

# How False Claims About Immigrants and Dead Pets Became a Trump Talking Point

Falsehoods claiming migrants in Ohio are killing cats and decapitating ducks went viral this week. The Trump campaign embraced them.

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A falsehood that migrants have killed wild animals and household pets for food ricocheted around the internet this week, vaulting from fringe social media posts to the presidential debate stage in a matter of days.

10 The claims were based on several unsubstantiated anecdotes and appeared to mix together unrelated stories about animal cruelty. The idea also has deep roots in racist stereotypes, which depict foreigners as willing consumers of a variety of undesirable animals.

Their rapid proliferation underscores how quickly bogus claims can spread on social networks like X. Thousands of posts mentioning the idea flooded social media this past weekend and surged on

15 Monday, according to [Pyrra Technologies](#), a company that monitors social media.

It also signals the willingness of President Donald J. Trump to echo falsehoods and conspiracy theories as Election Day draws near. At the presidential debate in Philadelphia on Tuesday, Mr. Trump raised the baseless claims about migrants to an audience of millions.

20 “In Springfield, they’re eating the dogs,” he said, falsely, in a portion of the debate about immigration, offering no evidence. “The people that came in, they’re eating the cats. They’re eating — they’re eating the pets of the people that live there.”

In recent weeks he has also falsely claimed that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, that Democrats are conspiring to interfere with this year’s race and that investigations into [Russian interference](#) are a “hoax.”

25 Among the first prominent people to share the falsehood over the weekend was Charlie Kirk, the founder and president of Turning Point USA, a conservative group. He wrote on X on Sunday that “residents of Springfield, OH are reporting that Haitians are eating their family pets,” sharing an undated post from a private Facebook group about crime in Springfield that has fewer than 9,000 members. Mr. Kirk’s post was viewed 3.9 million times.

30 The author of the Facebook post said a neighbor’s daughter’s friend had seen animal cruelty against a cat outside a house occupied by Haitian immigrants.

Officials for the City of Springfield, which has a population of about 60,000, said they had seen “no credible reports or specific claims of pets being harmed, injured or abused by individuals within the immigrant community” and called the claims a persistent frustration. The city has [grappled with a surge of immigrants](#) in recent years, including an estimated 20,000 people from Haiti moving to the city since the pandemic.

Elon Musk, X’s owner, and Donald Trump Jr. both amplified the story, reaching millions.

40 Senator JD Vance of Ohio, the Republican vice-presidential nominee, followed on Monday, claiming that “reports now show people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn’t be in this country.” His post was viewed more than 10 million times.

A Trump campaign email to supporters in the afternoon also quoted the claims. Mr. Musk and Mr. Kirk did not immediately respond to requests for comment. A spokesman for Mr. Vance said his posts had been based on “a high volume of calls and emails over the past several weeks from concerned citizens in Springfield.”

45 The falsehood continued as influencers circulated a round of A.I.-generated artwork mocking the situation or praising Mr. Trump. Among thousands of posts referring to the baseless claims identified by Pyrra on fringe social networks, nearly 20 percent included hateful language, according to an analysis by Pyrra that classifies posts based on racist, anti-Semitic and other offensive terms.

50 “Protect our ducks and kittens in Ohio!” the official account for Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee wrote on X, including an A.I.-generated image of Mr. Trump hugging the two animals. It was seen more than 71 million times.

Other influencers shared A.I.-generated images that used overtly racist caricatures of Black men and women.

55 Mr. Vance [appeared to backtrack](#) on Tuesday, writing on X that “it’s possible, of course, that all of these rumors will turn out to be false.” But he encouraged supporters to continue repeating them, writing in a second post: “Keep the cat memes flowing.”

“Ultimately, the fact that this story relies on dubious evidence, unproven claims and fearmongering rather than facts doesn’t stop its spread at all,” said Mike Rothschild, a conspiracy theory [researcher](#). “The people sharing the memes want it to be true, so it’s true for them.”

60 Rumors that a cat was eaten also appeared to be linked to a woman who was arrested in Canton, Ohio, about two hours east of Springfield, in August. Police officers were called by concerned neighbors, who claimed that she was on drugs, after she was seen outside next to a dead cat. A police report said she had been found with blood on her “feet, hands, and fur on her lips.”

65 The woman, Allexis Telia Ferrell, 27, lives in Canton and pleaded not guilty to charges of cruelty to companion animals. The court has scheduled a hearing in October to determine her competency to stand trial. Her lawyer did not respond to requests for comment.

Though many posts claimed Ms. Ferrell was from Haiti, birth records show that she was born in Ohio in 1997.

70 Other claims appeared connected to a Springfield City Commission meeting on Aug. 27, when several residents railed against city officials over the Haitian population, whose rapid growth in the region has inflamed tensions among residents. Last year, a recent immigrant from Haiti was driving a minivan that collided with a school bus, killing an 11-year-old and galvanizing opposition to the migrant population.

75 At the commission meeting, Anthony Harris, a social media influencer, made an unsubstantiated claim that ducks were being decapitated in the park as he complained about the lack of a police presence. City officials and a police representative said there had been no credible reports to support that idea.

On Tuesday, Mr. Musk posted a video of Mr. Harris speaking at the meeting to his millions of followers. It was seen more than 20 million times.

80 Later on Tuesday, Mr. Harris posted a video to his Facebook page walking back his claims, saying he was going to “clear up” stereotypes. He interviewed a man who said that he was from Haiti and that claims about killing animals were false, adding that people “were being lied to.”

Some claims about Springfield also included a photograph of a Black man walking across the street carrying what appeared to be a dead Canada goose. The image spread widely online after it first appeared on Reddit, including posts on 4chan, the anonymous message board known for racist  
85 content. Many of the posts falsely described the man as a Haitian resident of Springfield.

In fact, the photo was taken in Columbus, Ohio, 40 miles east of Springfield, on July 28. The photographer, a 55-year-old man who agreed to speak anonymously because he feared repercussions, said he had seen the man crossing the street and simply thought it was a humorous moment.

The photographer was contacted on Monday by a woman in Ohio’s Department of Natural Resources  
90 who was trying to verify its authenticity after receiving “so many false reports about ‘haitians in springfield’ with that photo,” according to text messages reviewed by The New York Times. The department did not respond to requests for comment.

In a phone interview, the photographer said he regretted posting the photo after seeing it used to denigrate migrants.

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