

**Date and Time:** Saturday September 14 2012 1:25 -- 7:35 pm

**Weather:** Pr 10mm; RH 66%; BP 102.3 kPa; sun/cloud; calm; T 20° C

**Activity:** Donors' Picnic and walkabout, all watched by a Cougar (possibly)

We received five visitors on site today who were not only donors to the Thames Talbot Land Trust, but old friends. For the Record: Doug Mitchell (artist), Maria Gitta (university administrator), Alan Beck (former Head of Geology at UWO), Jamie Beck (IBM analyst), and Aija Downing (retired computer scientist). Being more of a social event than an onsite project, we went for a paddle in the river, then walked the main trail. The weather was spot-on glorious, with shafts of golden sunlight splattering on leaves in the deep forest and almost fall-like air.



Dappling sunlight camouflages picnickers to the point of anonymity.

We followed the exercise with a picnic that lingered into the evening, everyone being glued to the pleasure of it all. Pat and I packed up at the end.

The day was overshadowed somewhat by the news that a cougar had been sighted crossing Highway Two the evening before. During the picnic, I caught the odd nervous glance over a shoulder or two. Might it be here, watching us?

## **Cougar Report:**

The following information was gathered by Darren Jacobs last Friday. A fuller report will follow, once we have interviewed Ms Martin:

At approximately 9:20 pm on the evening of Friday, September 13, Arlene Martin and her mother were driving from London to their home at Moraviantown, when a very large cat crossed in front of them from a ravine south of the road. Ms Martin claimed that the animal was about the height of her hips, was a tan colour, and had a very long tail. It was not running as fast as a deer would, crossing the path of her vehicle. In fact, for a split second she thought it *was* a deer, only to realize that the body was too low, in short, catlike. Both mother and daughter saw the animal clearly in the headlights, about 35 m ahead of them. Darren locates the ravine at Battle Hill, about 6 km east of Wardsville and 9 km from Newport Forest.

I first became interested in the subject of Cougars during the three-year all-season study we carried out at the Kirk-Cousins Natural Area (aka "A'nowaghi" or Place of the Turtles) in the late 1990s. The site is just south of London, being a complex of kettle ponds associated with the Westminster Moraine. In late winter of 1998 we photographed the tracks of a large felid in a snow-covered field south of the parking lot. The tracks measured a good 11 cm wide and had the distinctly felid pattern of heel and toe pads. (no claws, no X-crossing between toes) I showed the prints to Davison Ankney, well known wildlife biologist, who remarked after examining the prints carefully, "What else can they be, but cougar tracks?"

Since that time I have catalogued some 50 sightings (three rejected as misinterpretations) and carried out 14 personal interviews of eyewitnesses. About 20 percent of the sightings appear to involve all-black (melanistic) animals. Early on, there was considerable scepticism about wild cougars, especially in the offices of the London Free Press, where reporter Joe Belanger had to endure the snickers of colleagues who followed the then-official line that no such population existed in Ontario. Since that time the MNR has revised its opinion. At the Peterborough Conference of the Ontario Puma Foundation on May 25-29 2007, I gave a paper that used a statistical approach to estimate populations based on human-animal interactions. The method (deliberately conservative) produced an estimate between 17.3 and 41.5 (this is math, remember) animals in Ontario. Perhaps the most intensive burst of sightings (sometimes called a "flap") took place at Moraviantown between November 2 and 12 in 2002 and involving two tan cougars. I covered three sightings, all apparently genuine, one very close to the witness.

Black animals have been sighted at least twice from the Fleming Line near Newport Forest, the climax coming on Tuesday April 10 2007, when George Nicholas of the Oneida First Nation and I were working on the trail in Bluebell Woods. We came out into the Lower Meadow for a break in mid-afternoon and instantly spotted a large black animal descending the road into the Lower Meadow about 200 m away. George has hunting experience and knows something about the relative sizes of distant animals. “Look,” he said. “It’s a cat! A *big* cat!” The animal’s gait was distinctly catlike, with rolling shoulders, as it picked its way down the hill. As soon as it spotted us, it flashed into the Gallery Forest and was gone.

### IMAGES:



This image, taken by a trail cam in Montana (*Field & Stream*, April 14 2009), was captioned “Dead deer walking”. However, it shows a Cougar and a White-tail Deer in the same image, enabling one to compare them. in terms of relative size and coat colour.



Scat found on the bank of Fleming Creek on May 27, 2012 looked like human feces, with a maximum thickness of about 2.5 cm in diameter, but filled with bone-chips and self-grooming hair (not human, right?). At first I thought the chips were bits of eggshell but an HCl test proved them to be bone, possibly cranial bones from a Wild Turkey. When the scat had dried sufficiently, I dissected one of the stools completely.

Having examined scat of many types over the years, the following animals can be eliminated on the basis of scat characteristics: Red Fox, Coyote, Black Bear, and Timber Wolf. As Dave Ankney might say, “What else can it be?” And, yes. It’s a match with images of real cougar scat.

Still fresh-looking, the stools have been there long enough to attract some Silphid Beetles. Strangely, the scat had almost no odor, even when fresh.