

BOOK REVIEW

Mystery Cats of the World Revisited: Blue Tigers, King Cheetahs, Black Cougars, Spotted Lions, and More by Karl P. N. Shuker. Anomalist Books, 2020. 397 + xv pp. \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-949501-17-9.

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Chicago, Illinois

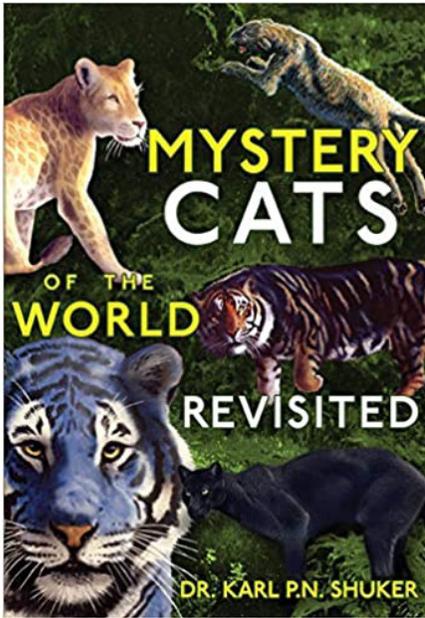
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At long last, after 31 years, the first book by noted British zoologist and cryptozoologist Karl Shuker has been expanded and updated. *Mystery Cats of the World* first appeared in 1989 and was the only book to review feline cryptids worldwide. In this 2020 edition, Shuker repeats this admirable achievement, and in the process gives us a solid overview of current knowledge of felid evolution, taxonomy, and genetic variation. In fact, the only feline mystery cat he does not describe is Hello Kitty. This edition will leave you purring with cryptozoological delight.

Shuker has more than kept up with cryptozoology over the years, keeping the public informed with numerous popular books on dragons, new and rediscovered animals, the Loch Ness monster, and many other lesser-known cryptids. His *ShukerNature* blog (2009 to present) and his regular “Alien Zoo” column in *Fortean Times* provide an always-fascinating glimpse into ongoing cryptozoological controversies.

Scientific names and genetic relationships are updated throughout the text in this new edition. He notes that since 1989, our understanding of genes that cause variations in felid coat color has become more complicated. For example, the chinchilla mutation in tyrosinase was then considered responsible for “partial albino” tigers (white tigers with black stripes). In 2020, a point mutation in a transporter protein that prevents the manufacture of pheomelanin (red and yellow pigments)



(Cover illustration by William Rebsamen)

is seen as a more likely cause. Rather than go into great detail about these ongoing discoveries, Shuker sensibly opts to include the bare minimum of updated felid genetics in his discussions of specific cryptids. However, for clarity and comparison he provides a table from the first edition that describes the six major genes and their mutant alleles that in the 1970s were thought by UK geneticist Roy Robinson (1978) to be responsible for major cat color morphs. (Believe me, this chart comes in handy throughout the book.)

With regard to current thinking on evolution, some authorities suspect modern felids are not necessarily descended from fossil nimravids (saber-tooth cats of the early Oligocene), as Shuker states, but Feliform taxonomy is in a constant state of flux. The next 20 years will undoubtedly see the emergence of new fossils and phylogenetic relationships.

Illustrations that appeared on glossy paper in the first edition have been moved into the text and reduced in size without, in most cases, any serious loss of resolution. This is an effective way to reduce costs, allow for many additional graphics, and reserve space for more content. The only serious case of unfortunate downsizing occurs on page 4, where a chart comparing dog and cat tracks has been minimized to a level requiring a magnifying glass.

The book is arranged into seven geographical chapters (and an eighth with conclusions and thoughts on cryptid conservation), followed by three appendices. In the following sections of this review, I will list the primary cryptids he describes to give a flavor of the diversity of animals included, with an emphasis on the updates to the first edition for comparison.

But first, I must mention one major bibliographic irritant. Shuker has taken the numbered endnotes from the first edition and transferred them to an unsorted, unalphabetized bibliography “in the order that they are first referenced” in each chapter, adding in new resources used in the current edition. The ostensible reason for this is given as “ease of direct cross-referencing between main text and bibliography.” This is a tremendous disservice to the reader, who may not want to follow along in the bibliography to keep track of his place in the text. Granted, authors’ names have been added in the text to make this slightly easier, but this just adds an unnecessary hurdle to fact-checking or follow-up. It would have been much more user-friendly to put the entries in alphabetical order by author, perhaps subdividing them by subtopics within each chapter.

The formatting of the index is a lesser annoyance, with page numbers wrapping flush left and interrupting a visual vertical scan of the entries, although this is the fault of the publisher, not the author.

GREAT BRITAIN

Shuker chooses to review primarily the same cases of British mystery pumas, lionesses, and lynxes that he focused on in the first edition, although numerous sightings (some with photos and video footage) have occurred since. The more recent cases do not really add much to the evidence, and in any case Shuker has described them in a chapter of his in-print book *Cats of Magic, Mythology, and Mystery* (2012). There is a new section on Isle of Wight mystery cats, and Shuker discusses the 1995 official UK government report on alleged mystery cats seen on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall (Baker & Wilson, 1995). The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food concluded that, though tracks found were from domestic cats and a dog, it could not disprove the presence of a much larger cat and that there seemed to be no significant threat to livestock.

Shuker has enhanced his multicausal solution for British big cats that he outlined in the first edition. In addition to sightings of domestic feral cats (*Felis catus*), Scottish wildcats (*F. silvestris silvestris*) outside their official range, escaped or released exotic cats (pumas, black leopards, and lions), and a handful of non-felids like dogs, he

now accepts the possibility of a lingering population of Eurasian lynxes (*Lynx lynx*), which supposedly died out in Britain 1,300 years ago. He finds no evidence for an unknown large felid species in the UK.

Since the first edition, the Kellas cat has been formally identified as a black-coated hybrid strain of Scottish wildcat and domestic cat. Shuker notes this and suggests that two black “rabbit-headed cats” shot in Scotland could be Kellas cats. He also speculates that these hybrids could have a long pedigree; Highland folklore about a black “fairy cat” (*cait sìth*) matches the description of a Kellas cat down to its white primary guard hairs.

IRELAND AND CONTINENTAL EUROPE

In this chapter, Shuker sorts through the myriad forms of European (*F. silvestris*) and African (*F. lybica*) wildcats, their recently simplified taxonomies, and how they might fit in with sightings of a Kellas-like black cat (*F. daemon*) reported in the South Caucasus and a now-forgotten small South African black cat (*F. obscura*) described in 1834. Still puzzling is the wildcat of Corsica (known locally as a “cat-fox”), first identified in 1929 and now considered a domestic cat variety introduced to the island in Roman times like its counterpart in Sardinia. But wildlife officials on Corsica analyzed fur from this felid in 2012 and found that its DNA was similar to an African wildcat.

Shuker also offers new information on the alleged Irish wildcat, including two 21st-century sightings and fossils of European wildcats in Ireland dating to as recently as 3,000 years ago. In addition, he records:

Evidence that cave lions (*Panthera spelaea*) and scimitar cats (*Homotherium*) persisted into the late Pleistocene.

A new report of a juvenile black panther (a melanistic leopard, *P. pardus*), undoubtedly a released pet, seen and captured in Armentières, Nord, France, in September 2019, then subsequently stolen from the pen where it was being held in the Maubeuge city zoo.

A mention of the Beast of Gévaudan, France (Shuker, 2016), responsible for some 100 human deaths in the 1760s, which a new book by Karl-Hans Taake (2015) identifies as a juvenile lion (*P. leo*). However, Shuker favors the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) hypothesis, perhaps an import specially trained by notorious local

man Jean Chastel, in combination with predations by wolves (*Canis lupus*), as suggested by historian Jay M. Smith (2011) and other researchers.

ASIA

Unrecognized color variations seem to be a primary puzzlement for feline cryptids in Asia, although there may be a few undiscovered species as well. Shuker covers the genetic ins and outs of white, white stripeless, golden tabby, red, and brown stripeless color morphs of the tiger (*P. tigris*). He offers new information on the elusive blue tiger of South China, whose pelt may be due to a combination of double-recessive genes similar to those seen in the Maltese domestic cat. He provides extensive documentation on black tigers—both those with abnormally dark background coloration (melanistic) and those with abnormally widened black stripes (pseudo-melanistic)—and lays out new material on black tigers in ancient China and recent instances of pseudo-melanistic and partially black individuals killed in the wild or born in zoos.

Other Asian cat anomalies include:

A new single report of a tiger with a green background color in Vietnam.

Possible survival of the Bali and Javan tiger populations.

Updated taxonomy for the Iriomote cat of the Yaeyama islands of Japan, discovered in 1965 and now considered a subspecies of leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis iriomotensis*).

A possible variety of clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) on Iriomote island.

A few unrecognized leopard colorations.

Shuker also describes a clowder of mystery cats that are new to this edition, among them a blue-spotted cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) kept by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir in 1608; a 16th-century painting of a striped king cheetah morph in India (described completely in an appendix that reprints his 2013 article on the topic in the *Journal of Cryptozoology*); the elusive *pogeyan* of the Western Ghats, India; a

supposed saber-tooth cat in China; the striped *seah malang poo* of Thailand; a short-tailed variant of the Asian golden cat (*Catopuma temminckii*) in Sumatra; and a horned cat from the Lesser Sunda Islands.

AFRICA

Africa seems to have a greater number of cat cryptids than any other continent. Shuker provides updated information on the king cheetah (cream-colored fur with blotchy spots and three dark stripes from neck to tail) of southern Africa. At one time it was thought to be a separate species, but since 2012 it has been recognized as a genetic mutation caused by reinforcement of a recessive allele. However, its multiple distinctions in pelage from normal cheetahs, as well as its forest habitat and nocturnal behavior, could mean (as Lena Bottriell suspects [1987]) that the king cheetah is in the process of becoming a new species through environmental adaptation. Shuker makes note of a possible king cheetah variety that once existed in Tanzania.

Shuker also lists some apparent cheetah genetic morphs, such as a small-spotted woolly variety in South Africa, a finely speckled version in Tanzania that he calls the “cheetaline,” melanistic specimens, and a pale desert variety in the Qattara region of Egypt. All these are considered odd for a cat whose genetics are less varied than other species.

Shuker provides further information on the well-established spotted lion or *marozi* of the Aberdare Range in Kenya (and possibly other regions), known from pelts, observations, and indigenous lore. He favors a separate race or subspecies of lion. He also provides updated news on leucistic white lions observed in the wild and on game preserves; mostly photoshopped pictures of black lions; a supposed green lion from Uganda; rare melanistic African leopards (although these are common in Asia); and the *chakpuar* of Senegal, said to look like a lion with red fur and a long neck.

Also in this chapter we find further ruminations on the mysterious *mngwa* or *nunda* of Tanzania, a gray-striped, donkey-sized, purring felid allegedly responsible for human maulings in the 1930s. Shuker suggests as candidates an outsized African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*), a maneless buffalo lion akin to the famous Tsavo lions of 1898, or even violent young men dressed up as lions who thus attribute their murders to man-killing mystery cats.

Further felids:

Expanded evidence for existing or formerly existing striped cats (tigers) in south and east Africa.

Mountain tigers and water lions in central Africa with large teeth that, Shuker speculates following Bernard Heuvelmans (2007), could represent surviving machairoidontid saber-tooth cats.

A new section on the *fitoaty*, a mysterious black wildcat of Madagascar that recent research suggests is taxonomically different from the island's known feral cats.

NORTH AMERICA

As the archetypal North American cat, the puma (*Puma concolor*) holds a central place among the continent's mystery cats. Eastern pumas are now no longer considered a subspecies, and in 2018 they were declared extinct, having been classified as endangered since 1973—even though alleged puma sightings in the Eastern states continue to be reported. Are they stragglers from the west or a breeding population?

Reports of black pumas, or other melanistic large cats, from 2012 to 2020 appear in an extensive appendix compiled from the *ShukerNature* blog. As with the British mystery cats, Shuker declines to mention recent sightings in the main part of the text because they are so similar to reports documented in the first edition. He once again lists the major candidates for black panther sightings—the cat-like fisher (*Pekania penanti*), black feral domestic cats, the jaguarundi (*Herpailurus* or *Puma yagouaroundi*), a melanistic bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), melanistic pumas (including some recent specimens), melanistic leopards, or melanistic jaguars (*P. onca*). He suspects the explanation for black pumas is multicausal but involves melanism in several species, as proposed by Mark Mayes (2018), especially for reports in Texas and the South.

Shuker next examines recent reports of maned mystery lions in the U.S. and suggests three explanations: large dogs, African lion escapees or releases, and possibly a surviving fossil American lion (*P. atrox*), as advocated by Loren Coleman (1980). However, he points out that morphological and behavioral attributes make the latter hypothesis somewhat untenable.

Other cryptids include a single new report from Tennessee in 1996 of a cheetah-like cat with a red head and paws, a red dorsal stripe from its head to its tail, and a golden-brown body with black stripes and spots; some improbable rumors of a living saber-tooth cat (*Smilodon fatalis*) in the American Southwest; North Carolina's mystery felid, the "Santer," from the 1890s; and a folkloric assortment of unlikely feline wowzers, wampus cats, glawackuses, splinter cats, cactus cats, and Ozark howlers.

MEXICO, CENTRAL, AND SOUTH AMERICA

Shuker provides an update on the *onza*, a puma-like felid with long limbs and a slender body from Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental range, for which there is some physical evidence in the form of skulls, pelts, and one complete specimen. The latter turned out to be a genuine puma, although the results of this analysis had not been released when this book's first edition was published. Shuker writes that this does not negate the possibility of a real *onza* living in the wild, which could represent a puma color morph, a puma subspecies, or a completely new species, such as a surviving American cheetah (*Miracinonyx trumani*).

Other Central American cat cryptids include the Aztec "wolf-cat" reportedly seen in Moctezuma II's zoo; Christopher Columbus's fearsome ape-faced cat; and the Nayarit ruffed cat, two pelts of which zoologist Ivan T. Sanderson (1973) once obtained and which apparently is represented in Aztec and Mayan carvings.

South American mystery cats include several unrecognized jaguar varieties (albino or leucistic "ghost" jaguars) and the *jaguarete* (dark on top with white underparts), which Shuker suggests could be a black-and-tan or pseudo-melanistic jaguar morph or even a rare melanistic puma.

New cryptids in this edition are the *yana puma*, an entirely black puma morph of great size found in the Peruvian highlands; the *onça-canguçú*, a black jaguar with a white collar and a tufted leonine tail tip; a large gray jaguar with solid black speckles; a brown "rock jaguar"; and a red jaguar known from only one account in Brazil.

Shuker provides updates on a wide assortment of miscellaneous felids:

Siemel's mystery cat in Brazil's Mato Grosso, which seems to be a puma with brown spots and a dark stripe across its spine, possibly a puma x leopard hybrid.

The *warracaba* of Guyana, a jaguar that hunts in packs.

The dog-like *mitla* of Bolivia.

Various pack-hunting mystery cats of Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador.

A white-coated cat with solid black spots from Ecuador.

A tapir-hunting, semi-aquatic, dark-gray cat with massive paws.

A black rainbow tiger with multicolored stripes on its chest.

A striped tiger in Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador, as well as a Venezuelan cat known as the *wairarima*, any of which could represent a surviving saber-tooth (*Smilodon*).

A handful of puma-sized, shaggy-haired, amphibious "water tigers" variously known as *iemisch*, *yaquaru*, *entzaeia-yawá*, *maipolina*, or *chongonga*. Shuker considers the possibility these could represent a saber-tooth adapted to aquatic life, perhaps analogous to the water lions of Africa.

AUSTRALASIA

Shuker offers little new information on the Queensland marsupial tiger except to refer to new books by Tony Healy and Paul Cropper (1994), and Malcolm Smith (1996), and his own updated 2016 volume. After considering whether the tiger could be a surviving dog-like thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) and reviewing the status of its persistence on the mainland, Shuker turns to his favored explanation, a surviving form of the marsupial lion (*Thylacoleo*), whose fossils are found throughout the continent.

Tawny-colored pumas and black panthers continue to be seen in Western Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria. Among Shuker's candidates to explain these sightings are a novel strain of giant black feral domestic cat for which there is some recent evidence, and one tantalizing report from 1961 involving a black panther with a pouched cub, suggesting a marsupial classification. He has also found that some scientific laboratories might be deliberately misidentifying cat fur and scat as canine, further muddying the trail of evidence.

New in this edition is a section on the shaggy-maned mystery lion of the Blue Mountains known to local Aboriginal Australians as the *warragal*. Shuker agrees with cryptozoologist Rex Gilroy (2006) that it could represent another form of *Thylacoleo* species differing in character from the Queensland tiger.

A new section on New Guinea mystery cats includes one recent sighting of a striped cat, and a final section reviews the rare, if real, mystery cats of New Zealand and Hawaii.

SUMMARY

Shuker sums it all up in a final chapter in which he concludes there are three types of modern-day mystery cats: species unknown to science; unrecorded morphs or non-taxonomic forms of known species; and known species occurring in unexpected localities.

In a plea to fellow researchers, Shuker looks toward the future of this specialized form of natural history:

It is time for cryptozoology to come of age. It continues to gain interest and respect, but it must now accept a major responsibility too. No longer should it be content merely to seek out new animals, it must also ensure that its discoveries are conserved and perpetuated, otherwise its goals will be meaningless, its ideals empty.

Finally, he quotes the late cryptozoologist Lionel Beer, who advised: "Take only memories, leave only footprints, kill only time."

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