

The WOODCHESTER *Word*

Special News Feature - 09 January 2011

Big Cat in Woodchester?

A deer killed in Woodchester early on Wednesday has been confirmed by experts as 'almost certainly' the victim of a big cat. The carcass was seen by a number of local people at a spot which is on a popular route for dog walkers. A local resident noticed particular features on the deer which suggested it had been killed by a large predator, and called in some expert help.

Big cat expert Frank Tunbridge was emailed photos of the carcass and photos of evidence at the site were also sent to Rick Minter, a well-published big cat expert. He passed them on to leopard and puma kill experts in South Africa for additional verification. "The South African leopard expert feels they are big cat, having looked at the photos" was his initial feedback. "Further investigations and trail cameras are worthwhile."

Frank Tunbridge visited the site on Wednesday afternoon on National Trust land at Boundary Court Farm. He confirmed that it was "very likely" to be a big cat kill. A number of trail cameras were set up in the hope of getting pictures of the cat returning to feed at the site.

Because of the injuries to the neck caused in killing the deer, and the way the carcass had been consumed, with 'high value' organs being devoured first, it was thought likely that the deer had been brought down and eaten by a large predator. Extensive 'plucking' of the carcass (where hair is removed prior to the flesh being eaten), along with claw and teeth impressions, were also thought to be highly indicative of big cat activity.

On Friday a team of experts visited the kill site including Rick Minter and Dr Robin Allaby, Associate Professor at the School of Life Sciences at the University of Warwick, who was contacted by the National Trust. They examined evidence around the kill, and collected samples for DNA testing. Plaster casts of large paw prints around the kill site have been made and are being sent to various experts for further identification. After his visit to the site, Rick said that the carcass and scene "ticks all the boxes for a big cat kill".

The Woodchester kill is now known to be one of three in the local area last week. A deer was killed near Painswick on Tuesday and another near Dursley last Sunday, at a location where a large black cat has been seen by local residents in recent months. The team visited the Dursley site to take samples and confirmed that this was also a big cat kill.

The results of the DNA analysis from both sites will take some weeks to be completed, but are eagerly awaited as they may



The carcass of the young roe deer killed by a big cat



Experts visit the kill site on Friday



Collecting DNA samples and evidence

provide definitive proof not only of a big cat in the area, but exactly what type of animal is involved. "These creatures are incredibly shy and there is very little good photographic evidence" commented Frank Tunbridge. "DNA results confirming what kind of animal is involved would be really exciting and would make this one of the best evidenced kills in Gloucestershire."

Big cats are quiet and elusive creatures which go out of their way to avoid human contact and pose no direct threat to humans. There are no reports of anyone in the UK having been attacked by a wild cat, and even photographs of these creatures are extremely rare. In the event of a wild cat sighting, you should stay calm, on no account attempt to go near any big cat, and contact local police to report your sighting.

(Rick Minters book, *Big Cats: facing Britain's wild predators*, is published by Whittles Publishing Ltd., www.whittlespublishing.com, ISBN no. 978-184995-042-8)



A black panther - the most commonly sighted big cat

Want to know more?

We are hoping to arrange a meeting at the village hall in the next few weeks at which Rick Minter and Frank Tunbridge will speak on big cats in the wild. Evidence and photographs from the Woodchester kill will also be presented. Look out for posters around the village for more information.

Big cats alive and well in UK

Most experts agree that big cats have been living in the wild in the UK for more than 30 years and reports suggest that the numbers of wild cats roaming the British countryside are increasing.

An article in the BBC Wildlife Magazine in 2005 reported 2,123 sightings of big cats between April 2004 and July 2005, with the South West a hot-spot for sightings. Almost 60% of all the sightings reported were of black cats (believed to be 'black panthers', a melanistic variation of leopard which is very common), 32% were of brown or sandy coloured ones (possibly pumas) and 6% were lynx type cats.

In that period there were 17 reports of a big cat with cubs – an increasing trend suggesting that there may now be breeding populations.

A skull found by a Devon farmer in July 2005 was identified by zoologists as that of a puma.



It is thought that some of these animals have been released by private owners who could no longer look after their growing 'pets'. There is documented evidence of many releases of big cats into the wild from private ownership since the Dangerous Animals Act was passed in 1976, including panthers, pumas, lynxes caracals, ocelots and jungle cats.

Local sightings on the increase

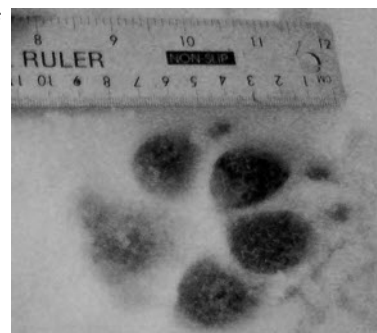
The Stroud News and Journal has carried many reports of big cat sightings in the area, particularly in the last ten years.

More than 100 sightings were logged in Gloucestershire in 2005, including that of a big cat filmed on a CCTV camera crossing a main road near a zebra crossing in Cirencester.

In 2009 there were news reports of sightings in Lechlade, Poulton, Aston Downs, Dursley, Kings Stanley, Butterow Lane, and Chalford.

In February 2011, footage of a big cat was captured on a CCTV camera at a Stroud industrial estate. The film clearly shows a large cat prowling around an empty car park at night.

One clear piece of evidence was a set of paw prints found in snow in January 2010 after a resident saw a large cat 'the size of a Labrador' running down a country lane in Thrupp. The stride was over 120cm in length and tail marks were also evident.



Residents of Woodchester have also reported sightings of a large black cat over the last few years, including at the foot of Bear Hill and in the fields bordering Selsley Road. Most are consistent in that the creature is reported as being black, and the size of a large dog.

Have you seen anything?

If you think you have spotted a big cat in the Woodchester area at any time in the last few years, we would like to hear from you. We also plan to keep a log of any future sightings or evidence of big cats in the area, including kills or paw prints and claw marks etc. Contact woodchestercat@gmail.com with details or phone Frank Tunbridge on franktunbridge@hotmail.co.uk, or call 07711 476715.