

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

**Level:** Advanced

### 1 Warmer

Where in the world do people go to search for these mythical creatures? 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.

absurd      aura      blob      credible      cryptid      feral  
frenzy      paranormal      poignant      stocky      uncannily      wholesome

- something that seems to have no definite shape \_\_\_\_\_
- someone or something who is strong but not tall \_\_\_\_\_
- a quality that seems to surround or come from a person, place or situation \_\_\_\_\_
- used to describe an animal that lives in a wild state but was once kept as a pet or lived on a farm \_\_\_\_\_
- used to describe a creature whose existence is not confirmed, such as the Yeti \_\_\_\_\_
- unable to be explained by science and therefore mysterious \_\_\_\_\_
- a period of great energy and activity \_\_\_\_\_
- considered to have a good influence on people, for example because it does not involve sex or drugs \_\_\_\_\_
- giving you feelings of sadness \_\_\_\_\_
- in a strange and mysterious way \_\_\_\_\_
- able to be believed or trusted \_\_\_\_\_
- completely stupid, unreasonable or impossible to believe \_\_\_\_\_

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

1. I don't think I believe him. His excuse is just not \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Since her husband died, Christmas had become a \_\_\_\_\_ time for Margaret.
3. The man in the photo looked \_\_\_\_\_ like my Uncle Frank.
4. There was an \_\_\_\_\_ of mystery in the castle library.
5. Of course it's not true – what an \_\_\_\_\_ idea.
6. The plane looked like a tiny white \_\_\_\_\_ in the sky.
7. The politician is hoping that his \_\_\_\_\_ image will appeal to voters.
8. I've heard that there's a family of \_\_\_\_\_ cats living in the old factory.

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***Is there a pleasure in not knowing if the decades-old mystery about a cat prowling the country's South Island is fact or fiction?***

**Ashleigh Young**

**13 November, 2020**

- 1 The photograph is disappointing. It shows a dark blob striding up a leafy trail in the distance. The size of the creature is hard to work out, though the witness, an osteopath 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. While the mention of the aura seemed strange, it was also compelling. I want to believe.
- 3 The "big cat" is something we've pieced together with the scraps of information we have at hand – distant aerial shots of a creature seeming to slither up South Island hillsides; security-camera footage in which, after several boring minutes, a black dot finally darts over a road; men yelping incredulously, "That's not a cat!" as a cat lopes through the snow.
- 4 The people you'll find in these regions aren't just cryptid hunters and bloggers of the paranormal. They are also ecologists, conservationists and other experts who have been trying to figure out what it is that people have been seeing around the New Zealand countryside since the 1960s.
- 5 So far, none of these experts are convinced that the big cat is anything but a feral cat, but the ecologist James Ross recently told RNZ that, despite his scepticism, "Definitely, they've seen something. It's different; they're not sure what it is."
- 6 But these 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 The reports have come from places such as Cromwell, Ashburton, Twizel and Marlborough. 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 bush 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" bounded 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, a small frenzy of further reports aren't far behind. It's as though the big cat unleashes something in us, some deep need to shake up what we think we know about the New Zealand wilderness.
- 10 Nothing unites a people like a long-running monster mystery, and at a time of global chaos and despair, there is something almost wholesome about the idea of the big cat ambling around out there; something poignant, too, in its utter solitude and otherness in this landscape.
- 11 Of course, the big cat also unleashes lots of loud laughing from non-believers. For a long time, I laughed, too. Look at the facts! This thing isn't eating farm animals. Investigators haven't found any droppings, footprints or hair that could belong to it. And New Zealand has strict border controls.
- 12 But my laughter has begun to ring hollow. I admit, I am uncertain. "Bigfoot might be ridiculous, but we can't reject phenomena just because we find it hard to believe," said zoologist Darren Naish.
- 13 And while it's true that at least some of these reports, surely, are a case of people seeing what they want to see – I am reminded of Sir Edmund Hillary's search for the Yeti, the artist's impression of which looked uncannily like Sir Edmund himself – some of the reports just feel too credible.
- 14 And isn't there pleasure in not truly knowing? Many kinds of uncertainty in the world are awful, but this one is a delight.
- 15 "These creatures walk among us," one eyewitness from a small Canterbury town intoned in 2016.
- 16 I want the big cat to live forever among us, eating whatever it eats, bounding across dark highways and slinking through the snow, a beautiful, absurd, jet-black coded message of the New Zealand wilderness.

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### 3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Where does the big cat supposedly live?
2. Describe what the big cat looks like according to eyewitness accounts.
3. What reasons does the article give to support the non-existence of the big cat?
4. What do most experts believe the big cat really is?
5. What does one zoologist say about people's dismissal of the big cat?
6. What reasons does the author give for hoping that the big cat really does exist?

### 4 Using key language

a. Find and underline these phrases in the article.

1. at hand
2. shake up
3. long-running
4. ring hollow
5. a case of

b. Talk about what the phrases mean. Look up the meanings of any you do not know.

c. Use the phrases to complete these sentences.

1. The new president plans to \_\_\_\_\_ the healthcare system.
2. Her repeated promises that things will get better have started to \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Let's turn our attention to the task \_\_\_\_\_ and not worry about what other people might do.
4. It wasn't him. It was \_\_\_\_\_ mistaken identity.
5. She has a \_\_\_\_\_ battle with her neighbours about the height of her cherry tree.

d. Choose the three phrases that are likely to be the most useful for you, 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 there is 'pleasure in not truly knowing' whether these creatures really exist? 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 items.
- c. Write a fictional account describing the moment on your expedition when you had a sighting of the creature you were searching for.