

Big cat investigation launched after deer deaths

Two mangled deer carcasses found in Gloucestershire are being tested for feline DNA. Are wild panthers, pumas and leopards really on the prowl in peaceful Britain?



SCIENCE
GEOGRAPHY

In the darkness of winter, it is easy to imagine terrifying things lurking in the shadows. But what if there really are wild beasts stalking Britain's countryside?

Ramblers recently found the remains of a roe deer in Woodchester, Gloucestershire that had been picked clean by a large predator. Then, a dog walker came across another roe deer a few miles away that had been brutally savaged. When the dog walker returned with her camera, the deer had been stripped to the spine, and all the internal organs were missing.

What could have done this? A fox would be too small, and dogs are messy eaters. The signs – neatness, fur plucked, neck broken, nose removed – pointed to only one culprit: a big cat.

There have been whispered rumours of huge felines prowling the British Isles for decades; stories that at first were dis-



Could black panthers like this one be roaming the wilds of Britain? Evidence is growing © Getty Images

missed as nothing more than tall tales. But in remote areas like Dartmoor, The Forest of Dean and the Scottish Highlands, evidence has been mounting. Footprints, droppings, mauled wildlife and livestock have been found, and a number of sightings are reported each year. Most experts now agree; there are large, predatory cats living wild in Britain.

Most people think that these creatures are feral pumas or panthers. One theory is that, after the laws on exotic pets were toughened up in 1976, many pet big cats were released into the wild by their owners. Some, it appears may have survived and even bred in the wild.

But there is an even bolder view. Some fringe naturalists believe these cats to be a native, British species, currently unknown to science. Big cat tracker Di Francis, for example, links the recent spate of sightings to ancient legends of

black dogs haunting lonely places. As ordinary people became more aware of exotic animals in recent times, they began to correctly identify these strange creatures as huge, black cats.

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE...

Would it be a good thing if huge predators were prowling the moors? Some find the idea alarming. Farmers don't want leopards eating their livestock. No parent likes the thought of panthers in the park. Wild and remote places are frightening enough already, some feel, without the addition of animals that want to eat you.

But others think it would be exciting to find such fierce predators in the British countryside. The British Isles are pretty tame most of the time with mild weather and placid, boring wildlife. The odd leopard, say enthusiasts, could add some much needed spice.

Q & A

Q Should I really be worried about big cats?

A Potentially. In parts of the world where humans are known to coexist with big cats, such as the Sundarbans in India, attacks on people do happen. However, Frank Tunbridge, an expert on Britain's big cats, argues their shyness means that people have 'nothing to fear'.

Q Will we be able to find out what kind of cats are out there?

A Yes. Big cat hunters are using wildlife cameras in an attempt to get photographic proof, whilst scientists from Warwick University have been asked to examine the deer carcasses by the National Trust.

Q What are the scientists going to do?

A When animals feed, they leave behind traces of their saliva and cheek cells, both

of which contain DNA. As the corpses were fresh, there is a good chance that these DNA traces will not have been contaminated.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Life without danger is dull.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?