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. 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: 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.
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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 Summer, 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 1930s," says Summer. "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 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 Offenbuttel, 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 ruffe 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 diamondback rattlesnakes, often by airplane.

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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 or 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 fruitless 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 belled-bender 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 hybrid offspring, 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 believe the lizards are on the menu for predators such as herons and kingfishers, or other animals including house cats, bobcats, dogs, coyotes or bears, as most people state they have glimpsed black panthers. As with coyotes 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 the Carolina Panthers. Most of the time it was not from a captive animal or another local 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 travel hundreds of miles from known populations only to fail in finding a female to breed.

Bruce Ingram is the author of four books on river fishing and one on fly fishing. "The New River Guide" and "Fly and Spin Fishing for River Smallmouths." For more information contact him at ber_ingram@uno.com. Everything he writes is true.