

## FERAL FAUNA

### HAVE YOU SEEN A BIG CAT?

Mike Griffiths



When *Land for Wildlife* Officer, Avril Baxter, decided to jazz up our display at Woolorama this year by introducing a 'big cat', little did she know that it would spark so much interest.

The taxidermied puma (hired from the WA Museum) took pride of place and with the caption 'have you seen' drew records from Peaceful Bay, Denmark, Frankland, Orchid Valley, Muja Power Station, Allinson, Wellington Dam and Wagin. The most recent sightings included three from the Tambellup area in the past 18 months and two years ago at South Balladonia.

Big cat stories have been around for many years as Mike Griffiths reports:

Talk to people living almost anywhere in rural WA between the Murchison and the south coast and, before long, you're bound to bump into those who have stories about 'big cats' in the countryside. You're also bound to hear stories about circus accidents and American servicemen involving exotic big cats, and you realise that the line between fact and folklore gets a bit blurry. But just how much is fact and how much is folklore?

To answer that question, it's necessary to do a bit of proper homework, listen to people who have first-hand information, and look for evidence – and keep the newspapers for cleaning windows! Then it starts to get interesting ...

Military historians and others are well aware of the custom of military forces from many countries of carrying various animals as *military mascots*. It is a well-known tradition from Britain and the US, particularly during the American Civil War, World War II and post WWII years. The tradition continues to the present day, but in war-time, it was almost the norm for US servicemen to have dogs, monkeys, roosters, donkeys, badgers and yes, even exotic cats as mascots for ships, army regiments or air force squadrons. The animals were given names, and in many cases, even ranks! After WA saw a vast build-up of US forces during WWII, Western Australians talked about seeing American servicemen with 'mountain lions' on leashes at various camps and on navy ships. Interestingly, two US airforce squadrons stationed in other Australian states had black panther-like animals as their emblems.

As far as the circus accidents are concerned, one of the few facts that is firmly established is that a great number of circus convoys criss-crossed WA in bygone years. A typical circus convoy from the 1950s, for example, included a number of trucks towing caravans and trailers with equipment and animals; it was quite normal for circuses to carry a host of animals on these trucks, including elephants, bears, ponies, tigers and lions. Cougars and panthers were also known to be carried in smaller numbers, but thankfully all animals were generally very tame and closely watched. At least two circus convoys were known to have had roadside accidents in the late 1950s and early 1960s in south-west WA, but there is no documentation as to which animals were carried and if any escaped. But as all good historians know, a lot more things happen in history than are documented or picked up by the local press at the time – especially where infringements of wildlife laws were involved!

So what of big cat sightings in WA? To the majority of people who have never had unusual experiences of any sort, it may be difficult to understand that those who report seeing big cats often feel a bit the same as they would if they'd seen little green men or the Loch Ness Monster. After being ridiculed or dismissed a few times by people close to them or a local 'authority', they are not always particularly enthusiastic to tell the world about their encounters. (This happened a number of times with naturalists who reported good sightings of 'extinct' ivory-billed woodpecker in the US, now

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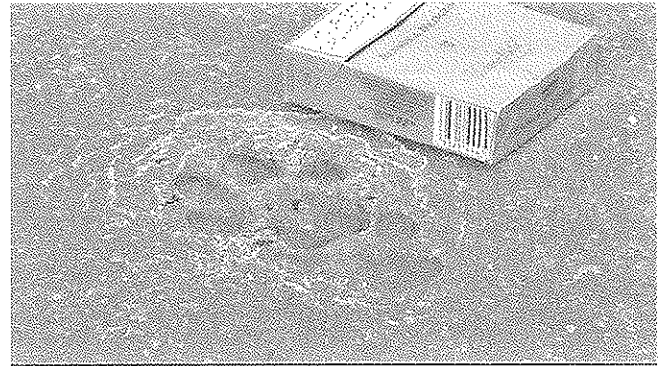
**Big cat****FERAL FAUNA**

known to be present in low numbers.) At the same time, it is important to remember that our feral cats sometimes grow to the size of small dogs and are surprisingly common across the State. (Ecologists are well aware that their impact on native fauna is very worrying, as reported in various editions of *Western Wildlife*.) Many sightings of 'big cats' happen during the night or in bad light, and many are only fleeting glimpses of the animals, and furthermore, many people are not experienced at recognising wildlife. We must therefore, as a general rule, listen carefully to those who report 'big cat' sightings, while not being too hasty to judge either way until we are sure of certain facts.

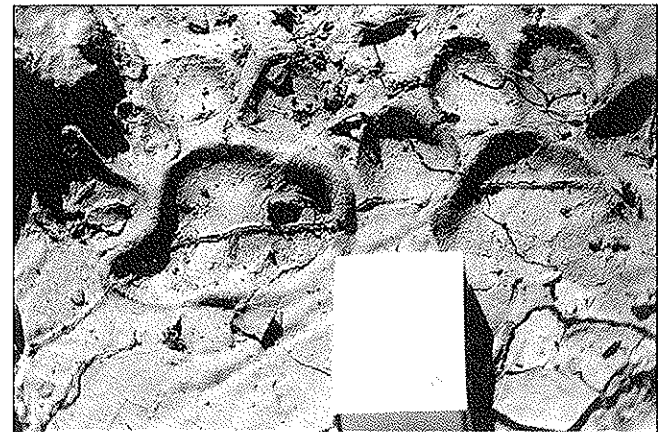
Local people in rural areas on farms, stations, and in Aboriginal communities may not always be wildlife experts or have biological training, but as many *LFWers* know, landholders often know their local wildlife and bush better than anyone else! And quiet conversations with these people all over southern WA reveal that there are many who claim to see large brown or black cats that often have long, thick tails, muscular bodies and move like greased lightning when prompted! They are often reported to send normally brave farm dogs into rapid retreat, and are sometimes reported jumping over fences rather than through (some have described this as an almost 'effortless' gliding motion when the animal is in full flight). Horses with slash marks to shoulders and necks, and fully grown sheep with broken necks and rib cages eaten bare with surgical precision add to the intrigue.

So what of the evidence? And where are the photos? Many photos turn out to be feral cats and other bush animals, lack scale objects to indicate size, or are simply too blurry to tell. But ask how many people have good photos of the snow leopard in central Asia or the eastern cougar in Quebec and New Brunswick (confirmed in recent years) and you may sympathise with locals who will tell you just how unexpectedly the 'big cats' appear and how fast they disappear. It's interesting to note that early American settlers called the cougar the 'spirit cat' as they rarely saw them even when their presence was known from footprints in the snow and stock losses. And keep in mind WA's feral deer, known from a few scattered areas mainly in the south of the State but are rarely seen by the public (see *WW*, January 2007 regarding feral deer from the Shire of Gingin). These are large hoofed animals that move around in herds but few (if any?) photos of WA's feral deer exist.

Aside from photographs of the animals, other forms of evidence of 'big cats' may be just as difficult to obtain. But a few photos of very big, distinctly cat-like footprints from various areas in WA have come to light, some in quite recent years. Unlike dog prints, cat prints rarely show



Footprints across edge of muddy lake-bed south of Ballardonia, WA. Several people examined the prints, which were widely spaced and at one point, seen to show a leap of over 2 metres from the lake-bed up onto rocks. None showed claw marks. Photo courtesy Don Bird.



Footprints in the Eneabba district close to where 'big cats' have been reported. The matchbox is 5.3x3.5cm. Photo courtesy Ray Woods.

claw marks, and are typically more rounded than the rectangular dog prints.\* That being said, it can still be surprisingly easy to confuse dog prints with those of large cat species. Other evidence of big cats could include scats or well-documented animal kills, but this is rarely considered sufficient on its own and really needs to be considered in combination with other more concrete forms of evidence. It has been argued that until body evidence or DNA comes to light, the issue of 'big cats' won't be taken too seriously in Australia. And until there's good evidence ...

We hear people talk about 'panthers' and 'cougars' as if they're the same, but the true panther is a black leopard (*Panthera pardus*), native to Asia and Africa and distinct from the cougar, puma or mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), native to North, Central and South America. (The endangered 'Florida panther' is in fact a cougar, just to add to the confusion!) But if there's any exotic cat species out there in the WA bush other