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On Eyewitness Testimony

From: Ed Stewart <ufoindex@jps.net>
Date: Tue, 02 Feb 1999 12:11:18 -0800
Fwd Date: Tue, 02 Feb 1999 15:44:23 -0500
Subject: On Eyewitness Testimony

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Is there a lesson here to be learned by ufologists?

This article appeared on the Boston Globe, 02/01/99 and can be found at the web location:

[http://www.bosto.com/dailyglobe2/032/science/You ll never believe what I saw=_.shtml](http://www.bosto.com/dailyglobe2/032/science/You_ll_never_believe_what_I_saw=_.shtml)

Since the address is too long to fit on one line, I am reproducing the article here for those that may have difficulty accessing the site address give.

NATURE JOURNAL

You'll never believe what I saw!

By Sy Montgomery, Globe Staff, 02/01/99

Maureen Clark was carving a ham on the morning before Christmas when her 16-year-old nephew, Rory Grant, glanced out the kitchen window and saw something really big moving in her back yard in Lincoln, N.H. "What IS that?" he asked.

Some pretty impressive wildlife wanders through Clark's yard - coyotes, bears, and the week before last, a big bull moose.

But she'd never seen anything like this: Grant estimated it was 24 inches high, 80 to 100 pounds, tawny with a long tail. It was about 35 feet away, partly obscured by a big rock.

"We were mesmerized by it," said Clark, who is a photographer. "I was just thinking, Wow, there is a BIG cat out in my back yard!" She rushed to get her video camera, but by the time she got to the window, the animal had moved away into beech saplings and brush.

For many hours over the course of several days, eight New Hampshire Fish and Game wildlife biologists viewed the three seconds of Clark's videotape showing the animal. Was it a mountain lion - an animal supposedly extinct in New Hampshire since the turn of the century? In some frames the tail looked striped, like a that of a house cat. In others, the ears seemed too pointy for a cat - more like those of a coyote.

The verdict: "We can confidently say," states Fish and Game spokesman Eric Aldrich, "that it's inconclusive."

"It's remarkable how difficult it is to tell what you're looking at out there," says Tom French at the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species program, part of the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

An animal's color and shape can seem to change with back lighting or glare and can be obscured by branches and brush. Even if you get a clear look at an animal in an open field, it can be terribly hard to gauge its size. And without all this information, it's often impossible to tell for sure what you've seen - or to help others identify it for you.

Even the experts are sometimes confused. About 10 years ago, Mark Pokras, an assistant professor of wildlife medicine at Tufts Veterinary Clinic, and wildlife biologists Bill Davis and Tom French were working on the bald eagle re-introduction project at the Quabbin Reservoir in Western Massachusetts one morning when a tawny flash streaked across the road yards in front of their jeep.

Pokras recalls thinking, it's definitely a cougar.

The biologists leapt from the vehicle to follow the animal.

"So we're walking through the woods along the trail of mashed-down ferns and brush and climb the top of a rise," the biologist continued, "and there is standing - an immature coyote." It had a long thin tail, and was standing in the yellowish morning light.

Then he looked at the tracks: They were too small to be a mountain lion's, only 1.5 inches across. And the tracks showed toenails, seldom seen in cat tracks but almost always a clue to a dog's. "I was mightily chagrined."

In the woods, things are not always what they seem. Sometimes they are even stranger.

Take for instance, the big bird of prey that birders kept reporting in a farmer's field in Middleborough last month. It turned out to be a caracara - a wide-winged fishing eagle native to the subtropics of Texas and Florida and tropical South America. No one knows how it got there.

And the caracara is not the only tropical visitor to New England this winter. Two months ago, wildlife officials got a call about a porcupine struck by a car on Route 6A in Barnstable - an area where porcupines are not normally found. It turned out the injured animal was even further from its normal range than anyone thought: The veterinarian identified it as an African Crested porcupine. It had escaped from a zoo.

Some "animal" sightings aren't animals at all. In a small Midwestern town several years ago, folks got so worried about a black bear they saw marooned on top of a telephone pole that townspeople eventually cut the pole down. Then they found they had rescued a black garbage bag.

Many reports of exotic animals turn out to be cases of misidentification. If all the weird critter calls to wildlife officials were correct, you couldn't walk out of your house without tripping over wolves and wolverines, badgers and armadillos, and you'd need an umbrella to protect you from all the bald eagles falling from the sky.

Wildlife agencies, veterinarians, and Audubon Society sites get these calls every day. "I call them 'the animals that aren't,'" says Eric Orff, a wildlife biologist with New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. For 22 years, like his counterparts across the country, he has been fielding calls like these:

"A 160-pound wolf is lurking at the edge of the woods!" Wolves were exterminated in New England a century ago. But even if they were to make a comeback - which biologists insist has not happened - there could not be enough to account for all the calls Orff gets reporting their presence - usually one a week. But there are plenty of coyotes - and dogs.

"I have a bald eagle in my yard!" A Cape Cod woman who called Massachusetts Fisheries and Wildlife described the bird perfectly: It had a big white head, a big curved yellow beak, and a black body. But it also had webbed feet; it was actually a black-backed sea gull.

Although eagles are returning to New England, often eagle sightings turn out to be other, more common birds of prey - a kestrel or hawk. But even these birds are often misidentified. One man reported finding an injured peregrine falcon and brought it to Tufts' veterinary clinic. It was a baby pigeon.

"A bloodthirsty fisher is ripping the guts out of everything in the neighborhood." Fishers, sleek members of the weasel family, are seldom seen but often blamed for imagined, wanton destruction. Usually folks who call Orff about fishers didn't, as it turns out, actually see anything, but they heard something - often an eerie scream in the night (which might be a tomcat or a fox).

When folks do see a fisher, which weighs about seven pounds, they sometimes report seeing a wolverine - a heavy-built, 70-pound carnivore that lives in the wilderness of northern Maine and out west.

Such dramatic size exaggerations are not infrequent. Twenty-pound coyotes morph into 160-pound wolves, and 10-pound house cats grow into 100-pound mountain lions.

Some of this has to do with perspective. "We are a lousy judge of distance," says Jim Hall, hunter education coordinator at New Hampshire Fish and Wildlife.

But another reason that animals may appear larger than they are is that their wildness looms large in our imagination. And this can profoundly affect what we see.

"Partly you see what's there," says Pokras, "and partly you see what you expect." Or want. Or fear. Supposedly seeing is believing, but the opposite is sometimes truer: sometimes we see what we believe.

Philosophers and naturalists have known for centuries that we don't just see with our eyes. "The mind's eye is not passive," Amherst College physics professor Arthur Zajonc writes in his book "Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind." The physician, statesman and poet Empedocles theorized that a sort of fire burned in the human eye like a lantern, and that sight was cast like a ray from the seer to the thing seen. Euclid, the great Alexandrian mathematician, believed this too, as did Plato.

In a way, they were right. Belief in a "fire in the eye" was quenched by the mid-1900s, but psychologists still explore what Zajonc calls "the inner, psychological pole of sight." Investigations of hunting accidents reveal that, though rarely, sometimes people have honestly "seen" and fired at a buck - only to find they have shot a person. Psychologists call this phenomenon "premature closure" and "early blur": the seer glimpses an outline or a shadow and psychologically fills in the missing parts. After waiting in a blind for hours for a wild turkey to appear, the first big thing that moves may well look to the hunter's impatient eye like a wild turkey. (Hunter orange, notes Hall, works well because it interrupts premature closure, acting as a "circuit breaker.") Premature closure can turn a house cat into a mountain lion, a dog into a wolf, a sea gull into an eagle.

How, then, can you ever find out what you've really seen out your window?

Wildlife experts offer this advice:

Note the important features of the creature: its color, shape of beak or ears or tail, color of fur or feathers. Photograph or videotape the animal if possible; if not, write down the description of what you see as you are looking at it.

Try to gauge size by noting its height relative to a bush, tree, rock or stalk. If you videotape it, have someone videotape you at the site where the animal was standing for comparison.

Look for tracks or scat the animal has left behind. Photograph or videotape these after putting a ruler in the picture. Protect the evidence beneath an overturned bucket until an expert can help you identify it.

Call state fish and wildlife officials as soon as possible. Your sighting may be important. Your evidence could help document the existence or return of a rare species, or you might have discovered an escaped captive that needs your help.

Everyone who has looked at Maureen Clark's videotape agrees she did everything right, but still, no one knows for sure what she saw. Sometimes mystery is the essence of nature. Keep looking out the window. You never know what you might see.

Sy Montgomery is an author and naturalist who lives in New Hampshire.

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