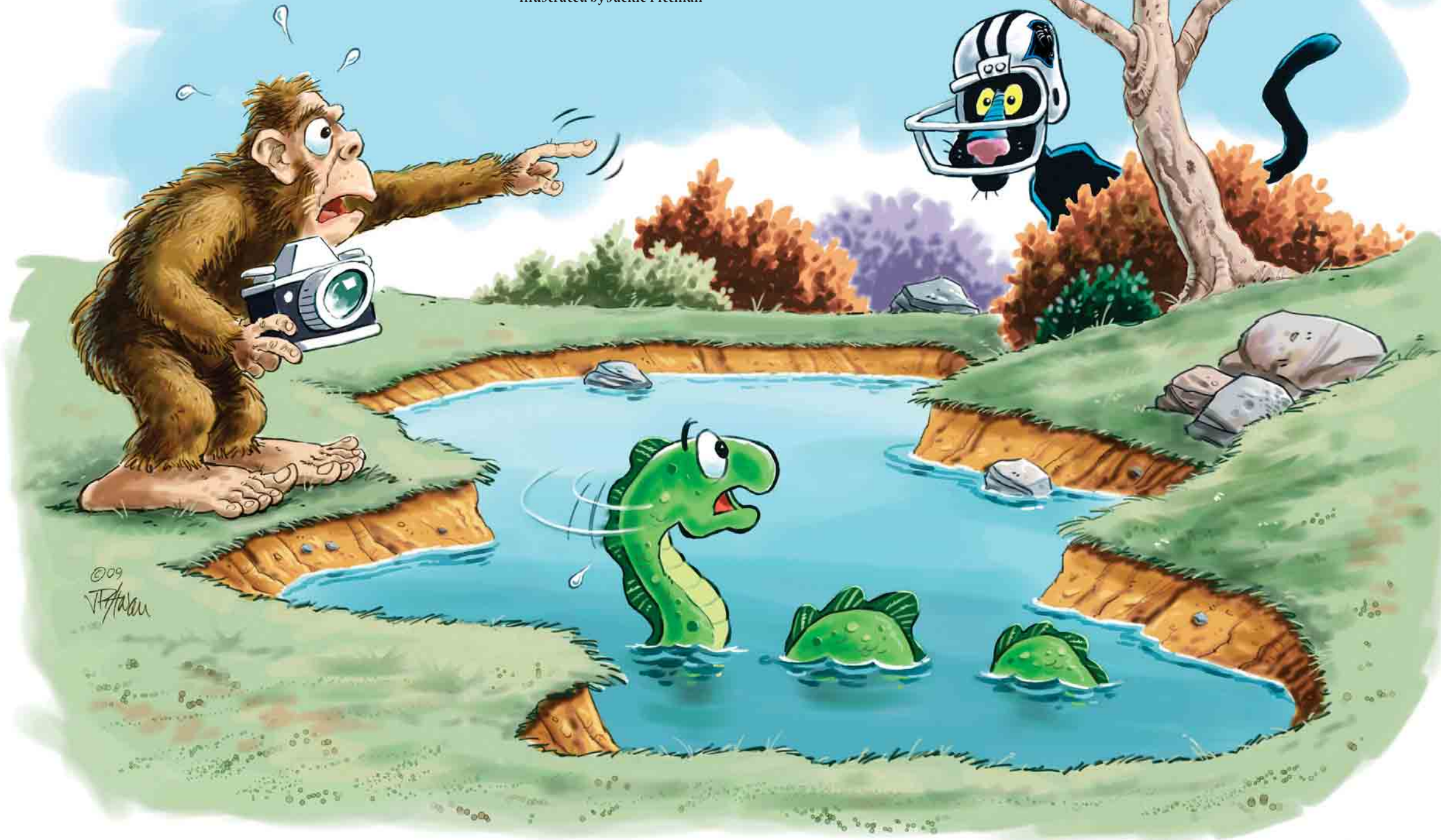


# The TRUTHINESS Problem

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Think you know  
the truth about black wolves,  
mountain lions and  
parachuting rattlesnakes?  
**THINK AGAIN.**

According to comedian Stephen Colbert, truthiness involves things that we claim to know are true without regard to evidence, logic or facts.

In my travels in North Carolina, I have come across all kinds of examples of truthiness in relation to fishing, hunting and wildlife in general. Indeed, well-meaning folks who love the outdoors seem to have a propensity to believe in all sorts of things—beliefs that have no basis in fact.

Deer and turkey enthusiasts are not immune to this affliction. I asked Evin Stanford, who is in charge of managing these two big-game animals for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, to debunk some of the worst examples of truthiness pertaining to whitetails and turkeys.

Belief: Turkeys are so stupid they will look up when it rains and drown.

Fact check: Utterly false, says Stanford.

Belief: Tryptophan is a chemical in turkeys that causes people to become drowsy when they eat the meat from these birds.

Fact check: False. “Although wild turkeys have slightly more tryptophan than domestic turkeys, and tryptophan in high doses can potentially induce drowsiness in people, the amount of tryptophan in turkeys is so low that it cannot have any effect on humans,” says Stanford. “In fact, the amount of tryptophan in wild turkeys is on par with amounts in other foods.” For more information, see [www.nwtf.org/flyinghigh/thanksgiving-tryptophan.html](http://www.nwtf.org/flyinghigh/thanksgiving-tryptophan.html).





**BELIEF:**  
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**FACT CHECK:**  
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Belief: Turkeys eat quail eggs and chicks.  
Fact check: Utterly false, says Stanford.  
Belief: Wild turkeys don't fly.  
Fact check: "As most hunters know, this is false," says Stanford. "And, yes, adult turkeys do roost in trees."  
Beliefs: Gobblers send forth jakes to see if the "coast is clear," and gobblers will crack open hen eggs to make hens want to mate longer in the spring.  
Fact check: False, says Stanford.  
Belief: Only dominant bucks breed.  
Fact check: Though this was once thought to be primarily true, "recent research has shown that even young bucks often participate in breeding activities," emphasizes Stanford. (See Back Porch, Nov. 2009)  
Belief: Once a spike, always a spike.  
Fact check: Utterly false, says Stanford.  
Belief: The moon phase determines the timing of the rut.  
Fact check: "Research indicates that the timing of the rut is determined by the photoperiod—the length of daylight,"

Stanford explains. "The rut often occurs during the same time period each year. If it were driven by moon phase, the timing would vary by as much as a month."  
Lastly, while I was in Alleghany County this past September, a hunter told me that albino deer should not be killed because American Indians held them sacred. It is true that many tribes believed that albino deer and other animals possessed mystical abilities, but is there a biological reason for not shooting an albino deer? The answer, of course, is no.  
"There were many groups of Native Americans across the continent, so it's probably not accurate to lump all of them together and say all groups thought that albino deer were sacred," adds Stanford. "Although I have heard this myth before, I am not sure if it's accurate. There is no biological reason for not shooting an albino deer."

**Coyote Myths**  
Last June in Buncombe County, someone told me that coyotes had eaten all the grouse in the area. At first, I thought I would let this falsehood slide, but I had to ask the following questions: "Do you mean to say that coyotes are entering overgrown thickets, rhododendron and laurel for example, and flushing grouse, or do they point them like bird dogs while other coyotes move in for the kill?"  
Coyotes are not major or even minor predators of ruffed grouse. They are animals primarily of fields, agricultural areas and open woods, and grouse are inhabitants of clearcuts and copses. Perry Sumner, Wildlife Commission Surveys and Research Section manager for the Division of Wildlife Management, says that one of the worst current myths is that the state stocked coyotes, which, of course, it did not.

"Coyotes were here as long ago as the 1950s," says Sumner. "In the western part of the state, they arrived by natural migration. In the eastern part, coyotes were helped along by fox hunters releasing them or by having the animals escape from pens that were designed to keep them in but did not."  
"The interesting thing is that coyotes will kill red foxes if they have the chance. It's a

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territorial kind of thing for the coyotes to do, just as in wolf territory wolves will kill coyotes if they have the opportunity."  
Ironically, says Colleen Olfenbittel, the commission's bear and furbearer biologist, the coyotes' penchant to kill red foxes means that they have targeted one of the major predators of ruffed grouse, as well as of quail and rabbits.

**Rattlesnake and Wolf Myths**  
The perverse belief that the Wildlife Commission secretly stocks certain animals is not restricted to coyotes. Numerous times, not only in North Carolina but also in Virginia, West Virginia and Tennessee (the other states in which I hunt and fish), I have had individuals tell me that their respective game departments are releasing diamond-back rattlesnakes, often by airplane.



I always ask those people if they know who is in charge of positioning the parachutes on the rattlesnakes while they are in the plane and removing the chutes once the vipers touch down safely. And last year at an outdoors show in Charlotte, a man (in hushed tones) told me that the commission was releasing black wolves into the North Carolina mountains.  
"We do not and have not stocked rattlesnakes!" says Brad Gunn, wildlife biologist and section manager for the commission. "Also, we are not stocking and have not stocked wolves of any color, including black. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released red wolves on Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge during or around 1987, and there are reportedly more than 100 in that area now."

**Fishing Myths**  
Myths are not limited to game animals, predators and reptiles. In Stokes County last summer, a fisherman told me that smallmouth bass organize themselves into schools and take turns blocking minnows while their fellow school members eat. Kin Hodges, District 7 fisheries biologist for the commission, says that he can't totally rule out this smallmouth behavior, but . . . "Although we've all seen small schools of smallmouth chasing schools of minnows, I doubt that they possess the mental capacity to organize themselves in that manner," he says.  
To further expound on the mental abilities of fish, a recent article in *Fly Fisherman* magazine stated that research had indicated that trout have an IQ of about 6. To put this in perspective, the average human has an IQ of 100, and the IQ of an inanimate object is obviously 0. By inanimate I mean an object such as a chair, sofa or block of wood. A creature that is barely smarter than a block of wood is not prone to deep thoughts.

Two other fishing tales I have long heard are that when barn swallows or other swallows are flying, it means that the fish are active, and that the presence of herons means that fishing should be good in an area.  
"I've also heard various stories about how bird activity can relate to fishing success," says Hodges. "I could possibly see some of these as being true, if the increased bird





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activity was related to an approaching weather front that would also kick-start the fishing.” The problem I have with the heron story is that these birds often forage in areas with mud, sand or silt bottoms. Angling for any species of bass in areas like that is likely to be futile no matter how many great blue, green and other species of herons are in the area.

Hodges says that some misconceptions are so absurd that they are humorous.

“The funniest fish myth I’ve ever heard is that the hellbender is the male of the catfish,” he says. “I don’t know how widespread this is, but my co-workers in the western end of the state told me about it. Another good one I’ve heard is that fish eggs get introduced into new water bodies when rain falls.

“The logic is that fish eggs in ponds that already have fish in them evaporate along with the water and get deposited in different places when it rains. A more likely explanation for how fish get introduced into unstocked ponds would be that fish eggs can probably be brought in by fish-eating birds

such as herons and kingfishers, or other animals that visit ponds to hunt or drink.”

Hodges says he has also been told that warmouths are the result of a bass spawning with a bluegill. This is obviously false. Though sunfish can breed with each other to produce hybridized offspring, and different types of bass (largemouth, spotted and smallmouth) can breed with each other, it’s impossible for a bass to produce offspring with a sunfish. At least in the wild.

Another myth that bass fishermen perpetuate is that bass eat plastic lizards because they don’t like aquatic salamanders, since the salamanders eat bass eggs. Once again, consider the IQ of fish before you set much stock in this myth.

Hodges adds that yet another falsehood that comes from bass fishermen is that the wind blows around shad in lakes. It is true that fishing is often good along stretches of shoreline where a strong wind stirs the water. “I’ve heard anglers say that the wind blows in the shad, and the bass move in to feed on them,” explains Hodges. “My guess would be that the wind action stirs up food items from the lake bottom, and the shad voluntarily move in to feed on these items.”

Hodges said that one of the worst examples of truthiness involves fish stocking.

“Much of the angling public is still under the impression that stocking fish is necessary to have good fishing,” he says. “This is true in some cases, such as stocking stripers into reservoirs where they can’t spawn, or stocking trout into streams where they are unable to reproduce. But most of the species anglers complain about [bass, crappie, sunfish, walleye] are highly prolific spawners that reproduce successfully on their own.

“Stocking additional fingerlings on top of the offspring naturally produced by these species every year does not result in an increased abundance of adult fish. The exceptions would include situations where fish are stocked to rebuild a population depleted by a fish kill, or when a species is no longer able to reproduce because of competition from introduced exotic species. For example, walleyes not being able to reproduce once alewives are introduced into a lake.”

### Other Myths

Chris McGrath, wildlife diversity program coordinator in the Division of Wildlife Management, says that an example of truthiness that he hears all the time involves that perennial subject of myths, bats. Some people believe this mammal will swoop around and become entangled in a person’s hair. “I’ve had several people relay such stories, and I cannot find any reasonable explanation for why bats would do that, but some speculate that hair spray or shampoo may attract insects, which in turn attract bats,” says McGrath. “Alas, I can’t say that I’ve ever put much stock in that happening.”

A story that is part of American folklore is that yellow-billed cuckoos, which early settlers called rain crows, tend to make their call note (logically enough a “coo-coo-coo”) when a storm or rain is approaching. McGrath says that authors Eloise Potter, James Parnell and Robert Teulings state in “Birds of the Carolinas”: “There may be some scientific basis for this bit of folklore, because cuckoos apparently adjust the timing of their nesting effort to the temporary local abundance of suitable prey, which in many cases coincides with periods of rainfall.” But McGrath doesn’t have any personal knowledge to support or refute that statement.

### Cougar Myths

I have saved the best, or the worst, of the examples of truthiness for last. Since the mountain lion became extinct in this region many years ago, people have been claiming to spot these big cats. David Sawyer, surveys and research program coordinator for the Wildlife Commission, weighs in on the subject of Carolina cougars.

“The NCWRC or ‘state’ has not stocked coyotes or mountain lions to control the deer herd; I have heard this rumor for both species,” he says. “Most wildlife myths and rumors appear to come about by someone having knowledge of two or more events or activities [for example, increase in deer and appearance of coyotes, along with knowledge that the state has stocked other species in the past] and then attempting to make some sense out of the newest occurrence—that is, why the coyotes are here.

“They put two and two together and come up with five: The ‘state’ must have released them to control the deer. Rumors usually start out with somebody saying, ‘Maybe the state released them,’ then as the conversation spreads through the community, it becomes, ‘I heard the state released them.’”

Sawyer says that because the Eastern cougar is on the endangered species list, any restoration effort would have to be carefully planned with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has jurisdiction over federally listed species. There has been no such planning or restoration effort. The “state” has not attempted to cover up the existence of cougars; it simply has no documented evidence that they live in North Carolina.

According to Sawyer, the commission has had no documented evidence of wild mountain lions (cougars) in North Carolina since they were extirpated from the state. Documented evidence would include a live or dead animal, verifiable photographs, professionally verified tracks or DNA verification from hair samples or scat. Submission of samples would require a solid “chain of custody” to prove that the sample did indeed come from the wild in North Carolina and not from a captive animal or another location within the cougar’s current range.

Sawyer says that there is no breeding population of cougars in North Carolina, and any animal found or observed here at this point in history would have to be an animal that either escaped or was released from captivity or a male cat that somehow managed to walk hundreds of miles from known populations only to fail in finding a female to breed.

But what about all those pictures that folks send in to the Wildlife Commission?

“Biologists occasionally receive pictures from the public, but the pictures either appear to be house cats or bobcats or are just too poor in quality to tell what the animal is,” explains Sawyer. “Biologists also receive reports of cougar sightings. However, observations could be of many animals including house cats, bobcats, dogs, coyotes or bears, as most people state they saw the animal at a great distance, at night, or it was moving fast. It is possible a cougar

could escape or be illegally released from captivity and then be observed, and the few cats handled over the years were obviously domestic escapees or releases, based on behavior or identification markings.”

Olfenbuttel adds that one animal commonly mistaken for a cougar is a red fox infected with mange.

“Of the photos I have seen in North Carolina in which the photographer believes the animal is a cougar, I estimate that half turn out to be a mangy fox,” she says. “The lack of fur makes the animal appear tawny, like a cougar, and the lack of fur on the tail makes it appear to be similar in shape and size to that of a cougar.”

Over the years, I have even heard people claim that they have glimpsed black panthers. Once again, Sawyer has to debunk a myth.

“The only large cats that are frequently black are the jaguar and leopard, each carrying recessive or dominant genes for melanism, the opposite of albinism,” he said. “Neither animal is native to North Carolina. In their melanistic form, both of these cats are frequently called black panther. As with cougars or any captive animal, it is possible that these cats could escape or be released from captivity and later be observed by someone.

“There is no black cougar known to science other than the possibility of a melanistic animal. However, I am unaware of the confirmed existence of a melanistic cougar ever occurring, and the odds against one being born are likely astronomical.

“When I was a district biologist,” Sawyer said, “I experienced an increase in ‘black panther’ reports after the establishment of Charlotte’s pro football team [the NFL’s Carolina Panthers].”

The lesson learned from all these examples of truthiness? Perhaps this saying is appropriate: “Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts.”

*Bruce Ingram is the author of four books on river fishing and floating, among them “The New River Guide” and “Fly and Spin Fishing for River Smallmouths.” For more information, contact him at be\_ingram@juno.com. Everything he writes is true.*