PREFACE

I have a confession. I've not read all the books and pamphlets on UK big cats, yet they are within reach on my shelves as I write. I've consulted them and enjoyed chunks of many but, sadly, I find the core bits dull. And although I do suggest one website, I loathe the internet image of British big cats. The sites display a world of chattering anoraks indulging in the shock of out-of-place animals. I'm being harsh, I know, but the subject is portrayed as if it were little more than solving a puzzle or cracking a code, as if one day it will all be over. Detective work matters, but we need to consider the wider connections of our vagrant cats and the effects of big predators in nature and on our psyche.

Some of the big cat books are in part tedious for one main reason: they churn out people's reports with no context. Sighting after sighting is listed as if each is a revelation. Eyewitness reports of cats of different shapes and sizes are vital so, yes, sightings and witness accounts are the foundation of the topic and should inform and guide us. And every encounter with a possible big cat is indeed noteworthy to the people and for the area concerned. But an emphasis on sightings can be overdone. Without analysis, they can dilute the essence. I may be guilty of this in what follows, but I have tried to strike a balance.

The other obsession, understandably, is pictures. There is a desperation for something visible, a need to reveal the secret animal. For me, photographs are desirable but not essential. They can be forever nit-picked, as we will see later, and yet they are seen as the end game, as vital and definitive proof. I do not agree. They are a distraction from other good evidence and are just part of the set of clues and information we need. And to think there is a finale, to consider that the subject somehow ceases, insults the process – this is wild nature, dynamic and interactive, something we might find stirring. It is an infinite game, not a set-piece session of Cluedo.

The subject of our mystery cats is burdened with opinion and everyone feels qualified to hold forth. I am frequently told that 'so and so', a bigwig in some organisation or a professor somewhere, doesn't believe in big cats being here, as if this is news that should bring our work to a halt.

But it does not matter. I'd expect people to be guarded on this topic, especially if they've not seen and heard what I have seen and heard. There is no rush to become aware of big cats in our countryside. This book is not designed to convert anyone. There are questions for us to tackle, when we are ready, about how we study and relate to these cats. If this book helps our readiness, it will have done its job.

There may be natural scientists who regard the book as shallow, full of cut corners and weak postulations. I accept the risk of such a response, but I would stress the spirit in which this work is offered: it's aiming to offer pointers, provoke debate and awaken a gentle realisation that something is afoot. My roots in social science feel the need for rigour too. Trends in human observation and emotion need justifying if they are to count and be recognised, while the cats themselves leave a range of signs and are sometimes captured on film. I hope enough snippets of evidence are offered and claims supported while the book holds its audience and engages minds.

To the strict scientists who think I am hasty in my assessment of the big cats here, I say this: when would you start this debate? How and on whose terms, given that it is so far-reaching? A predator's landscape of many dimensions is before us to survey and to study. A mystery animal is becoming real. The great challenge is to make evident what is invisible. The cats always have the upper hand so their lives will stay mostly hidden, but why not discover what we can?

Meanwhile there are farmers – some fascinated, some anxious – who appreciate a friendly contact with whom to swap notes. There are people who can lead the way to the predator now, but there are rules of trust to learn and new partnerships to forge.

Parts of the text may seem earnest, but I hope compensation comes with the reality and drama described elsewhere. And I make no apology for the more profound thoughts. We all have a responsibility to stay measured as we consider this new wildlife before us. The cats force us to think about their world, our self and ourselves.

The deer in our woods are alive to the large carnivores which now stalk them. Some people's dogs and horses have sensed large cats and, by their reactions, alerted their owners. Nature knows and shows us that new and extraordinary animals have melted into the landscape. The emergence of Britain's big cats invites us to think afresh as we experience our own outdoors.

Rick Minter

COMING TO YOUR SENSES

'Some people have quietly concluded that there are a few big cats living undercover in Britain. It sounds like a tall story to me. But knowing what I do about leopards, anything is possible...'

(Jonathan Scott, narration for 'The Secret Leopard', Natural World, BBC2, 2010)

We view leopards and pumas as majestic and enigmatic. They are large wild felines, unknown to us. Sometimes graceful, sometimes fierce, they dwell in the depths of far-off lands. Watching footage of a leopard killing and consuming an antelope is a stunning and humbling experience. I've just watched on YouTube an African leopard clamping its prey at the throat. The ambushed impala kicks and shudders limply as the asphyxiating clasp takes effect. The instant the deed is done, the leopard moves swiftly to the rump of the prey and immediately shears into the flesh, lest any lurking scavengers arrive. The night scene is floodlit by safari vehicles. Tourists whisper in excitement at what they are seeing, cameras flash relentlessly and guides brief their clients. The situation is both dramatic and serene, a perfect demonstration of a large carnivore at work, dispatching and consuming prey. The impala's swollen body suggests it was pregnant. This is nature's harsh code, not ours.

Watching the leopard at work on its own patch, its hard-defended territory in Africa, may be a powerful moment, but it is also highly packaged. The spectacle is played out before a gallery of camera-snapping tourists. The event is far removed from our own ordered existence, in which our lives rarely encounter the frisson of risk or the discomfort of the deep outdoors. The visitors, the adventurers behind the camera lens, have got their prize. Their global travel, their holiday money and their hopes have all been rewarded. The action over, they have a striking moment to hold on to until the reality check: the retreat to the world of pavements, central heating, packaged food, Wi-Fi and Twitter feeds.

After much consideration, I want to suggest there is an alternative reality just around the corner, in the comforting charm of the British countryside. A cut-price safari is available here. Large cats which we regard as symbols of wilderness – the likes of the leopard, the mountain lion, our once-native lynx and maybe some we don't yet know of – have established their own homes here. They can occupy spaces from deep Exmoor valleys to the conifer-cloaked Scottish hills, and from rugged Welsh pastures to the arable lands of East Anglia and Humberside. As I finish this book, in May 2011, reports of panthers have come from locations as diverse as a Cornish estuary in southwest England and the coast of Sutherland in northeast Scotland. And feral cats are not just living in remote places: they are reported in the open farmland of middle England and in derelict spaces on the edge of towns. They can inhabit the same places we do, living in our shadows. According to reports, they cross carriageways at night, they use underpasses, traverse old railway lines and shelter in quarries, old tunnels, derelict buildings, and mines. Our nature reserves, commons and golf courses are part of their larder. We have no impala and dik-dik for them to trail, but we have an abundance of deer, including roe, fallow, muntjac and sika. Becoming alert to theses secret cats, and sensing some of their signs, is part of the cut-price safari.

TOWARDS ENLIGHTENMENT

It may seem audacious to propose big cat territory throughout Britain, but I am not alone. There are many closet followers of these mystery mammals and yes, we do keep pinching ourselves. But if I am ever worried about being labelled a crank, I can defer to my local police force. They are matter-of-fact about the presence of big cats, breeding big cats, in the area. The nation's top broadcasters are on the case too: the topic has cropped up on mainstream TV from a cast including Bill Oddie and Ray Mears, as we shall see later.

If large carnivores are sometimes around the corner in our countryside, how do we feel about that? Is it cause for concern, a reason to rejoice, something to study or all of these things? The issues need to be thought through and talked through. This book is designed to help us reflect calmly on the situation, to help us consider getting used to some new animals in the countryside. Animals which are all about extremes, the most elusive on the planet but sometimes dramatic and conspicuous when in action, animals which go unnoticed but which can also leave tangible signs. And, like big predators the world over, creatures which can be revered and feared, loved and loathed.

I hope this book can help us grapple with what might be termed the discovery stage of our big cats – to help people feel that they are allowed to raise the prospect of large wild cats living in the countryside.

A black leopard keeps to cover in its large enclosure in Africa.
Photo: Mark Fletcher

In the environment and nature sectors with which I am most closely linked, some people deny the subject, others shuffle with unease at the very words 'big cats', while others again are eager to explore the issue, sensing something fresh and relevant, a new ecology which asks questions of what we think we know. Acclimatising to the presence of big cats and all that they represent is not easy, but we should perhaps begin by being more open.

With awareness may come ambivalence as we think about new types of carnivores in our land. This may be all the more reason to embark upon a research stage, to distinguish facts from assumptions where we can. Research will inform us in various ways. It may help us learn more and consider any responses we make, for we should be considered rather than hasty in our actions. I have not compartmentalised this book according to the stages listed below, for they are not always sequential and not always distinct. Perhaps, however, they represent the scope of how we should prepare our minds and think further.

UK Big Cats - stages of awareness

The sequence of becoming aware of and attuned to big cats in our landscape might be as follows:

Discovery and awareness

Research, survey and understanding

Response, possibly including education, information, and advice

My point is that we should learn what we can about these animals before we make any response, especially of a formal type. Our personal views might vary and may change over time or as we find out more. I hope, though, that we would all agree that the research stage is important if we wish to understand these animals better, and appreciate their lifestyles and the effect they may have on our environment.

TABOO QUESTIONS

Reports of big cats across Britain are unremitting, but there is more to the subject than these moment-in-time observations. Our wildlife and our landscapes may be changing, gradually and subtly, because of the presence of these new big predators. Does this matter? Will it affect many of us as we go about our daily lives? Will it have an influence on other wildlife and will it alter the ways in which people use and experience the outdoors? And should anyone or any organisation be bothered enough to do something to understand the nature of what could be happening?

The main motive of this book, then, is simple and modest: let's think a little more about the big cats that live alongside us, rather than treat them as taboo, and let's explore these sorts of awkward questions, however cautious we should be in our responses.

I appreciate that my tone on big cats here in Britain may smack of political correctness. I do not believe, however, that the cats should rule people's lives, affect their livelihoods and be accepted at any price. There is a balance to be struck and some rules to be aware of and, so far, the clandestine cats seem to be on the right side of this balance and these rules. But what about the human side of this balance? I find that people act responsibly in handling a big cat situation. From worried parents to dog owners, to farmers, to surprised car drivers and ramblers and, on the occasions when they are consulted, official bodies, the reaction is measured. There are, of course, different views depending on the context. 'I like the idea of them living quietly here, eating rabbits. There is plenty of space in Herefordshire for us to live alongside them,' said one eyewitness a while back. Many would agree, while the cats keep to natural prey. But when livestock becomes a target, the mood can change. 'My tolerance ends when my stock are killed,' said a pedigree sheep breeder to me in Herefordshire this May, after a large lamb, a ewe and a prize ram had been dispatched one at a time in cat-like attacks over a period of six weeks. She sensed a new alien presence. An intruder had upset the natural order on her land. Such situations seem sporadic, and livestock attacks seem contained or intermittent. They rarely linger as an ongoing curse. But experienced help and advice needs to be offered to landowners and anyone feeling under pressure from big cats. Avoiding the subject means that this doesn't happen, so people improvise, devising their own solutions. They get tips from others who have had a big cat visit and they find their way to informal help. This system works up to a point and I am part of it, but I know its limits. I see the families unsettled by a visiting cat. It is commendable that people want to find a responsible way forward, and we avoid pitchforks heading for the hills.

WORLDS APART?

Some people feel that a big cat passing through the neighbourhood from time to time becomes savvy – in its own best interest, it gets to know some rules. We will look at this again later, but one example comes from Frank Tunbridge, a colleague here in Gloucestershire. I recall it well, as Frank and I were sitting in my kitchen having our monthly catch-up about big cats as the incident was phoned through. I could half-hear the phone conversation unfold and realised it was notable. It came from a corner of the county where sightings are common, where we have come to expect routine reports. Some of them may be of the same animal,

The puma or mountain lion at home in Montana, US. The photo was taken in a large habitat enclosure. Photo: Patty and Jerry Corbin

apart from when there are colour distinctions. The informant was a lady who rented a field for her horse and foal. She had had two sightings of a black, panther-type cat in the field. She was not fazed by the events and felt the cat gave her a wide berth as it passed through. On the occasion of her second sighting her foal had bounded up to the cat when it saw it. The lady normally had a black lurcher with her, although she had left it behind that day, and the foal and the dog would enjoy a play together, the foal racing to greet the dog. She felt the foal's action was simple to explain – it had assumed that the big black cat was the dog. She watched in trepidation as the foal raced to the cat at the top of the field. The cat sat still, disdainful. It let out a threatening snarl and the foal beat its retreat, quickly returning to its mother. Foals, especially at a small stage, may be a target for a big cat, and this is a worry Frank and I sometimes hear raised by horse owners. This lady, though, was unperturbed and felt no need to protect her horse or foal. She felt she understood the cat, and was totally comfortable with its occasional presence. She said she sensed that

the cat was female and Frank agreed that this might be a good hunch. His reasoning for agreeing with her was the regularity of the cat's appearance, for he had been on its case, glimpsing it once at dusk and meeting locals who had too. It seemed to have a small territory, making it more likely to be female. It was also slight in build rather than of big, swaggering form.

The lady had one more observation to make, which endeared the cat to her. 'It shows me what it can do,' she said. 'It leaves carcasses, including one of an eaten-out fox, in the middle of the field, right where I can see.' This was the animal's message, the lady thought, of co-existence. 'It's telling me, "This is how I live. You've no need to worry, or to bother me."'

NATURE THAT EXCITES

As I write this, in the spring of 2011, a campaign group is challenging the proposed trapping and removal of beavers from the River Tay in an action proposed by the agency Scottish Natural Heritage. This, despite the fact that an official trial of released beavers, monitored and carrying implanted ID chips, is being carried out at Knapdale and will inform any further releases of beavers if it's decided to bring them back more widely in Scotland. The beavers on the Tay were seen as far back as 2001. It is generally accepted that the five that founded this population escaped from a wildlife park. The reaction to the Tay beavers tells us something about people's connections with free, unmanaged wildlife. When people first noticed beavers on the Tay they didn't run to the authorities and they didn't blab to the press. They kept quiet. People who were in the know seemed content for nature to take its course. They may have felt the beavers were best left to do their thing before public policy caught up with them.

I think the example in Tayside holds some clues, for I've seen this very reaction applied to big cats too. Although some eyewitnesses avoid reporting big cats for fear of ridicule, there are other motives too. Some people would rather not face up to big cats being around. They feel it's something we should keep to ourselves, rather than broadcast, and not something on which we should venture an opinion. I understand that view entirely. If a topic is surrounded by so much speculation, why pronounce on it with confidence? And, as in the case of the Tay beavers, some people don't wish to disclose something they feel is special when the consequences are unknown or even feared.

After one of my talks on big cats, a Cotswolds farmer who'd seen a panther in nearby woods wanted to challenge me. 'Isn't it like knowing a good beach – shouldn't you keep it to yourself?' he asked, forcing a rather agonised reply from me. I was, I said, simply reporting what I felt needed to be known. If people walk, play or camp, for instance, in areas where the cats are sometimes seen, then some of them might like to be

aware of the fact. That was all. I wasn't suggesting he carry a gun with him, I wasn't suggesting staying at home and I wasn't inviting him to be over-protective of his kids. I was just saying that a big cat may be present, sometimes, although mainly active at night, and by knowing that and by being a bit vigilant, he'd notice much more around him anyway. Remaining on alert would reveal all manner of tracks and signs of common wildlife and he would hear more birdsong in its many variations. All these parts of the natural world would come into much clearer focus. 'Enjoy it!' I said.

I finished my response to the farmer and the Cirencester audience by saying that I would prefer them to get a reasoned message from me rather than dubious information from people with a different agenda. I got a receptive hearing that day – although perhaps the gathering was self-selecting – and people were curious, polite and largely sympathetic. Since that talk in Cirencester I have done many more, often alongside Frank Tunbridge. I have briefed a great variety of bodies, from the Mammal Society to the Exmoor Society, from farmers' groups to Women's Institutes, Natural History Societies and civic societies. I've facilitated several workshops and spoken at two national wildlife conferences. All told, I have held discussions, mainly in the form of a collective gathering, with well over a thousand people on the topic. At many of these events I have deliberately sampled people's views and the responses are remarkably consistent. I am confident that research and survey is a well-supported option to take as a response to our big cats.

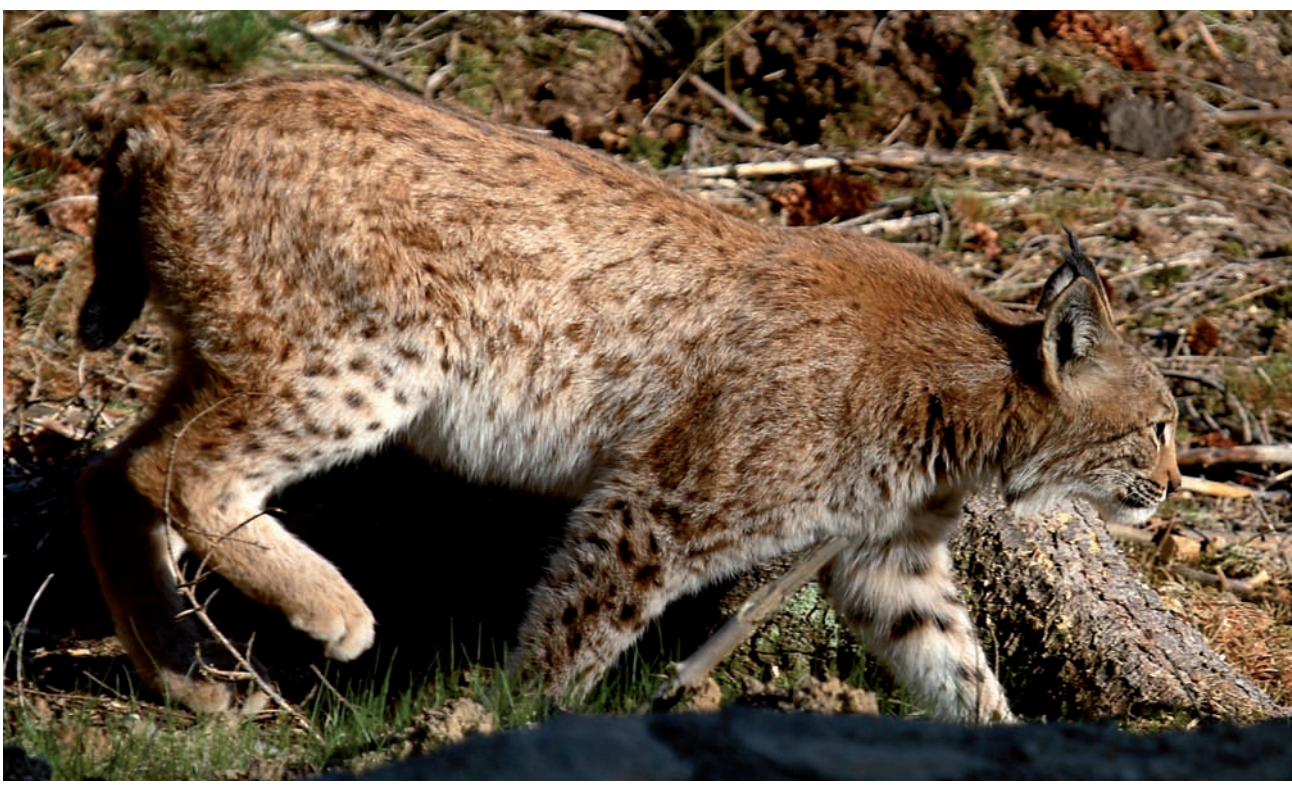
NATURE THAT ASKS QUESTIONS

The UK wildlife depicted in our textbooks is not always the complete picture. Real nature is out there, regardless, more contaminated than we imagine and doing its own thing. Our wildlife has become globalised: a cocktail of species are evolving on these shores, with origins that are a blend of native, exotic, traded, escaped, licensed and unlicensed. Britain is now a land of cosmopolitan species, from the jungle-like Japanese knotweed, which first spread from Victorian gardens and estates, to the raucous ring-necked parakeets screeching away in London parks. Our tainted and mixed-up nature has different effects on the landscape depending on where it appears. Japanese knotweed is seen as damaging to ecosystems and can cost huge sums to clear, but how about the spreading Himalayan balsam, the new blaze of popping purple we can see on summer walks? Some defend it as a late-season host for insects and an aid to pollination, while others see it as a rampant and worrying change, taking a stranglehold on our river banks. The signal crayfish in our rivers and lakes is clearly invasive and damaging, ousting our native crayfish and disturbing the freshwater ecology, but not all aliens are

bad news. Some naturalised arrivals can soon feel like long-lost friends. Witness the little owl, 'the Frenchman', which we now commonly hear at dusk. It arrived through the 1800s and had spread country-wide by the 1930s. It filled a vacant niche and is today our most noticed owl. So where do we draw the lines? What are the cut-off points in acceptance, and what are our criteria for impacts and effects? The way we regard our changing nature is as much cultural as scientific. We should be honest in our motives for separating the bits of nature we like from those which we want to control.

ENERGISING THE ECOSYSTEM

I once escorted a New Zealand ecologist on his first trip into the British countryside. As we surveyed the pastoral scene from the ridge of the Malvern Hills on the Herefordshire-Worcestershire border, he marvelled at the shaggy, wildlife-rich common land which had escaped the cleans-



A Eurasian lynx demonstrates its camouflage in a habitat enclosure in a Bavarian Forest. Photo: Miha Krofel

ing of modern farming. He remarked on the soft but regimented character of orchard plots, he picked out the roughly-grazed horse paddocks and he noted where the pastoral estate-land bounded the more intensive agricultural fields. He was fascinated by these first glimpses of an unfamiliar land, but there was a limit to his diplomacy: 'Your landscapes lack energy!' he declared.

Here, was the brutal verdict of an outsider from someone who has clout in his own country. In one clipped sentence he wrote off our countryside as dormant, bland and missing something. Our countryside may be pretty. It may be scenically striking across large swathes, and it may have all manner of artefacts which make it a cultural delight. But if you see the land, its vegetation and its wildlife as a living, dynamic entity, then much could be regarded as rather sterile.

FEELING THE DRAMA, SENSING THE WILD

Many people, especially from the world of ecology and wildlife conservation, are expressing this view these days. There is a vigorous debate about how to add that missing spark to the landscapes of Britain and 're-wild' them. A step on the way to this is widely referred to as 'landscape-scale conservation'. These are the tags for the latest thinking in how we should improve the lot of the UK's wildlife. Landscape-scale conservation and re-wilding mean moving beyond wildlife gardening or tinkering with small nature reserves, to create bigger spaces for nature, where it can do its own thing, to ebb and flow as a whole ecosystem. The people pushing this agenda suggest bigger units of land for nature reserves, a less prescribed and deliberate management of the land, and the introduction of grazing animals to pressurise the vegetation, creating more micro-habitats within it. This involves creatures like Exmoor ponies and Highland cattle, or even bigger, wilder herbivores to graze and browse, to create the disturbance and the niches for other wildlife, from insects to butterflies, to adapt to. The ultimate expression of this system might be beavers creating glades where woods meet river corridors and wild boar rooting around, their snouts ploughing the woodland floor, dispersing seeds and leaving fresh mounds of soil for fungi and insects to get to work on.

The desire for this new-style conservation is not just based on the richer ecology it will bring, but on a recognition that it has a vital human dimension too. It is exciting, both visually and emotionally. It can bring lyrical power to the land. It is the perfect response to the lack of energy noted by my New Zealand friend.

And this 'new nature', this new thinking about 're-wilding', is not a pipe dream – some of it is happening already, such as the Great Fen project, north of Cambridge, where fenland systems are being re-wetted and joined up. Another renowned example is the restoration and expansion

of native Caledonian forest in community projects like Trees for Life in the stunning terrain of Scotland's Glen Affric, and in the official beaver trials noted above in Argyll. But alongside visionary projects, a return to the wild is coming about because of some people's dubious behaviour. While an official reintroduction of wild boar might never have been sanctioned, the animal has 'accidentally' returned to British habitats in which it once flourished, having jumped the fences of farms where it was supplying prized low-fat meat.

In most 'complete' ecosystems, the agricultural and the wild herbivores (the grazing animals) and the deer are influenced by large predators. The grazing animals' movement through the year and by night and by day is affected by a wariness of what stalks them. The predator, whether canine or feline, is a key agent in the ecosystem process. Remove the predator and the deer will often need more intervention by man, especially to curb the numbers, and to keep the herbivores from concentrating on sensitive habitat where tree seedlings can be munched away like salad.

So beaver and boar are coming back, in different ways, as missing links in our ecology. But another creature, the master of concealment, has sneaked unnoticed into the landscape too. A big feline predator is here, in various guises. The most radical part of the re-wilding agenda is underway. The return of this predator is a cause of satisfaction amongst many people from all shades of opinion, yet I would suggest that celebration is premature. The big cats do largely go unnoticed and rarely create concern, but when they do, we need to support those who feel anxious, be it the sheep farmer under pressure or the worried dog walker who meets a curious panther. The arrival of the alpha cat needs to be acknowledged, but until we learn how and when to troubleshoot – though maybe not literally – co-existence cannot be complete. That is the challenge.