

# Castle stalks black leopard

**T**HERE IS NO camouflage jeep sitting in the driveway and no hi-tech, ultra-violet tracking devices stashed in the corner of the basement. But inside the home in this affluent Birmingham neighborhood lurks a man on the prowl.

John Castle is that man. And he's stalking Michigan's phantom feline: the black leopard.

To some, Castle is little more than a ghost buster. Many people are convinced the reports of sightings of a large panther-like cat are merely from confused individuals who have seen either a black Labrador, a coyote, a feral house cat or a fisher. They remain convinced, in their own minds, there is no large-cat population in Michigan.

But to hundreds of other reputable people who claim to have seen a large black, panther-like cat, Castle is their only link to the bottom of this unsolved mystery.

"I've seen enough reports that I'm convinced we have a small population of breeding black leopards in Michigan," Castle said.

If ANYONE has an inside track on the existence of a black leopard population in Michigan, Castle does.

He has been studying and following up on the reported sightings for 36 years. Since 1980, Castle has been stalking the cats full-time and has traveled thousands of miles and spent thousands of hours investigating the reports.

Castle received his first report of

## outdoors

**BILL**  
Parker

a panther sighting in 1953 while serving as the city editor of the Pontiac Press (now the Oakland Press). Although intrigued by the idea, Castle was skeptical. The sighting was probably that of a cougar under poor lighting conditions. He assumed the cat was probably an escaped pet.

More recently, however, there has been a rash of sightings, centered around a number of reports from Michigan's southern Lower

Peninsula, which began in 1984.

At that time, Castle had recently moved from an executive speech-writing position at General Motors and had the time to spend to seriously investigate the reports.

"In the early '80s I got the drive to get to the bottom of this mystery," said Castle. "I was a newspaperman, so naturally I was skeptical. But the more I've gotten into it, the less skeptical I've become."

ALTHOUGH NO panther, leopard or cougar has yet been caught, killed or otherwise positively identified in Michigan, Castle has gathered enough physical evidence to raise the eyebrows of the most ardent skeptic.

Castle follows up on most sighting reports. He discards many, however, such as "a black cat" and night sightings. He is also very skeptical of reports after an initial report. "Initial reports tend to develop hysteria," he cautions.

Despite the discarded reports, Castle has files and files of reputable reports, including some which even leave the skeptics with unanswered questions.

• Pat Polaron of Clio saw a

panther-like cat on her property 15

different times from 1985-1987.

During that time the remains of a neighbor's pet dog were found wedged in the crotch of a nearby tree. At one point, Polaron snapped a picture of the creature. Although the photograph was a little blurry, David Telfair, leopard trainer at Cedar Point Amusement Park, identified the animal as a black leopard.

• U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Agent Don Burger and a police officer

friend spotted a large cat-like

creature which was lying on a moon-

lit trail in Manchester. Burger re-

turned later with a .30-06 and a

scope, hoping the cat would return.

It did, but Burger couldn't get a

clear shot. "I could see it clear as

day in my scope. It was a black leop-

ard, probably weighing 70 to 75-

pounds," Burger told Castle.

• In July 1986, Selvio Fini, a Mil-

ford farmer whose land borders

Kensington Metropark, found one of

his saddle horses dead in one of his

fields. The neck of the horse had

been ripped open. Following a blood

trail, Fini said he jumped a "huge

black cat" and took a shot at it. Lat-

er that night a Milford police officer

fired two shots at a similar looking

creature.

These reports don't prove any-

thing. But they don't disprove any-

thing either.

CASTLE ALSO has dozens of plas-

tic casts of footprints left in the area

of panther sightings. Some casts leave unanswered questions as to what type of creature actually left the print, but other tracks were undoubtedly left by a large member of the feline family.

Although Castle has concentrated his efforts in Michigan, he has ventured throughout the nation in his pursuit. He has polled every regional wildlife office in the United States and Canada.

"My survey did yield an eye-opening statistic," Castle said. "Twenty-nine states and five Canadian provinces have received black panther reports in the past 10 years. Sightings number in the thousands. Where there are that many tales, there must be panthers."

**CASTLE'S BIGGEST** problem is authenticating the existence of these cats.

"If people see something, they know what they see so they aren't concerned with finding the fresh tracks and making a mold or getting a good picture," said Castle. "People have to understand that if they see something, they must find the trail immediately. They can't wait until tomorrow or all kinds of animals can come through the area and they may never find the correct set of tracks."

Even with tracks and pictures, many people will doubt the existence of black leopards in Michigan.

"The best way to authenticate their existence is to put one up a tree, tranquilize it and cage it," Castle said. "Or if one was killed, either by a hunter or a car, but I don't advocate that and I would hate to see it."

For now, Castle will continue his hunt with hopes of someday hitting the jackpot. But he knows the mystery could go on for years. They have been called the "feline flying saucers," said Castle. "But I've got so many credible reports, I just can't ignore it."

Castle can be reached at 646-0233 or by writing to him at 1909 Latham, Birmingham, 48009.

(Bill Parker is happy to answer questions readers may have regarding the outdoors. Hunters are also urged to report their success. Send your question or comments to: Outdoors, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham 48009.)



BILL BRESSLER/Staff photographer

John Castle believes there is a small population of black leopards residing in Michigan.

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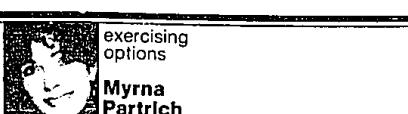
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**Myrna  
Partrich**

## Trying to work out a problem buttock

Dear Myrna: I have a problem buttock area. My butt is flat and sagging, yet it has plenty of fat. Can I help it with exercise?

Many women share this complaint.

Bodies are designed to store fat in these areas, which lose shape quickly. Fortunately, the muscle groups here are also some of the strongest in a woman's body. (I am assuming you are a woman by your handwriting).

Add the right exercise to your workout and you can have well-developed curves in no time. For example:

• On elbows and knees with a rounded back, leg weights around 22 pounds are attached to each leg. Extend one leg back, straight lift only a few inches higher than your butt and down to the floor. Control in each direction, working slowly and breathing. Don't use your back (place yourself in front of a mirror) and concentrate on your butt. Slightly bend your knee set of eight. When this gets easy, add another leg using five pounds.

• Pelvic tilts — on your back, abdominals in tight — squeeze your butt up one inch above the floor. Keep the small of your back on the floor and don't move it. In a rhythmic movement, add variation. Press leg up to ceiling and pump it slowly.

P.S. Don't forget your other areas — abdominals are extremely important to strengthen.

(Myrna Partrich, co-owner of The Workout Company Inc. of Bloomfield Township, is happy to answer any questions readers may have regarding exercise. Please send your letters to: Sports Department, Myrna Partrich, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, Mich. 48009.)