

# MORE ON BIG CATS IN WA

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The article "Have you seen a big cat?" in the October edition of *Western Wildlife* certainly got people talking! It has become very obvious that many people across rural WA are aware of the reports and rumours of large unidentified cats roaming the bush, and a good number have interesting and useful information about the animals, whatever the animals' identity.

One of these accounts comes from an area of the Great Southern where people have reported seeing very large unidentified cat-like animals over the years and losing livestock in unusual ways. In November 2005, scratchings were found on a wandoo tree that would make any naturalist or ecologist really stop and take notice - and keep watching over their shoulder! (see photo). The main scratched area was big - over 50 cm across and 60 cm from top to bottom, with the top of the scratchings approximately one metre from the ground. They appeared as two "lobes", which could correspond with the left and right paws of an animal (and is consistent with the pattern left by a pet cat scratching a post or board). There were also other scratchings around the tree trunk close to the main set of scratches, making it look like whatever was responsible really was letting off steam. But what was really interesting (or worrying!) was the depth of the scratch marks - they looked like they'd been done with sharpened steel nails, with an accumulated pile of "shavings" at the base of the tree. The scratches were far more widely spaced than those of a big house cat, and many were at least 30 or 40 cm long. It is unlikely

that the scratchings were hoaxed as they were found (purely by chance) in out-of-the-way bushland that few people visit. It seems almost certain that they were made by a large animal with very strong claws, but beyond that, it would be foolish to speculate.

Other interesting "scratch trees" have also come to light in recent times



*Scratchings of unknown origin on wandoo trunk in bushland in the Great Southern. The top of the scratchings is approximately one metre above the ground. Photo courtesy of Alan Jones*

in different parts of the State, but as always it is important to consider other causes and to scrutinise with a critical mind. Some recent sightings of the cats themselves have also been made since October's article, some of which genuinely scared the witnesses. One even involved a pursuit of a panicked fully grown western grey kangaroo by a "very large black cat with a long thick tail" (not many feral cats would panic a big fully grown kangaroo!). One aspect of sightings seems to be repeated over and over by witnesses: these cats move with extraordinarily speed, and are said to be quicker by far than anything else in the bush. Whatever their identity, it is essential to gather as many facts as possible,

photographing, measuring and recording everything. People who have good sightings of unidentified animals (themselves or by their friends or family) should write down as much information about the incident as soon as possible, including mention of points in the landscape or nearby objects to give an idea of size and distance. It is even a good idea to photograph the site as landscapes change with time. Eyewitness reports are definitely not in the same league as hard evidence, but should not be discounted. Witnesses should be given the opportunity to present their accounts in full, but this information is far more valuable when presented clearly and properly recorded. And in the mean time, we'll keep watching for more tree scratches and footprints - or maybe some elusive "body evidence"...

Interested readers are invited to contact Mike on 0428 530 989 or [hiromike@iprimus.com.au](mailto:hiromike@iprimus.com.au). Confidentiality can be guaranteed.

## *Did you know ...?*

... that one woylie turns over around six tonnes of soil per year while it is digging for edible fungi or burying seeds? Woylies have disappeared from most of our wheatbelt woodlands; is it any wonder that the soil processes - water infiltration, litter decomposition, regeneration etc - are not working well in those woodlands?