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‘SIGHTING OF BIG CATS (PART 94)’

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Mon Dieu! On a vu un tigre près de Paris!

On November 13th this year a tiger was reported to be roaming the area around the Disneyland theme park on the outskirts of Paris. Local residents spotted the big cat near Montevrain, prompting authorities to dispatch a helicopter and some 60 police armed with stun guns to set up a security perimeter. Parents were alerted and told to fetch their children from school in their cars. Experts analysed paw prints and said they were definitely made by a large feline, probably a young tiger, weighing 80kg. A convincing video of the beast was later released. A spokeswoman for Disneyland was reported to advise that there was no chance that people could confuse Tigger (who is one of their staff members in a costume) from a tiger roaming wild.

After a couple of days the hunt was scaled down, as was the status of the creature (firstly to ‘a big cat’ such as a lynx and finally to ‘a European wildcat or a large domestic cat). The video of the tiger was declared to have been made in Mumbai (and to be of a dog and a leopard). And the people of Montevrain resumed their peaceful existence.

There is a good timeline of these events by *Mirror Online* (*note 1*).

Big cat sightings in the UK

As many skeptics will know, for years now there have been regular reports that large cats such as lynxes, pumas, panthers, leopards and even lions have been spotted in the British countryside, occasionally making excursions into towns and cities. There are a number of websites dedicated to this phenomenon set up by people who are in no doubt that ‘they are all out there’. Simply Googling ‘big cat sighting’ at any time will reveal several local and national newspaper articles on the topic within the previous few months.

I wrote a piece on this topic for the Autumn 2008 issue of *Skeptical Adversaria*. At that time my interest was piqued by a story running in the *Rossendale Free Press* about the ‘Huttock Top Beast’, supposedly a leopard or similar creature sighted in Bacup, Lancashire, along with paw-prints. As with most other sightings, the people making the claim expressed absolute certainty that what they saw was a big cat and not, say, a domestic animal or fox. Even when confronted with evidence suggesting otherwise claimants still seem incapable of entertaining a more likely explanation for their sighting. Contrast this with the attitude of the open-minded skeptic: ‘It *could* be a panther (leopard, etc.) but it is *extremely unlikely*.’

This is well illustrated by the case of the ‘Essex Lion’. In August 2012 a couple photographed a cat in a field in St Osyth near Clacton-on-Sea, insisting that what they saw playing there (for up to 30 minutes) was not a domestic specimen but looked more like a lion. Another witness reported hearing something that sounded like ‘the roar of a lion’ in the evening. There was a serious alert and Essex Police mustered a force of around 25 officers, including specialist firearms officers, who were accompanied by experts from Colchester Zoo. Two police helicopters, one with thermal imaging equipment, were also deployed. The hunt was called off when a local woman announced that the ‘lion’ in the photograph was actually her pet Maine Coon cat ‘Teddy Bear’ who regularly plays and hunts in the field in question. Indeed Teddy Bear has a striking resemblance to the animal photographed (*note 2*). So the couple who reported that a big cat was on the loose could now breathe a sigh of relief, Yes? Oh no! ‘I don't think it was a domestic cat’, the wife declared when told the news; ‘Whatever it was, it's definitely still out there’.

In my 2008 piece on the Bacup sighting, I concluded: ‘I am prepared to bet that the authenticity of this animal will always remain unconfirmed and that the Huttock Top Beast will forever remain “a mystery”’. Sure enough, no such creature, alive or dead, was ever found and all went quiet. Then predictably, six years later (this October), the *Free Press* and other newspapers announced, ‘Is this the Huttock Top Beast?’ A woman living on a farm in nearby Norden, made a video of an animal chasing one of her chickens (*note 3*). I offer no comments and leave it to readers to make up their minds from the YouTube footage (*I wouldn't bother – Ed.*).

Notes

1. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/paris-tiger-recap-updates-armed-4626081>

2. <http://www.signal1.co.uk/on-air/blogs/chris-bovaird-258147/entry/484/>

3. <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/watch-huttock-top-beast-caught-7891850>