

Creature spotted at The Nature Institute: Park officials advising caution to hikers

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY - Trails opened at dawn Saturday, April 1 at **The Nature Institute (TNI)** in Godfrey, but TNI Executive Director **Angie Moan** said hikers should exercise caution when hiking TNI's trails.

Moan said several individuals working on trails have spotted what seems to be an animal with which no one at the park has experienced. Moan said reports to her office have included spotting a bipedal creature at least seven feet tall and 350 pounds. While this may sound a lot like the mythical Bigfoot, Moan said she does not want to jump to conclusions. She said hikers and TNI workers have spotted several different animals and even a few people who are at the park after hours.

"We have not had any bear sightings yet," Moan said, "But one woman said she spotted a cougar footprint, and we've seen gray foxes, coyotes, deer, turkey, bobcats, whistle-pigs, and even some armadillos."



Whatever the possible culprit for the sightings is, Moan said it is mostly active after dusk, when the trails are closed. She said the majority of sightings have been near TNI's pine forest area. She even provided RiverBender.com with a photo of what appears to be a den for a large mammal, or possibly a human trespasser.

"While I cannot confirm what the thing is, whether it's a Bigfoot, person or a bear," Moan said. "We are worried about hikers, and we take their safety very seriously."

TNI will not be closed, however. Trails were not open to the public throughout the winter, and April 1 is the first day they are open again to the public. As of yet, Moan said whatever is causing the sightings has not posed a threat to anyone. She said children should not hike on the trails unless accompanied by parents, however.

Steve French, of Grafton, claimed to have taken a picture of the creature while hiking through TNI last summer. He submitted the photo to RiverBender.com, but its validity could not be verified at this time. It appears to show something closer to the mythical Bigfoot than a bear or human.

"I smelled it first," French said. "It smelled like a mix of freshly cut grass and horse manure. I have never smelled something so strong in my life. I walked around the bend and was able to capture a photograph, but I never showed it to anyone, because I was afraid they would think I was crazy or a liar."

If French's photograph is valid, this would be far from the only sighting of such a creature in Madison County. According to the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO), Illinois has an abundance of sightings of a hairy hominid, and as many as 22 of those sightings have been registered in Madison County, ranging from rural Godfrey and Edwardsville to more urban areas in Alton and Granite City.

However, before anyone jumps to conclusions, one must remember such extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. Moan said the trails are open for the first time in 2017 and anyone who wants to investigate the sightings is welcome to do so. For hiker safety, Moan advises people travel in groups, keep children supervised and go home before dusk.