

'Big cat' country? New Zealand's obsession with giant feline sightings

Level: Intermediate

1 Warmer

Where in the world do these creatures live? Match each creature to the correct place.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Bigfoot | a. the Himalayas |
| 2. the Loch Ness Monster | b. the seas around Norway and Greenland |
| 3. the Kraken | c. the North American wilderness |
| 4. the Yeti | d. a large lake in Scotland |

2 Key words

a. Match the words in the box to the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

absurd aerial aura disappointing exist expert
feral sighting stocky wholesome wilderness witness

- not as good as you had hoped for or expected _____ (para 1)
- someone who sees something happen _____ (para 1)
- someone or something who is strong but not tall _____ (para 1)
- a quality that seems to surround or come from a person, place or situation _____ (para 1)
- used to describe an animal that lives in a wild state but was once kept as a pet or lived on a farm _____ (para 2)
- taken from the air _____ (para 3)
- a person who knows a lot about a particular subject _____ (para 4)
- an occasion when you see something unusual or something that you have been looking for _____ (para 9)
- an area of land where people do not live and where there are no houses, farms or other buildings _____ (para 9)
- something that has a good influence on people, for example because it does not involve sex or drugs _____ (para 10)
- to be real or to appear in the real world _____ (para 12)
- completely stupid, unreasonable or impossible to believe _____ (para 15)

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b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.

1. The _____ said that she heard gunshots around midnight.
2. He was able to take excellent _____ photos with the new drone.
3. Flying dragons don't really _____.
4. There was an _____ of mystery in the castle library.
5. Of course it's not true – what an _____ idea!
6. Luckily for me, my son-in-law is a computer _____.
7. The wine was excellent, but the food was _____.
8. There's a family of _____ cats living in the old factory.

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- 1 The photograph is disappointing. It shows a dark shape walking up a path in the distance. The size of the creature is hard to work out. The witness, a man named Mark Orr who was out mountain-biking with friends in Hanmer Springs, said the animal was "about knee-height", looked "very strong and quite stocky" and "just had an aura about it".
- 2 An aura. Almost all animals have auras, don't they? Even feral cats, goats, wild pigs. The idea of the aura seemed strange but also interesting. I want to believe.
- 3 The "big cat" is something we've put together with the bits of information we have – distant aerial photos of a creature going up South Island hills; security-camera videos in which a black dot crosses a road while a man shouts, "That's not a cat!"
- 4 The people you'll find in these regions aren't just mystery-animal hunters. They are also animal experts who have been trying to work out what it is that people have been seeing in the New Zealand countryside since the 1960s.
- 5 So far, these experts think that the big cat is probably a feral cat, but an animal expert, James Ross, recently said, "These witnesses, they've seen something. It's different; they're not sure what it is."
- 6 But the witnesses are sure. They know what they saw. "100 per cent not a dog," Orr said. Eyes "the size of 50-cent pieces," said one man, who insists he's seen it twice.
- 7 In October, a possum-hunter in North Canterbury said he'd seen a "monstrous" cat, about the size of a puma, and would never go into the wilderness alone again.
- 8 In 2019, a couple from Picton said they were driving along State Highway 1 at night when a "great, big, huge, black cat" ran across the road in front of them and was lit up by their headlights.
- 9 Whenever there's a new report of a big-cat sighting, many more reports follow. It's as though the big cat brings out something in us, some deep need to rethink what we know of the New Zealand wilderness.
- 10 Nothing brings people together more than a monster mystery. At a time of global chaos and worry, there is something almost wholesome about the idea of the big cat wandering around out there – alone and part of the wilderness.
- 11 Of course, many people laugh at the idea of the big cat. For a long time, I laughed, too. Look at the facts! It isn't eating farm animals. Nobody has found any big-cat droppings, footprints or hair. And New Zealand has strict border controls.
- 12 But now, I am uncertain. "We can't say things don't exist just because we find them hard to believe," said animal expert Darren Naish.
- 13 And isn't there pleasure in not knowing? Many kinds of uncertainty in the world are awful, but this one is fun.
- 14 "These creatures walk among us," one eyewitness from a small South Island town said in 2016.
- 15 I want the big cat to live forever among us, eating whatever it eats, running across dark highways and walking through the snow, a beautiful, absurd message from the New Zealand wilderness.

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3 Comprehension check

Are the statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text? Correct any that are false.

1. Many people think that big cats live all over New Zealand.
2. According to eyewitnesses, the big cat is large, thin and about the size of a lion.
3. Experts have found droppings, footprints and hair that probably belong to the big cat.
4. One farmer said that the big cat has been eating his farm animals.
5. Most experts believe the big cat is really just a large feral cat.
6. An animal expert says that we should not say things don't exist just because we find them hard to believe.
7. The author believes that the big cat exists but hopes that it doesn't.
8. The author says having something mysterious to think about allows people to stop thinking about bad things that are happening in the world.

4 Using key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with the words in the right-hand column to make collocations from the text.

- | | |
|-------------|------------|
| 1. aerial | a. chaos |
| 2. border | b. camera |
| 3. global | c. highway |
| 4. security | d. photo |
| 5. state | e. control |

b. Use the collocations to complete these sentences.

1. Coronavirus caused _____ in 2020.
2. The managers looked at an _____ of the new factory area.
3. The roads department is responsible for looking after the _____.
4. Many countries introduced strict _____ during the pandemic.
5. We have bought a new _____ to protect our house.

c. Choose three collocations that you would like to use and write a personalized sentence for each.

5 Discussion

- Do you believe that the New Zealand big cat or the other creatures in task 1 exist?
- Have you heard about any other mythical creatures? Do you hope or believe any of them might really exist? Explain why.
- What do you think the author means when she says that 'Nothing brings people together like a monster mystery'? Do you agree with her?

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6 In your own words

- a. You have been asked to join an expedition to look for one of the following creatures. Choose the expedition you would like to join, and write a list of things to take with you.
- New Zealand's big cat
 - the Yeti
 - the Loch Ness Monster
 - Bigfoot
 - the Kraken
- b. Read your list to another student and give reasons why you have included each of the things.
- c. Write about the moment on your expedition when you had a sighting of the creature.