

ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS, MODERN MYSTERIES

By John A. Keel

MONSTER SEASON

Throughout 1975 people in New Jersey and New York were catching unwelcome glimpses of our old friend—the tall hairy monster with blazing red eyes. The 7-foot-tall critters were cavorting in the woods only a few miles from Manhattan but none of the reports filtered down to the New York City press. As is traditional in these cases, local police officials and amateur monster sleuths scoured the areas of the sightings without turning up a single clue. And when they gathered in neighborhood bars after their futile hunts they asked themselves the age-old question: "Where can a 7-foot-tall monster covered with hair hide?"

One monster, described as "bear-like" and standing on 2 legs was sighted on densely-populated Staten Island. There are no bears on the island just across the harbor from Manhattan but since the creature was seen near the famous Tibetan Museum it may have been a disoriented Abominable Snowman searching for a compassionate Tibetan. Like the creatures of Sussex and Dutchess counties upstate, it too seemed to vanish into thin air.

Several years ago when I was blundering about the back country in central India, I came upon a huge grayish-brown object which I first took to be a giant anthill. As I walked closer my lunch suddenly churned upwards from my stomach to my throat. The anthill moved! I found myself facing a wild elephant. We were only a few yards apart and it studied me with its small, gentle eyes. I froze in my tracks, nervously expecting it to raise its trunk and spread its ears preparatory to charging. Fortunately, after a very long moment, it decided I was harmless, turned, and strode into the trees, moving with amazing swiftness and not snapping a twig or rustling a leaf as it went.

Elephants are incredible creatures. (In India they are called "the elephant people" because they are so intelligent and have so many human characteristics.) Despite their great bulk they can move with astonishing speed in total silence. Like most wild animals, they

would rather flee from Man than attack. A whole herd can pass through a district without the local villagers becoming aware of their presence.

About 5 years ago 2 tame elephants in the Catskill Game Farm 100 miles north of New York City decided to go for a stroll. They found a hole in a fence and took off. Their stroll lasted for 2 weeks. Literally thousands of people joined in the search while private pilots systematically covered the area from the air. The Catskill Mountains are laced with roads and private homes and cabins. Nevertheless, the 2 elephants managed to hide for 2 weeks and were finally found only a few miles from the Game Farm.

The point is: if something as large as an elephant can hide so easily from us it is not extraordinary that our tall, hairy monsters can also easily elude us.

MYSTERIOUS MARSUPIALS

In July 1975, another old friend popped up near Du Quoin, Ill. Several people reported seeing a kangaroo about 5 feet tall hopping through corn fields. Kevin Luthi said he was hesitant to report his sighting at first "because I thought everyone would think I was crazy."

There have been many kangaroo reports from Illinois in recent years. One witness was a police officer who gave chase but, of course, soon lost the trail. As usual, local authorities checked nearby zoos and circuses only to learn that no one had lost a kangaroo.

A decade ago a kangaroo was seen bouncing around the New England states and even turned up in Ohio. In fact, there are periodic kangaroo flaps in the U.S. and it all suggests that there are several kangaroos living unnoticed in the American countryside.

The *Macropus giganteus* grows to about 5-feet-tall and can leap 25 feet in a single bound. Some of our agile, leaping monsters, which are usually seen in the dark, could be one of these renegade kangaroos. Like elephants, they are timid creatures unless they're cornered. Then they can disable a man

in seconds with their vicious 4-toed claws. Luckily, there have been no reports of kangaroo attacks.

A number of other odd animals live wild in the U.S. Years ago a movie company lost some chimpanzees while filming a Tarzan epic in Florida. The chimps are still occasionally seen and have undoubtedly grown and multiplied over the years. Some skeptics try to blame them for all the sightings of Florida's famous smelly "Sandman"—the southern counterpart to the great Sasquatch of the Northwest. However, the Sandman is much larger than a chimp, is accompanied by a foul odor, and, like monsters everywhere, is fond of chasing automobiles and haunting popular lover's lanes.

Back in 1949, the late Ivan T. Sanderson was sent by NBC-TV to Florida to track down reports of a giant creature that had been seen roaming along river banks. Sanderson concluded, after studying eyewitness reports, that the thing had been a 15-foot-tall penguin. The king penguin can reach a height of 4 feet but there have been vague, unverified reports of a much larger type isolated on frigid, uninhabited islands in Antarctica. Sanderson speculated that one of these creatures, which are said to be covered with fur rather than feathers, somehow got caught in an ocean current which eventually deposited it in Florida.

Kangaroos in Illinois! Wild chimps and giant penguins in Florida! Wild monkeys have even been shot and killed in Tennessee! Back in 1967, police in New Jersey shot and killed a huge Himalayan Brown bear—a very rare creature found in only a few zoos. No one has ever managed to explain how a Himalayan bear appeared in New Jersey.

RIDICULOUS REPTILES

When I returned from India I brought back a "2-headed" sand boa and 3-fanged cobras. (Herpetology, the study of reptiles, has been a hobby of mine since I was a boy.) To promote a

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book I had written, my publisher ensconced me in the window of a store in Times Square where I did a daily snake charming act. Later I traveled around the country lecturing about Oriental magic and giving demonstrations with my snakes. People were always coming up to me after my talks to tell me of their own incredible experiences with snakes right here in America. To hear them tell it, one would think this country is overrun with 30-foot-long boa constrictors, giant alligators, and other bizarre reptiles.

Two tales that I heard over and over again (usually the teller said he had heard about it from a friend who knew the witness involved and was *very reliable*) concerned the legendary hoop snake and the milk snake. When frightened, the hoop snake is supposed to take its tail in its mouth, form a hoop, and roll away at great speed. The milk snake is said to approach cows and suck all the milk from their udders. Neither of these snakes actually exist but stories about them can be found in ancient literature and the myths were probably brought to this country by early immigrants and passed down from generation to generation ever since.

I've also heard about flying snakes in the U.S. but so far as I know none have ever been caught. There really are flying snakes in South America and Asia. They lurk in trees and when their lunch strolls past they flatten their ribs and spiral down like a stream of confetti.

Stories of unusual poisonous snakes also abound. There are actually only 2 snakes in the world that are aggressive enough to chase a man. They are the black mamba of Africa, a member of the cobra family, and the bushmaster of Central America. Both are very ugly customers and their bites are nearly always fatal. Natives claim that the only way to escape either of them is to run uphill. If there are no hills around . . .

Perhaps the strangest snakebite story of all occurred in Kenton, Ohio, on June 9, 1946. Orland Packer was horseback riding near his home when a giant snake suddenly appeared in his path. He said it was about 8 feet long and 4 inches in diameter. The horse threw him and the snake coiled about his leg, breaking his ankle and biting him in the heel. Then it bit the horse and slithered off into the woods and vanished. A huge search party combed the woods but never found it. The snake was described as having a flat head and a diamond shape on its back. It was definitely not one of your run-of-the-mill Ohio snakes.

Years later I mentioned the Packer incident in one of my books and I was surprised to receive a letter from Mrs. Packer outlining her husband's horrible ordeal. His wound refused to heal, she wrote, and he finally had to have part of his heel amputated. "He was on crutches for almost 2 years . . . His fever would rise till he would almost go out of his head then after he broke out in sweat where you could wring water out of his clothes. I changed his bed several times a day so I know . . ."

I sifted through all my reptile books trying to identify the culprit. Although the basic descriptions sounds like a king cobra, Packer would have died within hours if that had been the answer. The horse survived but lost "a patch of hair" where the snake had bitten it. Packer suffered agonies for years afterward. There is nothing in my snake catalogs that could explain this incident. The bite of the notorious bushmaster (and I hope there are none roaming loose in the U.S.) injects a substance which causes the blood to lose its ability to coagulate. Some bushmaster victims find their pores opening up and oozing blood when they enter the final stage before death. Packer's inability to heal suggests a similar kind of venom.

In any case, you don't have to go off on an African safari or join an expedition into central Brazil to see rare and exotic creatures. The U.S. is still populated with a wide variety of peculiar wildlife ranging from West Virginia's spectacular "Mothman" and occasional reports of ancient pterodactyls on the wing to kangaroos, Himalayan bears and ridiculous reptiles. Several U.S. lakes are supposed to contain giant sea serpents, and from the reports that pour into my mailbox each year our woods seem to be filled with huge hairy monsters. Not all these reports are wild hallucinations and drunken fantasies. There are all kinds of things out there and one day you might see one of them yourself. ★