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A Creature on the Loose Puts Milwaukee Residents on Edge

By KAY NOLAN and [JULIE BOSMAN](#) JULY 27, 2015



Looking for the animal on Sunday in Milwaukee as the citywide search intensified. A grainy cellphone video has given the animal a Bigfoot-like celebrity. Credit Michael Sears/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, via Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — One man saw the creature for only a few bone-chilling seconds, but he remembers that it was big, with heavy brown fur and a long tail, and not in any particular hurry as it walked through his neighborhood in Milwaukee and then disappeared into a thickly wooded ravine.

A police officer, tracking it the next day, described it as a “catlike animal” that had successfully evaded capture again. And Annie Nolen, a resident of the Brewers Hill neighborhood who spotted the animal slinking along a fence in her backyard, said she was momentarily paralyzed by the sight.

“I couldn’t move,” Ms. Nolen told local reporters later. “I thought, what am I looking at?”

Milwaukee officials are still not sure exactly what kind of animal has been spotted for the last week wandering through densely populated areas of this city, sitting under bridges, darting down hills and casually slinking past parked cars and small bungalows.

It could be a young African lion that was purchased on the open market, kept as a pet and then released when it became too large to handle, one wildlife expert speculated. (Wisconsin state law is notably relaxed on the possession of exotic animals.) Or it could be a cougar, an animal that has been spotted more frequently in populated areas of the Midwest in recent years. [The Milwaukee County Zoo](#) announced last week that all of its lions were safe and accounted for.

Whatever it is, the Milwaukee Lion, as it is now widely known, has captivated this city of 600,000 people, who seem to be alternately amused and panic-stricken by the creature in their midst. A [grainy cellphone video](#) of the animal, taken last week, has given it a Bigfoot-like celebrity, while a citywide search has intensified and expanded, bringing together the Milwaukee Police Department, the state’s Department of Natural Resources and local wildlife officials.

The lion now has a Twitter account, [@Milwaukee Lion](#), and there is a hashtag devoted to it, [#MKELion](#). (Plotting a possible escape to a rural town in the northwoods of Wisconsin, [@Milwaukee_Lion](#) tweeted: “.@Uber_WI How much to go from milwaukee to minoqua i am just wondering.”) It has been jokingly rendered in pictures, Photoshopped with a bright yellow cheesehead perched on its mane and lounging at Miller Park, watching the Brewers play baseball.

But the weeklong hunt for the creature has put some Milwaukeeans on edge. By Monday morning, the police were reporting a sighting along a quiet area of homes near the Milwaukee River. “I’m taking it very seriously,” said Jackie Bradley, a resident who said she had forbidden her three grandchildren to play outside that day. “I have a dog in the back, and I keep going back to check on him and I think I’m going to bring him in. I have a six-foot fence, but I’m worried a lion could jump the fence.”

Laura Hood and her son, Brandon Redd, scanned some nearby shrubbery for any glimpse of the animal before hurrying to their car. “I’m terrified to come out of my house,” Mr. Redd said.

Last week, one man apparently mistook a cream-colored pit bull in his neighborhood for a lion and shot it, [wounding its right leg](#). The dog, who is named Homie and was later reunited with its owner, is expected to recover.

The Milwaukee Police Department received 14 calls throughout the weekend from residents who believed they had spotted the lion, but as of Monday evening, it was still on the loose.

According to some sightings, the animal is said to be accompanied by a smaller lion: Keimarey Evans, 14, said he was sure he saw what looked like a lion cub just a half-block from his Milwaukee home.

“I could see it peeking out of the bushes,” he said.

But some residents were skeptical. “A lion is at the top of the food chain. It’s been a week, and it hasn’t eaten yet?” said Michael Chachere, adding that there should have been sightings of droppings and dead animals, or even a missing child.

Neighborhood violence was a far greater danger than a purported lion, Mr. Chachere said.

“I think it’s a waste of city taxpayers’ money, to be honest,” he said. “That was a lot of manpower that the police used.”

Karen Sparapani, the executive director of the Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal Control Commission, said she accompanied a large police force and five state wardens on a search for the creature last weekend.

They focused their search on a ravine where the animal has been spotted by nearby residents. “Of all the places in Milwaukee it found to hide, it chose a place with fresh running water and abundant wildlife, with coyotes, rabbits and ducks,” she said.

A police officer who spotted the animal is a seasoned hunter who has visited Africa, Ms. Sparapani said, and is convinced that it is a young male African lion. “We think it’s an exotic pet that escaped its housing,” she said.

Jeff Kozlowski, owner of the Wisconsin Big Cat Rescue in Rock Springs, Wis., said that if that was the case, there was little hope of finding the person who lost control of the animal.

“If you had a pet lion and it got out and it was causing this much uproar,” he said dryly, “would you call in and say it was yours?”

Kay Nolan reported from Milwaukee, and Julie Bosman from Chicago.

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