

Eastern Cougar Foundation



S P R I N G 2 0 0 5

INAUGURAL DIRECTORS COLUMN

A regular feature of this newsletter will be brief introductions of each of our Directors. I'll begin because I'm the oldest (age before beauty, as the old saying goes). I am a native Texan and have degrees in wildlife conservation from Texas A & M and Oklahoma A & M. I was employed as a wildlife research biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for almost 20 years before I retired in South Carolina in 1983. During the last five years of my employment, I primarily searched for cougar sign in the Southeast - tracks in the mud or snow, scratch hills in the leaves, covered deer kills - that sort of thing. I also trained biologists and foresters with every natural resource agency in the Southeast to look for sign by sending them newsletters, track diagrams and sample casts of actual cougar tracks. While no positive evidence of wild populations of cougars was found, the effort was undoubtedly worthwhile because it stimulated interest in this species. While I rarely go looking for sign any more, I still get phone calls in the middle of the night from people who think they have seen a cougar. Usually, they are unable to find a clear track or other concrete evidence so the sighting report is filed away until such time as there may be a clustering of such reports that demand further investigation.

One of my duties during this investigation was to write the Recovery Plan for the eastern cougar. New techniques and technology, such as DNA analysis and the availability of inexpensive trail cameras, have made that plan hopelessly outdated. My cougar-related activity in the next few months will be to revise the Recovery Plan to incorporate these new techniques. There will be no official involvement of the Fish and Wildlife Service in this revision, so the new "Plan" will have no legal status. Nevertheless, it should help guide the actions of ECF. If space permits, the revised portions of the "Plan" will be published in this newsletter.

Robert (Bob) Downing

Stokes Michigan Video Controversy by Joseph A. Lankalis



Figure 1

NOTE: Several ECF Directors reviewed the Stokes video and concluded that it shows two housecats. ECF member Joe Lankalis describes how careful analysis leads to that conclusion. The video can be seen at http://www.miwildlife.org/c_ai_video.asp

On April 24, 2004, Carol Stokes of Monroe County, Michigan, videotaped two felines crossing a cornfield behind her property. She turned the tape over to the Michigan Wildlife Conservancy (MWC), and thus began a heated controversy when the felines were claimed to be two cougars.

Dennis Fijalkowski, executive director of the MWC, publicly announced that following July that the Stokes cats were a mother cougar and a grown cub, and claimed to have definite proof of a breeding population of cougars in Michigan. The basis for his identification were size, color, and long black-tipped tails. All of these arguments can be countered by scientific analysis.

The MWC's strongest argument for the Stokes cats being cougars is their large size. However, size is illusionary. Beyond 100 yards, both size and distance become difficult to judge. A three dimensional scene becomes two dimensional on film, which increases the probability of an optical illusion. Hollywood is famous for such optical illusions. Remember the size of the housecat in the movie, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*?

Any determination of size from the Stokes video will result in an apparent size, not the actual size. The closer the cats are to the camera, the larger will be their apparent sizes against the background. The distance between the cats and the woods is not clearly established. The MWC hired two forensic video experts to determine the sizes of the two cats. Analyst Mr.



Figure 2

Townshend guesses the distance to be five feet. This is the origin of an optical illusion that both forensic experts failed to notice.

An optical illusion will occur if the field is not perfectly flat, and the distal surface is at Carol Stokes's eye level. If the field should have a crest, or high spot, between the viewer and the woods such that the crest coincides with the edge of the woods, that crest would appear adjacent to the edge of the woods. If the cats were on top of this crest, they would appear larger than life. Use of a particular cottonwood tree in the video as a size reference would be useless because the cats are not near enough to it. But Mr. Townshend based his calculations on the diameter of that cottonwood tree being 15.5 inches. Using that value, he estimates that the cats were 70 to 74 inches long.

The calculations are best done using the DVD with a large digital TV screen. This yields lengths in the range of 56 to 59 inches. The CD-ROM or the website video clip will yield images too blurry to measure. An analog TV will introduce the effects of parallax which interfere with accuracy. When measuring the diameter of the cottonwood tree, the shaded part of the trunk is difficult to discern. It may even be missed entirely because it blends in so well with the background.

There are clues indicating that the cats are farther than five feet from the woods. In Figure (2), a 3-way split image is produced showing a deer, the lead cat, and John Stokes walking along the edge of the woods on May 15. The feet of both John Stokes and the deer are obscured by the alleged crest, but the feet of the lead cat are completely visible. John Stokes is wearing black high-top shoes that should be seen over the grass which was four to six inches high. This suggests that the cat is on the opposite



Alcona Cat Hoax

"A cougar similar to this was reported to have been videotaped in southern Monroe County, just north of Sylvania, last April."

CAN YOU SPOT A HOAX?

by Joseph A. Lankalis

Surely you have seen some cougar hoaxes on the internet. There was the porch cat from Laramie, Wyoming. And then there was that huge cat shot in Washington that turned up in Pennsylvania and Texas. Who knows how many more states will be blessed with that same photo? You may have heard of the notorious surgeon's photo of the Loch Ness monster. It was taken by Dr. Kenneth Wilson in 1932, and for years was accepted as positive proof of Nessy. On his deathbed, Wilson confessed to how he fabricated the photo.

The hoaxers are out there. People enjoy being able "to pull one over." Also, there are a lot of people who would like to be the first one to provide concrete proof of cougars east of the Mississippi. And, there are just as many people, if not more, anxiously awaiting for that concrete proof to be presented. The situation is quite ripe for a hoax to appear anywhere anytime.

The event may just simply be an honest mistake by overzealous people. Housecats often end up being the cause. Really spectacular hoaxes can be fabricated with a mounted cougar. How would one ever spot one of these?

A mounted cougar planted in a sylvan setting may have repetitive revealing flaws. One particular flaw that can be easily detected is the pose. In the past, taxidermists built their own mannikins for whatever pose their clients desired. Today, taxidermy catalogs supply about a dozen standard styrofoam poses. A

suspicious photo can easily be matched with a particular mannikin on display.

Although these mannikins may look life-like, they don't always fit into a habitat setting. There may be something unnatural about the pose that a good behaviorist can detect. The posture of the ears, glassy eyes, flaws in the nose and mouth are things to be aware of.

Is the photograph extraordinarily picturesque? People are basically lousy nature photographers. They tend not to have the equipment, nor the patience of Leonard Lee Rue. So, if the photo is too perfect, there is a good possibility that it has been fabricated. The photo should show some activity. Photos of cats in leisurely poses are likely to be bogus. Cougars are just too alert to be caught off guard. The phony photo is set up in a picturesque sylvan site executed with fabulous sharpness and detail. A closeup using a wide angle lens is an impossible shot even with the best of luck. However, with a mounted cat, it is a piece of cake. Be wary of quality fit for National Geographic Magazine.

The hoaxer would be pushing his luck with a closeup photo. A careful scrutiny of the face is then possible. Very few taxidermists are able to produce life-like facial expressions. While the cat is alive, the face seems to have personality. The flesh on the face is soft and puffy, especially around the eyes, nose, and mouth. But after the skin is applied to the head form, it dries and shrinks producing mummified stares. The facial expression lacks personality. Freeze-drying circumvents this defect. Another thing to note are the ears. On a living cat, the ears are nice and smooth. The ears have to be skinned out and then inserts placed inside them, otherwise, the ears will curl. The inserts keep the ears straight, but the skin lifts away making the ears appear rugose. If excessive shrinkage occurs, the edges become frayed. The unnatural ears just don't look as smooth and thin as the living ears. Cats express their emotions with their ears. If one is familiar with feline emotions, he can be aware of mistakes in ear posture.

I have included a pictorial quiz to test your ability to detect the hoaxes. Some of the pictures are of living cougars, and some are mounted specimens. Can you pick out the phonies?

Here are the answers to the photos on the other side. Don't peek. (A) live (B) dead (C) live (D) live (E) live (F) dead (G) live (H) dead (I) live (J) dead (K) dead (L) dead.

side of said crest from the deer and Mr. Stokes. This would cause the cat to appear larger than it really is. In Figure (3), the lead cat can be seen descending down a slight slope (taken from frames 10:00 and 15:00). This indicates that the cat is not near the edge of the woods at all.

The MWC emphasized that the cats are both the same color. The video is of poor color quality, but when the color is enhanced, the two cats are definitely of two different colors. The lead cat is orange and the second cat is gray. The suggestion that the gray cat is in shade is disclaimed when one considers that the time is 7:34 p.m. On April 24, that is approaching sunset. The sun's rays should be reaching under the tree canopy instead of penetrating through it. Two cougars would rarely have as much color difference as seen in Figure (1).

Cougars are characterized by long black-tipped tails. Domestic cat tails are about 36% of body length, whereas cougar tails are noticeably longer at 41%. The Stokes cats' tails have been determined to be about 36%. The black-tipped tails are only present under specified conditions using old fashioned equipment. The original video is VHS and usually observed on analog TV. Had the Stokes camcorder been digital, the black-tipped tails would not have been present. They are a result of a flaw occurring in VHS tapes and analog TV tubes. This flaw is called "shadowing" by TV salesmen. Digital camcorders and TVs lack this flaw. Shadowing occurs whenever an object moves across the screen. The old style tapes and tubes cannot respond quickly enough to the motion leaving a dark edge, or shadow, on the trailing edge of the object as it vacates its position. Any TV salesman can explain this phenomenon. When the cats are motionless, or a digital TV is used, the trailing dark shadows are not present. If the cats should move in

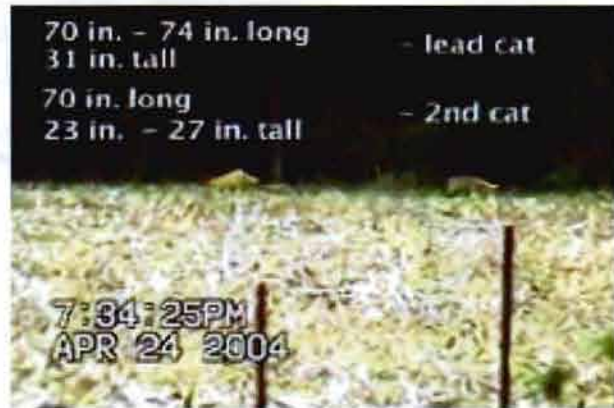


Figure 3

reverse, the shadows would appear on their faces. The Stokes cats really do not have black-tipped tails.

The arguments for housecats deal with shape and behavior which are specific for housecats and carry more weight than apparent size. Whether the housecats appear big or small, their proportions will be constant and different from cougars. Figures (4), (5), and (6) contrast the proportional differences between American shorthair domestic cats and cougars. To enhance the contrast, the body sizes were equalized. The Stokes cats' silhouettes correlate more with the housecat's.

Behavioral differences are most evident in tail postures. The housecat is the only free-roaming cat in North America that habitually walks with an erect tail. According to Dr. Michael W. Fox, author of *Understanding Your Cat*, the "tail-up" posture is displayed by the subservient cat, or when it is greeting. A cougar would only curl its tail instead of raising it. In the tail-up posture, the housecat's basal tail joint readily forms a right angle with the sacrum. The housecat tail can even be pulled forward towards the head. The cougar's basal tail segment will only go 45 degrees above the horizontal. According to Jay Buchl, an experienced cougar hunter from the Rocky Mountain Sportsmen Association, if the cougar's tail is forced beyond that angle, injury will occur. The Stokes cats displayed erect tails.

One last argument for the improbability of the Stokes cats being cougars is the nature of the surroundings where



FIGURE (4). COUGAR

FIGURE (5). STOKES CATS

FIGURE (6). HOUSECAT

The cougar's head is small and its neck is long in proportion to its body. The cougar's tail is long enough to reach the ground. The housecat, on the other hand, has a larger head and shorter neck, and its tail does not reach the ground. It is obvious that the Stokes cats are housecats.

Figure 4, 5 and 6



Eastern
Cougar
Foundation

Officers

President

Todd Lester
email: scb01489@mail.wvnet.edu

Vice President

Chris Bolgiano
email: bolgiace@jmu.edu

Secretary/Treasurer

Jaquetta Lester

Program Officer

Helen McGinnis
email: helenmcginnis@meer.net

Newsletter Submissions:

Deadlines: April 1 and October 1
Send Submissions to:
Editor: Traci Hickson
email: traci@future.org

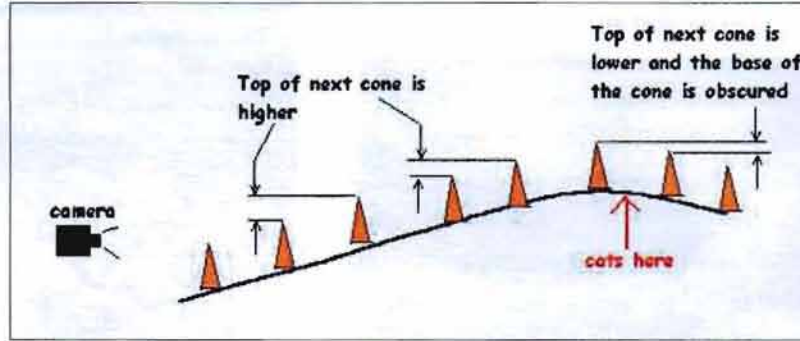


Figure 7

continued from page 3

the Stokes live. If one logs onto TerraServer.com and investigates the vicinity around Lambertville, one will find it to be heavily urbanized with numerous neighborhoods, heavily laced with vehicular traffic, and commercial development. The forests are sparse and separated by major highways. The city of Toledo lies a short distance to the south. That is hardly the habitat for a breeding pair raising offspring.

If Carol Stokes filmed two housecats in the cornfield behind her home such that they appeared twice their size against the woody background, it should be very easy to duplicate her accomplishment again.