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Reed, Matthew and Naylor, Rhiannon and Lewis, Nick (2014) Feral big cats in rural Gloucestershire - reflecting on the possible presence of exotic animals in the English landscape. (Unpublished)

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Abstract:

In the winter of 2012 the discovery of savaged deer carcasses in Gloucestershire, quickly followed by reports of video footage from an area nearby thought to be of a big cat, gained a significant amount of regional and national press coverage. The presence of unexpected creatures in the British countryside is not a new phenomenon; from the Loch Ness Monster to the Beast of Bodmin Moor, reports of the unusual and unexplained have seeped into British culture. This paper investigates the presence of big cats in the county of Gloucestershire through an exploration of the experience and opinions of local people. The study incorporated an online survey, a media analysis and the mapping of big cat sightings in the area. The findings provide an interesting insight into the cultural function of the possible presence of big cats, in that it is the unexplained rather than the proven that captures people's interest. Understandings of nature, and the search for a re-encharnted countryside, outside of human knowledge or control, are brought to the fore.

Highlights

- An exploration of public understandings and constructions of feral big cats in the British countryside
- Findings from an online survey, mapping exercise and media analysis present a complex representation of non-native wild cats
- The mystique behind the possible existence of big cats rather than proof of their existence is the main focus of public interest
- The big cat represents a symbol of wildness within what has become an over-humanised rurality

Feral big cats in rural Gloucestershire - reflecting on the possible presence of exotic animals in the English landscape.

1. Introduction

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Besides the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move
(Ted Hughes – The Thought Fox)

Something is stalking the field margins, copses, lanes and otherwise dark corners of rural England; something thought to be feline, stealthy and non-native. Often known after its first contemporary sighting as the 'Beast of Bodmin', but increasingly as the wild cats or big cats of rural England, these creatures stalk the discussion forums of local newspapers, Internet sites, and regional television as well as, according to some observers, 'wild' England. The very existence of these animals is the subject of discussion and controversy, held by some as the post-pub folklore of the over-imaginative or over-indulged and by others the common sense knowledge of a new genus or genera of predators in the English countryside. These large cats exist in the zone of never quite proven, never disproven, and lodged in the interface of probability and possibility.

This paper reports on a project that sought to investigate the existence of these 'big cats' in the county of Gloucestershire in the winter of 2012, during a rash of publicity about sightings in the media. Rather than the aims of cryptozoologists to capture and prove the physical existence of the animals, the project sought only to record the reported experiences and opinions about the 'big cats', as well as the media coverage around them. Our purpose was not to prove or disprove but to bring some of the tools of critical scholarship to bear on a matter of interest to a local public, entering into a dialogue of mutual trust - of not to ridicule or to be ridiculed - but to openly enquire. This paper reports on the results of an on-line survey locally promoted within Gloucestershire, the mapping of sightings of 'big cats' reported to the county Police

force and an analysis of the local media coverage. The findings of these enquiries were in turn placed on an open blog for public comment and discussion.

That something fearsome and worrying stalks the English countryside is embedded in popular culture, most famously in Conan-Doyle's tale of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' a narrative re-worked in the latest incarnation of 'Sherlock' on the BBC in March 2012. The red-eyed monstrous 'creature' stalks the barren moors of the far south west of England, an area where all native predators larger than the fox have been exterminated. In Conan-Doyle's tale, and the recent re-working by writers such as Mark Gatiss, the hound is the product of human interventions into nature - creating a monster. Since the 1980s those same moors have been stalked by a 'beast', which according to witnesses is a large cat, possibly a puma, along with some physical evidence in the form of pug marks, torn carcasses and grainy photographs. Since that time the sightings of cats have multiplied as each district or region reports their own version, such as the 'tiger' of the fens or a lynx shot in East Anglia, contemporary British rurality is populated by sightings of a possible big cat.

Unlike the monsters of fiction these cats are often said to be ex-pets, released from private zoos during the 1970s in response to a change in the law (The Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976) by caring owners who turned them loose rather than have them destroyed¹. In countryside with verdant cover, a ready supply of game animals and carrion, observed by a largely unarmed population of humans, this popular ecological theory argues that these animals have created a small but viable population. This theory gained credence during the 1990s with the accidental re-introduction of the wild boar, leading to three populations of boar in England and the 'Wild Boar Action Plan' in 2008 (Natural England, no date), with their protection under the Wild Mammals Protection Act (1996). In the view of Natural England, these populations were established through accidental releases during the period 2004-7, although official confirmation of a breeding population of wild boar was in 1998 (British Wild

¹ An account given credibility by at least one of the ex-owners admitting publicly to releasing some these animals into upland areas (REF).

Boar, 2013)². Posing the question, if boar could return after 700 years why not adaptable top predators?

The English countryside is a closely managed ecosystem, with the treatment of animals particularly predators and exotics, or those that combine both attributes, particularly contentious. Hunting the fox, the largest residual predator, has been a topic of considerable public and scholarly discussion and remains highly contentious (see for example Anderson, 2006; Milbourne, 2003), as is the management of the largest native omnivore, the badger (Wallwork and Dixon, 2004; Enticott, 2001). At the same time, exotics as diverse such as mink, ruddy duck and muntjac deer have met with either extermination programmes or hunting that conservationists have welcomed (Loveridge, Reynolds and Milber-Gulland, 2006; White et al., 2003). Into this complex intertwining of conflicting narratives of the role of the rural, the status of natives and exotics, predators and prey steps the possibility of a new apex predator/s. It invites us to re-imagine the rural as a place of danger and dynamism and/or a zone into which people project their fears and hopes. This paper begins by discussing the literature around big cats, through the 'discipline' of cryptozoology and other treatments of the topic by scholars. It then moves to discuss our methods, of how the data was collected and analysed before discussing the results of that analysis.

2. Cryptozoology and the tracking of big cats

The short-flowering discipline of cryptozoology provides a useful nomenclature for separating through the range of possible animals. In his book on the subject Arment (2004:9) provides a useful two-fold definition of a cryptic:

These mystery animals are cryptids, or hidden animals.... but a cryptid is an ethnoknown animal which may represent a new species or a species previously considered extinct

To clarify this further, he discusses the ecological dynamics that might allow 'mysterious felines' to become cryptids citing melanistic leopard (black panthers) in

² For nearly 70 years there was a population of Tasmanian Wallabies living in the moors of Staffordshire
http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/nature_studies/the-decline-and-fall-of-the-peak-district-wallabies-8503546.html

North America, New Zealand and Hawaii, as well as cougars in Australia, and a range of cats in the UK. It would appear that although Arment argues he is principally interested in biological investigation his subtext is that of folk knowledge of not just unknown species, but also of exotic introductions that become hidden animals. He is able to dismiss 'exotic hoofstock' - feral sheep, deer and ungulates - to focus on the predators. In this he suggests that cryptozoology is less interested in the investigation of species unknown to science but the pursuit of more charismatic carnivorous candidates.

Karl Shuker's (1989) 'Mystery Cats of the World' provides a guide to the unidentified felines across the planet. He locates the earliest sightings of 'big cats' in England to the fifteenth century, with the 'Girt Dog' (actually a cat) and William Cobbett in his 'Rural Rides' reporting tales of mysterious black cats. Shuker's history really starts in the twentieth century with a compendium of sightings of different cats across the UK with 'Shooter Hill Cheetahs' and 'Surrey Pumas' in the 1960s and into the 1970s pre-dating the Beasts of the west-country moors in the 1980s. The cats on Exmoor were as Shuker argues, 'as far as the media were concerned the Exmoor Beast appeared to have sprung into existence Athena-style – fully formed and fully armed' (Shuker, 1989: 45), and certainly defined the beginning of contemporary big cat reporting. Such sightings were certainly not completely dismissed by the authorities and during the summer of 1983 the Royal Marines surveyed them looking to capture the beast. The Marines spotted cat like creatures but offered, along with the Police, evidence of dogs not of the cats that most of the local observers reported (Fairley, Welfare and Clarke, 1987).

While many writers have focused on the evidence of the existence of big cats, the subject that captures so many people's fascination has been viewed by some academics as representing an interesting shift in the way that nature is viewed in public fora. For example, Buller (2004) cites Alien Big Cats (ABCs) along with re-introduction of previously exterminated species and the protection of rare breeds, as illustrations of the shifting relationships between animal species, the countryside and the societal construction of nature. While Buller (2004:136) recognizes the potential authenticity of some sightings "backed up, on occasion by footprint and other evidence", he argues that what is important is the popular discussion of their presence

rather than the scientific evidence that may signal their existence. He continues to explain that big cats signal a societal unease tempered by fascination:

The big cats might be construed as a willingness to believe in the potency of the wild, even within our tamed countryside (Buller, 2004:136).

Buller continues to argue that his examples of the changing role of animalia in the countryside confirm Latour's and Whatmore's contention that nature is increasingly no longer the 'other' in politics but the wild is increasing on the 'inside'.

The way that non-native creatures such as big cats are constructed and understood by the public provides an interesting lens through which to explore the changing relationship between the public and nature. In his book 'Ecology of Fear', Davis (1999) discusses the relationship between urban populations and wild cats, as well as their mythological analogues. He investigates the infrequent but sometimes deadly encounters between cougars and 'slow, soft animals in spandex' (Davis 1999: 249) speculating that despite most mountain lions actively seeking to avoid humans, a sub-population in southern California had started to predate on humans. As he notes, despite extermination programmes by the State, mountain lions remained largely unknown to ecological science and their behaviours poorly understood. Later he argues that 'appearance' in Los Angeles of El Chupacabra, a vampire from Puerto Rico that preys on livestock is a manifestation of urban fears:

The Otherness of wild animals is the gestalt which we are constantly refashioning in the image of our own urban confusion and alienation (Davis, 1999: 267).

Known animals are anthropomorphised into 'characters' - 'thieves' or 'gang' members. Whilst we turn our fears of the human world back into nature as beasts - allegorical fauna - including animals as social symbols, for example the dog as fidelity, but also in the form of monsters. Davis (1999) tracks how mountain lions were equated with violent street criminals, packs of coyotes with gangs and El Chupacabra became freighted with political symbolism, humour and the politics of migration. These animal encounters speak of urbanisms uneasy relationship with the wild; the changing predation patterns of the mountain lions and particularly the arrival of the cryptid, El Chupacabra, can be seen as a 'telluric symbol of the power of the countryside over the city' (Davis, 1999: 268). Although evidence of El Chupacabra remains scarce, recently a mountain lion has found to be resident in the park

surrounding the ‘Hollywood’ sign, demonstrating the interweaving of urbanism and predators in California.

The British environmentalist, George Monbiot, has no doubts that big cats do not exist in the UK:

In other words, despite thousands of days cryptozoologists have spent hunting the Beast, despite the concentrated efforts of the police, the Royal Marines and government scientists, there is none [physical evidence].(location 890)

Monbiot mocks a big cat investigator who caught himself in his own big cat trap for two days, before he moves to concluded that these reports by ‘reputable people are imaginary’ (loc 950) and that:

There is no discussion of phenomenon in the scientific literature: I cannot find a single journal article on big cat sightings. None of the psychologists I have contacted has been able to direct me to anyone studying it. (loc 978).

Having consigned the study of the phenomena to the interest of psychology he continues to speculate that the sightings reflect a repressed desire, mixed with ‘genetic memories’:

Perhaps they awaken old genetic memories of conflict and survival, memories which must incorporate encounters – possibly the most challenging our ancestors faced – with large predatory cats. They hint at an unexpressed wish for wilder and fiercer than those we now lead. Our desires start back at us, yellow-eyed and snarling, from the thickets of the mind. (loc 1026)

Unfortunately for those studying genomics Monbiot provides not evidence or suggestion as to the mechanism for these memories but echoes Davis’s account of El Chupacabra that the big cats are symptoms of the repression our wilder selves.

Had Monbiot asked scholars of other disciplines he would have found a series of papers in the literature of ecology, archaeology and anthropology discussing the potential and possibilities of ABCs. The recent discovery of a Canadian Lynx in the collection of a museum in Bristol reported by an article in the journal ‘Historical Biology’ and widely covered in the mass media show that this is not a new phenomenon. The specimen had been shot and mounted in 1903, after at least a period of living in the countryside of south Devon, the paper concludes:

Lynxes (and other felids) can undoubtedly survive in the British countryside without problem. This assertion is demonstrated not only by the lynx, puma, leopard cat and

jungle cat specimens discussed here, but also by the survival in the wild of a Clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) that escaped from Howlett's Zoo in 1975 and then survived for 9 months until shot by a farmer (Blake et al., 2013).

Escapees such as these do not support the presence of a breeding population but rather the possibilities available to such renegades. The second paper concerning physical evidence in the literature concerns tooth pit analysis undertaken by Coard on five carcasses recovered from Cambrian Mountains of Wales (Coard 2007). Coard's purpose is not to prove the presence of ABCs but the veracity and utility of tooth pit analysis but she concludes:

In the absence of any other independent or verifiable data, the individual tooth pit dimensions, tooth cusp distancing and patterning all strongly support the involvement of a medium-sized felid in the modification of four of these study carcasses. (Coard 2007: 1683)

Coard describes the sample size as 'pitifully small' but concludes that the pattern of marks left by the teeth fall more in the range of the 'puma and leopard than the wolf' p1683. Expressed with caution, Coard raises the possibility that there is some physical evidence of the presence of ABCS in the Welsh mountains.

The discussion of re-wilding in several ecology and conservation journals has fostered a debate about the presence of ABCs in the UK, and the possibilities that it might present.

This paper seeks to further explore the role of cryptids, in this case big cats, in the ways that we understand and portray the rural. The methodology adopted is outlined in the following section.

3. Methodology

Three distinct but complementary approaches were used to further our understanding of big cat sightings in England. First, we presented the public with an opportunity to report both their experiences of seeing big cats and/or their opinions on the phenomena. Second, we plotted the sightings reported to us, along with those from a Freedom of Information request and third, we conducted an analysis of the media coverage of these sightings. All of these sources of information were reported back

through a blog. The research was mainly focused on the county of Gloucestershire, where big cat sightings had recently been reported in the media, although individuals outside of the county were not prevented from taking part.

The tool used for reporting sightings and capturing opinions was through an on-line survey, which was open to all who were motivated to complete it. A controlled sample was not possible but we encouraged participation through a press release to local newspapers, leaving the link on on-line discussion forums and through appearances on local radio shows (RF and MR). This promotion encouraged people to report opinions and encounters with the premise that we took no stance on the existence of the big cats. In the period that the survey was open 210 useable responses were collected. A total of 75 respondents provided details of experiences with the phenomena. A wide range of experiences were detailed from direct encounters at close-range to fleeting glimpses in numerous scenarios, observations of potential physical evidence to inexplicable dramatic behavioural changes in accompanying dogs. The experiences collated through the online survey were further classified into 'sightings' (where the respondent gave details of an actual sighting) and 'description' (where the respondent gave details of an experience or similar but did not refer to an actual sighting). In many cases the experiences detailed an exact location of the incident. This facilitated accurate location on the interactive map. Where a more general location was provided – such as 'Cheltenham', location pins were sited in the centre of the relevant settlement. With the experiences that provided no location details, pins are sited on the location of the CCRI office from which the research was conducted¹.

To further enhance these details, submission of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request was planned. Upon investigation, it became apparent that two previous requests had been submitted to Gloucestershire Constabulary in 2009 and 2011. Rather than repeat a request, given that one was comparatively recent, it was decided to utilise information already available, and incorporate them into the interactive map. Again, where possible these were located as accurately as possible, given the available details. The date the report was lodged and incident number is provided in the respective map marker.

To provide further context to the sightings and opinions gained through the first two research approaches, local media articles were collected from the online database Lexis Library. The two most widely circulated regional newspapers in Gloucestershire, the Gloucestershire Echo and the Gloucestershire Citizen were selected for the analysis. These have a joint circulation of just over 42,300. The database was searched using the term 'big cat'. 145 press articles were found, with the earliest dating from May 1998. The cut-off date for the analysis was the 31st March 2012 when the analysis was conducted. The press articles were downloaded and manually coded based on key themes emerging from the data. These including for example 'experience', 'natural', 'unnatural' and 'proof'. The coding of the data went through a number of iterations until a clear set of key themes were established. The results from the three approaches are presented in the following section.

4. Findings

It is clear from the findings from the data collected through the three research approaches that the presence of big cats in the countryside remains contested. While, the majority of respondents to the survey (59%) were convinced of their presence, 23% were certain that they do not exist and 18% remain uncertain. Although it could be anticipated that those who believe that they have seen a cat would be more likely to participate, it is interesting that a significant group of other people felt motivated sufficiently to want to record their scepticism. Of those who were certain that there are no big cats (48 respondents), their main reason for their position is a lack of scientific evidence (75%), that they have not seen it themselves (6%) and because of the media coverage of the issue (4%). One sceptical respondent highlighted the lack of physical evidence and of observations of young:

We have never found a dead one in all the years they have been 'in the area', also never seen a cub if they are here then they would be reproducing

Of those who believed in the presence of big cats in the area (124 respondents), just under a third reported seeing a cat themselves, with nearly 10% having seen a big cat outside of the locality - ranging from neighbouring counties through to France. Reports of sightings from others were also influential (12.9%) as well as coverage in

the media (27.5%). This foregrounds the importance of personal experience, either directly or reported - either in person or via the media.

All respondents were asked what sort of evidence would be persuasive of the presence of wild cats; they were allowed to make multiple selections. Over half of respondents favoured clear physical evidence such as high quality video footage, DNA or footprints whilst fewer people felt that they would be convinced by sightings either by a large group (32%) or even themselves (21%). With regards to how such creatures might be treated, most favoured legal protection (34%) or just ignoring them (32%), with 17% favouring the creation of a sanctuary. Only 2.4% believe that they should be exterminated on grounds of safety. One respondent suggested that they should be returned to their place of origin, while others saw them as adopted fauna:

I think we should ignore them as they have obviously been living quite happily for ages untroubled, so continue to let them.

To further understand the way in which the possible presence of big cats may influence people's view of the countryside, we posed hypothetical questions as how the wild cats might influence the use of rural areas. If the presence of a wild cat was deemed only possible, 61% of respondents would be happy to visit an area, while just over one third would be more careful but still visit, with only 3% avoiding the locale completely. In the event of the presence of a wild cat being confirmed, respondents would become more cautious but would continue to visit with 49% remaining unconcerned, 43% visiting but being more careful and those not visiting rising to 6%.

These descriptive statistics provide a picture of a benign view of the wild cats, where even those who believe in them do not consider them to be a threat to either people or the ecology of the area. Even if their presence were confirmed most would continue to use and visit the countryside as before, with only a small group fearful of the creatures. Scepticism could be defused by a high quality video footage or physical trace of the creature.

The sightings reported through the survey were mapped alongside police reports. The map of the sightings provides an interesting counterpoint to the question of the rurality of big cat sightings. Our interactive map (which can be viewed at [online²](#))

distinguishes between sightings reported to the Police and those reported through the online survey. It is clear from these reported sightings that whilst the majority of encounters are in rural areas big cats are being seen in urban settings, ranging from small villages through to the urban centres of Gloucester and Cheltenham. They also reflect the degree to which local state bodies recognised the presence of the big cats. For example, the wildlife and environmental crime officer of the county's constabulary deems the sightings as significant:

If you suspect you've seen a big cat you should jot down the details and contact the police. We will take sightings seriously and will investigate.

²<http://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?msid=205990745013335377099.0004bbbdc5c6d86a0c53d&msa=0&ie=UTF8&t=h&ll=51.844263,-2.127228&spn=0.702495,1.234589&source=embed>

The interactive map is therefore comprised of three different markers:

- Blue pins – Sighting
- Red pins – Description
- Yellow pin – Reported to police

The interactive map was posted in a dedicated blog alongside the findings from the online survey and a discussion forum was provided to provide an opportunity for the public to engage further with the research and feedback on the findings. Although a significant number of the public had been keen to share their experiences or report their scepticism through the survey, engagement with the findings was minimal.

The data collected through the Freedom of Information request make clear that the authorities take potential big cat sightings seriously. The Forestry Commission revealed in 2009 that its rangers had reported spotting big cats twice whilst undertaking deer surveys using night vision equipment in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. One of those working for the Commission reported that: 'I couldn't tell you how big they were or what they were. They were just large, full cats'. Within the genre of the media reporting (see below), he noted that: 'We weren't scared, but more interested, excited and surprised.' This adds to the uncertain status of the big cats, as state agencies take reports of their presence seriously and provide credible witnesses, but this is not the proof that many seek.

Media analysis

We collected 145 press articles from the local newspapers through the period of May 1998 to March 2012 and systematically analysed these reports for emergent themes. Often in these reports the line between the words of the reporter and those of the subject of the report are blurred, as the reports become a blend of knowing playfulness and earnestness. The themes start with the use of ‘dramatic language’ that informs the use of ‘peril’ both as a narrative device but also a way of framing debate around the sightings. This leads to the reports of the eyewitnesses, some of whom responded with awe to their encounter and others with fear. The status of the cats is the next theme as they cross the cultural borders of town and country that develops into a discussion of whether these animals are now ‘native’ fauna or interlopers. These reports are not met with universal acceptance, and what can be viewed as proof is the next theme, and how that turns to grisly mockery.

The first theme is the dramatic language used to describe the animals in the encounter, which are often a beast such as in the “Beast of Dean” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 17/05/2000) and the “Beast of Birdlip” (Gloucestershire Echo, 23/10/1998) so locating the animal in the local landscape. It is often “stalking” (The Gloucestershire Citizen 06/03/2012), or “prowling menacingly” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/02/2012) watching with its “green eyes” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 08/03/2012). These animals make a range of distinctive sounds one person reported, “it’s stalked me – I heard it growling” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 08/02/2012), others heard an improbable, “puma-like roar at a deer kill site” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 30/01/2012) as the sounds become associated with a possible species - “big, snarling, panther-like creature” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 22/04/2011). At times they are a, “mystery animal” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 18/01/2012) or “an amazing creature” (Gloucestershire Echo, 15/02/2012) but more often a “vicious wildcat” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 29/02/2008) or more decorously “an elusive cat stalking around the Cotswolds” (Gloucestershire Echo 19/09/2006).

After the frisson of description often follows an exaggeration emphasizing peril: “A terrified dog walker fled for his life after a close encounter with what he expected was

a puma” (The Gloucestershire Citizen 06/03/2012) or an equally un/fortunate driver, “A motorist has a lucky escape when a large black cat shot across the path of his car” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 18/06/2008). This sense of peril is heightened by unattributed warnings “calls for police to patrol the streets to keep people safe” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/02/2012) or that these animals are a “danger to pets and children” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/02/2012).

The peril and threat diverges in the next theme, as witnesses report their experience of their close encounters with the felines. One group clearly draw from wildlife TV and reverence for nature, combined with British sang-froid - “I felt like I could have opened the window and stroked it” (The Gloucestershire Citizen 05/06/2010). Others stated “the most amazing sight...we looked at each other for a minute” (Gloucestershire Echo 21/10/2010) that they were “amazed and awestruck” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 18/10/2010) or “I wasn’t scared, I was in awe” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/02/2009) and that they felt that the animals were - “no threat to me whatsoever” (The Citizen, 18/10/2010). It seems that the animals reciprocated in these accounts, “It just sauntered across the road in front of us and was completely unafraid” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 23/03/2000). For these witnesses “it was absolutely beautiful, a fantastic sight” (Gloucestershire Echo, 22/02/2000) in which their wonder at nature was re-affirmed. 0

A second group found the experience far more stressful, “I wanted to run away” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 29/02/2008), others did, “we just ran” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 04/10/2007) whilst others went even further “I just ran and ran until I got home. I was absolutely terrified. It will give me nightmares for weeks to come” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 18/09/2000). Most were not concerned for themselves but others who might be more vulnerable, “hopefully they would not attack people but if it is small children then you just don’t know” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 02/11/2006), an idea that recurs, “It frightened him to death...if it had been a child, it might have gone for him” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 10/02/2007). These animals are watching; “They’re very cunning and lithe creatures which could be anywhere near us day and night as the habitat gives them all the food and cover they need” (Gloucestershire Echo 21/10/2010) and foraging for food, “Preying on pets and foxes” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 10/02/2007) and this has led people to fear not

only for public order but for the officers of the law: “He is concerned about police safety and believes future life-threatening attacks are inevitable” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/12/2003).

The next theme is the juxtaposition of the wild in the urban, as these animals are seen as incongruous interlopers across cultural borders, most alarmingly for Marjorie P who “reported a lynx had tried to get through her cat flap” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 30/08/2002). Others had even closer encounters, “He felt something brush against him. A few moments later, the security light came on nearer the main house. By its light, he watched a big black cat walk across the lawn” (Gloucestershire Echo, 03/06/2010). These creatures were seen in urban areas, “stalking the streets of Bourton-on-the-Water” (Gloucestershire Echo 22/05/2006) or car parks “I saw an animal in the car park...I looked again and realised it wasn’t a fox” (Gloucestershire Echo, 03/05/2006), even in people’s gardens - “It then went across the gravel where our cars are parked and then jumped over the garden gate” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 26/06/1999) and “she saw a big black cat on top of the roof. The creature fled across the top of her shed and disappeared” (Gloucestershire Echo, 06/10/2000). Their presence in urban areas was often reported as ‘fact’, “These cats do enter urban areas and are often seen in rural towns and villages” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 21/08/2008) possible because of an earlier trend, “sightings could soon be more common as the animals become suburbanised” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 20/12/2000). This theme tends not to be surprised at the presence of wild cats but instead of their presence in urban areas.

This is reflected in the penultimate theme whereby these cats are viewed as adopted fauna, “Soon these cats will have to be accepted and classified as part of our fauna” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 21/08/2008). People need not be alarmed as “the animals seen in the UK are not huge 200lb beasts like those in Africa but smaller animals that have ‘bred-down’ to suit their environment” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 2/02/2004), even using the language of ecology, “These cats have found a niche among our native wildlife into which they have now immersed themselves” (Gloucestershire Echo, 03/06/2010). This normalization extends to the nativeness and living conditions of the creatures, “They are living comfortably in our countryside, their preferred prey being deer, of which we have plenty, the diminutive Muntjac and

larger Row being ideal for their needs” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 21/08/2008) and “Most wild cat sightings are attributed to panthers, with reports also of their smaller cousin the lynx, once native to this country” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 06/01/2009). It is both a source of pride, “Now the animal is breeding and has become the British Big Cat” (Gloucestershire Echo, 26/08/2010) and perhaps an ornamentation to our wildlife “Part of our natural wildlife, not a fantasy but a feature” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 08/09/2010).

Nagging at this normalization is again the absence of proof, an area of debate and potentially more drama. Sheep and deer seem to offer the most grisly evidence, with - “savaged carcass” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 23/01/2012), a “deer’s mutilated body” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 30/01/2012), “stripped skeletons of four sheep” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 18/02/2000) or more anatomically specific “savaged leg of a deer” (23/01/2012) or “severed head of a deer” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 24/02/2000) referenced as proof. Beyond this is too much for the sensitive: “Gruesome discovery of a wild deer ripped in half...Mr Mansfield, a graphic designer, supplied vivid pictures of the grizzly carcass but The Citizen deemed them too upsetting to print” (The Gloucestershire Citizen 22/10/2008). This focus on the corporeal stretches to the signs of the presence of these cats, such as “unusually large footprint” (Gloucestershire Echo, 10/02/2012) linking to practical suggestions offered by “International gorilla expert Ian Redmond” who advised “walkers take a plastic bag with them to help gather suspected big cat droppings, and cotton buds to gather DNA evidence from possible kill sites” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 03/02/2012). Many people have seen these animals, “In the past seven years, 61 concerned callers alerted police to big cat sightings” (Gloucestershire Echo, 15/02/2012), and “Big cat expert noted that between 40 and 50 sightings were reported to him each year” (Gloucestershire Echo, 10/02/2012) but physical evidence is so far scant “Tests for DNA on two deer carcasses proved negative” (Gloucestershire Echo 24/02/2012).

This provides ample space for those who remain sceptical as to the presence of these cats, some quantify their dis-belief “We have 100,000 deer and foxes, and 50,000 badgers killed on our roads yet no one has found a puma” (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 08/02/2012). Others point to the link between publicity and the cats, “It was

a very brief sighting but it didn't behave like a dog...The week before she made the sighting she met two national newspaper reporters in the woods. Hunting for the black cat which is rapidly turning from myth to reality" (The Gloucestershire Citizen, 23/01/2012). Some contributors want to believe, but just cannot find the proof: "I'd like to know if it was a big cat but no one comes up with definitive pictures. It's a bit like the Loch Ness monster" (Gloucestershire Echo, 22/05/2006). Whilst the most sceptical turn to mockery, such as: "Mary and Jim believed a big cat had decapitated their tabby [pet cat] Tigger" (Gloucestershire Echo, 11/05/2005).

5. Discussion

Over a period of more than ten years the local newspapers have developed a complex set of narratives about the presence of big cats, with some reports clearly playing up the gruesomeness and fearfulness of a big cat whilst others were more 'factual' in tone. It is clear in these articles that the wild/big/alien/British cats have become freighted with meanings that are specifically locally – references to particular villages, locales and people, through to larger themes of nationality, rurality and social order that need to be enacted and performed locally. Often viewed as 'fillers' for newspapers with a slow news day, this analysis demonstrates that they are much more, providing a parallel forum for discussions about the locality – simultaneously exotic and threatening, familiar and wonderful. The sighting of an 'Essex Lion' in the summer of 2012 fell into much of the form of this discussion, with jokes competing with faux outrage about the waste of public money investigating the lion (BBC Essex News, 28/08/2012). This was followed by an attempt to take the matter seriously, with suggestion that a feral population of domesticated cats may have grown in size under evolutionary selection pressures³.

The putative presence of these animals does raise significant practical and philosophical questions in a countryside that is very carefully managed and held to be 'known'. An increasing band of investigators is appearing, undertaking forms of 'popular' ecology – collecting scat samples, recordings of growls or roars, skeletal remains, videos and photographs to prove the existence of these animals. The FOI

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-19411647>

requests underpinning the interactive map that we present in this paper and the statement from the Forestry Commission poses the question of who defines what species are resident in the UK and what counts as evidence. As an example of this process is the Welsh Pine Marten, which has been 're-discovered' in Wales after a carcass was found on a roadside 40 years after the last example was found (BBC News Wales, 2/05/2012). During the interregnum 300 sightings were reported, extensive surveys for scat held, camera traps set up and baited hair tubes, the only confirmed scat was found in 2007 until the body was recovered in 2012. This suggests that there needs to be an interface between the popular ecology of those searching for the big cats and those who record species in the wild places of the UK, that there may be a role for a form of 'citizen science' beyond the conservative norms of wildlife conservation.

As Buller (2004) notes above, the suggestion of the presence of big cats is a willingness to believe in the potency of the wild in an English context, which may cause a reconsideration of the role of other species in the countryside. The hunting of foxes would be re-contextualized if rather than the apex predator it was the indigenous wild dog living alongside the considerably larger and better camouflaged exotic. Conservation policy has in recent years focused on exterminating species that pose risks of cross-breeding with native species, hence the cull of the ruddy duck. Whilst species that do not represent the same threat are left to be managed as pests or protected, such as muntjac deer and North American crayfish the former and wild boar the latter, programmes to re-introduce once native species as part of re-wilding, such as the great bustard on Salisbury plain, wolves in Scotland or beavers in Hampshire would appear to be less intrusive in the context of the elusive exotic felines (Navarro and Pereira 2012). Even if the cats are not proven they can serve as a way of discussing the parameters of conservation and how 'wild' the public appetite for wildlife might be.

In the telluric imaginings cited by Davis (1999) in the case of vampire goat killing monsters, the willingness to believe in big cats hints at the desire for an acknowledgement of the sublimity of nature, particularly in the hearth of the industrial revolution. That in a society surveilled by CCTV, overflowed by satellites, surveyed by ecologists and in a land dwelt on by tens of millions of people, an element of nature remains unknown. Alongside those who subscribe to the physical

presence of unknown felids are those who argue for these beasts being remnants of an archaic population unrecognised by human history but stemming back to pre-history, intertwined with these beliefs are those who see the cats as spiritual reflections of the lost fauna of England. Pointing to another mystic tradition of an Albion protected and haunted by authigenic spirits both human and animal (McKay, 1996). Whilst Davis (1999) sees this as a problem of urbanism, it could equally be a facet of the process of dis and re enchantment with the English countryside (Ritzer, 2004).. Similarly, others discuss the ‘containment’ and ‘bringing in’ of the wild in animal-inclusive social models (see for example Anderson, 1997) at a time when many seek out ‘wild nature’ (Balmford et al., 2005) as a ‘refuge’ from our human selves (Cronon, 1995). The big cats suggest the possibility of ways of re-enchanting the English countryside beyond the rationalised structures of conservation management.

6. Conclusions

The poet Ted Hughes chose to live in rural west Devon, as he claimed that the area was ‘un-exorcised’, that it harboured a wildness unknown in other areas suggesting the possibility that contemporary rural England might yet harbour some things untamed. Big cats, or the possibility of such cats in the English countryside injects the possibility of that wildness into the neat taxonomy of its flora and fauna. Their unknownness, the inability of ruling out their existence, adds vigour to the discussions, as witnessed by the attention to the search in our research but dis-interest in the results, for many the possibility is more intriguing than any degree of knowledge. Simultaneously this does not imply that these creatures do not exist, rather something of the structure of peoples’ interest in their existence. Unlike the badger, fox, deer or avian species these animals have no history, other than the one being very publicly constructed in the present, therefore they represent a zone of possibility and as such intrigue. Unlike the ecological imaginings of the re-wilders this is not a restitution of an ecosystem to its post-glacial purity but potentially the wilding of landscape of a globalised, hybrid agro-ecosystem with all its attendant accident and contingency.

Unlike the common critiques of cryptid sightings, such as Bigfoot, the Lochness Monster or El Chupacabra, these creatures have been seen by groups of people, at

different times of day and by various categories of witness. The sightings are diffuse in form; with some certain that they have seen a particular feline and others uncertain as to what they have seen, but the consistent theme is that of a large feline animal. Again, we are left with the residual contingency of the possibility of their existence. We cannot yet attribute a symbolic value to these animals; only to the sightings themselves and these seem to express a difference between the rural and urban, town and country. Certainly sightings in urban areas conjure images of an unwanted invasion into the human domain, while those in rural areas appear more sought after and intriguing. They suggest a lingering attachment to the possibility of the wild in the British rural, of something that remains unknown, marginal and exotic. In this these are strikingly novel claims about contemporary English rurality, that in its copse and field corners at dusk or dawn it harbours the possibility of the unknown, a radical contingency that is not recognised in the dominant discourses of rural conservatism and conservation. A warning that in these 'post' times that if you go down to the woods today - you better be prepared for the possibility of a big surprise.

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