

NORTH JERSEY

Experts: Cougars only inhabit NJ bars

But locals contend they've seen mountain lions with their own eyes

BY SID JOHNSTON
Staff Writer

It looks like the viral cougar photos that have been circulating around residents' e-mail boxes in North Jersey have finally been tracked down.

Christopher Spatz, the president of the Eastern Cougar Foundation (ECF), a national organization tracking cougar sightings in the East, contacted *Suburban Trends* after reading the original cougar article investigating the photo's authenticity published on Jan. 6. Spatz said that the ECF tracked the photos to a motorcycle fan forum named Hayubusa.org.

The forum has the cougar photos dated from Nov. 23, 2009, and the forum poster named "Takeuon" claims that his uncle took the photos in Conifer, Co., approximately 23 miles southwest of Denver. The original forum post can be viewed online at hayubusa.org/forum/random-thoughts/121383-colorado-kittys-want-pet-them-pics.html.

The fact that these photos have been dated before the initial claims should leave no doubt where they originated from, but the photos continue to make their rounds and change locations in a "telephone game" scenario. The photos have ended up in more residents' mailboxes, claiming that they were taken in Wantage on Jan. 7 after the snowstorm.

The newspaper's investigation tracked down Alicia Stillman, who works in Parsippany, as the recent circulator of the Wantage claim. When asked where she received the photos from, Stillman said her friends, who remain unnamed, claimed to have taken the pictures in their yard. But she now knows the photos are a hoax.

Stillman's friends "were playing a joke and claimed to have seen large cats on their property, but these are not their pictures," Stillman said. "It was originally forwarded to them from their family in Pennsylvania, and the cars in the photographs have Colorado plates on them."

Michele Mitchell of Mendham received the Wantage cougar claims, and wasn't too happy to find out that the photos were a hoax.

"That's pretty irritating," Mitchell said. "I was all over this because my mother's house backs a nature preserve (in Sussex County) and she walks the trails



PHOTO COURTESY OF BUCKMANAGER.COM

This photo of a cougar carrying off a deer was claimed to be from Port Murray last year after being posted on Gunks.com. The photo was traced back to southern Texas and is another example of a hoax photograph.

daily, having numerous bear encounters, and this just sent me through the roof."

However, some residents in the area are adamant that mountain lions are in the area. Ken Gilliam, a Pequannock resident who used to live in the Upper Greenwood Lake section of West Milford, alleges that he saw a mountain lion on a rock ledge back in April 2006 on East Shore Road in Greenwood Lake around one mile north of the Monkville reservoir in Ringwood while he was fishing.

"I heard this roaring, and when I went to investigate it, I saw the mountain lion," Gilliam said. "I know what I saw; it had a long tail and was very large."

Gilliam reported the sighting to the local police, who according to him, didn't seem too interested in his claims. Gilliam said he knows the difference between a cougar and another large cat, like a bobcat, saying that he has been out to Montana hunting in the past, and has seen cougars in their native habitat.

Timothy King, a hunter in the Haskell section of Wanaque, is also convinced that mountain lions are in the area, after finding evidence that made him a believer.

"I was hunting in April 2009 and found a mountain lion footprint while I was wandering around in northern New Jersey," King said. "I know what I saw, and this was the real deal."

King said that he has talked to people he quoted as "credible sources" claiming that mountain lions are in the area. He has heard stories of people on Larsen Drive in West Milford seeing cougars around their house, and he feels that their stories com-



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAYUBUSA.ORG

The viral cougar photos were traced back to a forum called Hayubusa.org, with a Nov. 23, 2009 date on the post. The poster claims that his uncle took the photos in Conifer, Colo., which is approximately 23 miles southwest of Denver.

combined with the footprint he found is evidence enough.

When asked if he had evidence of the puma paw print, King said he took a photo of it. *Suburban Trends* requested a copy of the photo so a biologist could verify it, but as of publication, the newspaper has yet to receive it to verify its legitimacy.

Making sense of the sightings

Spatz, who is originally from Washington in Warren County, said that it isn't the first time the ECF has received "bogus" cougar photos, referencing a picture taken in Southern Texas of a cougar with a freshly killed deer that was part of a mountain lion hoax that made its way east last year.

"A rock climber from Andover posted it to Gunks.com saying a friend from Port Murray outside

of Washington in Warren County took the picture on his cell phone," Spatz said.

The ECF has spent roughly 10 years investigating sightings from Nova Scotia to Georgia, and in this time, the ECF couldn't produce one cougar confirmation, Spatz said. This included a camera study in High Point State Park in Montague from 2006 to 2007, which showed no evidence of pumas, Spatz said.

"We realized that 'incidental evidence' like road kill, trappings, shootings, pumas run up trees by a hounds hunter, wandering into towns or cities, and random camera pictures appear even with the very low densities of cougars moving into the Midwest and Louisiana from the Dakotas and Texas," Spatz said, noting that this evidence should be turning up if cougars were in the East.

Spatz said that "there's an

extraordinary misapprehension with sightings, despite all the 'big cat, long tail' reports," Spatz also said that the ECF's experience has shown that residents sometimes confuse pumas with bobcats, and sometimes even housecats. Spatz further pointed out that the confirmed puma sightings east of the Rockies are always young males, with none of the females needed to create a stable breeding population.

"It's highly unlikely that the cougars will get (to the East) on their own," Spatz said.

Spatz additionally said that there have been cougars that formerly were pets in the East. Spatz explained that half of the confirmations from eastern Canada have shown DNA from Latin America, which points to evidence that cougars were "bred for the exotic pet trade."

"There were more confirma-

tions in the East in the 1990s than there were in the 2000s, suggesting crackdowns on the pet trade may be having an effect on the number of captives and the potential for releases or escapees," Spatz said. "Those do turn up from time to time, and, obviously, can happen anywhere."

Could the cats come back?

The ECF decided to deemphasize its search for cougars 18 months ago and is currently focused on protecting the "recolonizers" in the Midwest and reintroducing the cats to the East. The ECF feels that "apex" predators, like cougars and wolves, are crucial to help regulate the ecosystem from animals like the white-tail deer (*odocoileus virginianus*), Spatz said.

The white-tail deer have made a comeback, which recently has led to a bow hunt in Woodland Park (formerly West Paterson) around Garrett Mountain in an attempt to cull their numbers and has caused a controversy and protests about the methods used to control them.

"If we are to have any chance of stopping the collapse of our eastern forests from white-tail over-browsing, it'll be through reintroductions of wolves and cougars," Spatz said. "The predators won't kill enough to reduce the deer population, but the research shows they alter the way deer and elk browse."

Spatz explained that 25 wolves in the Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming changed the browsing behavior of around 20,000 elk in the first year after their reintroduction, and the area's ecosystem began to recover.

When asked how residents might react to reintroducing cougars back into the area, Spatz said that attacks on humans are rare, with around 111 attacks and 22 deaths in 118 years, and no attacks in Florida, which he said is "the most pressured population of big predators in the world."

"That's a meteor strike probability," Spatz said. "Vehicle collisions with deer kill 200, injure 20,000 and cause more than \$1 billion in property damage each year, outnumbering all other wildlife threats combined."

Spatz said that the fact that cougars are living without incident in the suburbs of California, Colorado, and Florida is what the ECF is using to make the case for restorations in the Midwest and eventually the East.

E-mail: johnston@northjersey.com

KINNELON

Marine who visited students killed in Afghanistan

BY DEBORAH WALSH
Staff Writer

The school community mourns the passing of U.S. Marine Sgt. Christopher Hrbek, who was killed in action in Afghanistan last Thursday.

Sgt. Hrbek, 25, was killed when he stepped on an improvised explosive device in the Hamal Province. He is the brother of Lori Hrbek, fourth-grade teacher at the Stonybrook School. Hrbek invited her brother in to speak to Stonybrook students. He had visited the school several times, the last time being last November before his fourth deployment.

James Opiekun, superintendent of schools, relayed the somber news to the school board at its Jan. 14 meeting.

"I have some sad news. Back in November, Sgt. Christopher Hrbek, who is the brother of fourth-grade teacher, Lori Hrbek, visited our kids. He's had several tours of duty including in Jordan and Iraq. Lori was notified that her brother was killed in Afghanistan," said Opiekun. "Our sympathies go out to

Lori and her family."

Opiekun said counselors would be made available to the students on Friday.

Jodi Mulholland, principal at Stonybrook School, said a faculty meeting was held to discuss how the matter would be handled. On Friday morning counselors, including the student assistance coordinator, guidance counselors, director of guidance, child study team members, school psychologist, and director of special services were available to the students. The superintendent of schools was also in attendance, she indicated.

"We talked to the kids. It was important for them to know that Ms. Hrbek was OK. We share with the kids what they need to know. I'm sure parents will also speak with them in the sensitive way they choose," said Mulholland. "The support is here for the students and teachers. We're one family here."

According to Mulholland, Sgt. Hrbek was deployed in November for a seven-month tour in Afghanistan. He had already been to Jordan, Greece and Iraq. Sgt. Hrbek spoke to the students about his job and his duties. He told them

about what basic training was like and even led the students in some exercises.

"Lori was so proud of him. He was passionate about the career he chose. He was passionate about serving his country," said Mulholland. "We are so proud of Lori. Our support is here for her. Lori is in charge of our environmental club here. She always gives back to the kids and community. She always looks for ways to help out."

Mulholland said Lori Hrbek would run drives to collect different supplies for the Marines. Students also wrote letters and sent cards to Sgt. Hrbek, she said.

Sgt. Hrbek is a graduate of Westwood High School. He was a volunteer fireman in Westwood.

Mulholland said Sgt. Hrbek was slated to receive a Bronze Star for valor. In a sad coincidence, Hrbek was to receive the Bronze Star for saving the life of his sergeant major who stepped on an IED in December and suffered horrific injuries.

E-mail: walshde@northjersey.com



PHOTO COURTESY OF KINNELON BOARD OF EDUCATION

U.S. Marine Sgt. Christopher Hrbek was killed while serving in Afghanistan last Thursday. His sister, Lori Hrbek, a teacher at Stonybrook Elementary School in Kinnelon, had often invited him to her classroom to talk to the students.