large, black animal ran across the road in front of him and disappeared down the embankment into a patch of reeds. The sighting happened too quickly to register much; the most noticeable feature being that it had a very deep chest. He was fairly convinced that the animal was a large cat. The only other possibility he could think of, from the shape of the chest, would be a big, black lurcher. It occurred to me that a lurcher would be unlikely to dive for cover in a patch of reeds, but I suppose it can't be ruled out.

Finally, Tyne Tees Television made the documentary on the Durham Puma (I think I only have three recent sightings of alleged pumas; by far the majority of my records are of alleged black panthers). It features Nigel Dunstone from Durham University who is an acknowledged authority on big cats world-wide. The programme is due to go out in March.

(PS: I am thinking of launching a competition for anyone who can provide me with proof of any of the following fabulous beasts: a feral cat the size of a Labrador, a muntjac with a long tail; a non-human primate around any large water body in Northumberland (I'm not too fussy which species of primate as long as it is over 8' tall and has big feet). I would possibly accept a wolverine in Weardale or even a 30' Anaconda; unfortunately I can't accept pine marten in North Yorkshire, as they are just not cryptic enough anymore).

Summer 2005

I've had two reports passed on to me recently by Gerry White. The first relates to about five years ago and was on a side road near Blanchland. The sighting was by a countryside worker who had previously been very sceptical of big cat stories; that is until a large cat with tufted ears and a short tail (i.e. a lynx) walked across the road in front of him.

The second report is recent/ongoing. There have been a number of sightings of a big, black cat in the Iveston/Delves Lane area. Added to this a roe deer carcass has been found which has had its head licked clean of hair, which is something only a cat would do. There have also been a number of sheep kills in the area, which the farmer had attributed to dogs until recent events. Gerry didn't have any more details at present, but apparently the evidence was sufficient to get even Eddie Bell to reconsider his opinion that there aren't any black panthers out there. I look forward to hearing how this one pans out.

I've finally got round to putting the big cat records that people have been passing on to the newsletter onto a spread-sheet. There are over 30 of them, plus I'm sure I'll have a few more laid around on scraps of paper, however I know that this is just the tip of the iceberg as I only have a few sources of information and there will be many more reports that I don't get to hear of. I've summarised the records to give people a

rough idea of where the records have come from and what they seem to be describing. In order to keep the spread-sheet to a reasonable size I've divided the reports into two categories. Category A records are basically those where a big cat seems the only reasonable explanation. That isn't meant as a reflection of the recorder's reliability but rather reflects the circumstances of the record; it could well be that all of the records are of alien cat species as I do screen out any reports that I'm sure don't refer to big cats. As with all wildlife records, it's always a work in progress, so please feel free to let me know any additions or amendments. A full copy of the database can be obtained from me, minus the recorder's name for reasons of confidentiality

AREA	NEAREST TOWN	NEAREST YEAR	NEAREST SPECIES FIT	NEAREST CATAGORY
Cleveland	North Stockton	1999	Puma	A
Cleveland	North Sedgefield	2004	Panther	A
Cleveland	North Hartlepool	2004	Panther	A
Northumberland	South Riding Mill	1999	Panther	A
Cleveland	South Roseberry	?	Panther	A
Cleveland	South Guisborough	2002	Unknown	A
Northumberland	South Riding Mill	2000?	Unknown	A
Northumberland	South ?	c2000	Lynx	A
Durham-West	Blanchland	1999	Panther	B
Cleveland	North Stockton	?	Panther	B
Cleveland	North Stockton	2004	Unknown	B
Cleveland - North	Billingham North	2003	Panther	B
Durham-West	Barnard Castle	?	Unknown	B
Cleveland - North	Stockton North	?	Lynx	B
Cleveland - North	Stillington North	2003	Panther	B
Cleveland - North	Stillington North	2003	Panther	B
Durham - East	?	2003	Panther	B
Durham - Central	Durham	2003	Puma	B
Durham - East	Bishop Middleham	2003	Panther	B
Durham - South	Dalton	1994?	Panther	B
Northumberland	Whittingham	1995	Unknown	B
Northumberland	Stanton	2004	Jungle Cat	B
Durham - East	Bishop Middleham	1990s	Panther	B
Cleveland - North	Sedgefield	2005	Unknown	B
Durham-West	Iveston - Delves Lane	2001	Panther	B
Northumberland- East	Rothbury	2001	Unknown	B
Northumberland - South	Bellingham South	2002	Panther	B
Northumberland - South	Hexham South	1999	Unknown	B
Northumberland - East	Morpeth East	2004	Puma	B
Northumberland - East	Seghill	2000	Panther	B
Northumberland - South	Hexham	?	Panther	B
Durham - West	Medomsley	2002	Lynx	B

Autumn 2005

First up for this edition was a sighting by John Armstrong, again at the Castle Eden Walkway, albeit ten years ago. John was there at 5.30am studying rabbits for an



Photograph taken by John Armstrong at Castle Eden Walkway 1995.

Environmental studies degree. He noticed that the rabbit he was watching was watching something else. The something else turned out to be a black cat the size of a Labrador and longer than an Alsatian. He watched this for a few minutes at fairly close range before the cat moved off. Further down the track he saw another, smaller black cat, which may or may not have been associated with the first one. He managed to get a photo of one of the cats but the photo was taken at a great distance and

slightly blurred. It most likely depicts a cat in the distance but a case could be made for it showing a black slug at much closer range.

Another of my sources knows a farmer who knows a farmer who has reported sightings of a big black cat at Burn Wood south of the A66 near the Stockton/Darlington border. Also reported from Burn Wood were the remains of a deer up a tree.

You may recall in the last edition that I mentioned some sightings and dead animal remains near Blanchland that might even have convinced Eddie Bell that there really was a big black cat out there. I have since read that Eddie reckons that these might actually refer to a wolverine. Actually I'd settle for the wolverine, it would be just as fascinating to have one of them wandering about as a big cat, but it does seem to indicate the sightings may have been a bit more vague than I'd been led to believe.

As well as following me to Hartlepool, big black cat sightings also managed to follow me on holiday. Whilst visiting Kintyre, we were talking to a local couple about the wildlife there and they told me about a couple of sightings of big black cats their family had had near the village of Tarbert. The husband's had been a close range sighting of a black cat, bigger than an Alsatian whilst their son had had a vaguer night-time sighting whilst camping. I think I'll go to Newcastle next time, not much chance of a black cat there.

For those of you who saw the Tyne Tees documentary on the Durham Puma, I was very interested in the photo that Philip Nixon had taken of the alleged big cat running away with a rabbit in its mouth. I had seen a grainy version of this previously and had just dismissed this as being a fox. However after pausing the video and looking at it in more detail it was soon obvious that it was a cat, as its legs were far too thick to be those of a fox. Nigel Dunstone's conclusion had been that it was just a large feral cat. I would certainly agree that its legs appeared too short for it to be a lynx, but wondered if that could that have been an effect of the camera angle. Looking at it in detail its ears appeared to be tufted and it seemed to have a bit of a ruff around its neck, both lynx features whilst its legs appeared too thick to be domestic cat. Even more convincing, its ground colour was that reddish- yellow colour that is characteristic of lynx, but isn't found in any domestic breed of cat. Also the cat appeared to have spots on its back, again not found in domestic cats, except some of the leopard cat hybrids, but a lynx characteristic. So, in conclusion, we had a lynx shaped cat, which had the fairly unique colour pattern of a lynx; would someone like to tell me why it wasn't a lynx?

Post script. *Following this edition I did receive a reply from someone who had previously worked with cat species in zoos pointing out that the photo was in fact of a jungle cat. Thinking about it this would be a better explanation in terms of explaining the shorter legs and the tail, which I had conveniently ignored as being a bit long for a lynx; whereas the other features would still fit in with its being a jungle cat.*

Philip Nixon reports on his sighting.

The sighting and photography of this strange creature took place on Sunday morning of 16th August 1992. The photograph, in spite of its quality is still reputed to be one of the best in support of evidence of the existence of the so-called Durham Puma. The area in which the photograph was taken is situated on the edge of a huge expanse of wild moorland in the North Pennines. This stretch of wild country runs almost unbroken from just over the Scottish Border in the North to Derbyshire's Peak District in the South.



The area has a large population of small mammals, such as rabbits, hares and even deer – more than enough to ensure the survival of a predator of this size.

My son, Mark, and I were driving slowly along a quiet country back-road that connects the Weardale villages of Ireshopeburn and Cowshill, in the north-west corner of County Durham when we encountered a large cat, with a freshly killed adult rabbit in its mouth, in the middle of the road. The cat crouched and glared at us for a few seconds as I stood on the brakes and brought the car to a sudden halt. I grabbed a camera with a 400mm lens from my son who was in the front passenger, almost strangling him with the strap in the process! I leapt out of the car and at the same time the cat cleared a four foot fence to my right and made off, at full speed across a field towards a small wooded valley. As it ran I rested the camera on a fence post for more stability was able to fire off three frames, re-focussing with each one, before the animal vanished into the woods. One of the pictures is quite clear, but the other two were unfortunately not usable.

The first thought I had after the initial excitement was that the animal may have been a Scottish wild cat – I have seen these animals before and they can reach quite a size – I have read that a big male wildcat can attain a body length of almost three feet, plus a foot-long tail – certainly a big cat by any standard! The animal I saw was, I would say, about the size of a Labrador bitch, but more heavily built.

It has also been suggested by cat-experts that the animal could have been a jungle cat that had escaped from a zoo or collection and survived in the wild by taking rabbits, hares and small mammals.

I didn't think I had photographed anything that was worthy of national news. The family knew of the photograph, of course, and it was my Mother who eventually suggested taking it to the media.

It was almost a year before I took the photograph into the Northern Echo Office in Durham City, and even then they did not seem particularly impressed, however after it was published the incident received lots of attention. Whatever the conclusion the photograph has provided a lot of material for conversation, discussion and speculation...



Philip Nixon and his son Mark, both of whom saw the cat. No surprise then that they have a Labrador. (Val Nixon ©).

Winter 2005.

The first two encounters in this edition come courtesy of Big Cats in Britain and its indefatigable editor, Mark Fraser, and both involve sightings in two of the North East's big cat 'hot spots.' The first encounter was in early July when a large, "panther" type, cat was seen by a family near Tynedale. What was possibly the same animal was seen shortly afterwards at Duke's Wood, Hexham when what was described as a large cat walked across the path in front of a dog walker. The encounters were recorded in the Hexham Courant, but unfortunately it doesn't seem to have bothered with details like colour, how big "large" it was or how soon after "shortly afterwards" was.

The next report, although brief, seemed much less ambiguous. It was at Pinchinthorpe, near Guisborough, in early August where at around 1am, a large black cat leapt across the road in front of a car. The driver and passenger estimated that it was three feet high with a body about four feet long plus the tail. The driver's immediate thought was Afghan hound, by which I take it she meant big with a long tail, rather than resembling an emaciated, four-legged Womble. She also reckoned that had they been going any faster they would have hit it, which would have definitely put Pinchinthorpe on the map.

You may recall the sighting by Jack Smurthwaite at Elwick, Hartlepool where he reported a mother and cub. There was a follow-up report a few weeks later at the Castle Eden Walkway, but surprisingly no other reports turned up. I caught up with Jack again recently and he was telling me about taking part in the ITV documentary on the Durham Puma. He said that a farm worker had seen it a couple of weeks after his sighting on the other side of the A19, i.e. about a mile away, but wouldn't come forward for the programme. He also claimed that a number of other people had seen it but again wanted to keep it to themselves.

From time to time I'm called on to give talks about various mammals and I reckon that the best thing about them are the new mammal records that you get off the audience. I spoke to the Darlington Wildlife Group last month on 'Mammaliens' or 'Alien Mammals' for those of you who can't stand puns. Rounding the talk off with some of the odder mammals that might have been living in the British countryside I mentioned big cats. As it happened a member of the audience knew of a couple of sightings local to Darlington, both of them earlier this year. One was by a water board inspector who saw a big, black cat from a distance of about 50 metres. The cat walked in front of two stacks of bricks, which the inspector later measured as being 40 inches apart. The cat's body, minus the tail, was the length of the gap. I wasn't sure of the exact location that he was describing, but it was in the Eaglescliffe/ Urlay Nook area and would have only been a couple of miles from Burn Wood where it was reported in the last edition that a deer carcass had been found up a tree. The other record was from Middleton St George, which is just a couple of miles from Burn Wood in the other direction. A friend of my informant had seen a big, black cat there on two occasions at the beginning of the year.

I've found some more details on the (dead deer killed by big cat/lambs killed by wolverine) story that appeared in the last two editions. The story stems from an article in the Evening Chronicle in March, in which a farmer is reported to have seen a big

cat chase a deer over a fence into some trees and kill it. The dead deer mentioned above was the carcass that was later found at the spot. The suggestion of wolverine was reported as being made by Eddie Bell in response to a separate incident of lamb predation. Hopefully that makes things a little clearer (though not necessarily any more credible).

Recent radio-carbon dating of lynx bones found over 100 years ago have brought the species' history in Britain that bit closer to modern times. It used to be thought that the lynx became extinct in Mesolithic times c3500bp, but in recent years a lynx bone from Scotland was carbon dated to c1800bp. The latest findings, sponsored by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority were on bones from two caves near Settle, one of which was dated to c1800bp and the other to c1500bp. The findings also shed light on a seventh century poem, which mentions a game animal from Cumbria called the Llewyn. Although originally thought to be the lynx this was dismissed because lynx were assumed to be extinct then. This now appears not to have been the case and brings the lynx up to medieval times. The find is significant because it lends weight to the idea that the lynx died out due to human-induced factors rather than changes in climate. If that is the case, the government is obliged under the EC habitats Directive to consider its reintroduction. I think its time for a letter to my MP!

Perhaps my strangest record so far, and there have been some strong contenders for the title, was of a photo sent to me by a young lady from Sedgefield. She had been walking with her boyfriend in Hamsterley Forest when they came across a deer acting strangely i.e. wandering about the path in front of them as if dazed. She took her camera out of her bag and tried snapping a photo but, by the time she did this, the deer had wandered off and all she got was a picture of some trees. At least that's all she thought she'd got, but when she viewed the pictures on her telly, there was a pair of turquoise eyes staring back at her from a cat-like shape. Thinking that it might be a big cat and concerned that someone should know about it, she rang me to ask if I could identify it for her. As you can imagine I thought this could be it, the Durham Puma finally revealed. I was therefore more than a little perplexed when I got the photo and couldn't see anything resembling a cat (or anything that wasn't a tree really!). Until, that is, I decided to zoom in whereupon a pair of eerie turquoise eyes appeared on the picture. I still find it unnerving when they pop up, even though I've seen the picture lots of times now. This definitely wasn't a big cat but the dark shape that the eyes shone from looked vaguely like a long-legged cat and my deflated hopes held out for the faint possibility of a small lynx.

Thinking I needed a second opinion I sent the picture to Kevin O'Hara who digitally sharpened and lightened it to try and show more detail, but instead of becoming clearer the cat's body mysteriously disappeared leaving just a pair of shining eyes. To Kevin, the matter of fact zoologist, it had just been my imagination or, at best, a small mustelid (everything's mustelids with Kevin), but coming from Darlington, the home of Lewis Carroll, I knew exactly what I was looking at. Here in front of me, after an absence of over 100 years, was the Holy Grail of cryptozoology; none other than a living descendant of the Cheshire Cat! (Inspired by this validation of North East mythology I'm taking the local reptile group up to Chester le Street; we're not coming back without proof of the Worm!).

Spring 2006

The Trimdon Panther made another appearance last October when it appeared off Coal Lane west of the A19. A local farmer was outside his car opening a gate when the cat walked across the road, lit up by his headlights.

Meanwhile, not far down the road at Wynyard, there's been an unusual visitor at the bird table. My informant was serving a customer in Tesco's who was buying large quantities of bird food and in the conversation asked what was the most unusual wildlife the customer had seen in his garden. To his surprise the customer replied, "a puma!" It turns out that a large black, Labrador-sized cat (so not actually a puma) had twice been in his garden. The customer had also seen the same animal on the Wynyard Road out of Billingham, early one morning.

My contact details are now on the Big Cats in Britain website, which resulted in a call from a concerned lady from Newfield near Chester le Street. A neighbour had told her of an early morning sighting of a cat the size of a retriever walking along one of the walls around her family's farm. The cat jumped across the gap of a farm gate without any appreciable effort. The lady in question had herself seen a similar creature from fairly close range about three years previously near Plawsworth. The animal was black and the size of an Alsatian. She reported the sighting to the police who apparently didn't take too much interest, but told her that there had been loads of sightings in that area.

According to the Gloucestershire Echo the police force in that county were taking big cat sightings more seriously and had instructed their Wildlife & Environmental Crime Officer to record sightings and gather evidence. There was also a short article in the Northern Echo about the Baglan Beast in South Wales. It seemed that there was proof positive of the existence of a big cat there when an off-duty police officer saw it; casts were made of its footprints and some hairs from the footprints were sent away for DNA testing. The hairs were confirmed as coming from a big cat, but the article just said that it was a puma or a lynx. I would have thought that if they could get it down to big cat as opposed to domestic cat, they could distinguish between lynx and puma. However there now seems to be some question as to whether all these bits of evidence were connected. That is to say: that the hair was from the footprint; that the footprint was from the big cat; that the big cat was the one that the police officer saw; down in Baglan town in the morning! (Make up your own tune!)

Just when I think that I've heard the best ever big cat story, something comes along to top it. My new best story concerns a farmer near Richmond who was out driving around his land on a quad bike. Just as he was passing a pond, he looked back and saw what he thought was his Labrador following him. Getting off his bike to scold the dog and send it packing back home he found himself face to face with, you guessed it, a big, black cat. He was close enough to see the long tail sweep down and back up again, close enough even to see its yellow eyes, in fact he was so close that, realising that he wasn't armed, he jumped into the pond to get away from the cat. There really ought to be a prize if anyone can beat that one!

Summer 2006

Hot on the heels of my recent remark that I hadn't heard of a good report of a puma in the North East for seven years, I had a phone call a few weeks back from Tony Henderson of the Newcastle Evening Chronicle asking my opinion on a sighting that had just come to light. The sighting, on 18th October last year, was by several members of staff at Northumbria University. They were watching a large animal in the long grass on the Benton campus which, when it appeared fully in view, turned out to be a large cat. The description was along the lines of long brown tail, body light brown to cream, head a bit darker and small for the size of the body. The animal was described as the size of a large dog. They managed to watch it for several minutes. Whilst it would be nice to be able to announce the return of the Durham Puma (ignoring the fact that this was north of the Tyne) doubt has been cast on this explanation by none other than our own Kevin O'Hara, a man who was surely a carnivore himself in a previous life. It turns out that the sighting was almost in Kevin's backyard and as he puts it: **a**) there's no way there would be a puma wandering about there without him noticing some kind of sign of it and **b**) why hasn't it eaten his dogs by now? I must admit it's a bit puzzling as to which part of the woodwork a puma could have appeared from, there not being any sightings for such a long time, but there aren't many cats, big or small that would fit the description given. Your guess is as good as mine.

Chris Hall, who is a member of the organisation 'Big Cats in Britain' and who lives in Billingham recently sent me copies of lots of press articles on big cat sightings dating from the early 1980s to early 1990s. The articles were a fascinating historical testament to the big cat phenomena, as this was the heyday of the Beast of Bodmin and the Durham Puma. I had always been under the impression that there were lots of reports of the Durham Puma at that time, but what struck me about the articles was that that they tended to recycle what were just a handful of reports, and not all of them definitely big cats. Certainly there was nothing to suggest that there might be a population of big cats out there, though interestingly some of the big, black cat sightings were from the same area as the present day, i.e. the so-called Trimdon Panther (so-called by me that is, though I'm sure it will catch on), which might suggest that breeding has occurred at some point.

I thought I might have actually solved the mystery of the Trimdon Panther last week. Driving home along the A1 (M) between Sedgefield and Darlington I noticed a large black object by the side of the road, which I assumed from a distance was a blow-out from a lorry tyre. I glanced over at it as I passed and was completely taken back to notice that it was furry and I even fancied that I saw a large rounded paw. A black animal that size could only be a Labrador or a panther and that paw was too large to belong to a Labrador. For the next hour I played over what I should do: should I go back and risk stopping on the hard shoulder and throw it in the boot; should I ring the police and risk looking stupid if it wasn't a panther; could I risk someone else getting the credit for finding it? Anyway, before I decided on a course of action, I persuaded my teenage son, Paul, to travel back up with me so that he could have a better look from the passenger seat as we drove past it again. (Fortunately he regards this sort of behaviour from me as being quite normal though I suspect he doesn't mention it to his friends!). I drove back up the opposite carriageway to Sedgefield, repeatedly explaining to Paul what he would have to look out for in what would just be a brief

glimpse (though I was prepared to do a few more circuits if necessary). We drove back south again, scanning ahead to try and take in every detail of this black object and, as we approached, its identity became only too obvious; someone had thrown a life-size cuddly toy onto the hard shoulder. Please don't tell anyone!



The Castle Eden Walkway cuddly panther. (Cheryl Hudson ©).

Autumn 2006.

The reports in this edition all come courtesy of the work of the Big Cats in Britain (BCIB) organisation. In addition to their usual activities as a focal point for records and doing vigils, one of their members, Shaun Stevens, had the bright idea of contacting every Police Force, under the Freedom of Information Act, to ask for their records of where a big cat had been reported. Not all of them have replied as yet but the Cleveland Force has and their six reports are inserted below:

1. **29/09/2000:** Masefield Road Hartlepool. "Big black cat bigger than a dog, sure not a dog." Note newspaper Hartlepool Mail featured similar sighting on Hart by-pass several days previously.
2. **13/08/2001:** Phoenix Park Hemlington Middlesbrough. "Large cat possibly a lynx."
3. **04/04/2002:** Danby Road Beck Norton, Stockton on Tees. "Black panther, large black animal with long tail & orange? yellow eyes."
4. **18/09/2002:** Lingdale Road Boosbeck. "Large black panther type cat."
5. **07/12/03:** Stillington Stockton on Tees. "Large black cat type animal convinced not a domestic animal."
6. **09/12/04:** Errington Wood, New Marske. "Black panther, very large black cat too big to be domestic cat."

Shaun also contacted all the Local Authorities to ask for records of which species they had licensed under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act. Again not all responses have been received but so far the list runs to 144 individual cats held in 17 different locations (see below). These are only the ones that are in private hands. None of the Local Authorities had any reports of escapes! The list was:

Asian leopard cat x 10;
Bengal cat x 25;
Bobcat x 4;
Caracal x 7;
Leopard (Amur) x1;
Leopard (clouded) x 8;
Leopard (common) x 5
Leopard (melanistic) x 7;
Leopard (Persian) x 3;
Leopard (snow) x 16
Lion x 6;
Lynx (Northern) x 2;
Lynx (European) x 13;
Lynx (Siberian) x 2
Geoffreys cat x 2;
Jaguar x 1;
Ocelot x 5;
Puma x 4;
Scottish wild cat x 16
Serval x 2;
Tiger x 5

BCIB had received two recent reports from this region. The first was from a couple, who were holidaying near Wooler, who saw it twice. The first time they were driving out of Wooler Common at 9.30pm when they saw a cat about 100 metres in front of them, standing in the road. The cat stood still until they got within twenty metres of it when it bounded off through the hedge. The next day the man was walking past the same spot when he saw the cat 250 metres away across a small valley. They described the cat as being six foot long in total and two foot high.

The second report was actually just down the road from me in Darlington. A man in Gainford had been hanging out cooked chickens to attract foxes so that he could shoot them and was surprised when a big cat came along instead. He described the cat as being greyish with dark markings and small ears. It was three feet long and three feet high; I'm not sure whether he meant it was three feet high when it stood up to get the chicken, or that it was in fact square. As it happens, cats that are three feet long and greyish with dark markings aren't that rare in these parts, there's one down our street, so I decided not to pursue this.

Finally big cats have again pursued me on my holidays. This year we were down in Suffolk and came home to find that there had been two reports of a big cat within a few miles of where we had been staying during the period we had been down there - I really must remember to put it in a cattery next year.

Winter 2006

Big cat sightings have again been few and far between this quarter, but it has at least seen the re-emergence of a couple of former favourites. Perhaps the best of the sightings was of a puma at Dipton, so the Durham Puma no less. In May of this year, a man was out walking his dog around the edge of a field, when he was aware of a big cat in the stubble. The cat was only 20-30 yards away from him and he saw it for about twenty seconds in total. It was described as being sandy-brown and about three feet high at the shoulders but longer than a German shepherd.

Back in my patch, I was pleased to hear that the growling bush at the Castle Eden Walkway has made a comeback. You may recall that I, along with several visitors, had an unnerving encounter with this menacing, auditory Cheshire cat-like phenomenon back in 1999. Now one of my placement students, Richard Blackburn has had a similar encounter, my influence obviously rubbing off there. I'll let Richard tell it:

“A couple of weeks ago I was walking along the CE Walkway, and I turned off onto the Thorpe Larches footpath. About a hundred metres (GR399267) along I thought I heard some rustling in the vegetation to the right (north), but wasn't sure because my backpack was making a noise. So I stopped and did in fact hear some noise from the vegetation and then I heard a kind of high pitched growling - like a defensive or scared snarl. And that's about it, I didn't see anything. It was one of those incidents where about five minutes afterwards you wonder whether it was anything at all.”

It wouldn't be the Big Cat Diary without a black cat sighting and there have apparently been a number of them this year at Lowick in Northumberland. Two of them were in early September, one seen at a distance of about 100 yards, the other from someone operating a JCB.

I am understandably a bit sceptical of tigers on the loose, but curiously there have been reports of them in North Yorkshire this year. The first was in April, just off the A19 between Thirsk and York. What makes the sighting intriguing, if true, is that the observer claimed to be a qualified biologist who had previously worked in a zoo with reptiles and big cats, including two sub-species of tiger. He didn't get a long look at the animal but described the animal as being the size of a $\frac{3}{4}$ grown male Bengal tiger with what looked like a mane ruff. There were then another three reports of tigers around the Tadcaster area in June. In one of the sightings, seen from a distance of 50-100 yards, the animal was described as being six feet long and orange with black stripes.

For my part, having come across a very large, cuddly “Bagheera” and a three feet tall Winnie the Pooh laid by the side of the road, I would love to find a Tigger to complete the set; after all they are wonderful things!

Spring 2007

Spurred on by a request from the Big Cats in Britain organisation for an article for their Yearbook, I've finally got round to collating all of the alleged big cat sightings that I've received into some sort of a report. Since I started the Big Cat Diaries about

six years ago I'd received some 65 reports as of last November. Of these 42 can best be described as panther; five as puma; three as lynx with fifteen unspecified. The unspecified category included those second-hand reports where there wasn't sufficient detail given to assign the animal to a species category. It also included a few first-hand reports which might have been well observed and clearly reported, but where the description didn't comfortably fit with a known species. At the end of the report I concluded that:

“From the quality of some of the reports there is good reason to believe that there are, or have been recently, big cats of at least three different species at large in the North East. What seems equally as clear though is that these are largely isolated individuals and, even allowing for the occasional breeding event, this is a population that would be described in any other circumstances as critically endangered or even effectively extinct. In my opinion, whether we continue to have big cats in the North East depends either on future surreptitious releases or whether there are viable populations of these animals in other parts of the country from which individuals could disperse into the region; whilst the former is always possible, the latter I think is very unlikely.”

Having come to the above conclusion I thought that this might be a good point to draw the Diaries to a close however the reports keep on rolling in so I shall probably continue with them until the clammer to stop reaches my ears.

At the beginning of December, Jonathan Pounder and I led a guided walk entitled 'The Path of the Panther.' We weren't expecting to find any panthers but rather used it as a badge to try and drum up some interest for a walk through, what is probably, the least-populated and least-explored part of East Durham. We'd planned the walk before I'd plotted the big cat reports onto a map and I subsequently found that most of them were actually from further south or east with the only recent one near the route being the sighting at Pudding Poke Farm last year. As confirmation that this isn't 'Big Cat Country' we were talking to one of the farmers. He mainly farms sheep, several hundred of them in fact, and he claimed not to have seen any evidence of a big cat. However, a few days after the walk George Howe was told by a farmer next to Pudding Poke that last winter he saw very large paw prints that weren't dogs in the snow at the back of his house. The resulting publicity from the walk has so far produced several other reports, one of which is reproduced below:

“I saw the article in the Northern Echo re: Big Cats in the North East and thought I would tell you about my sighting. It was perhaps eight years ago. I was with another family member in the kitchen of my home in Sidehead, Weardale, when we saw a big black cat walking through a flock of sheep. Because it was walking through the flock, we could easily tell the size of it - body length about the same as the sheep, with a tail about as long again, held low. Height-wise, up to the shoulders of the sheep. It was early morning and very sunny. The cat didn't bother the flock - they just carried on feeding with hardly a glance. The cat just jumped over a wall and disappeared from sight. Another family member saw a big black cat 2-3 years ago crossing the road in front of her car as she was travelling home from work after dark near Lanchester. Unfortunately, as is usually the case, we don't have exact dates and we don't have photos, however, I hope this helps”



Sidehead, Weardale. In the past three years Weardale has gone from having no big cat reports to being the second most frequently mentioned area for them. (Jan Edwards ©)

Other reports I've recently received are summarised below:

- July 2006. Big, puma-sized albeit low to the ground, black or very dark, cat running along road in front of the witnesses car for some seconds, on the road between Leadgate and Lanchester. (Report via Veronica Carnell).
- Three reports via Phil Roxby of Darlington Council's Countryside Section. Two were of a big, black cat in 2004 at Skerningham Woods in Darlington. Interestingly, for me at least, this is less than a mile from where I live. The third was of a puma, seen in 2003 between Darlington and Hurworth.
- A black, panther-sized cat was seen by a Durham County Council countryside ranger at Hardwick Hall, near Sedgfield, seven years ago.

Sitting in the planning department reception talking to George Howe about identifying animal tracks, amongst other things, a man waiting to see about a planning application overheard and asked if we were talking about the big cat. He and another witness had seen what they classed as a big cat last summer as it ran between some bushes near the A179/A19 junction. He described it as black and three feet long not including the tail. Also in the snow last winter he found large cat-like footprints, the size of his hand, in his garden in Hartlepool, which at the time was on the edge of a new housing estate overlooking the countryside. The prints were so large that he felt that the cat that he had seen must have been a youngster as whatever made the prints in his garden would have had to have been much larger than that. He claimed that several people had seen the cat and talked about it as if its existence was taken as read.

Picking up the subject of whether there are enough big cats in captivity to fuel any future leaks into the wild, the Big Cats in Britain organisation has finished its FOI grilling of Local Authorities for details of licensed dangerous wild animals. It has now collated a total of around 160 exotic cats in private ownership. These include 16 leopards of various sub-species (eight of which were melanistic); 16 snow leopards; 20 lynx and six puma. It is now starting to collate the number of exotic cats held in zoos or other public collections; there's no way of knowing how many unlicensed cats are being kept but I'd wager that there's more than one or two. As well as the cats the survey also found in private ownership (to the tune of the 12 days of Christmas please); 6,000 wild boar; 2,000 farmed ostriches; 500 assorted monkeys; 300 American Bison; 250 poisonous snakes; 50 crocodilians and (altogether now!) a partridge in a pear tree!

And finally! I get a bit repetitive saying that I'm going to end with a tale to end all tales but there's no way I could improve on the following from John Drewett. Just bear in mind that his encounter was post the 1976 Dangerous Wild Animals Act!

“Around 25 years ago I was the voluntary warden for a woodland nature reserve in east Surrey. Each winter we held regular work parties during which volunteers helped coppice the hazel and sweet chestnut. On one winter's day I was showing new volunteers around the wood during our lunch break when we spotted a large animal in one of the tree tops. As it slowly descended to the ground we got a good look at it, so I was later able to identify it as a coati. A member of the raccoon family, coatis are normally found in central and south America, rather than the Home Counties! I was also press officer for the Surrey Wildlife Trust at the time so sent off a news release. “This gained coverage in the national press and also attracted the attention of MAFF who wanted to know why I hadn't caught it and handed it over to them! I visited the reserve with a MAFF official who wanted to trap the animal to stop it breeding (I always thought two animals were needed for this!), but as MAFF were not prepared to monitor their own live trap and I had a full time job 35 miles away, nothing happened. No more was seen of the coati till the next winter, when I had a similar encounter again. Then, the following month we were coppicing near the road when a lady turned up asking for her coati back! I explained that I didn't actually have it, but asked for her name and address so that I could let her know if I saw it again. Her property turned out to be a house beside the wood, about a kilometre away. As MAFF also had an interest in this animal I passed on her details to them. They later contacted me to say they had visited the lady who kept various exotic animals in her garden and hired these out for filming purposes. The garden had no security other than a four foot wooden fence. Among the animals they found when they visited was a tiger. Now that would have livened up a coppicing session!”



Summer 2007

Once again I haven't had any reports sent to me recently so this edition's reports have all come from the Big Cats in Britain (BCIB) website. They are all quite close encounters and at the very least don't seem to leave much scope for confusion with domestic cats.

The closest of these was in the Whitworth Hall area of Spennymoor. A large black cat, described as a bit taller and 1.5 times the length of the observer's Labrador crossed the road about 50 yards in front of their car. As the car pulled alongside the farm track which the cat had moved onto, they got a good look from about twenty feet as it walked away.

Almost as close but this time without the benefit of a car in between was a report from Berwick on Tweed. This was from someone who was walking quietly through a wood and down to the river in the hope of seeing otters. In this report the observer had with them the industry recommended yardstick for measuring big cats, their Labrador. The animal was described as black, three feet high and four feet long plus its tail or, they conservatively estimated, one and a half times the length of their Labrador. It may have been watching some sheep that were grazing nearby in the woodland and seemed startled, reacting by running down a bank and out of sight over a brow only 10-15m from the observer.

The third was from Tantobie and of a large, reddish cat, described as being golden retriever sized (nice to see a bit of originality there). It was about 200 metres away but 200 metres isn't much of a head start as you can imagine from their report:

"We were pushing our son up the road towards Tantobie in his buggy when we became aware that an animal had walked out onto the road ahead by the bus depot. "As we continued towards it, it raised its head and really scrutinised us I remember the hair standing up on the back of my neck and I turned to my partner and asked her if she was seeing what I was seeing. It was during this time my mind was trying to fit what I was seeing with what I had in my head for reference at first I thought it was a fox because it was red then I looked along its long body and checked out the tail and realised it wasn't a fox the tail was way too long the worst feeling was knowing this thing was standing it's ground and was really checking us out I then remember trying to convince myself it was a dog? Then suddenly a car must have been coming through Tantobie towards us as the animals ears pricked and then any doubts about it were completely dispelled as it leapt to the fence at the other side of the road, cleared it in a single fluid bound and disappeared across the field at full tilt this was when we realised it was a very large cat because of the way it moved it was beautiful we had always wondered what had been eviscerating lambs in the field at night because when it was lambing season there was always lambs taken in the night here and the dog would refuse to go out there the farmer would just pick up the carcasses and nothing would be said! I remember reporting the sighting to the RSPCA and was surprised to be told I was the third sighting that year so I didn't feel such a fool I feel lucky to have witnessed this but am always reminded if the car hadn't come I think we were very definitely of great interest to this animal!"

I was just getting round to writing this when I was surprised to find a report on the BCIB discussion group which referred to Wynyard Woodland Park. The report concerned a set of tracks found in late 2005, which lead from woodland across Pickards Meadow and back into the woodland. It had snowed earlier in the day so the tracks were no more than three hours old. They were described as cat tracks as opposed to fox, dog or badger, 3-4 inches wide and without claws. The reporter obviously knew the area well and even knew of previous reports. I decided that I must

follow this up but on re-reading the report I noticed that they had said that they had found them when they were going to do some work on the pond. In other words this was someone who worked there, i.e. someone who I used to work with, i.e. someone who I still often visit to lead such as bat walks for or just to drink their tea and eat their Freddo bars, i.e. someone to whom I regularly point out to that I would be very interested in unusual wildlife records, particularly ones of big cats. I did think about embarrassing them by mentioning it in this column but I think I can understand where the misunderstanding has come from; which leads me to a bit of a confession. Since turning 40 a number of my powers have diminished rapidly. My eyesight has declined from being able to tell the reproductive state of a male bat by the amount of dark-colouration in its epididymis, to the point where I can't even say if its got a willy (and bats are quite well endowed in that respect). But even more worrying my psychic powers have crashed. It's got so bad that I've gone from knowing all of the mammal sightings that group members have in their heads the moment I sit down at the computer to write these columns to the point whereby if you don't actually tell me I don't know about them. To accommodate me in my dotage I hope that you will all humour me and take time to drop me an e-mail or give me a ring next time you see something that might be of interest.



Pickard's Meadow, Wynyard Woodland Park: Is this the north east hot spot for Big Cat sightings or is it just that I have more contacts in that area? (Ian Bond ©)

Autumn 2007

The mapping exercise of big cat sightings that I undertook for the Big Cats in Britain Year Book article last year highlighted some interesting patterns about the distribution of big cat sightings. It largely indicated three main areas of sightings; the Trimdon Panther; a miscellany of cats that I am christening the Hexham Hotchpotch and the

Guisborough Growler (actually it was never recorded as growling but I know how fond the countryside ranger types among you are of alliteration). The past few months have seen a new cat on the block in the Sunderland area (annoyingly I can't think of a name for a big cat beginning with S). The first sighting was in May, when a pensioner walking along the riverbank at North Hylton came face-to-face with a large black cat about 50 or 60 feet away. The cat, described as the size of a Labrador, sat on the path staring at the man before, in the words of the Sunderland Echo, "scampering off into nearby undergrowth."

A similar looking beast was seen at Penshaw in June. The observer was quoted as saying: *"I was cycling along westwards toward Penshaw on the old railway line now used as a cycle track, I was going round a slight right hand bend then I saw this largish black cat like animal in front of me just strolling down the track. It then stopped about fifty yards away from me; when it saw me slowly did a U turn strolled back about twenty yards and did a left turn into dense trees and shrubbery."*

While the sightings might be plausible on the face of it, I really have trouble believing in a big cat that both scampers and does U turns. A more typical sighting and location saw a big black cat, described as three feet high and four feet long and resembling a black-panther, run out in front of a car in western Tynedale near Halton Lea Gate in April. Being unable to find anything facetious to say about this I shall move on quickly back to home territory in Cleveland.

Having berated my former colleagues from the Wynyard Woodland Park for reporting an interesting big cat "record" to the Big Cats in Britain organisation but not telling me, soon afterwards I got another report from Dave Neal the current warden there. A resident in Woodside Cottages, adjacent to the visitor centre, was up one night unable to sleep and was watching out over the fields at 2.30am when they saw a black cat running across the fields. The cat was described as being one metre long, which regrettably is the same size as a large moggie. However their enthusiasm in passing on the record was much appreciated and should be widely emulated.

An even more dubious report also originated from the Wynyard Woodland Park. A woman, now living in Australia, contacted the Big Cats in Britain organisation to tell of how she was walking along the main path with some friends and their children when she got the impression that something was watching her and that the something was behind a particular bush. She didn't actually see anything but as her party moved on they heard a crashing noise from the direction of the bush which convinced her that it must have been a big cat (obviously!). She then went on to complain that the authorities in charge hadn't posted any warnings about big cats in the area, as they would be capable of killing a small child. As it happens the black panther is listed on the site's virtual visitor centre as one of the animals that might be seen there but, as the case for big cats is still regarded by many as unproven and certainly no small children have been carried off, it might be thought a little over the top to issue warnings just yet.

Another possible case of mistaken identity, though perhaps more understandable than mistaking a bush for a panther, was a report by a family who let their German shepherd dog chase rabbits and hares along by the Portrack Marsh Nature Reserve. (This really annoyed Jonathan Pounder, the editor of this newsletter, when he heard

the story as he manages the site). The dog chased an animal, which they described as a cat because it appeared to have a shorter face than a fox and didn't run like a fox. However it was reddish-gold in colour, 15 inches high and ran with its tail straight out behind it. Now what does that remind you of?



Virtual Visitor Centre, Wynyard Woodland Park: Just another of the animals that you might encounter in the Country Park. (Ian Bond ©).

Still in Trimdon Panther territory I had a more convincing case when I got a call from a chap from Hartlepool who had been out jogging one Saturday morning at around 10am on the Hart to Haswell Walkway, which runs north west from Hartlepool or, in the interests of fairness, south east from Haswell. Just before Hesleden he saw a cat's head poking up out of the grass verge. He estimated he got within 30 metres before the cat got up and ran ahead of him for 20-30 metres before disappearing off through the grass again. He got a brief side view and then a view from the back as it was running away. He described the cat as black and 24 inches high to the shoulder. He compared it to the Border terrier that he had with him and said it was twice the height and three times the length of the dog. He even went as far as taking the dog into the grass where the cat had emerged from so could make a fairly accurate comparison though he did think better of continuing his run any further. Whatever it was it doesn't sound like your standard moggy and certainly not a fox, or a bush!

Winter 2007

Although I was tempted to put the BCD to bed at the end of last year, it's as well that I didn't as 2007 has been as bumper year for big cat sightings in the North East. July was particularly good, so much so that I had three in one day!

First I got a call from a former colleague at Stockton Council who manages Cowpen Bewley Woodland Park. The Council's drive-on lawnmower man was cutting the narrow grass paths through the site that afternoon when a large cat jumped out in front of him. It was described as black, knee to thigh height with rippling muscles. The lawn-mower man does a bit of shooting, I was told, so wasn't regarded as a complete novice to wildlife. He also knew that a sighting of a big, black cat at the same woodland park had featured on Richard & Judy two weeks previously which, for some reason, had completely escaped me. I actually went and investigated this one, the sighting being only about 90 minutes old by the time I got there. CBWP is pretty big, a previous warden used to brag that the site in its entirety was bigger than the City part of London, but unfortunately there wasn't anywhere where signs would be obvious. Its mostly 15 year old woodland plantation which is very dense but with no mature trees for scratching or dragging ungulates up and no areas of mud for prints. My only line of evidence was a lady walking two golden retrievers from which I deduced that unless she'd started out with three golden retrievers, one of which had been eaten, then whatever feline the lawn-mower man had seen had probably legged it.

On checking my e-mails when I got home I had one from a Nina Scotland in Thirsk giving details of a sighting that she'd had. Although a little out of our region I thought I would quote it in full as it's a pretty good description of a puma which had the advantage of something close by to help with the assessment of the size.

"After reading your big cat diaries, I thought you might be interested in the sighting I had recently. It was approx 3am, and upon a visit to the loo, I happened to look out of the window - it was only a crack. Initially I saw two cats, but they appeared to be massively different in size. I thought this was just due to the angle I was viewing them from, and the fact that I could only see properly out of the gap with one eye at a time. "I opened the window fully, to see a small, domestic black cat cowering very low to the ground, moving slowly away from a very large, light brown/sandy coloured cat, sat near my garage. It was sat upright on its haunches (is that the right way to put it?) and at first glance appeared to be a large dog, but as it got up and moved towards the domestic cat, it was unmistakably a large cat. It was approximately two and a half feet high at the shoulder - it was next to a car, so easy to assess height, and had huge paws and a large fluffy tail, (I can't honestly remember how long it was, I was concentrating on the cat itself). The main impression I got was that it was of a playful disposition, and quite a young cat, but I could be mistaken! It trotted across the car park in pursuit of the scuttling, ears back, terrified domestic cat, and disappeared from view behind the houses. I have not heard any reports of missing cats on the estate, and no bodies have been found that I know of, so perhaps it was just playing! My colleagues reckon it was a Maine coon, but it wasn't very fluffy apart from its tail, so I don't think that was it. Having seen the picture on your website of the cat running off with a rabbit in its mouth, I am of course comparing it to that, but the cat I saw was a leaner - maybe it couldn't catch rabbits and was trying small cats instead? Does that count as cannibalism? Anyway, I will keep my eyes peeled, and let you know if I see it again.

"We live on Alanbrooke Barracks near Thirsk, and the car park backs on to open farm land between Topcliffe and Thirsk/Northallerton. There are large wooded areas, and lovely hedgerows to hide in, and plenty of deer and rabbits to feast on!"

The third report was the best of the day, in fact one of the best ever given the quality of the observation and the qualifications of the observer. I got a call from a Police officer in Northumberland about a big cat he had personally seen the previous day at 4.30am. He was driving slowly down a quiet country lane near Corbridge when he saw a big cat sat by the side of the road with a rabbit in its mouth. The cat was as big as his Labrador and was brownish with stripes, like a brindled bull terrier was how he described it. Its tail wasn't particularly long though not stumpy like that of a lynx. He said it was just like a normal cat only six times the size; the rabbit was almost engulfed in its mouth. He stopped and watched it for twenty seconds from about 50 feet then it dawned on him that he was in a video car although the video was switched off. He switched it on but the sound of it starting up must have spooked the cat, which then leapt off and disappeared (if only, if only!). He got out to investigate and estimated the height of the cat from surrounding objects. He later compared this to his Labrador and came out at about the same size, i.e. about 26 inches. I explained that no such cat was known to man (I forgot about clouded leopard, which might just fit the description at a push). Nevertheless he was adamant about what he saw. There was the slightest possibility that what he saw was a puma with the stripes being the effects of shadows, though he thinks not, but everything else he would be prepared to give as evidence in court, as he put it. He intends to do some more investigations and a bit of field work himself; I got the impression that this chap was pretty determined to get to the bottom of this, so there may be more to follow.

Meanwhile on 2nd July at Mountsett near Burnopfield a couple of people were walking their Labrador through long grass near Mountsett Crematorium. As they played frisby with the dog, a large black cat was disturbed about five meters away from the dog and ten meters from the people. They watched it for about 10-15 seconds as it ran away, jumping over the long grass. It was described as the same size as the 36kg dog and as having pointed ears; the latter point is interesting, as panthers have rounded ears whereas domestic cats have pointed ears.

Also in July was a sighting that made it quite big in the Northern Echo down here with the title "Is beast back on the prowl?" As the article pointed out, its been several years since there have been any reports of big cats in south-west Durham. This particular sighting occurred at 10 o'clock at night on the new West Auckland by-pass near Evenwood. The cat, which was walking across a field that had horses in, was described as one to one and a half metres long in the body and about half a metre tall with a tail about two thirds the length of the body. The colour of the cat wasn't mentioned in the report, possibly everyone assumed that it was black. The cat didn't appear to take any notice of the horses but the horses seemed to be somewhat nervous.

Another big black cat with pointed ears appeared in a garden in Meadowfield Rd, Stocksfield in March. The cat, described as three feet high, body length four feet plus tail, was seen from four feet away in the following somewhat terrifying encounter:

"My dog (Springer spaniel) and I had just returned from our morning walk and I was busy in the garage. We are in a semi-rural area, one acre of garden, backing on to a field with overgrown woodland bordering our fence. The dog rushed up to the fence barking violently at a holly bush. I went over to calm her down saying nothing was there. I moved to the right hand side and was confronted with this large black cat staring at me with yellow eyes just behind the bush/fence. It made no sound and after

a few seconds started walking alongside the border fence into the undergrowth. I could hear it breaking branches as it walked over the area. I then decided to get in quick with the dog as she was still barking violently and feared for our safety. I have lived in the house for 28 years. In fact there was one reported in the local paper last week, but this was ten miles away; believe this to be a different one. There were sightings last year across the road in a neighbours drive at night and there has been remains of deer found locally."

Spring 2008

(Guest edition by James Stoker)

Ian Bond emailed me last week to ask if I would write this quarter's Big Cat Diary based on the two sightings I have had and the research that I am now taking on for the 'Beast of The Bay.'

My first sighting was in early 2005. I was 'tomming' about with my friends at the Castle Eden Walkway (Wynyard Woodland Park) near one of the art instalments, Celestial Kitchen in Stoney Field, if my memory serves me correct. My friend noticed something moving through the grass (there were three of us all in all). We went to the top of the hill in Stoney Field back towards the old railway station and we turned back to look and saw a large feline type animal but sandy coloured, not black like me and my friends expected it to be. At that time I hadn't started researching these reports, I had limited knowledge of big cats before the incident but found that the 'puma' best fitted what me and my three friends saw.

My mates both said exactly the same as myself on the size, about as big (if not bigger than a Labrador (and how sick I am of hearing that expression now-a-days)). One of my friends with me on the day is the son of a farmer, and his father has seen two big cats in County Durham, which have been reported. (Note – not to me).

My second and last sighting luckily came about a month after the first, when I had got myself sufficiently clued up on the types of animals, and previous sightings. I was being the 'geeky' me and train photographing and I caught in the view finder of my camera a black animal, walking across the tracks of Tees Marshalling Yard (near to Maze Park) by the time I could get the camera to function properly and take a decent photograph the animal had disappeared. The size of this creature, when I first spotted it was about as high as the buffer-beam on a standard coal hopper wagon, so about three to four feet approximately.

In 2007 my interest in big cats was re-ignited as I began to hear rumours of the Beast of The Bay's reappearance. For anyone that doesn't know, the Beast of The Bay is a big cat that has been sighted in the Whitby, Robin Hoods Bay, and coastal areas of that locality. This has now become a little hobby for me, collating reports, going to the places that the cats have been sighted and so on.

I have outlined below the main sightings that I have on this:

Sneaton to Ruswarp road August 1998.

Egton to Aislaby Road 2001.

Sighting near Bay October 2005.

Bay September 2006.

Fylingthorpe November 2006.
St Peter's Court Woods January 2007.
Sleights in July 2007.
Whitby Abbey July 2007.
Eskdaleside in August 2007.
Sighting between Fylingthorpe and Ravenscar September 2007.

These sightings seem to point to two animals a lynx type and a black cat type and all seem to be pretty credible. Of course I have received more reports than the above but in the interests of not confusing people only the more 'credible' have been used.

Summer 2009.

Having taken a year out from the Diaries through circumstances beyond my control, it's interesting to look back at 2008 as a whole and see what it brought by way of big cat sightings. Perhaps the big news nationally was that, following a Freedom of Information request, the Forestry Commission confirmed that it has had two reliable sightings of big cats in the Forest of Dean in recent years. *The sightings were obtained by the Forestry Commission's staff who were using thermal imaging cameras to undertake a deer census. Back in the North East I received over twenty reports during 2008, although not all of them relate to 2008.

What is clear straight away is that the focus of sightings in our region is now in the Tynedale area. I expect that I have missed a lot of these as I am some way from Tynedale but the Hexham Courant seems to have been kept busy with panther reports, too many to list individually. There was even a report of a mother panther with twin cubs in the Oakwood area of Hexham which is only the second report indicating breeding that I have come across for the North East. That particular report relates to some four years ago so perhaps one of the cubs could be the animal that crossed the path of NMG's very own Francesca Leslie in the following dawn encounter:

"I am very puzzled by a creature seen today on my morning commute from Hexhamshire to Newcastle. Time was 7.05am, so it was still fairly dark. I was chugging along the B6530 from Corbridge to the Brocksbushes roundabout – grid ref NZ 012 636 – when a largish mammal shot across the road in front of me, from left to right (so north to south). I had my headlights dipped unfortunately so would estimate it was around 30m ahead – just out of the headlight range. It moved so quickly that I initially thought I must have imagined it, but when I looked to my right as I drove past the verge onto which it had shot I saw a distinct black shape moving up the embankment. I am very used to creatures of various shapes and sizes flinging themselves in front of the car on dark country lanes and can confidently rule out deer, badger or an oddly shaped hare.

"It was far too large to be a domestic cat, and moved with such stealth and speed that I doubt it was a lolling runaway dog. It was unlike anything I've ever seen before, particularly in terms of movement. The nearest mammal I can compare it to in size and shape is the industry-standard oversized Labrador. In the past I have been very sceptical of the supposed sightings of Tynedale's 'black cat' and of British big cats in general. However, in the absence of a common cat-shaped deer or a new subspecies of speedy long-legged badger perhaps I am no longer a doubting Thomas?"

**The Forestry Commission Rangers were not using cameras but thermal imaging visual devices. It was largely reported in the national press that they took pictures of the cats, this is untrue.*

Francesca is responsible for the North East Regional Environmental Data Hub at the EYE Project, which I assume will now be getting its own big cat database.

Things seem to be pretty busy down Stocksfield way as well, with several reported sightings. I had an e-mail from the lady whose spaniel had the face-to-face encounter through the fence at the bottom of her garden, reported in BCD Winter 2007. As well as furnishing more details of her encounter she has also heard of several other reports by people in the village. In fact, to the list of sightings by the butcher, the baker and candlestick maker, we can add one by an English Nature officer when, back in 2000, a Labrador sized black cat crossed the track opposite Stocksfield Hall as he was leaving the building.

Not a million miles away as a panther might roam a sighting in Slaley Forest received a fair bit of publicity when it featured on BBC Look North. A woman was walking her lurcher along a quiet forest track when a big black cat described as three to four feet long plus tail and a good two feet high bounded across the track just a few metres in front of them. The lurcher took off after the cat but soon thought better of it and returned to its owner and wouldn't leave her side after that.

When I wrote the Path of the Panther article based on big cat sightings up to the end of 2006 I noted that I had only come across one report from Weardale. Well that has now changed with two sightings reported by a well-respected ecologist. The first was around ten years ago when he was with a group of four people in a car when they saw a Labrador-sized black cat which disappeared into the scrub at the side of the road as they drove past. Then in late 2007 my correspondent and his partner (who he points out is one of the seemingly few people to have seen a wild European lynx, albeit in the Alps) were walking down a road with their dog when a panther-like cat came out of the hedgerow and walked away from them ahead of the dog until it disappeared round the bend in the road. The dog was about twenty metres ahead of them and the cat less than fifty metres. The dog saw it but is trained not to chase. In total they probably had ten seconds of view with the animal side on as it entered the road and a rear view as it loped away. It had the characteristic low slung back of a panther and the tail swaying behind with a curl at the end.

More recently in November 2008 a large black cat, described as about the size of a puma, was seen by a motorist at Eastgate in the middle of the day. The animal was about 35-40 yards away and it jumped over a seven-foot wall before disappearing into Halfmile Wood.

Continuing further south a van driver coming out of an industrial estate at Langley Park in February 2008 was surprised by a black cat the size of an Alsatian which bounced down a bank side and crossed the road about thirty feet away. The animal appeared to take no notice of him.

Not far from Langley Park but back in November 2005 a woman described a close encounter she had in a country lane between Tudhoe & Croxdale Colliery to Merrily Harpur, a leading UK big cat researcher.

"I pulled into the entrance of a field and got out of my car. I took a few steps and was about to walk across the single track lane when I looked ahead through a gap in the

hedge and my jaw dropped at what I saw ahead of me. Ahead of me was a gap in the hedge of about eight feet, and through this gap, about 22 yards away, I saw this huge black cat running as only a cat can run. I watched it for about five seconds and had a perfect view of it. I could see its cat face and its long tail, which was the same thickness throughout its whole length. Its face was the 'perfect' cat's face and its body was the body of a cat, but of a cat that was about twenty two inches high at the shoulder. It was a sight I will never forget."

I had been under the impression that the Trimdon Panther had disappeared, as I hadn't heard of any reports since summer 2007. However a couple of reports have come to light, which suggest that it's back in its old haunts, or perhaps never left. As reported to the Big Cats in Britain organisation in November 2007 two people watched a big black cat in their garden in High Hesleden. The cat, described as the size of a Doberman with a large sweeping tail and square face stood in the garden for about five minutes before wandering back into the adjacent cornfield. More recently, in December 2008 a farm worker had two sightings in one day near Coal Lane in Hartlepool. In fact I am told by someone on a neighbouring property that almost everyone in those parts claims to have seen it and it has even been put up by the local hunt though neither my correspondent nor the person who told him that almost everyone had seen it, had actually seen it.

Even further south, two ladies who live in Kirklevington Village, and who regularly go for short walks around the surrounding countryside have twice seen a large black cat on the western outskirts of the village. The first sighting was in 2007 when the cat ran out of a farm drive and along the side of a hedge disappearing down towards Saltersgill. Saltersgill is a woodland of around 10ha in a steep-sided river valley. The cat was 25 metres away when it appeared from the drive. They saw it mainly from the back but it was evident to them that it was a cat by the way it bounded. The second sighting was on 22nd July 2008 when the cat walked across a farm drive and crouched down under a hedge. One of the ladies went to the gate of the farm drive and could see the cat under the hedge about 25 metres away but couldn't make out any details. Her dog was stood with her but the two animals didn't appear to react to each other. On both occasions the cat was described as black with a thick tail. By way of comparison the ladies had two dogs, a retriever and a medium-sized lurcher, with them on both sightings. The cat was described as almost the size of the retriever at the shoulder. One of the ladies has a black domestic cat and described the cat they saw as being some ten times the size of her cat.

According to the husband of one of the witnesses, since March 2008 there have been several sightings of a similar animal by staff at Durham Tees Valley Airport. On one occasion one of the security staff had claimed that the cat had brushed past his leg in the dark. I find this a bit hard to believe unless he just has the one leg now.

While large black cats always make up the majority of sightings there have also been a few reports of other species. Bob Wilkin told me of a report from Earsden, near Morpeth in November 1997. A group of workmen renovating a farm building watched what they described as a puma, walk across some fields. The farm rears ostriches so the farmer and his sons went out looking for the cat armed with shotguns in case it was a threat to the young ostriches but nothing was found. There was no

description of the cat so it wasn't necessarily a puma and may just as easily have been one of those big black cats that are often thought to be pumas.

In Spring 2006 a lynx was reportedly seen by two people in Gosforth Park. They had just gone behind some bushes when one of them saw a large cat described as light brown, even creamy perhaps and with dark spots. It had a thick but fairly short tail and tufted ears. It closely resembled the picture of a lynx featured in the Journal on 14th January 2009. The second person didn't see it immediately as it was quite well camouflaged. The cat was seen from a distance of about ten yards. It didn't seem particularly concerned, "acted as if it owned the place" as the witness said, and just moved off.



Gosforth Park. You never know when there might be a lynx lurking behind a bush?
(Veronica Carnell ©).

Something resembling a lynx also featured in a report of a road casualty in 2007 at an unnamed location between Hexham and Bellingham. This was related to me by a farmer whose friends were driving past his land when a strange looking animal ran out in front of them and was hit by their car. Their immediate thought on seeing the animal run was that it was some sort of lemur but on getting out to inspect the dead body they saw that it was a cat. Although they didn't call it a lynx it was described as having a short, bob tail, long legs with a big head, prick ears and big whiskers. As they were on their way somewhere and couldn't drag on board a dead animal they moved the body into a nearby ditch but when they went to have a look at it the following day it had gone.

I like reports of lynx, partly because I would like to see them back in the wild in Britain anyway but mainly because a good sighting doesn't leave much room for confusion with domestic cats (though I can't deny that they are shaped a little like a

muntyjac). What I don't like, because I don't have a box to file them in, are reports that don't fit any known cat and I've had two of those recently. The same farmer who told me about the road casualty lynx also told me of his own encounter with a big cat. In 2006 he was driving along a track in the Forestry Commission's Wark Forest above Stonehaugh when he disturbed a large, fawn coloured cat. The cat was very muscular with a body about the size of a good-sized dog but with noticeably short, thick legs. The other noticeable feature was the long, muscular tail, which had six to eight black rings on it. There were no markings on the body. The cat appeared to be trying to get away from him and ran alongside the car at around 15mph before scrambling away under a deer fence.



Lynx: I like reports of lynx; there isn't really anything to confuse them with. (Jonathan Pounder ©).

The second anomalous sighting was towards the eastern end of Tynedale in 2008 although as with the dead lynx, the actual location is confidential. A woman was out walking her dog near some allotment gardens when a large cat crossed the path c25 metres in front of her and disappeared through a hedge into a field. Her dog ran to the spot in the hedge, which allowed her to make a reasonable size comparison. She estimated that the cat was an inch or two shorter than her dog but longer in the body. The cat had a noticeably long tail and a greyish body with markings that she thought were stripes but couldn't be sure weren't spots merging in to stripes. I haven't heard any other reports of a cat resembling this from the North East except perhaps the one by the police officer last year and perhaps the Medomsley Tiger both of which were close enough to this site to be within a big cats normal patrolling area. I told her that the only recognised large cat species that could resemble her sighting was clouded leopard. She Googled it while we were chatting and said that it could well have been that although it beggars belief a little to think that we have a clouded leopard loose in

the North East; not least because if all of these reports are accurate then the North East has more species of large cat than any one of the world's continents.

Perhaps I was suffering from cryptozoological withdrawal symptoms in not writing the Diaries but I had the strangest dreams last year. One night I dreamed that I'd spotted Bigfoot. As it ran away up a hill I shouted to my wife to get the camera out and then shouted "Its Bigfoot" but in that way that you do in dreams when you are paralysed and the sound wont come out, until I screamed it with such intensity that I forced the sound out loud and woke myself up with the noise. A couple of nights later I solved the big cats in Britain mystery. My Mam had captured the cat in her front room. It turned out that it was a cross between a panther and a Labrador but was only ocelot size and was a lovely golden brown colour with floppy ears. The animal was harmless but was unbelievably hyperactive so I named it Tigger. Its speed and agility were almost supernatural and last thing I can remember about the dream was that I shouted it and it flew to my rescue (can't remember what I needed rescuing from) like a cross between Lassie and Superman. I thought that these dreams might portend great things for me but we are now well into 2009 and all I have managed so far is a ten second appearance on Look North.

Winter 2009

(Author's note – I wrote this edition to go out with the Autumn 2009 Droppings column; you may find that bits of this don't make complete sense on their own but I wasn't going to waste some good stories and haven't had time to re-write it).

Looking back over the Big Cat Diaries I notice that they are becoming a bit repetitive. I seem to alternate between saying that the Trimdon Panther has disappeared and following that up the next edition with reports that its back. Anyway, at the risk of further repetition, it looks like the Trimdon Panther is back and with a vengeance.

Hot on the heels of a two sightings in one day by a farm worker west of the A19, in December 2008, was a sighting by two workmen who were repairing a track across arable fields in the north of Hartlepool; one of them was seated in a large excavator so had a high viewpoint. They both saw a large, completely black animal walking across a field of cereal stubble. They described it as Shetland pony size or bigger than a Great Dane. As they watched it cross the field they realised that it was a cat. This was on account of the long tail that curled upwards and the way the animal walked, stopping periodically with one paw in the air. A few days later they found very large footprints in an area where they had excavated soil and smoothed it down flat (the surface was smooth and damp enough to show a rat's footprints and even the rat's tail print clearly). Two prints were found which were described as bigger than the larger man's fist. We showed them a nearby dog footprint (Labrador-size) and they said the prints were much bigger than those. Unfortunately the tracks had been obliterated by further earth moving works by the time we got there.

Another big, black cat the size of a large dog was seen by a man out jogging near Bishop Middleham. He watched it for about a minute from a distance of about 200 yards then decided he'd better jog in the other direction. A similar animal was seen from a bus by one of Jonathan Pounder's Environmental Conservation students as it was scratching a tree near Sherburn.

Bringing it almost up to date, in mid June I received another report of the big black cat in the west of Hartlepool. Ironically I was leading a guided walk over that way two days after the sighting and was telling people that there had been no reports for a while as the report hadn't yet filtered through to me. The sighting was in a remote part of Hartlepool with just the odd farm and house, the usual Trimdon Panther patch in fact. One of the residents was driving home when she saw a big, black cat next to the road eating a sheep. The cat was described as being bigger than a dog (I dare say it would have to be to be eating a sheep).

While I was leading the walk we found two large droppings on a footpath next to a hedge about half a mile from the above spot. They were about four times the size of your standard fox dropping and reminded me of the alleged big cat droppings at the Big Cats in Britain conference. As I didn't have anything to put them in I just left it at that but, when I subsequently heard about the sighting, I tramped back over there after work and photographed and collected them (as you can imagine I didn't tell the wife that's why I was late home). A closer inspection showed small mammal bones and vegetation in the dropping among the sheep's wool so I'm pretty sure they are from a fox but I might just slip them in for DNA analysis with the potential pine marten scats (just in case they come back as cat).

Until recently all of the unusual cat sightings in Hartlepool and the surrounding area have been of large, panther-like cats. However I was told about a Durham County Council employee who had been on his way to a meeting in Hartlepool when he saw a strange looking cat that he couldn't identify. When he got back to the office he told colleagues about it and looked it up to see what it was. He reckoned that it most closely resembled a serval, which is a medium sized, long-legged, spotted cat that looks like a skinny lynx. I reckon it probably was a skinny lynx; we can't possibly have yet another different species of exotic cat wandering around the North East, can we?

Another recent sighting that was definitely put down as lynx was at Collingwood's Monument at Tynemouth. The animal was described as mottled, dark-brown with pointed ears and what appeared to be a thin, short tail and was a little smaller than the observer's golden retriever. It broke cover about 15-20 feet away and ran into some bushes as the dog chased it.

Closer to home, indeed just a mile and a half from my home and on my regular jogging route, a couple of men out fishing at night on the River Skerne had a close encounter with a big black cat that was on the riverbank just a few feet from them. They fled on their cycles, leaving their fishing gear behind. As they went one way the cat apparently ran off the other way as they heard it splash across the river into the Skerningham Community woodland plantation. This is a large area of young trees about three to four metres tall and really dense. However it is well traversed by dog walkers so the cat couldn't normally be living there but there are quite a few much more secluded woods on the side of the river that the cat was originally on, including the aptly named Catkill Woods.



The ones that got away! The spot where the anglers had the unnerving encounter on the banks of the River Skerne." (Ian Bond ©).

Coincidentally the day that I heard about the big cat sighting the subject of cryptozoology came up at tea as I mentioned my encounter with the Bigfoot look-alike on the A68 (strangely my family are never surprised by such things). Without me mentioning this big cat sighting my son said that his friend's dad had seen a big, black cat. It had ran across the road in front of him and a passenger on the A167, just a mile or two away from Skerningham and his friend's dad had looked at the passenger and said, "did you see what I saw." My son's friend has several cats including a large Maine coon cross so his dad knows what a large domestic cat looks like and, what's more his friend's dad is a police officer, so is probably a bit more observant than most.

When I plotted the big cat sightings for the North East on a map it was interesting to see the clusters such as the Trimdon Panther but just as interesting to see where the gaps were and none more so than Kielder. Anyway that gap has now been filled. I have recently heard of two reports from Kielder and whatever they were, they weren't the same thing. One of them was a typical black panther sighting, nearly three feet tall, seen at night from a car by three witnesses by the side of the road that leads from Kielder to the Scottish Border. It was watched as it walked away from the road and into a field. The second cat was seen by a jogger from a distance of about fifty metres and across the river. It was described as low to the ground, appearing Springer spaniel size, tan/sandy in colour with triangle shaped ears and a huge tail with a rounded bulb-like end. So rather like a puma except too small and with the wrong ears. Whatever mystery cats may be lurking in Kielder, at least there should be plenty for them to eat; there are an estimated 6,500 roe deer, plus a wallaby.



Kielder: England's largest forest with an estimated 6,500 Roe Deer but still only two reports of big cats in the past ten years. (Janet Bond ©).

Spring 2010

I haven't set myself much in the way of ambitions for 2010 but I am feeling a bit more positive about the chances of finally finding the Trimdon Panther. My 'big' present for my 50th birthday (I also got a notebook made out of Elephant poo!) was a night vision scope with the capability of seeing 250 metres in the dark.

A bit more clarity certainly wouldn't go amiss as the past few months seem to have thrown up a very mixed bag of big cat sightings from perfectly plausible panthers, to cats only partially observed, to cats that ought not to be. Rather than sort them on the basis of what makes sense to me I've included them all for the sake of completeness; make of them what you will.

Perhaps the most closely observed sighting is also perhaps the most unlikely in terms of the description and location. In the Heritage Park at Souter Point, South Shields a man had a close view of a large cat, almost two feet in height and dark grey in colour with a slightly lighter bit on the tail. The sighting scared him so much that his son got in touch wanting to know whether to report it to the authorities.

More in the classic panther mould was a sighting in Heighington in August. Two people on a cycle path near Heighington Railway station watched a large, black cat, described as slightly smaller than a greyhound, from a distance of about fifty metres for some fifteen seconds before it disappeared through an opening in some bushes.

This is only about a mile from the sighting of a similar animal by my son's friend's dad earlier this year.

It's surprising how often, when word gets round that you are interested in big cat records, that someone tells you that they know someone who has seen a big cat in Britain. A colleague came up to me to tell me that his brother-in-law had seen a large (but not quite panther-sized), black cat take a leap at a bird on the outskirts of Nunthorpe near Middlesbrough. More recently Michelle Appleby read the Big Cat Diaries for the first time and was reminded how as a child in Wheatley Hill in the 1980s she was warned by her parents not to play in the nearby quarry because of the panther. In fact sightings from the area of the quarry were so frequent that the local rabbiters and whippet lads stopped going there.

Fortunately the reports over the years don't seem to have put people off visiting the Castle Eden Walkway as there has been another sighting from there, albeit a little vague on this occasion. Someone was walking their dog on a lead at the remoter, northern end of the Walkway; where Brierley Wood meets the track, when they saw around fifty metres ahead of them what they thought at first was the back of a dark coloured Doberman. The idea that this was a dog disappeared as the animal itself disappeared into the dense woodland without making any move to greet their dog on the lead, nor were there any other people at that end of the Walkway that a dog might belong to.

Another close sighting that unfortunately happened too quickly to get a clear identification happened in woods along the River Tees at Croft, near Darlington. The person who told me the story was walking on his own back to his car with his head down, gingerly picking his footfalls in the mud, when he glanced up to see a deer heading towards him at speed with a large, black something in pursuit of the deer and a couple of feet behind it. This was about 25 feet away from him. The deer saw him and swerved up a hill. He only glimpsed the big black thing so couldn't say for sure whether it was a Labrador or panther. We thought big cat more likely because a Labrador wouldn't have got within two feet of the deer unless it had more or less stood on it before the deer bolted (and this would have had to have happened about 30 feet from him for it to still be two feet behind the deer). Also he saw no-one else in the wood that the dog could have belonged to. I suppose a black lurcher is a better possibility than a Labrador but again you wouldn't expect it to be unattached or to just disappear quietly and not be seen again.

A similarly fleeting glimpse was reported in the Morpeth Herald in October. A woman was walking her Giant Schnauzer dogs along the riverside near Morpeth when a large black animal came up from the river, ran in front of them and climbed over a wall. The dogs didn't notice it go past but when they came to the point where it had crossed the path they became highly excited, running in circles and trying to get over the wall. While not convincingly, to my mind, a big cat sighting, the fact that the animal climbed a wall would seem to rule out dog or deer, although given the proximity of the river, I suppose otter must be a possibility.

December brought a couple of sightings that might have yielded some evidence. In one, between Newton Moor and Longframlington, a cat, estimated to be four to four and a half feet in total length was seen from a distance of about 400 metres. The

person who saw the cat returned to the area the next day and found some deer leg bones and a large dropping, which they collected. I've seen a photo of the dropping and it's certainly large enough but, as we know from our pine marten experiences, it's the DNA that counts. I don't know if anyone is getting it analysed but I'll keep you posted if they do.

Some potential hard evidence almost came from the second sighting as well when the cat ran out five to six feet in front of a car on the road from Ellington to Ashington. It was described as black, with the face of a panther and a body two feet high and three feet long. Its other distinguishing feature being that it now only has the eight lives.

In contrast to my birthday, Christmas has left me feeling slightly less enthusiastic about finding the Trimdon Panther. I got a copy of the book "The Man eating Leopard of Rudraprayag" by Jim Corbett, which I've been unable to put down. This was an animal that could cross a room full of sleeping people and snatch its victim without anyone being woken and which could carry a person for long distances without letting any part of their body touch the ground. It occasioned the thought that the 250 metre on my night vision scope could also be measured as 15 seconds set-off if pursued by a panther. Would anyone like to help me try out my night vision scope?

Autumn 2010

I was nearly famous earlier this year. A reporter from the Daily Mail contacted me about an article that she wanted to write based on tracking down a big cat in Britain. The Mail was responding to an article in the Telegraph reporting on the admission by Natural England that there might be the odd big cat roaming across the British countryside. The reporter wanted someone who could take her to track down a big cat and come up with some evidence. I explained that I hardly ever follow up big cat sightings, as the cat would be some distance away by the time I got there and unless the sighting was near a muddy waterhole the chances of a definitive track were slim. The best that I could offer was to show her how I would go about looking for signs at one of the hot spots for sightings, Wynyard Woodland Park. As it turned out that was the best offer she could get in the time available so I rounded up a few volunteers and we spent a morning having our pictures taken several hundred times, peering at dog tracks.

I don't think the story was quite what she wanted. For a start we were more like "Last of the Summer Wine" than Steve Irwin, the arithmetic mean of our ages, me included, being seventy-something. Then I stubbornly refused to be drawn into making any dramatic statements about the numbers, the threat posed to the public or the effects on the British countryside of exotic big cats at large. Whether it was that or the subsequent retraction by Natural England I don't know but I bought the Daily Mail for several weeks afterwards without any sign of the article, not even so much as a hint that big cats might be taking our jobs or somehow be responsible for the death of Princess Di.

As it turned out we were looking in the right place. Unknown to me at the time, there had been a sighting of a panther-sized, black cat on another part of the former Wynyard estate only a matter of a few days before our failed tracking expedition. The cat was seen from about twenty feet away, fortunately on the other side of a security fence, as it just casually strolled past the observer. In fact a minor flurry of reports of

the Trimdon Panther has come to light just recently. Some of these have been a little bit ambiguous, for example there have been two reports over the past two years of a large, dark cat near a farm at Trimdon. In both of these cases the animal seems to be of a more modest size than a panther, though still described as bigger than a bulky Staffie. A third sighting was by a bird watcher who claimed to have seen a similar animal near Hurworth Burn Reservoir. A more typically panther-like cat was seen crossing a field off the Castle Eden back road in the middle of the afternoon in mid-April. It was watched for about a minute from a distance of about twenty metres and was described as black or dark brown with a tail about a metre long.

An even more compelling sighting was by an old acquaintance of mine, who I hadn't seen for years. He got in touch to tell me about a couple of sightings at Bishop Middleham, one by himself about three years ago then another by his son last month. His son's sighting had been from some distance but his own encounter was a much closer affair. It occurred while he was pounding his regular, three-mile circular running route from the village. He'd left it a bit late and it was starting to get dark and his first assumption was that the animal coming towards him was a fox. He quickly realised that it was far too big for a fox so his assumption switched to black Labrador; except that this was a bit too big for a Labrador and it looked like a cat. They continued heading in each other's direction until at about twenty five yards distance the cat turned and ran a few yards before leaping over a wall and disappearing.

Still potentially within the Trimdon Panther's home range, a motorist driving between Durham and Darlington in the early hours of the morning was surprised to see a deer running in a field next to some woodland. Even more surprising was a puma-sized black animal that was chasing the deer. The motorist who was from Poland was particularly surprised as, in their words, "I thought it is impossible to see puma in UK."

Meanwhile in our other "hot spot" for big cat sightings, Tynedale, a couple had a quite a surprise themselves in their own garden in Haydon Bridge. On hearing noises they went out to investigate and saw a large, black cat, bigger than their Labradors. They both reckoned that it could have killed them if they had cornered it but instead the cat just jumped over a wall and walked away.

A few years ago Weardale was notable for not having had any reports of big cats, at least none that came to my attention, but the numbers of sightings continue to creep up and it is becoming at least a "moderately warm spot." A couple of years back Louise Harrington's partner was working in a field at Wolsingham when two gamekeepers drew up hurriedly in their land rover, leapt out and asked him if he had seen the big cat. He hadn't seen it himself but they claimed to have watched it for several minutes through binoculars.

More recently I had an e-mail from someone claiming to have seen a big cat in Frosterley this May. With perhaps the exception of having a couple of lumbar vertebrae missing, the description sounds exactly like a panther, even down to the rounded ears which are a notable distinguishing feature between big cats and moggies. It's such a good, detailed description that I've decided to include it verbatim rather than try to do justice to it in summing it up.

“I have seen a large, black cat roam a field just east of Frosterley, Weardale this morning. I was on my way to work and a passenger in my wife's car when looking out to the left I saw a large cat- not panther sized, but squat rather, like an Alsatian. The animal was a jet, shiny black with rounded ears that appeared velvety. The tail was long, thick and followed the animal's rump down to where it met the ankle and then curved up in a definite 'u' shape.

“You couldn't mistake it for anything but feline. Had velvet shine to its coat, a curled tail, large paws and rounded ears; but was squat rather than long. Did not have tapered face or the thin body of a lynx, but followed the construction of a panther, but without the length.

“The cat was about the same size as an Alsatian when viewed from a distance of about 25 yards. However, I imagine an adult panther to be quite a long, sleek creature. This was not. The length of the body was much shorter than I would've expected. In fact, the length of the body was equivalent to that of an Alsatian and yet its paws, head and tail were of, I surmise, 'panther size'. This gave the animal a 'four-square', solid appearance but was 'pocket sized' in big cat terms. There was nothing of the length between the last rib and the pelvis, as you would expect in big cats.

“What is weird was that it was approaching a fence and was clearly assessing the sheep who grazed in the field beyond. I know a number of the farmers around this area and I haven't heard them speak of finding the bodies of adult sheep or cows with enormous injuries you'd expect to find with an actively feeding adult big cat in the area.”

A few years back it seemed that we had a third hotspot for big cat sightings in our region, around the Guisborough/Cleveland Hills area. However all of the reports that I have heard of more recently have been south of the border across the North York Moors and Ryedale. My favourite of these Yorkshire big cat sightings involved the organiser of the local fell races. He was marking out a course near Osmotherley when a panther crossed the path near him. I was told that he subsequently warned the runners at the beginning of the race not to be last. However the best known of these is the big, black cat dubbed the Beast of the Bay that has been repeatedly spotted in the area north of Whitby. Just a couple of weeks ago “The Beast” turned up again as it ran across the road in front of a motorist, late at night at Boulby. It stopped briefly and looked back at the car before running off into a field. As Boulby is a couple of hundred yards on the Northumbria Mammal Group side of the North Yorkshire border I thought I'd better include it for the sake of completeness.

Finally I had a report from what seems to be a completely new area for big cat sightings, Craster on the Northumberland Coast. An angler was driving out of Craster in the early hours of the morning, earlier this year, after a night's sea fishing when a big, black cat crossed the road about twenty five metres in front of his car, moving from one small copse to another. The angler was adamant that this was a big cat and not an otter as he has seen otters on many occasions while out fishing.

I must admit I have managed to achieve a little bit of publicity lately with a mention in the Journal and Radio Newcastle promoting my talk on big cats in the North East, at South Shields. The Journal said something to the effect that I thought there were lots of big cats across the North East, which, I must point out, is almost the opposite of what I have always said. The talk went well with a good fifty people attending. It

turned up a couple of old sightings from Sherburn and Kielder, the Sherburn one being of particular note as it was a clear observation and the size of the cat could easily be judged by the hedge it was outlined against but the best report was of a panther seen crossing a large roundabout in Lancashire. The chap who saw it slowed down and watched it from about ten metres as it nonchalantly walked twenty metres into some trees. He described it as black and easily the size of his retriever. Not much room for mistaken identity you would think with that story but it still didn't stop a lively debate on whether or not there are big cats out there.

As it turned out the Mail did get a suitably dramatic article on big cats. It was by Mark Fletcher who produced the BBC documentary on leopards. He started by claiming that he would have felt responsible if the recent story of two girls being stalked by a big cat in the Forest of Dean had turned out to have had an unfortunate ending; *“My worst fears nearly became a chilling reality last week when two girls were stalked in the Forest of Dean – by what appears to have been a huge black cat.... But what really brought this strange case home to me was the fact that if they had come to any real harm, I would have felt responsible.”* His documentary had included a short section about the possibility of them living wild in Britain but hadn't made much of it so as not to cause alarm. However now he had *“come to the conclusion that it is time to tell the full, disturbing story.”* He even goes on to suggest that the cat that supposedly stalked the girls was known to a local big cat enthusiast who had christened it “Boris” and claimed that it was more dangerous than the other big cats that lived in the Forest of Dean. I suppose the article was useful in flagging up the fact that lots of people across the country are seeing big cats but I can't believe that if people like this big cat enthusiast have enough evidence to identify individual cats that they haven't published it. He's also got me worried that perhaps I should be feeling responsible for not warning people about the potential dangers in the countryside. So just to cover my back please be aware that some of you could be allergic to bee stings, that there are trees that could fall on you, grass you could slip on and that you might get trampled underfoot by a procession of ramblers. Did I mention the possibility of being attacked by big cats? Thought not; its probably a bit further down the list!



Puma: We may have the “Durham Puma” in popular imagination but only six of around 150 reports have actually described an animal resembling a Puma. (Paul Crowther ©).



Panther: The large, square head; long body; long, stout tail; rounded ears and powerful build distinguish a Panther from a scaled up black moggie. (Nigel Spencer ©).



Black Moggie. Even without the benefits of scale, it's clearly not a panther. (Sam McKeown ©).

Unwinding the Path

What are all these reports telling us about big cats in North East England?

When I started collating big cat reports for Northumbria Mammal Group my first thought was to see if any patterns emerged in their distribution. Whilst cats are adaptable they do have habitat preferences, whatever those might be in modern Britain and they also have

home ranges though these can vary considerably in size. As there is nowhere in the world where the species being reported are sympatric and as they are all members of the guild of predators of medium to large herbivores it is also possible that their distribution is shaped by competition between the species, including killing and consumption of one big cat species by another. However the effects of competition is a notoriously contentious subject in ecology and it would at the very least need to assume that big cats exist in sufficient numbers for competition to occur, something which I now seriously doubt, though more of that later.

The reports on which this article is based have been collected mainly from local newspaper articles, members of Northumbria Mammal Group or colleagues and friends who knew that I was interested in the subject and more recently via the Big Cats in Britain (BCIB) organisation. I am not an active researcher of big cats or big cat sightings, indeed the only active researchers that I am aware of in the North East are Eddie Bell in Durham and Chris Hall in Cleveland.

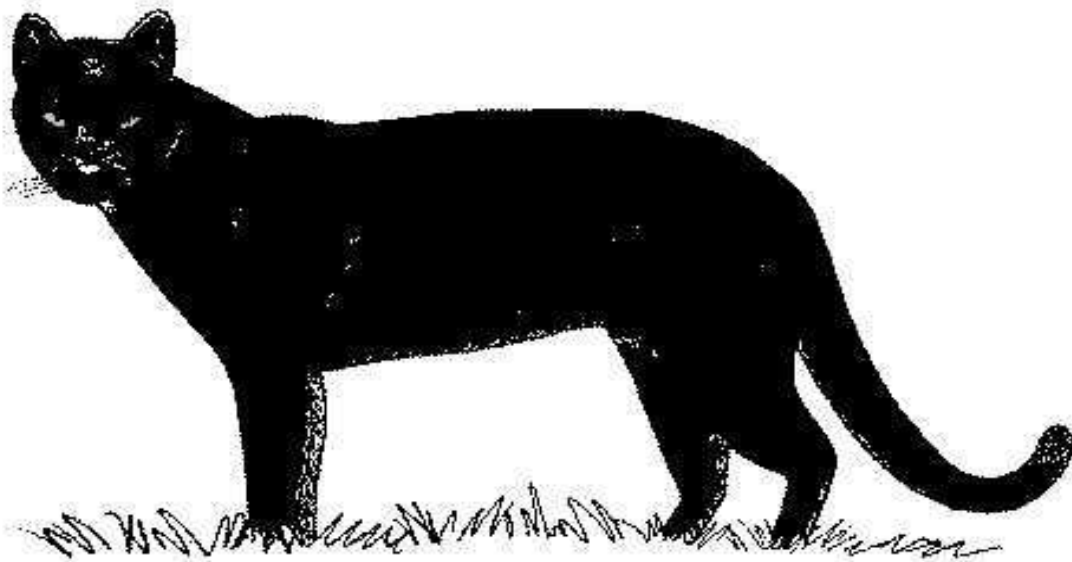
Having written up most of the reports I've received for the Big Cat Diaries column in Northumbria Mammal Group's quarterly newsletter I had a feeling for where the main areas were where big cat reports emanated from. However plotting the individual records onto maps of the North East proved to be a very useful way of bringing the distribution of records into sharper focus and I have included these maps below as Figures 1 – 4. Some of the dots on the maps show approximate location as many of the reports only gave a general location such as "outskirts of Hexham." Where there are several reports for such a general location I have used some licence in estimating the national grid references so that they show up as separate records. However the reports have been plotted at two kilometre (tetrad) resolution and at certain of the 'hotspots' a single dot on the map might represent two or more reports.

In plotting the reports, I only included those that occurred since the late 1990s and in practice all but five of the records were from 2000 onwards. This is because with



older records there is very little chance that the individual cat in question is still alive. Of the older records that I am aware of many would fit the current patterns, though in the mid 1990s there was a cluster of records from the Otterburn/ Kirkwhelpington area in mid-Northumberland and earlier still a number of records, including a confirmed scat, from Teesdale in south-west Durham. Where the description was clear enough, reports have been broken down into the following recognised species: panther* puma, lynx. As many of the reports were received second hand, e.g. newspaper stories, there wasn't always enough information to assign them to a specific species and such reports were recorded as unspecified species. On the other hand what was particularly curious was that I received several first hand reports where the reporter had a very good look at the cat from close range and described it in some detail but the cat in question did not appear to fit the description of any known cat.

One such category that crops up on several occasions is black cats that are considerably bigger than domestic cats but not big enough to be panthers. According to Mark Fraser of BCIB these are the second most reported type of cat nationally, although they form a very small proportion of the reports that I have received for the North East. While I feel uncomfortable with the idea of cats that ought not to be, the quality of the reports and in several cases, the qualifications of the person making them means that they merit analysis, even if I am not satisfied with the possible explanations.

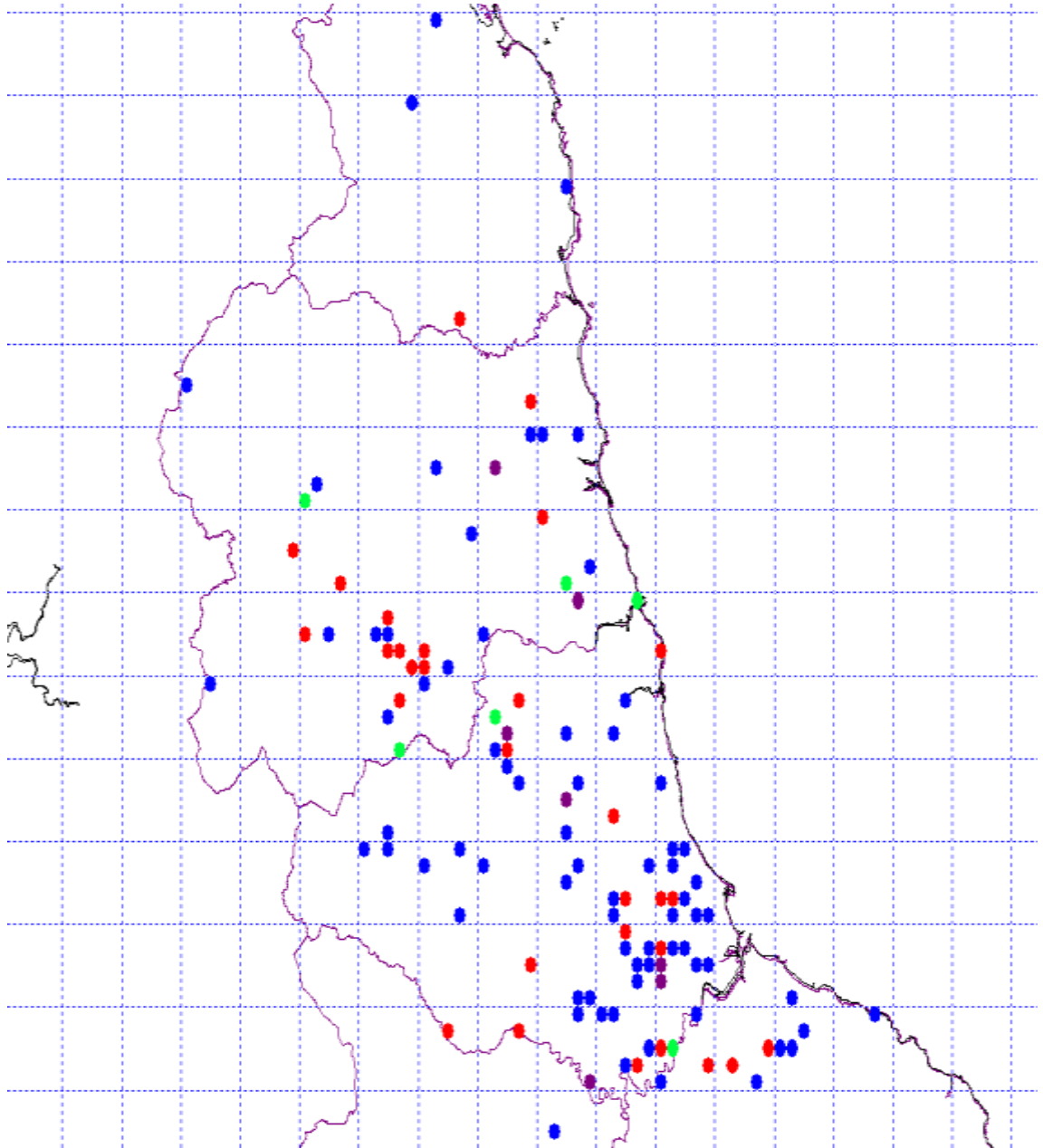


Identi-cat. A drawing based on witness descriptions of a black cat too big to be a moggie but too small to be a panther. (Copyright Martin Bailey BCIB ©).

*The term panther is used here in its usual sense as denoting a melanistic cat of the pantherine group, i.e. a black leopard or a black jaguar. Leopards and jaguars are of similar size and colour whether in their normal spotted form or black form, and it would take a reasonable amount of familiarity with both species to tell them apart. I have assumed that reports of panthers refer to black leopards as these are more common in captivity than jaguars but this is not necessarily the case and adds another potential complication to analysing the records. Panthers are popularly referred to as black panthers though strictly speaking that is a tautology as the term "panther" implies they are black. It is worth pointing out that pumas are never black.

Fig 1. Distribution of all big cat reports.

Blue = Panther.
Green = Lynx.
Purple = Puma.
Red = unspecified/unknown species.



As of August 2010, I have received a total of 102 reports that can be attributed to a particular species. Of these 88 refer to panthers, seven to pumas, six to lynx and a single one to serval. In addition seven reports are of black cats that are very much bigger than domestic cats but which clearly aren't panthers and a further five reports where the species was clearly described but doesn't fit a known species.

There are a further twenty reports where the species wasn't described in enough detail to ascribe it to a particular species. Usually this was because the colour wasn't mentioned in the report though both statistically and because the press seems to take for granted that big cats are black there is a good chance that these would have fitted in to the panther category if full details had been given. These 134 reports have been plotted in Fig 1.

There are a few reports that are too vague to even estimate the approximate location or which occurred over a decade ago and which are therefore excluded from the discussion. Overall I estimate that I have received around 150 reports. This is approximately fifteen per year although this isn't evenly spread throughout the past decade as the numbers of reports have increased in recent years due in all likelihood more to my more recent connections with BCIB than an increase in cat numbers.

As stated in the introduction, the overall picture of big cat reports is fairly similar to that of three years ago however there have been a few notable changes. In my 2007 article I expressed surprise that there hadn't been any reports for either Kielder or Weardale. That has now changed with seven reports of panthers in Weardale and two recent reports of big cats at Kielder. Nevertheless the Trimdon Panther so called because the early reports seemed to coincide with Tony Blair's then constituency, still dominates in terms of numbers of reports.

The distribution of the reports of panther is shown in Fig 2. While this shows the general pattern of distribution it misses some detail in that certain dots represent more than one report. There are actually 35 reports of panther from the four ten kilometre squares, NZ32; NZ34; NZ42; NZ43, which are what I tend to class as the Trimdon Panther. There are a further eight reports of panthers a few miles further south west around Darlington and seven in central Durham, more or less between Spennymoor and Chester le Street on a north south axis. County Durham also seems to have its own big cat "triangle" with single reports of panther, puma and lynx plus two reports of unspecified cats, all roughly between the three points of Lanchester, Consett and Rowlands Gill.

Tynedale remains another area where sightings continue to crop up with nine reports of panthers and seven reports where the species is unspecified. The number of reports from the wider Morpeth area is also worth noting and stands at three panthers, one puma and two unspecified big cats.

There have been six reports of panthers and a further three reports of unspecified big cats on the northern perimeter of the North York Moors, mainly around the Guisborough area. The forests here merge with very large areas of overlapping woodland, mostly coniferous plantation, which fringe the western and southern perimeters the Moors and continue into Ryedale. There have been numerous sightings from these other areas and it is likely that the animal(s) responsible for the Guisborough sightings are also the source of the sightings further south.

Figure 2. Panther reports.

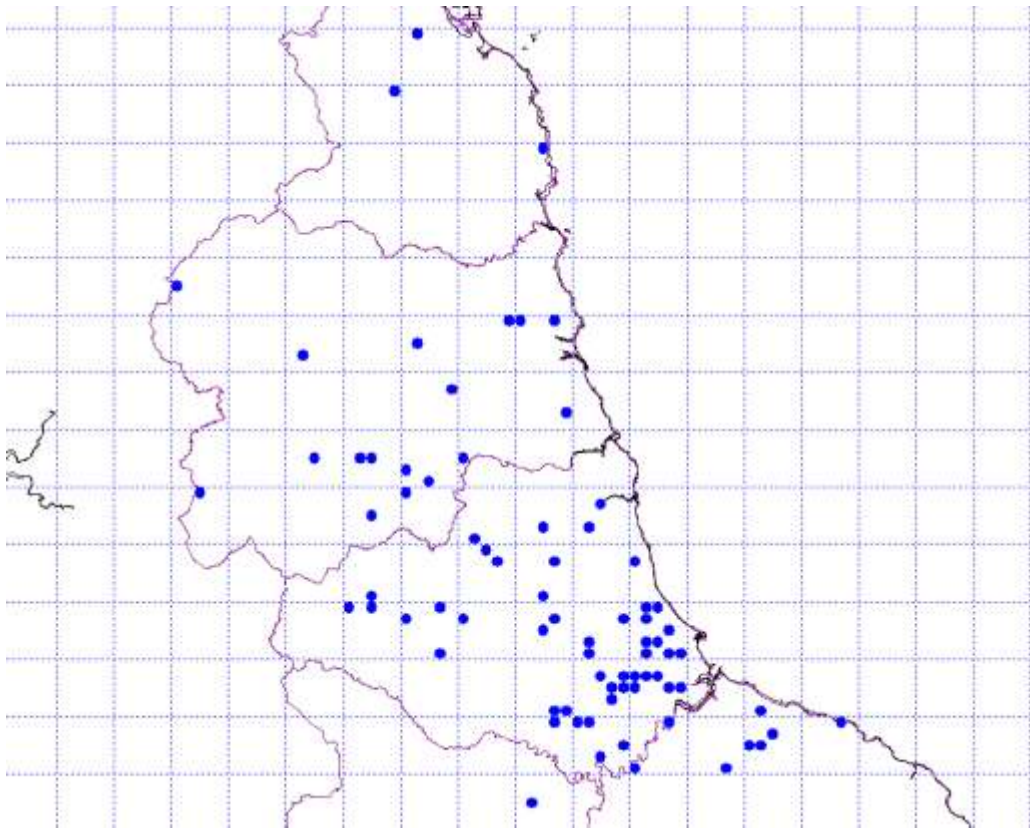


Figure 3. Puma reports.

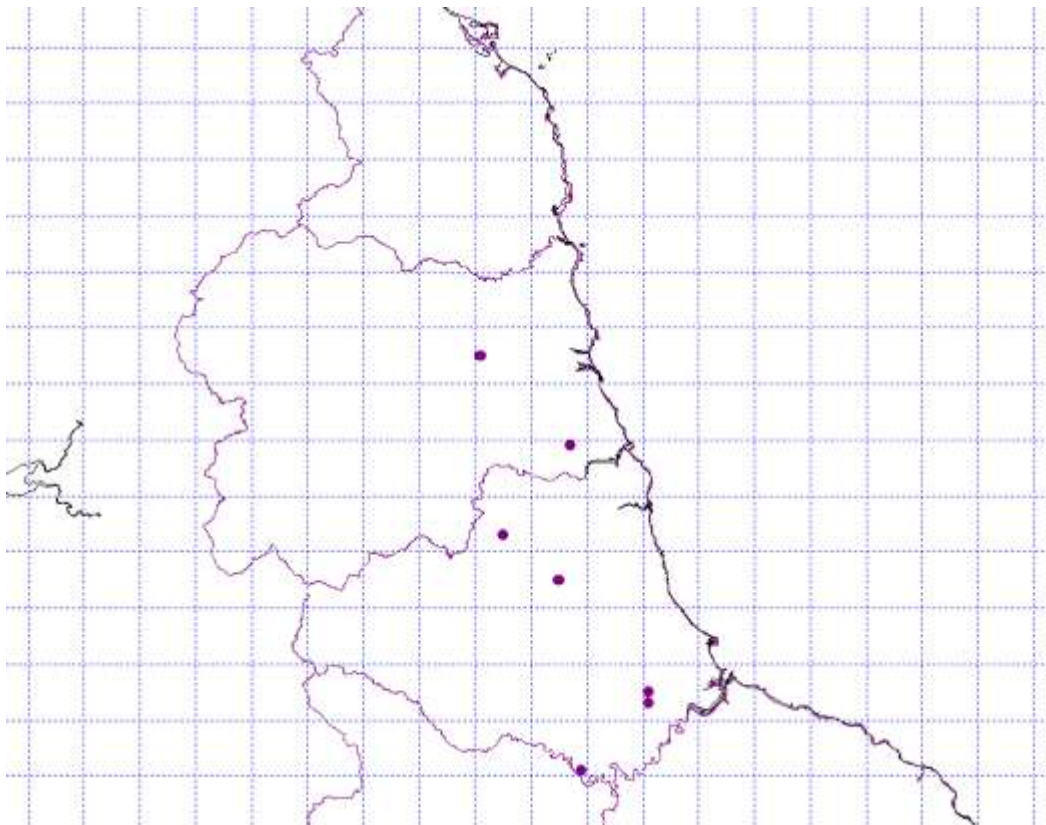
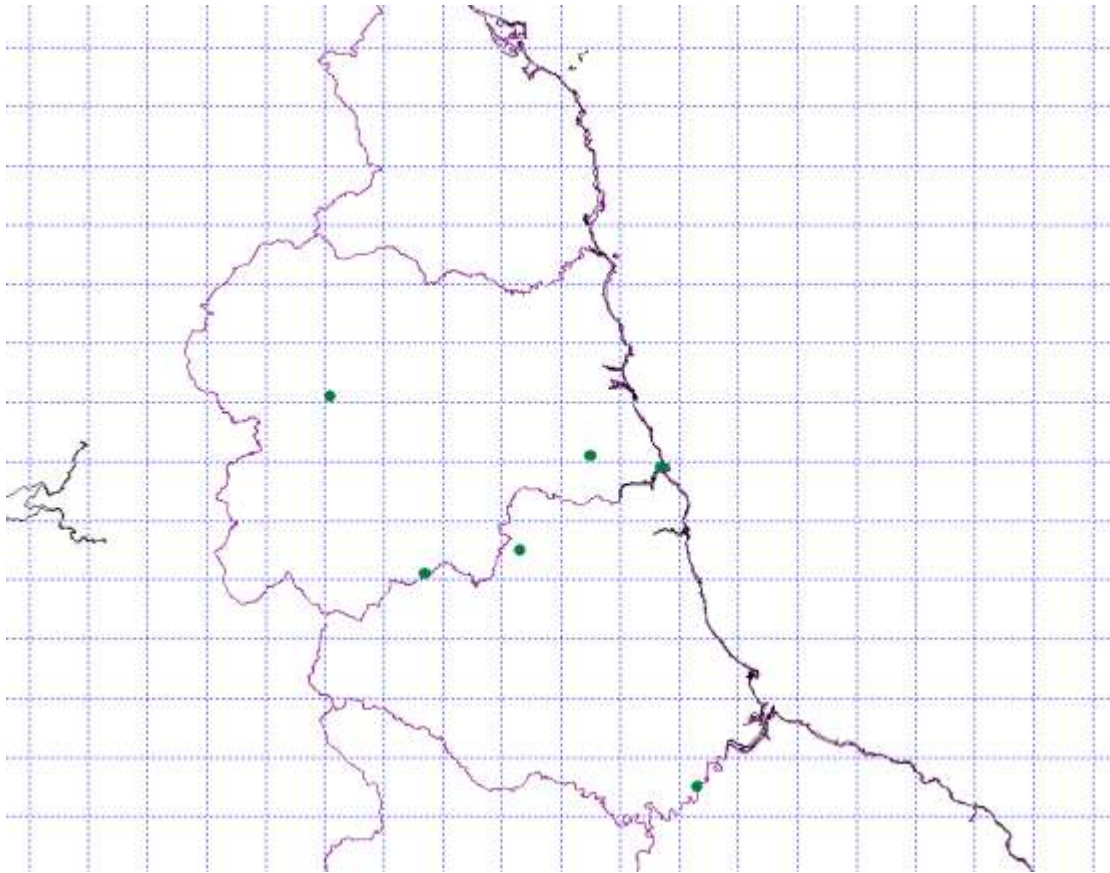


Figure 4. Lynx reports.



For species other than panthers there seems to be no clear pattern to the reports. The distribution of the reports for puma and lynx is shown in Figs 3 & 4. As can be seen from the maps, the reports have been well spread out across the north east with the only place having more than one report being the southern end of the Wynyard Woodland Park with two reports of pumas, albeit several years apart.

The reports of big, black cats that aren't panthers are similarly spread out across the region at Nunthorpe, Burnopfield, Slayley and Fontburn Reservoir though there are three reports within about ten kilometres of each other between Thorpe Thewles and Trimdon. It is easy to dismiss these as all being misidentifications of black, feral domestic cats but some reports in this category are by people who are very familiar with mammal identification and who had a good look at what they were seeing. As this is a common category of big cat sightings nationally there has been much speculation among people interested in this phenomenon. Suggestions that I am aware of include: a species of cat, native to Britain but unknown to science; naturally-occurring hybrids between different cat species; individual feral domestic cats that exhibit gigantism; melanistic jungle cats or Scottish wild cats. I have listed them in what, in my opinion, is an increasing order of plausibility though as far as I am aware only the category of melanistic specimens of known species is actually documented as occurring and then only in the case of Scottish wild cats in the UK.

The only other category of cat description that occurs more than once is of a large, striped cat that is more or less panther-sized. There have been three reports of a cat fitting this description, two of them first hand. The most closely observed was from around Corbridge but the other two were within a theoretical roaming distance of each other for a big cat. It is worth pointing out that no such cat is known to exist but it is hard to argue with the Corbridge sighting unless it was a very convincing hoax. The closest that I can come to an actual species of cat is if the stripes were really elongated blotches, in which case the cats might fit the description of a clouded leopard but the presence of yet another type of big cat on the loose in the North East, especially one as rare in captivity as a clouded leopard, also stretches credulity to the limit.

What, if anything, do all these reports tell us about big cat distribution in North East England? Well firstly it should be noted that any conclusions are based on reports of big cat sightings, not necessarily all of which are actual big cat sightings. Whilst puma and particularly lynx are fairly distinctive in having a colour or shape that is not reproduced in the vast majority of domestic cats, there are a lot of black cats roaming about which could resemble panthers if the scale at which they were being viewed wasn't clear. One of the first cautionary notes that bird watchers learn is that size in the field is notoriously difficult to judge and this might be even more the case for cat sightings which are generally fleeting and take the observer by surprise.

The Big Cats in Britain organisation receives a fair number of photographs or videos of purported big cats of which the person who saw the animal was convinced that it was a big cat. So far investigation have shown that all but a very small number would fit in the range of a domestic cat and even those that appear somewhat larger than that are clearly not panthers. In analysing these reports then we have to live with an unknown but potentially large source of error. Nevertheless a lot of the reports have been made by experienced naturalists or in circumstances where the size could be accurately judged and it seems reasonable to assume that many of the reports are accurate.

It is an axiom of wildlife recording that the distribution of records reflects the distribution of recorders. This is clearly the case with this data set. Most of the records that come to me personally are from the south of the area, which is where I live and work. The majority of the Trimdon Panther records have come to light through my contacts working as a countryside ranger and then as an ecologist for the past eleven years in that area. Only around three of those reports from this area have come to me via BCIB. Contrast this with the six reports from Morpeth, only one of which would have come to me other than through the BCIB website. If we extrapolate this to other areas in the North East it could be argued that there are quite a few additional records in other areas that a locally based recorder might come across and this of course could totally change the picture of big cat distribution.

In spite of these shortcomings there are enough good quality reports to indicate that at individuals of panther, lynx and puma have been at large recently in the North East. So if we assume that there have been, or continue to be, at least some big cats at large in the North East, can we make any estimation of how many cats we are dealing with; could it just be that there is a single animal of each species roaming at length across the region? Kitchener (1991) summarises a number of studies into the ranges of different cat species. For each species the range size varies considerably both within

and between studies. A study by Herfindel et al (2005) found that home range size could vary by a factor of 10 and that this is strongly influenced by prey density, though the biggest factor in determining home range size is the sex of the animal, as the territories of males overlap two or more female ranges and are therefore typically the corresponding number of times as large.

Kitchener gives figures for lynx home ranges of between 46 and 135 km² for females and between 275 and 450 km² for males, whereas a study by Linnell et al (2001) of lynx home ranges in Scandinavia found home ranges of between 300-1400km² the highest recorded for the species. Home ranges for puma can also be large, up to 826 km², but Guggisberg (1975) quoting Hornocker would suggest that a typical range is perhaps 60-70 km² for females and perhaps three times that for males. Leopard home ranges would seem generally to be smaller. Kitchener quotes ranges from 8-60 km² for females. Simcharoen et al (2008) radio-tracked leopards in Thailand and found that females territories averaged 26 km², whereas those of males averaged 46 km². Norton & Henley (1998) found similar results radio-tracking three male leopards in South Africa with home ranges from 40-69 km². It is worth noting that these latter two studies were on animals from tropical regions where prey density may be significantly higher than in more temperate regions.

What the home range of any of these cats would be in Britain is a matter of speculation, but it is worth noting that all of the Trimdon Panther reports cluster within an area of c300km² and to take in the additional eight reports around Darlington would expand the putative territory to around 500 km². Leaving aside the exceptional lynx territories in Scandinavia, this is getting towards the upper limit of big cat territory size and certainly much bigger than a typical figure for a leopard. On the face of it, it would seem unlikely, though by no means impossible, that any one big cat would be patrolling the entire area that has been lumped together as abode of the Trimdon Panther. It is certainly extremely unlikely that a cat living in the Sedgefield area is also holding territory around Hexham. On the other hand Morpeth is only 25km in a straight line from Hexham and it is not impossible that these sightings could be of the same individual. The reports around Guisborough are only some 10-15km from those in Sedgefield and Darlington but are separated from them from by the large urban conurbation of Teeside; as stated above it seems more likely that these reports are of animals whose range is contiguous with other reports from the North York Moors.

Studies of big cat home ranges would usually occur in situations where interactions with other individuals of its species go some way towards defining the boundaries of a cat's territory. Whereas a male cat's territory will usually be limited to that of two or three female's territories by the presence of other males, one might suspect that it would roam more widely if it were a lone animal with no other male's territories to avoid or females to stay in the vicinity of. Even so, while a male might travel huge distances in search of a female, it would be unheard of for one to regularly patrol a territory of the area from the Tees up to Morpeth, let alone Wooler.

Making the above assumptions then, including the fundamental one that most of the reports are of the animals they purport to describe, it seems likely that there are or have been several big cats at large in the North East. Given the wide spacing of the reports of lynx and puma, they would almost all have to be separate individuals.

Likewise, even allowing for panthers to be wandering over much larger home ranges than is typically the case, the distribution of the reports suggest that at least five or more individuals have been involved.

If there are those many big cats at large, might we expect to have found more evidence of them? Big cat evidence other than sightings would be in the form of droppings, scratch marks, calls, footprints or remains of prey items. There have been reports of examples of some of the above, but they are exceptional in their occurrence. In fairness though, I am not aware of anyone who is actively trying to track big cats in this region and the first four of these signs might not be recognised or noted except by persons who would be expert enough to recognise them for what they were. Prey items might similarly be missed or assigned to another predator though the two reports that I've received of ungulates up trees are only likely to have been left by panthers. Nevertheless if each animal is killing one or two medium-sized ungulates a week then it would likely raise someone's suspicions. Similarly a tally of around 150 reports over a period of approximately ten years doesn't seem that many, even allowing for the fact that I am not receiving all reports and that some sightings will inevitably go unreported; though it is worth noting that some researchers tracking European lynx may never see their subjects unless the animal is actually trapped.

Assuming they are out there, what are the prospects for them? It seems to me very unlikely that we have more than odd, individual cats scattered across the North East. If they occurred at higher densities then they would surely have been much more noticeable, even given their propensity for remaining hidden. If we were dealing with any other species with numbers that low we would conclude that they were critically endangered and on the point of extinction. One way that this situation would differ from most situations with critically endangered species is that usually the threat of extinction is precipitated by removal of habitat or direct persecution. It could be argued that in Britain there is a vacant niche for big cats and currently no known persecution. Therefore big cats in Britain could take advantage of this and increase in numbers.

Introductions of animals have occurred many times across the world and re-introduction is an increasingly common conservation tool and there is an increasing body of knowledge both practical and theoretical on the likely success. Hetherington (2005) carried out a Population Viability Analysis of the viability of re-introduced populations of Eurasian lynx in Great Britain. He calculated that a founder population of around 12-32 lynx would be required in order for the population to have a 95% chance of persisting ten years after the release. Even assuming that all six reports of lynx are accurate it is unlikely that the animals could contact each other and even then this would be well below the minimum figure thought necessary to successfully establish a population. Furthermore lynx are strongly associated with woodland (Hetherington 2008). Most of the reports of lynx have been in habitats that would be sub-optimal for them therefore the survival chances of those individuals is likely to be significantly reduced. The situation with regards to the persistence of a population of pumas would be broadly similar and it is notable that there has only been a single sighting of these cats in all but one location.

The likely long-term scenario with panthers is not greatly different in my opinion though there are some minor differences. Leopards are noted as being one of the most

adaptable and opportunistic of all cats, utilising a wide range of habitats and taking a diversity of prey species from rodents up to ungulates that are twice their size, (Brakefield 1993). Reports of panthers are much more numerous than for other species and seem to follow a pattern, indicating that we are dealing with the distribution of real animals rather than random cases of mistaken identity. While I have only heard of two reports that would indicate that breeding has occurred, that of a mother and cub at Elwick in 2004, and mother and twin cubs in Hexham in 2008 if true this would mean that the animals are, in fact, travelling further than I've assumed or that the Trimdon Panther and its Tynedale equivalent are at least two animals of different sexes. Nevertheless with what is still a tiny population chance effects such as a single premature mortality or a skewed sex ratio could render any such population effectively extinct.

In my 2007 article for the BCIB Yearbook I finished with the following conclusion:

"I probably can't add a great deal to comments I made a few years ago in an interview for the Northern Echo. From the quality of some of the reports there is good reason to believe that there are, or have been recently, big cats of at least three different species at large in the North East. What seems equally as clear is that these are largely isolated individuals and, even allowing for the occasional breeding event, this is a population that would be described in any other circumstances as critically endangered or even effectively extinct. In my opinion, whether we continue to have big cats in the North East depends either on future surreptitious releases or whether there are viable populations of these animals in other parts of the country from which individuals could disperse into the region; whilst the former is always possible, the latter I think is very unlikely."

Given the increasing number of big cat sightings that have been unearthed by BCIB in recent years I would change the last two words of that paragraph from "very unlikely" to unlikely but otherwise I think the summary still stands. Part of me hopes that I am wrong and that we do end up with a largish carnivore as part of our fauna but only time and more evidence will tell.

Postscript

I'm sat putting the final touches to this book in late October 2010; these things always take longer than you think! I'm trying to decide whether to write up another edition of the Diaries and fit that in before going to press. As usual I've had another series of reports: a puma that was clipped by a car in Northumberland; several sightings of black cats too small to be a panther but big enough to make the observer wary about following them; two sightings by an ex- countryside ranger in the same wood and a large cat print seen by an experienced mammal ecologist. I could go on, which, I suppose, is the point. There doesn't really seem to be a logical place to stop the Diaries except perhaps as I wrote in the first edition; *"until such time as its existence is proven beyond doubt, at which point we'll apply for funding for a project officer."*

That was ten years ago but we're still missing that definitive proof of their existence. Perhaps that proof will arrive next week, that puma must be getting down on its lives or maybe I'll be doing a sequel to this in another ten years time. Either way I hope it makes a walk in the North East countryside even more interesting.

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