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Rare Whale First Discovered Along the Carolina Coast a Century Ago

John Hairr

On a warm summer morning in July of 1912, a large animal—over 16 feet long—washed up on Bird Island Shoal, inside the entrance to Beaufort Inlet between Beaufort and Fort Macon. For the fishermen who found the strange carcass, it was an odd find. But none who saw the unusual creature stranded on the sandbar would have guessed at the significance of what had come ashore that morning on an island along the Carolina coast.

At first glance, it looked like an ordinary blackfish or cowfish, generic terms locals used as a catchall phrase for relatively small, dark-colored cetaceans such as pilot whales that occasionally visit the area. But upon closer inspection, this particular whale was unlike any they had ever seen. This cowfish had a long, pointed beak like a dolphin. Even stranger was the fact that there were no teeth showing from the jaws.

The remains of most marine mammals that stranded along this stretch of coast in years gone by did not survive for long, as the inhabitants processed the bodies of whales, dolphins and seals for oil. But the fishermen who found these remains were curious about this strange whale, so they contacted the folks at the U.S. Fisheries Laboratory at Beaufort on nearby Pivers Island. Perhaps they could find someone there who could figure out what kind of creature had washed in from the Atlantic Ocean through Beaufort Inlet.

Two assistants from the lab sped to the scene in Launch 106, but they were as clueless to the animal's identity as the fishermen before them had been. They knew they would have to call in the resident expert on marine life of the area, Dr. Lewis Radcliffe. As director of the U.S. Fisheries Laboratory at Beaufort, Radcliffe examined a wide range of marine life in the vicinity of Cape Lookout. A noted ichthyologist, he inspected sharks, rays, bluefish, and just about any other type of fish that

was caught by the fishermen working out of Beaufort or Morehead City. Occasionally he inspected the marine mammals such as whales, dolphins, manatees and seals that were captured or washed ashore along the southern Outer Banks. He kept an eye out for anything unusual that might be of scientific importance to researchers.

Radcliffe and his associates knew they had found some sort of whale, but exactly what type of whale it was they could not tell. They hauled the animal's remains back to the laboratory at Beaufort, where Radcliffe carefully studied the animal and gathered as much data from it as he could. This must have been quite a task, as adult whales of this species weigh between two thousand five hundred and three thousand pounds.

Radcliffe reported (True 1913), "Body covered with a thick layer of fat, flesh beneath this layer very dark red, of loose texture, coarse and stringy." He described the animal's coloration as, "Back, slate-black; lower sides, yellow-purple, flecked with black; median line of belly somewhat darker; a grayish area in front of vent; fins the color of the back."

The whale was 16 feet long, and the width of its flukes was 4 feet 8 inches. The scientists in Beaufort were unable to weigh the entire whale, but they were able to make some measurements of various body parts. The animal contained sixty-eight feet of intestines, and had a stomach that was made up of three chambers. The whale's heart was nearly a foot wide, 15 inches long, and weighed 10.5 pounds.

If he were to gain further insights on the whale, Radcliffe knew he would have to consult with someone who had more experience working with marine mammals. So he packed up the head, flukes, a pectoral fin and various parts of the skeleton into a barrel. On July 29th, 1912, he shipped this collection north to the U.S. National Museum, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. He hoped scientists there would be able to determine the unusual whale's identity.

Radcliffe made some interesting observations about whales similar to the one in hand that were seen in the vicinity of Beaufort Inlet and the mouth of the Newport River. "I believe this form is not uncommon here. Large cetaceans which answer its description are not infrequently seen swimming about the laboratory, three being sighted at one time. In swimming, the dorsal fin is seen above the water, and at times it resorts to the bounding motion not unlike the porpoise."

The decision to send the whale's remains to the Smithsonian for further examination was an opportune one. Once in Washington, they piqued

the interest of Frederick W. True, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian. True's distinguished career at the Smithsonian began in 1881 when the then 23-year-old Connecticut native became the museum's librarian and acting curator of the Division of Mammals. He served in a number of important positions during his tenure at the Smithsonian, and in 1897 was named curator of the Department of Biology.

True was considered the nation's foremost expert on marine mammals. He studied the remains of these and other mammals sent to the museum, and created a collection of marine mammal skeletons that was unrivalled in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to working on animal remains in the lab, he occasionally took advantage of opportunities to travel on the oceans to remote reaches of the world with the vessels of the U.S. Fisheries Commission to study marine mammals in the wild.

Despite being burdened with the administrative duties of his position, True continued to study whales whenever an opportunity presented itself. Just two years before the remains of the mysterious whale from Beaufort arrived at the Smithsonian, he had published an eighty-nine-page monograph discussing the beaked whales of the world. He commented (True 1910) on the rarity of beaked whales in the world's oceans. "The beaked whales belonging to the family Ziphiidae are, with the exception of the bottle-nosed whales of the genus *Hyperoodon*, among the rarest of cetaceans. Of the three genera *Mesoplodon*, *Ziphius*, and *Berardius*, so far as I have been able to ascertain from published records, specimens representing about one hundred individuals are known, and somewhat more than one-half of these belong to the first-named genus. *Berardius* is the rarest genus, only about fourteen specimens having been collected thus far. The U.S. National Museum contains specimens representing some twenty-five individuals of the three genera, or about one-fourth of the material presently available. Among these are six specimens of the genus *Berardius*, or nearly half of all that have been recorded thus far."

Once he finished his examination of the whale from North Carolina, True realized that he was looking at the remains of an animal from an as yet undocumented species. True (1913) noted, "The lower jaw was only a very little shorter than the upper, and its superior border was concave. There was no appearance of teeth in either upper or lower jaw, and it was not until the integuments were removed that two small teeth were discovered, lying close to the extremity of the mandible. These teeth are small, conical, and acute, and are strongly inclined forward and a little outward. The presence



Fishermen looking over the strange whale that stranded upon Bird Island Shoal near Fort Macon, North Carolina, in July of 1912. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution.



Frederick W. True examined the remains of the whale found on Bird Island Shoal and determined it was a species new to science. Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution.

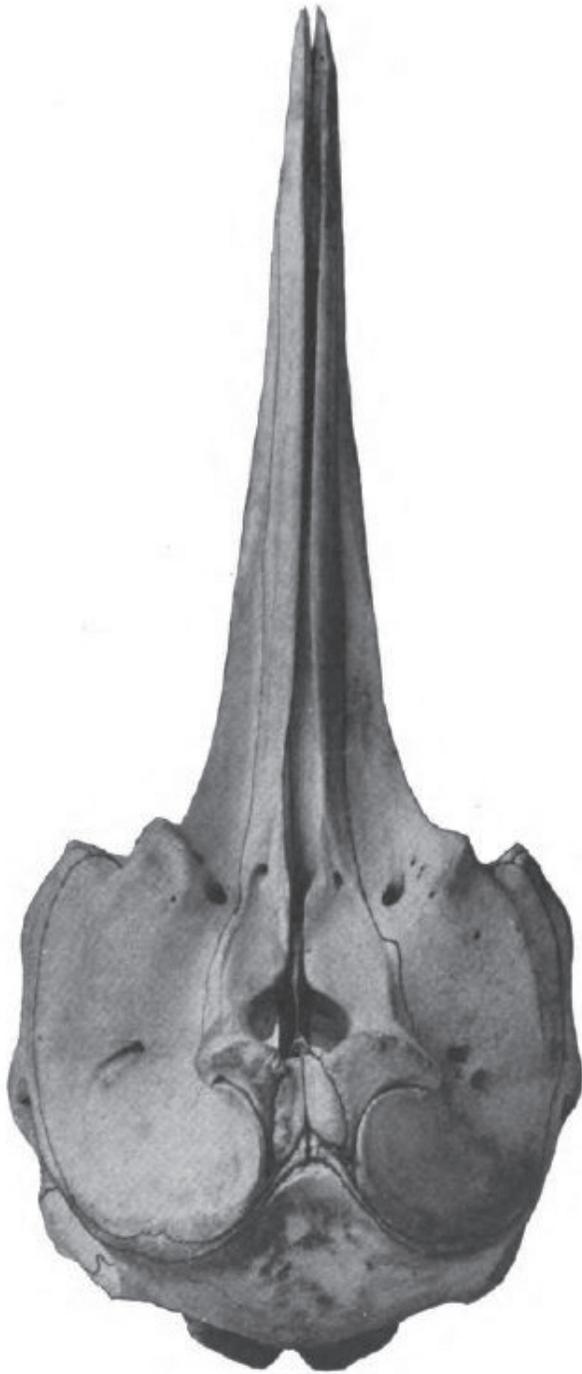
of teeth in this position at once suggested that the species was either an undescribed one, or else *M. hectori* Flower, of New Zealand. An examination of the skull showed, however, that the proportions and general conformation were quite unlike those of *hectori*. On the other hand, it presented a very close resemblance to *M. europaeus* in many particulars. It might be supposed that the peculiar position of the teeth was characteristic of the female of that species, but both sexes of the latter are known, and both have the teeth near the posterior end of the symphysis. There seems to be sufficient reason, therefore, to regard the Beaufort specimen as representing a new species.”

Since he was the first to describe the new species, True was able to assign the official Latin name to these beaked whales—*Mesoplodon mirus*. The species is commonly referred to as True’s beaked whale. Other names for the species include True’s North Atlantic beaked whale, or the wonderful beaked whale.

Like other species of beaked whales, True’s beaked whales are rarely seen in the wild. Several were found down through the years stranded along the coast as far afield as South Africa and Australia. Scientists today believe these whales are distributed in the temperate waters of the world’s oceans, but admit to knowing little about their migrations and living patterns.

There is a possibility that True’s beaked whales inhabiting the southern hemisphere are a distinct subspecies from those found in the northern hemisphere, but as of right now, there is just too little information on these rare cetaceans to make that determination. Jefferson, et al. (2015) note that marine mammalogists currently recognize a North Atlantic Form and a Southern Hemisphere Form.

Most specimens of True’s beaked whales have been found in varying degrees of decomposition. Nearly thirty years after the specimen was discovered at Beaufort, naturalist H.H. Brimley of the North Carolina Museum of Natural History studied one of the most important of the stranded True’s beaked whale specimens. This particular whale, measuring 17 feet long, was found in March of 1940 just north of Oregon Inlet by some fishermen. What is notable about this whale is the fact that it was a gravid female, the first ever discovered in the world. Studying this animal and her unborn calf gave Brimley the opportunity to gain some new insights into the life history of these cetaceans.



SUPERIOR VIEW OF SKULL OF BEAKED WHALE.

This view of the skull of the True's beaked whale appeared in True's final report of his examination of the specimen sent from Beaufort.

Museum director Harry Davis headed to the Outer Banks to retrieve the specimen, which had deteriorated somewhat over the week that had transpired between when the whale stranded and when he was finally able to make the trip to the coast. Upon returning to Raleigh, the animal's remains were studied in depth by his colleague. Brimley noted (1943), "The specimen proved to be an adult female ziphioid whale, 17 feet in length and it was found to contain a well-developed foetus about ready for delivery. The foetus measured 7 feet 2 inches in length with an estimated weight of 175 to 200 pounds."

The researchers were intrigued with the unborn whale, and made some rather detailed observations of the animal. "In situ, the foetus was doubled back on itself, left side to left side, the distal portion making a quarter turn in the region of the caudal peduncle so that the caudal fin fitted snugly against the throat, with the individual flukes curved up close to the sides of the head. The foetus was facing backwards in the body of the parent, towards the genital opening."

Brimley was not certain the cetacean he examined was in fact a True's beaked whale, as there are other species of beaked whales found in the same area. So to help confirm his theory as to the whales' identity he sent the skull from the female whale to Dr. Remington Kellogg, curator of the Division of Mammals at the U.S. National Museum, for further examination. Before shipping it off, Brimley made a mount of both the mother and calf for the museum in Raleigh. Kellogg's investigation confirmed the whale's identity as a True's beaked whale, and he informed Brimley that it was one of only eight such specimens ever reported.

Despite being studied by some of the nation's top experts, True's beaked whales remained enigmatic creatures. A few glimpses of deceased individuals were the limit of our knowledge of these animals. Almost eighty years passed before someone spotted and photographed what they believed was one of these whales in the wild. These particular animals were spotted off the North Carolina coast, not too far from where the first specimen had been found.

On May 29th, 1993, Dr. Michael Tove and twenty-eight of his fellow marine life enthusiasts were patrolling the waters off the Outer Banks, forty-five miles southeast of Hatteras Inlet, aboard the 57' fishing boat, *Country Girl*, which had been chartered for the trip. A noted naturalist, Tove organized the daylong excursion so the group of naturalists could hopefully spot a rare seabird called a Fea's petrel, *Pterodroma feae*. One



Naturalist H.H. Brimley of the North Carolina Museum of Natural History studies the remains of the gravid True's beaked whale and its unborn fetus found near Oregon Inlet, North Carolina in March of 1940. Photo courtesy NC Archives and History.

notable discovery of the day occurred shortly before noon when they spied a brown skua, *Stercorarius antarcticus*, the first instance of that bird being identified north of the Equator.

Two hours after spying the skua, the group spotted a pod of whales swimming on the surface of the ocean. Tove watched the animals as they swam near the boat, and quickly surmised that these were some sort of beaked whales. Tove (pers. comm.) observed, “I suspected *mirus* early on for several reasons. First, the head and body shape suggested that species and seemed incorrect for *europaeus* and *bidens*, based on my study of dead animals. Second, the stranding data made *mirus* among the most likely candidates.”

Tove excitedly shared the news of the importance of what they were seeing with his fellow passengers. For the next several minutes, the bird-watchers took their eyes off the sky and instead scanned the waters of the sea watching the three rare whales surface and dive. Fortunately, the captain of the boat was able to keep up with the animals’ movements, as the whales did not immediately dive into the depths to get away from their curious visitors.

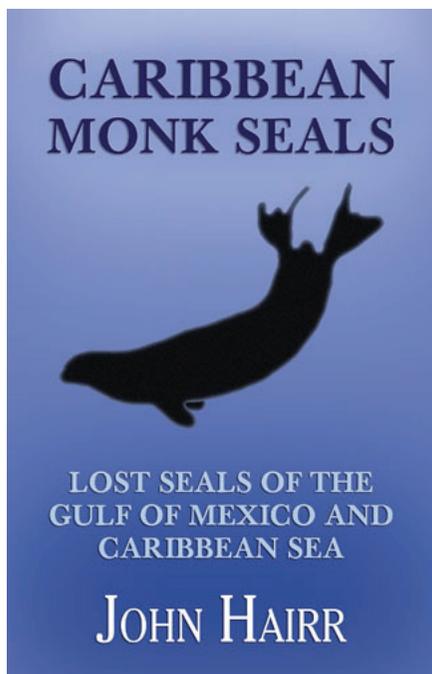
He continued, “There was a pod of three animals: two adults that appeared to be females and a calf. Due to our inadvertently separating the calf from the adults in our ‘chase’ (at a whopping 3 knots), we were able to stay with the animals for about ten minutes, during which time we successfully photographed them, including the 5-shot blow-roll series published in *Marine Mammal Science*.”

Tove (1995) later observed, “Although quite unlikely, one cannot summarily dismiss the possibility of another of the dozen or so species within the genus. Fortunately, the literature seems consistently to indicate that the combination of overall shape of the head, particularly the melon and beak with the sharp spinal ridge posterior to the dorsal fin, point uniquely to True’s beaked whale”

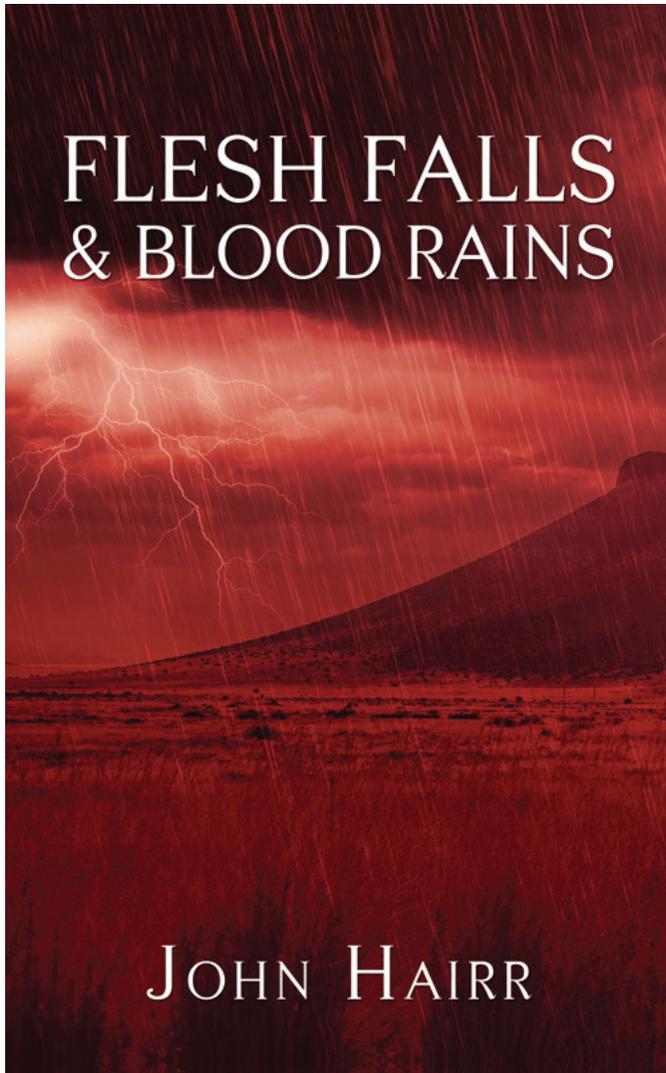
True’s beaked whales remain one of the most elusive species of marine mammals on the planet. Scientists today are unsure if beaked whales like the one found in Beaufort Inlet just over a century ago are in danger of extermination, or whether they are thriving in the depths of the ocean far away from human interference.

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Caribbean Monk Seals, by John Hairr



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A Honduran Mystery Animal

Chad Arment and Matthew Speights

A few years ago, Matthew and I attended the Creation Research Society's annual conference, and ended up hearing a third-hand story about a couple of strange quadrupedal (almost glyptodont-like) creatures that a missionary had seen in Central America. The story was vague, but intrigued me because I publish Bill Gibbons' *Missionaries & Monsters*, which details a number of mystery animals reported by missionaries and clergy as they traveled to remote areas of the world. Unfortunately, while the storyteller was enthusiastic about the report, she was cagey with pertinent details. (This is not particularly uncommon. Witnesses and others who have information about strange creatures sometimes feel they have to "protect" the animals by not sharing localities and other data.) It took several years, but eventually Matthew was able to elicit the witness' contact information. The witness (LS) is currently serving on a missions team on the other side of the world, but was happy to provide details of her unique sighting.

The Sighting

The location of the sighting was in grassland along a river in the mountains (approx. 5,000' elevation) Cortés Department, Honduras. The sighting occurred approx. 2001, at the end of the rainy season (possibly September), as the grass was very tall. Time of day was between late morning and noon. The approx. 80-acre property near the village of San Isidro is owned by a missions organization and used as a training school. River access is the easiest way on and off the property, but there is a dirt road to the nearest large town, Santa Cruz de Yojoa. The property is split by the river, with about forty acres of cleared grassland on one side, and jungle on the other. The area has villages clustered about four miles apart, with "lots of pineapple plantations, cattle ranches, coffee trees."

LS was on a tractor with a mower cutting the three-foot-tall grass. She first encountered a single animal, watching it for about 15 minutes as she mowed. She left, then returned to find two of the animals together. They showed no interest in her, or the mowing, for about ten minutes, until she got within six feet of them with the tractor's front end bucket, to force them to move to another area. Even then, it was "slowly, jerky movements," with no rush. ("They seemed docile when I was around, only when I pushed them to move with the tractor did they turn slowly, never showed signs of fear or alert, just moved on.")

The animals were quadrupedal, about as tall as a "12-hand Shetland pony" (or 48 inches tall at the withers). (The height may have been a little shorter than this, based on further conversation, so somewhere between three and four feet is a reasonable approximation.) The torso was barrel-shaped, though "deep on the sides, but narrow from the front view," so not paunchy. The body length from just behind the head to the start of the tail was about 3 feet in the larger animal, and 2 ½ feet in the smaller one. LS believed the weight to be between 450-600 pounds, noting "I used to raise hogs, at sales yard got good at weights, only I don't know how solid these guys were."

The tail was "not an attachment, just a continuous flow of the body. Underneath it was a continuance of the underline. That was about 10 inches off the ground, then dragged on the ground for about three feet." It came to a point with no spines or ridges. It "jerked when the animal moved." The animals had stout legs ("I couldn't put my two hands around the circumference. 18-20 inches?") The legs appeared short compared to the entire body; joints weren't visible except for the hocks on the hind legs. "They could sit like a dog" and stand up easily from that position. The feet had toes, with long claws like an alligator. ("We have gators at our base in Florida, so I am familiar.")

The head was very flat, with little snout. (The mouth reminded her of Kermit the Frog.) She did not notice nostrils, and saw no teeth, or tongue. (Neither animal attempted to feed on grass in her presence.) The head was encircled by a frill that went all around from jaw to jaw, no tapering, but pointed (with points, not spikes, spaced evenly apart). The base of the frill was a thick three inches before rising up into the points. It didn't seem to be able to move position, remaining upright. She did not see any ears or ear holes. ("Actually wondered if they had much hearing, as my tractor with the rhino cutter going was very loud.") There were no horns or spikes

on the face. Eyes were set close to the corners of the broad mouth. There was no visible neck. (“When they turned, it was a forearm-leading turn, not a head turn.”) They made no sounds.

Overall coloration was gray like an elephant or rhino, with no markings. One of the animals, however, had the neck/chest area coloration “the beautiful color of a cock pheasant.” The other’s neck was “shiny like chrome,” but she felt that may have been because they had just come from crossing the river, which was a few feet away. Skin texture seemed heavy like that of a hippopotamus, but not armored like an armadillo.

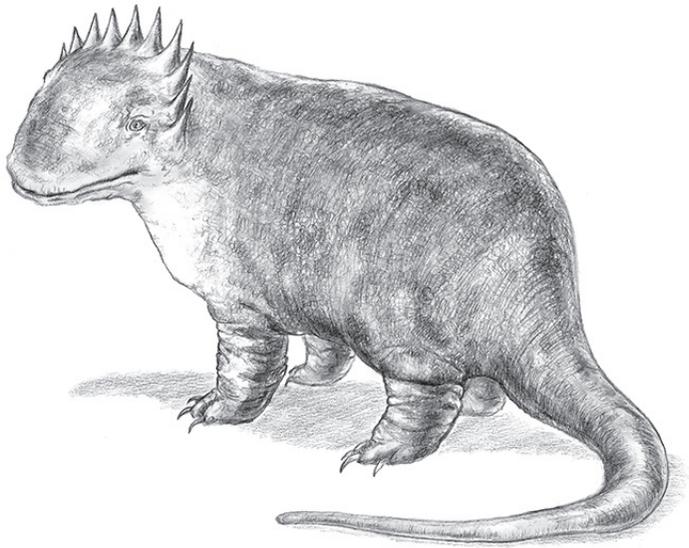
The animals had apparently arrived from the river. (“These rivers are shallow and narrow except during rainy season. Even then not very wide.”) After pushing them on with the tractor, LS left. Returning later, the animals were gone, and she believes they had to have left via the river, or she would have seen them go.

Two others on the property eventually saw the animals (one man, six months later, saw the pair cross in front of him on the road to Santa Cruz de Yojoa, surrounded by pastureland). They all agreed on the similarities. Locals, however, appeared not to know what they were talking about when they described the animals. (LS noted she knows little Spanish and no tribal languages there.) No further sightings after that, however, are known. The Mission’s current base coordinator has been there for a number of years now, without any sightings.

The witness is certain that it wasn’t a misidentification of a known species like a tapir. She believes that she saw a type of dinosaur, similar to drawings and toys of ceratopsian dinosaurs. Other than her experience, she doesn’t appear to have any real interest in dinosaurs, and no anxiety over trying to prove that she saw what she believes she observed.

Accompanying Sketches

LS was unable to provide her own sketch of what she saw, so I commissioned a blind contest on Freelancer, providing details from LS’ report, and after choosing a couple of images that I felt captured the basics, went back and forth between LS and the two artists to try and capture the morphological details. It can be frustrating for witnesses to go over the same details again and again, but it is important to try and pin down specifics. Of course, it can also be tricky finding an artist who is able to visualize what a witness is saying and put it on paper without pushing an interpretation of their own. When a witness is unable to offer a sketch,



Sketch by Oleksandr Pitura



Artistic Modeling by Steven Bellshaw

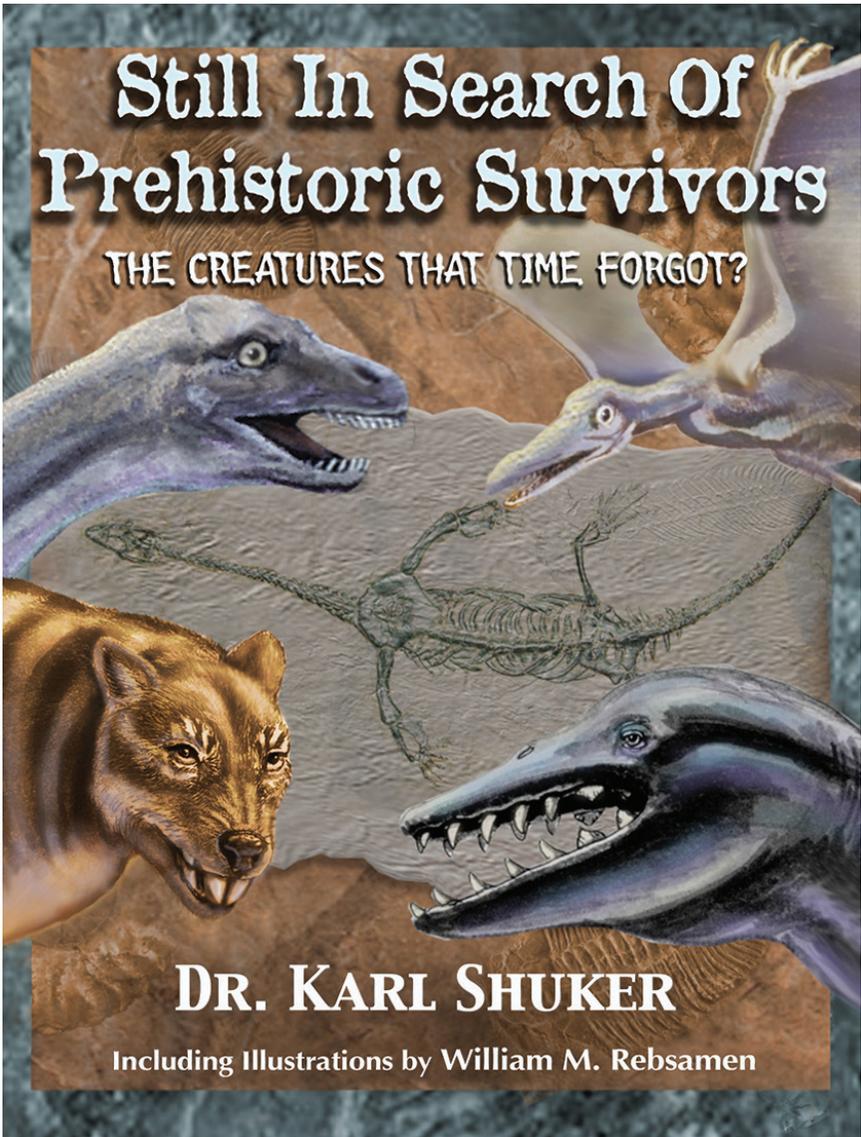
however, you have to find a reasonable alternative. Both artists came up with roughly similar morphologies, though Steven Bellshaw's art does depict a larger "frill" that seems to more accurately portray the witness' description.

Conclusion

Ceratopsian-like mystery animals are infrequent in the cryptozoological literature (outside of certain Central African reports). We have not run across similar accounts from Central America. Given that we had to specifically seek out the eyewitness, and she had no motivation to exaggerate what she saw (and in fact took several conversations to elicit some of the unique aspects of the case), we believe this mystery animal to be worth further investigation.

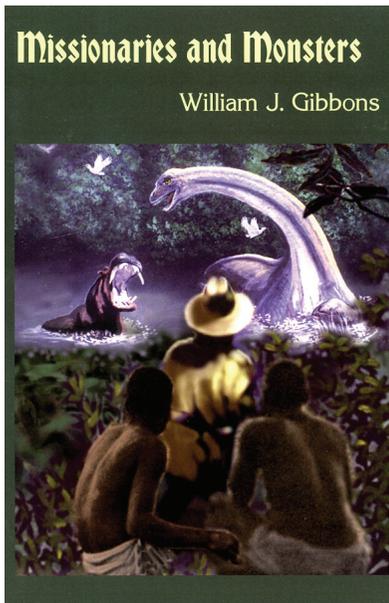
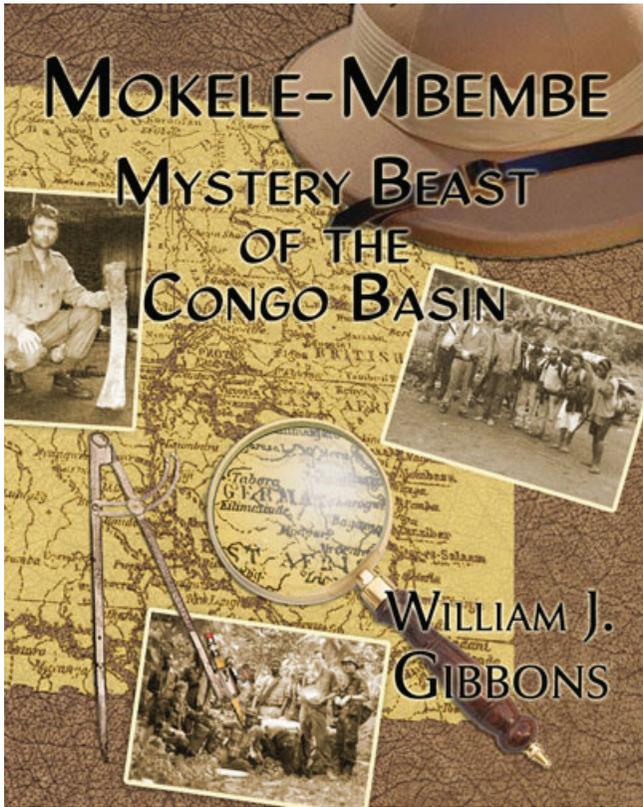
On the whole, the animal shares many features similar to those of ceratopsian dinosaurs. Intriguingly, the presence of claw-like nails is a feature of certain basal ceratopsians like *Montanaceratops*. However, there are certain other characters which don't immediately correlate to known ceratopsian fossils. How much discrepancy might be due to witness error, or to lack of diversity in preserved fossils, is unknowable until better evidence is presented (if in fact it can be obtained).

There is one impediment to serious investigation of this mystery animal. Honduras is a hotbed of drug lords and gun-runners. The U.S. Department of State has a current travel warning for Honduras, due to critically high levels of crime and violence. It may be possible to direct local investigation, but at this point we're unaware of any cryptozoological investigators in Honduras.



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Developing A Potential Discovery Path within Cryptozoology

Chad Arment

“A Salteur I found tented with the Courtes Oreilles came to me very ceremoniously, and having lighted and smoked his pipe, informed me that he had been hunting up a small river a few days ago, and that one evening, while in his canoe, he was surprised by the appearance of a very large animal in the water. At first he took it for a moose, and was about to fire at it; but on its nearer approach perceived it to be one of the Kitche Amicks or large beavers, which he dared not shoot, and allowed to pass near his canoe without molesting. I had already heard many stories among the Saulteurs concerning this immense beaver, but put no faith in them; fear, I presume, magnifies an ordinary beaver into such a monster, or a moose or bear in the dark may be mistaken for one of them, as they are seen only at night, and I am told are very scarce.” (Alexander Henry, in Coues 1897)

For years, I have noted that cryptozoology is best viewed as a methodology rather than a distinct field of study. This removes a number of trivial debates (e.g. how large an animal must be to be relevant to cryptozoology) and focuses on a well-supported zoological discovery technique (Arment 2004). Simply stated, the cryptozoological methodology is:

- a) Identify the target (referred to as a cryptid, or mystery animal)
- b) Gather information about the mystery animal and its alleged environment
- c) Use that information to gather confirmative physical evidence, making that evidence available for scientific testing, and if positive, for taxonomic designation and publication

This is the general cryptozoological methodology, but there are numerous legitimate alternate pathways within cryptozoology proper. For example, mystery animals can be identified from ethnozoological field research, from literature searches, from speaking to travelers, or personal experience. To evaluate the legitimacy of a mystery animal, different known species that might be misidentified will need to be considered. Hunting techniques will differ, depending on the type of alleged animal or the environment itself.

Here, I am proposing a methodological pathway that could potentially determine the existence of a very specific category of cryptid.

In most cases, “confirmative physical evidence” requires more than just DNA. A zoologist wouldn’t usually attempt to describe an unknown species with an unknown genetic sample; most zoologists would wait until they have a specimen, to evaluate morphological differences. However, recent advances in genetic testing have opened up a potential new avenue for cryptozoological discovery. Environmental DNA can be gathered and the presence of species identified even when they are not otherwise confirmed. The technology available allows for quick results, and is commonly used to detect invasive organisms and rare species. Now, for this to work as a cryptozoological technique, the species sought has to already be identified, so a completely unknown species can’t be targeted. But if an animal is believed extinct, it can be pursued through environmental DNA if its genetic profile is known.

One limiting factor is that this testing works best in freshwater environments. DNA spreads within these aquatic environments (though degraded into smaller fragments), but would be difficult to specifically locate in a terrestrial environment. (Marine environments are more complex, and a greater challenge, but technological advancements in the future may open this up further.) To illustrate both the potential and credibility of this technique, one simply has to examine the use of environmental DNA detection in searching for elusive Burmese pythons in South Florida, particularly in confirming populations where that invasive snake was not yet known (Piaggio et al 2014; Hunter et al 2015).

If we have a target organism that is believed extinct, and lives in a freshwater environment, it can be targeted to determine persistence in that environment. (It is possible to detect terrestrial species from contact with freshwater environments, but that is an area still being developed (Ushio et al 2016).) Now, from a practical standpoint, this has actually

been recently proven to work. The Alabama sturgeon, a fish feared extinct, as it hadn't been seen in several years, was determined to persist in Alabama waters through environmental DNA targeting (Anonymous 2016; Raines 2016; Pflieger et al 2016).

Now, I think we can take this a step further. Another fairly recent innovation is the extraction and analysis of "ancient DNA" from extinct organisms (*Camelops* (Heintzman et al 2015), *Mylodon* (Clack, MacPhee, and Poinar 2012), *Mammuthus* (Palkopoulou et al 2015), *Arctodus* (Mitchell et al 2016), etc.). Some, though certainly not all, unmineralized ancient remains are preserved well enough for DNA to persist to the present day. If a mystery animal is suspected to be closely related to a known extinct species, especially if that species is partially or fully aquatic, and if enough ancient DNA is available to create a genetic profile (and so available to create a primer and probe sequence sufficiently specific and sensitive enough to target and amplify the desired DNA (Pilliod et al 2012; Wilcox et al 2013)), it may be possible to incorporate ancient DNA into a cryptozoological methodology.

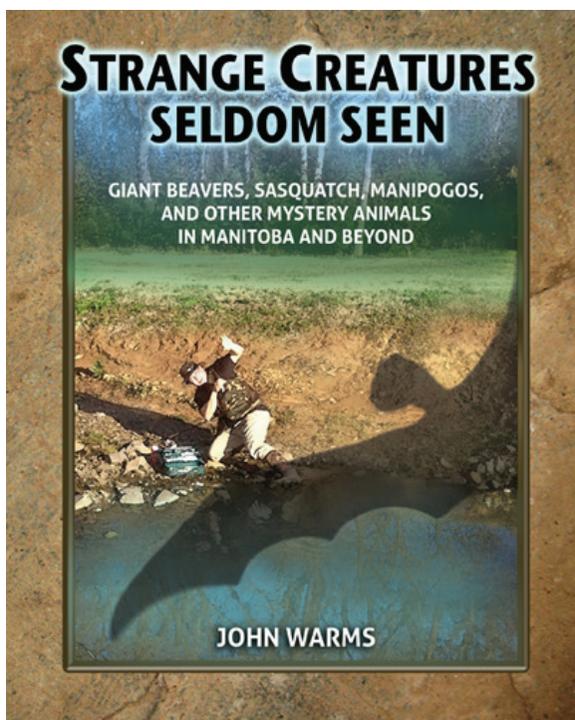
A perfect target for this sort of cryptozoological investigation would be the giant beaver, *Castoroides ohioensis*. John Warms' research in Manitoba (Warms 2015), suggests that this species may well persist to the present day. Ancient DNA extraction from *Castoroides* appears to have had limited success so far (Cleland et al 2016), but that may be due to poor DNA persistence in museum collection material. Freshly excavated fossil bones offer higher quality DNA samples (Pruvost et al 2007). I have no doubt that a concerted effort to create a complete genome sequence of *Castoroides ohioensis* would be successful, and that it would then be possible to create genetic primers to target persistent populations of that species and determine if it does, in fact, still exist. So long as the primers are sufficiently specific to rule out the smaller North American beaver, I think this is one of the few targeted methodologies that would not require a physical specimen to prove that a mystery animal exists.

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Strange Creatures Seldom Seen, by John Warms

John searches for mystery animals in Manitoba.

North American Giant Crayfish Tales

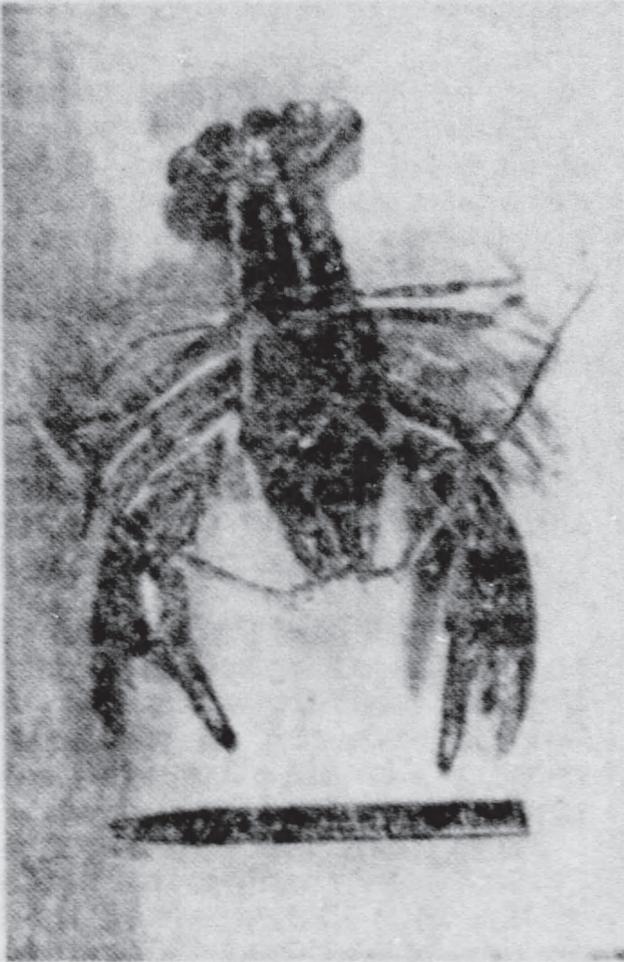
Chad Arment

Crayfish are the ubiquitous crawdads or mudbugs found throughout North America, usually small enough to easily catch by hand (accompanying pinches more annoyance than pain). Crayfish are cosmopolitan, being native to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Australasia. There are about 600 species worldwide, half of those native to North America. These crustaceans are important components of many freshwater systems (though there are a few species that have become invasive, expanding their range to the detriment of native species).

Most look like miniature lobsters, though the largest crayfish, the Tasmanian giant freshwater crayfish (*Astacopsis gouldi*), puts some lobsters to shame, with weights up to 13 lbs. In North America, crayfish are notably smaller. Species like the red swamp crayfish, *Procambarus clarkia*, may reach a little over six inches in total length. *Barbicambarus cornutus* (the bottlebrush crayfish) is probably the largest, known to reach lengths of up to 9 inches. (The bottlebrush crayfish has an interesting history of its own; described in 1884, it wasn't seen again until the 1960s. It is endemic to the Green River basin in Kentucky.) The smaller *Barbicambarus simmonsi* is only about 5 inches long, but was heralded as a "new giant species of crayfish" when it was discovered in Tennessee a few years ago.

Occasionally, reports of "giant crayfish" can be found in historical newspapers. Anything unusual in the natural world made for a popular paragraph for newspaper readers, so many editors (especially in rural areas) kept an ear out for those reports. But not all such crayfish were crayfish.

Freshwater prawns were sometimes mistaken for giant crayfish. There are a few larger species of native and introduced river prawns (*Macrobrachium*) that can be found, particularly in southern rivers and streams from Florida to Texas. *Macrobrachium carcinus*, the bigclaw river shrimp, is known to reach at least 12 inches in length. One biologist, Waldo Schmitt (Bassler et al 1931) noted: "Within the borders of the United States we have



CHAMP—The giant crayfish was taken near Stephensburg Lake, Hardin County, by O. G. Wilson, Jr., Louisville. The pencil in the picture is six and one-half inches long.

A large, but not extraordinary, crayfish from Hardin Co., KY.

Louisville, KY, *Courier-Journal*, August 29, 1948

a giant fresh-water shrimp, *Macrobrachium jamaicense* [now *carcinus*]. The largest specimen I know of weighed three pounds; its body length was ten and a half inches; the feelers, which were missing, were said to have been twenty-six and a half inches long; the larger claw of its sturdy pair measured thirteen and a quarter inches. It hailed from the Devil's River, Texas."

The following Texas crustaceans were almost certainly river prawns.

"Gonzales, Texas, July 5.—A monster crayfish was brought in Gonzales yesterday by George Greenhouse. Its claws measured twenty-five inches from tip to tip. One was thirteen and one-half inches while the other was not so long. It was caught in the Guadalupe river." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, July 5, 1907)

"THIS CRAWFISH BIGGEST EVER—Winnie Walker, a well known San Antonio boy, holds the distinction of having caught the largest crayfish from the San Antonio. Yesterday afternoon he captured three, the largest of which measured twenty-two inches from the tip of the claws to the end of the tail. The two others measured ten and twelve inches each. The catch was made near First Mission, where Mr. Walker spent the day with relatives, who live near the river. It was while he was attempting to catch some small crayfish to be used as bait for fish that he succeeded in landing the largest crayfish ever caught in the river. It was of the soft shell variety. He brought the catch to the city last evening and exhibited it among his friends." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, August 28, 1907)

"FIND FRESH WATER LOBSTER—Lockhart, Tex., July 30.—Messrs. Lea Beaty, Bruno Bock, Will Kreuz and Lee Lynch have placed on exhibition what they claim to be a fresh-water lobster which they caught in the Guadalupe River. From tip to tip the lobster measured 24 inches and is the largest one ever seen in this section." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, July 30, 1917)

"BIG CRAYFISH CAUGHT—Runge. May 5.—A large crayfish, having a spread of 25 inches, was caught in the San Antonio river near here by a Mexican youth. It is the largest crayfish ever caught here and it attracted a great deal of attention when put on display at the Janacek grocery store." (San Antonio, TX, *Light*, May 5, 1933)



WHAT IS IT? Capt. B. Struck, whose 11-year-old ward caught the monster, thinks it's a freshwater lobster or shrimp. His ward, young James Roser, was fishing for catfish in the resaca adjoining Struck's home on Lazy Acres Road last week. (Herald Photo)

A Freshwater Prawn

Brownsville, TX, *Herald*, August 17, 1969



A PRAWN! WHAT'S A PRAWN? According to Andrew Spell, age 15, son of Mr. and Mrs. Bill Spell of Cuero, a prawn is a cross between a crayfish and a shrimp. Young Spell caught just such a critter Sunday in the Guadalupe River about five miles out of Cuero. The prawn measured 27 inches from pincer to pincer. It is ironic that the lobster-like beast was caught this far north because they are mainly found in South America. Spell reports the prawn is edible...according to the encyclopedia but he doesn't plan to dine on his. He said it put up quite a fight after latching onto the shrimp bait and "it even tried to attack us when we got him in the boat," the lad concluded.

(Staff Photo)

A Freshwater Prawn (Correctly Identified)

Cuero, TX, *Daily Record*, August 7, 1973

In other cases, particularly when the “crayfish” is captured in brackish or marine habitat, a reported giant crayfish is likely a rock lobster or similar crustacean. For example:

“Ol’ Papa Épicé astounded Louisiana in 1934, but let’s not forget that for publicity’s sake the accepted measurement of 6 feet included his antennae. More accurate reports claim that the actual length from head to tail was 3 feet, 4 inches and weight was somewhere around 30lbs. Nonetheless



—AP Wirephoto

MONSTER CRAYFISH CAUGHT—This gigantic crayfish, also known as a Florida lobster, was brought up in a net by Richard Lundbloom, left, and Robert Fitch at Key West, Fla. The trophy, believed to be a record, weighed 11½ pounds and measured 41 inches from tail to feelers.

A Rock Lobster

Racine, WI, *Journal Times Sunday Bulletin*, November 20, 1960

these numbers are impressive since no other American cray reaches anywhere near these proportions. Since the species was never recorded doubts of authenticity suggest that the cray may have been a marine lobster introduced into a brackish swamp pool. DNA testing of the carapace has been inconclusive thus far.” (Anon 2004)

Similarly, this next one is undoubtedly a rock lobster, which are called crayfish in some parts of the Caribbean.

“A monster crayfish measuring over three feet in length and weighing 80 pounds was captured recently off the Florida coast.” (Monroe, LA, *News Star*, March 28, 1922)

More unusual are the following accounts.

“A giant crustacean of unknown species, but which must from all its appearance must be the father of all lobsters from the beginning of time, was found in a scoopful of sand and stone at the excavation at the big Wachusett dam at Clinton recently. It is 31 ½ inches long, and nobody in Clinton has ever seen any fresh water creature like it.” (Boston, MA, *Daily Globe*, November 12, 1901)

“Saranac Lake *Dispatch* to the New York *World*.

“While angling for bullheads, J. R. Tait and Charles Wendlekin hooked and landed a strange crayfish, which has since been called a lobster by persons who say they know what they are talking about.

“It has the claws, tail, legs, and long smellers, and is the color of a lobster. It is a young one, and has attracted much attention, because it is the first of its kind ever caught in the fresh waters of the Adirondacks.

“L. R. Bolton, of Boston, formerly interested in Maine lobsteries, says the fish is a lobster, and the first he ever knew to be found in fresh water. He says there must be others in the upper Saranac, and the catch will be brought to the attention of the State culturist.” (Washington *Post*, June 26, 1911)

Even stranger, large chicken-catching crayfish:

“CARRIED A FRYER DOWN INTO HOLE

“For generations untold the lowly crawfish has raised his sons and daughters along the lovely vales of Brush Creek, near Princeton, says the Bluefield Telegraph, and no one has ever suspected he was otherwise than a most peaceful citizen. The only depredations of which he has hitherto been accused were those connected with various nocturnal raids on corn fields just when the corn had come out of the ground. It is said that at such times he had been known to issue from his subterranean castle, and ruthlessly cut down corn, dragging it back with him to his den. It remains for our local fellow citizen, Attorney W. W. Rogers, to inject a doubt as to the herba-ceous habits of the crawfish, Mr. Rogers having stated the crawfish is as fond of chicken as the average Methodist circuit rider.

“Mr. Rogers, the first of this week, was over in Raleigh county in the neighborhood of Mabscott. He, with some other gentlemen, was passing the home of a citizen of Raleigh who dwelt in a flat at Mabscott. They noticed the sturdy Raleigh citizen industriously digging in his yard with a buttock. The man wiped the sweat off his brow and informed Mr. Rogers and friends a crawfish had stolen one of his chickens and he was digging him out. He stated he saw the crawfish slip up out of his hole and he was going to have that crawfish and chicken if it took a week to get it. Then he turned to his digging, while Mr. Rogers and his friends, doubting the story, stood and watched developments. After digging down some two feet the man found his quarry, and pulling it out, behold, there was a monster crawfish holding still in one of his claws a chicken some two or three weeks old. The crawfish had dragged the chicken down to his home and drowned it in the water at the bottom of the hole.

“The surprise of Mr. Rogers and his friends at such plain evidence of the depravity of the crawfish is responsible for the telling of the story on the return of Mr. Rogers to his home before. Insofar as known, the Mercer county crawfish has never been known to develop such carnivorous traits. But, still, this love for fleshy foods may account for many mysterious disappearances of chickens, dogs, cats and other pets in and about town.

“No one heretofore has suspected our crawfish to be other than feeders on vegetation. The valleys about town are filled with them, more or less. It is known that wolves and wildcats and squirrels

once inhabited these valleys, but they have disappeared. Then, too, many chickens have disappeared from numerous coops on the borders of the valley. Many dogs and cats have gone into the valley and failed to return. Still no one ever suspected the crawfish might be connected with all these disappearances which to date have been unaccounted for. No, the crawfish must hereafter be viewed with suspicion. His tribe must bear the stigma of flesh eaters and chicken thieves. The fair vale just below town, which bears the name of this freshwater crustacean, and which has added so much dignity, respectability, wealth, and loveliness to Mercer county, must now hang its head in shame over the depraved, degenerate character exhibited by the Raleigh county crawfish. We could wish that Mr. Rogers had never gone to Raleigh, that he had never repeated this tale of what he saw in the door yard of the Mabscott home. And there is no way in which we can figure prohibition had anything to do with it; hence these tears.” (Beckley, WV, *Sunday Register*, August 1, 1926)

“CRAB GETS CHICK—Pomeroy. June 25.—Screaming at the top of its voice for help, a week-old chick was seen disappearing into a hole in the yard at the C. M. Vining home on Wolf Pen Creek, back of Pomeroy, yesterday by Mrs. Helen Vining, wife of the owner of the premises. She ran to the rescue, but by the time she reached the scene of the disturbance the chick had gone down into the hole so far that she could not get it out. Quickly finding a hoe she dug around the chick until she could get a hold on it and hauled it out, only to find a giant crayfish hanging to one leg of the struggling chick. When rescued, the chick was still alive, but had one leg cut half off by the saw-like claws of the hen-yard robber.” (Athens, OH, *Messenger*, June 25, 1929)

While we know that new species of crayfish, even distinctive ones, are still being discovered in North America (for example, the zebra crayfish, *Cambarus clairitae*, described this year in Alabama (Schuster and Taylor 2016)), we are still awaiting solid evidence for a truly large North American crayfish (say, 12 inches in total length at least). But perhaps, in some small isolated watershed, a pair of formidable yet undescribed pincers await discovery . . .

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The Boss Snake of Murphy's Pond

Tony Gerard

Murphy's Pond, located in Hickman County, Kentucky, is the largest area of cypress swamp remaining in western Kentucky. Currently the area is part of the Obion Creek Nature Preserve, but the actual area of the pond itself is owned and administered by Murray State University. Only a small part of the area is actually open water; most is a mosaic of cypress swamp and lowland floodplain forest. Obion Creek runs nearby.

The area is home to many distinctly southern species. It allegedly has one of the highest cottonmouth population densities in the United States. All my life I have heard that a small alligator was killed on the road nearby the pond in the 1960s, but I could find no confirmation of this story in an internet search.

A story from my family's folklore involved a big snake killed in the Murphy's Pond area. In 1950 or '51 a group of my relatives were sitting in the yard on a summer afternoon. A cousin arrived and said that a large snake had been killed and brought out of Murphy's Pond and they should go see it. Of that group only my mother, Vanda (Oliver) Gerard, and my aunt Sue (Oliver) Fite are still living. They were about 14 and 12 years old at the time. The group traveled down highway 307 to a sawmill that was "right across from the entrance to Murphy's Pond."

The dead snake was laid out on a big log; its head and tail hung off either end. The story was that the night before, as the last logging truck was leaving the area with a load, it hit a bump. When someone went into the road the next day they found the snake dead in the logging road. Both my mother and aunt recall the marks of the truck tires being clearly visible on the dead snake about mid body.

My mother recalls the snake being between 12 and 15 feet long. My aunt thought it was larger. She noted "I thought they said the log was 30

feet long”. Both agree that the snake was a dark gray color, described as charcoal gray by my aunt. My mother recalls the snake as having distinct black spots about 3 or 4 inches across, my Aunt recall it as more mottled or “swirly” patterned in black. Both agree that the snake’s body midlength was at least as “big as a big coffee can (approximately 8-9 inches) or bigger” with a head proportional in size.

I posted inquires on several social media sites to try and find other witnesses. I was unsuccessful in finding any for that particular snake, but I did find a witness to a different big, dead snake in the area.

Cletus Murphy was attending Hickman County High School in Clinton in 1963 or '64. One spring day, probably in May, a fellow brought an enormous dead snake to school to show the faculty and students. It was so unusual that the entire school, about 300 people, was allowed to go out to see the snake’s body a class at a time.

The snake was in the back of a pickup with sideboards. Its head was wired to one of the sideboards to be more visible. The snake’s body was in several curves within the truck bed. “If it had been straight it would have hung way over the tailgate,” he noted. He believes the snake was about 15 feet long. He described its head as “big as a large grapefruit” and its body as being perhaps 8-9 inches thick.

The snake’s ground color he describes as yellowish with distinct blocks or diamonds of a charcoal gray color. Murphy remembers the belly as also being yellowish, of a slightly lighter color than the back.

The gentleman had run it over on Highway 307, “down in the bottom before you get to Beulah Baptist Church.” The snake had not begun to decompose and Murphy believed the fellow may have killed it the day he brought it to the school.

So were there actually two unusually large snakes killed in the same area about a decade apart? The descriptions sounded like two different species, and there seemed to be a big time gap.

Cletus Murphy had recommended that I also contact Michael Farmer. He was a lifelong resident of the area and had grown up close to Murphy’s Pond. It was Mr. Farmer that actually tied the stories together.

Michael Farmer remembered the incident well. In his version of the story the snake was hit by a logging truck somewhere near Murphy’s Pond. “I heard the driver was coming out and hit a bump, but he thought he’d just hit a log that had fallen off another load. The next day they found the dead snake,” he related. “They drug it up to a sawmill that was on the east

side of the road, where 307 and 703 meet, and displayed it on a log there.” Sometimes later, “Mac Engram took it to town and showed it around.” For a time it was also displayed at a local gas station.

Farmer remembers the snake as being greenish brown in color with darker spots or blotches. He said he honestly didn’t remember if the darker spots were actual spots, blocks or swirls, only that the snake had a darker pattern on its back. He remembers the snake as “12 or 13 feet long and as big around as a man’s thigh. Its head was as big as a small hog.” Unlike Cletus Murphy he remembers the snake as beginning to decompose; “It was gettin’ pretty ripe!” He related that people came from all over to see the dead snake as word spread. He also added, “If there had been two big snakes killed I surely would have heard about them both,” as he lived in the area all his life.

So it seems that there was only one dead snake and my family’s recollection of the date was wrong. With so much notoriety surely someone took a picture! I contacted the local paper, the Hickman County Gazette, but they only had archives going back to the 1980s. I was unable to get in touch with anyone from the local historical society.

So what was this enormous snake? My mother seems certain that the snake she saw was an anaconda. Cletus Murphy felt the snake he saw was “some constrictor like a Python/Anaconda.”

I spoke with Dr. Edmund Zimmerer, a herpetologist retired from Murray State University. He felt that my mother’s description might not be far off for an anaconda two days dead in the summer. He also noted that Murphy’s Pond has springs that keep certain areas ice free all winter. Dr. Zimmerer felt that a tropical species overwintering there “was within the realm of possibility.”

So if it were an anaconda or python we are left with the question of how it got there. Such big constrictors were not nearly as available to the general public at the time as they would be in later years, but introduction seems the only option. Dr. Zimmerer notes that there were small “roadside zoos” in many parts of Kentucky in the ’50s and ’60s and that often when they closed or went out of business they simply released their animals. He told of a population of coachwhip snakes that had existed for several years in Kentucky that came about in just this manner. Further research may turn up an answer (or at least more witnesses).

Oh—and just for the record—Cletus Murphy and Michael Farmer had both also heard the alligator story!



A young reticulated python in the Philippines.

© Tony Gerard



Yellow anaconda
(CC-SA) Bernard Dupont

EDITOR'S NOTE

Tony's account is of particular interest to me, as I included a couple of giant snake stories in *Boss Snakes* (2008) from the same region in Kentucky. Tony describes what happened in Hickman County, KY, in 1963 or 1964. In 1962, Hazel, KY, in Calloway County, a large snake, thought to be up to 24 feet in length, was reportedly seen by several people. Calloway County is just two counties east of Hickman County, in the southwestern corner of the state. Only now can I offer a resolution, though, to the Calloway County big snake. From the Louisville, KY, *Courier Journal* of July 12, 1962:

SNAKE 18 FEET LONG CAUGHT NEAR HAZEL

Hazel, Ky., July 11.—A snake about 18 feet long was captured near here Wednesday and some say it may be the mysterious Hazel monster. But others say, no, there must be a bigger one around somewhere.

A six-man hunting party captured the giant reptile early Wednesday on a road and threw a blanket over its head.

The snake was not measured immediately, explained Police Chief W. O. Parker of nearby Murray.

The snake was taken Wednesday night to a reptile farm near Park City, Ky., which identified it as a nonpoisonous South American anaconda.

Diamonds On Side

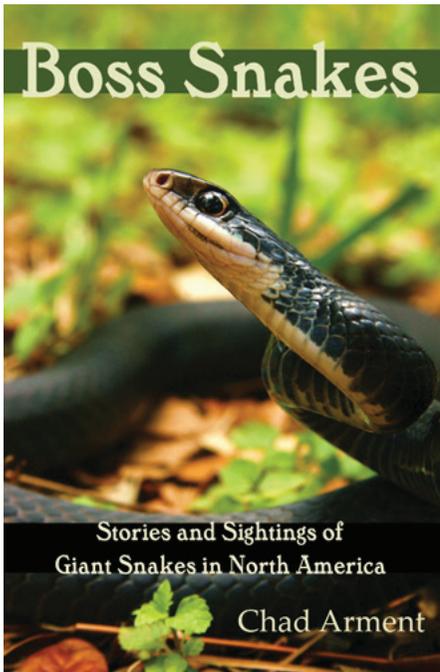
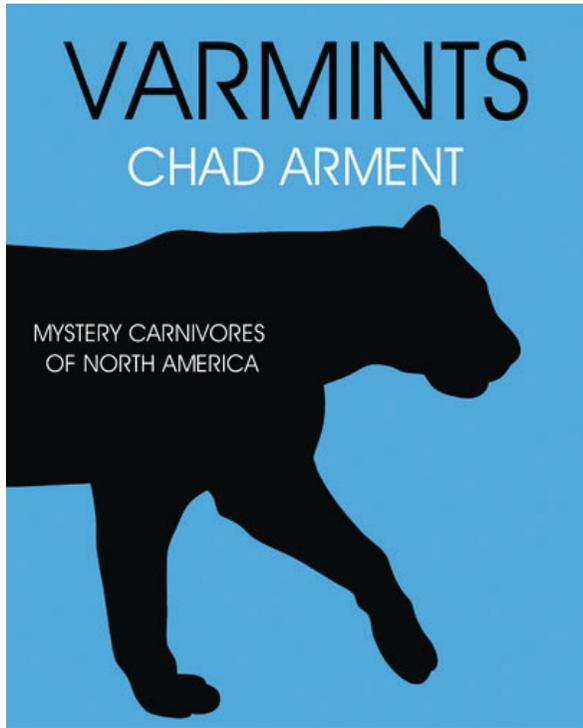
Chief Parker described the snake as brown, with black diamonds down its side and a yellow belly.

“Folks have been out hunting the snake ever since that fellow saw that 28-foot one in his cornfield last month,” Parker said.

The fellow the chief was referring to is Hildred Paschall, a farmer who reported that he saw Wednesday’s catch and “it’s not the one.”

Despite scoffers, Paschall still stoutly stands by his claim to have taken a long look at a mammoth snake in his cornfield. Paschall said the one he saw stretched across eight corn rows, which would make it at least 21 feet long, and maybe as much as 30 feet.

I haven’t come across any further reports from Hazel, so if there was another exotic snake loose in the area, it most likely succumbed to the following winter’s temperatures. In any case, this report provides some context for Tony’s account. It would not be the first time an exotic big snake found its way into a rural landscape far from its native home.



Varmints:
Mystery Carnivores
of North America
by Chad Arment

Boss Snakes:
Stories and Sight-
ings of Giant Snakes
in North America
by Chad Arment

Brief Notes

LITTLE BLACK PANTHER

Richard Muirhead uncovered an interesting news account (Van Smith 1960) that describes a small black panther-like feline seen in the Everglades National Park region of southern Florida. From the news story:

Everglades National Park authorities have a full size mystery on their hands in the form of a 'what-is-it?' animal.

The mystery is 10 years old—since the first sighting—but the story has never been told before because no scientist has been able to come up with the answer.

No one believes that this is a creature from outer space, let down by a space ship, but authorities do believe when the enigma is solved it may very well prove sensational.

The record of this creature is contained in a voluminous file of sightings marked 'The Little Panther.' Only there is no such thing as a little panther—not one that stays the size of this animal year after year.

Panthers run from 7 to 8 feet from nose to tail end. This creature is a third that size. It is also sleek black. Panthers are tawny.

If all these sightings were reported only by tourists, as many were, they wouldn't add up to much of a mystery. But scientists, rangers and wild life authorities in number have also attested to seeing this strange animal. They have no idea what it is.

A typical ranger report from Coot Bay Station, dated June 11, 1951, reads:

'Maxwell, J. Parker and B. Parker on duty here A. M. On

way down a large dark-colored long-tailed cat was observed near West Lake. Panther?’

Ernst Christensen, chief park naturalist, points out two interesting features in that observation. The reference to ‘cat’ means a wild cat or bobcat, which definitely does not have a long tail.

Also, panthers are not dark.

Christensen himself has seen the creature a number of times, once when he was in the company of Dade Thornton, wildlife photographer and local naturalist.

Their joint report at the sight of this weird animal was summed up briefly: ‘Damned interesting.’

Some viewers have described it as a jaguarundi of unusual size. Christensen disagrees immediately with this possibility. Though this would make the creature of a size nearly agreeing with all the other reports, the jaguarundi has unusually short front legs.

The creature does not. Also, jaguarundi is a native of Mexico and southern Texas. It would have had to cross the Mississippi to get here.

Another theory is that it is an ocelot, which comes from the same area as the jaguarundi, that has gone through a melanistic or darkening phase.

This darkening process, which can occur in men and animals exposed to tropical heat, takes many generations. It would mean the creature and its relatives have been here for a long time.

A third theory is that it is a very large feral cat. That means a very large domestic cat has gone wild or possibly is the offspring of a mating between a bobcat and an ordinary cat which produced the long tail.

A fourth is the most spectacular and interesting of all. That, says Christensen, is that the creature is some kind of animal new to science.

I sent FOIA requests to Everglades National Park, with no results. That may indicate any locally maintained records were thrown out after so many years, or are just not accessible. Archive.org does have scans of some

monthly reports of the park naturalist for Everglades National Park (NPS 1949-1959). These are only very brief notes, but the little black panther shows up twice:

March 2, 1956: "The famous 'black panther' in the west lake area was observed by two members of the Naturalist staff. Observation was at such close range that certain features were clearly discernable. The panther very definitely is a dark-colored cat-like animal with a long tail and is about one-half the size of a full-grown cougar. It will prove interesting to fully record this animal."

November 2, 1956: "Two observation records of small dark panther were made by Engineer Mikell."

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National Park Service. 1949-59. Chief Park Naturalist Report. <https://archive.org/stream/chiefparknatural4959unse#page/n495>

A MYSTERY BLACK SNAKE

Jan Roth, a naturalist residing near Lay, Colorado, wrote a newspaper article in 2015 that brought together reports of a moderate-sized black snake, ostensibly similar to eastern North America's black racer, from the area ranging from Savery, Wyoming, south past Craig, Colorado, all the way to Meeker, and west to Browns Park, going back to 1986. (Basically, this is the northwestern tip of Colorado.) Roth believed that "The species we're looking for appears to prefer Oak brush and serviceberry ecozones close to creeks or running water between 6,500 and 7,500 feet in elevation." Roth noted that it could be a new species or a range extension of a known species, though he didn't suggest any possibilities. There are only a few racer-like snakes in Colorado. Yellow-bellied racers seem an unlikely culprit as they aren't black, and coachwhips are not found anywhere near that part of the state. (If coachwhips had somehow been introduced, that might be a possible explanation, as some individuals can be melanistic, but it's certainly not the dominant color phenotype, so further evidence is necessary.)

Roth, Jan. 2015. Jack Rabbit Road and the mystery snake. Craig, CO, *Daily Press* (Feb. 27) <http://www.craigdailynews.com/news/2015/feb/27/jan-roth-jack-rabbit-road-and-mystery-snake/>

LUMINOUS CATERPILLARS OF AUSTRALIA

I noted in *Cryptozoology and the Investigation of Lesser-Known Mystery Animals* (2006) that there were cases of suspected bioluminescent spiders. Even more intriguing is a suspected luminous moth in Springbrook, Queensland, Australia. The late bioluminescence researcher Garry Maguire first discovered what he thought were just glow worms high in the trees, back in 1998. They turned out to be caterpillars. He noted, "On closer inspection the tail glows continuously and when disturbed and in motion the head, tail and the whole digestive tract of the caterpillar exudes bioluminescence in the blue/green spectrum not unlike a neon tube." Early caterpillars live down under the surface of the forest soil and leaf litter, and only move to the surface to graze when they are more mature. Maguire noted they were very mobile and could disappear into the ground quickly. Captured caterpillars developed into luminous pupae. For a time, Maguire suspected that these were simply larvae of a local firefly, but by 2006 noted that they were identified as the caterpillars of an as yet unidentified moth. Maguire noted that there were historical records of settlers in the area who had described a luminous moth (circa 1914), but he had never heard of anyone spotting such a lepidopteran in recent times. Unfortunately, I learned while trying to contact him for further information that Garry Maguire died just in the last couple of years, and there is no one currently attempting to continue his research into this mystery.

https://web.archive.org/web/20080724104930/http://springbrook.info/research/luminous_caterpillars.htm

GOLD COAST PIPEFISH

Diver Ian Banks photographed an unusual pipefish in the Gold Coast Seaway of Australia in November, 2009. US biologists ran across the photo online and realized it was a possible new species. A trip to the Seaway in 2014 was unsuccessful; poor weather conditions made conditions difficult. A trip in search for the pipefish was planned for late 2015.

- Larkins, Damien. 2014. Pipefish photo sparks international search. (Nov. 25) <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/11/25/4135417.htm>
- Short, Graham. 2015. Expedition to find rare pipefish in Queensland Australia. (May 16) <http://sciworthy.com/science-news/expedition-to-find-rare-pipefish-in-queensland-australia/>

THE DESERT RAT-KANGAROO

The oolacunta, or desert rat-kangaroo (*Caloprymnus campestris*), is a small marsupial first described in 1843 from an unknown location in South Australia. It was not seen again until 1931, when several specimens were collected over the next few years in the far north-east of South Australia. A few reports of the species were collected from the 1970s and 1980s, but field researchers were unable to find a trace of the species during the 1990s and 2000s, and it was believed to have gone extinct. Robinson and Forrest (2011) detailed a possible sighting of this marsupial in the Peake Hill Mine area by a member of a nature group party camping by the river. The possible re-discovery is one of many interesting discovery narratives that could be told about Australian wildlife. (For example, there's the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, *Onychogalea fraenata*, thought to have disappeared by the 1930s, but rediscovered in Queensland in 1973 when a fencing contractor recognized the species from an illustration reprinted in a Woman's Day magazine (Gordon and Lawrie 1980).)

- Gordon, G., and B. C. Lawrie. 1980. The rediscovery of the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, *Onychogalea fraenata* (Gould) (Marsupialia: Macropodidae) in Queensland. *Australian Wildlife Research* 7: 339-345.
- Robinson, Tony, and Tiana Forrest. 2012. A possible sighting of the desert rat-kangaroo or oolacunta (*Caloprymnus campestris*) on the Peake Station, South Australia. *South Australian Naturalist* 86(2): 63-75.

ARCTIC PYGMY SEALS

Philippe Coudray, author of *Guide des Animaux Cachés*, has provided an English translation of that book in PDF form (at <http://www.philippe-coudray.com/Pages/A-guidebook-to-hidden-animals.html>). One account particularly intrigued me (the Arctic pygmy seal from the Barents Sea) as I have previously noted a report of pygmy seals in the Canadian

Arctic Islands (Arment 2004). Philippe kindly forwarded his source for the Barents Sea account, *Les Survivants de L'ombre* (by Jean-Jacques Barloy, Arthaud, 1985), along with a translation: “Danish, Norwegian and German seafarers are familiar with pigmy seal bands that live off the coasts of the Sea of Barents, between Norway, Svalbard and Siberia. However, these seals remain enigmatic. According to Roland Heu, Vice-President of the French Arctic Society, these seals are likely a subspecies of the ringed seal (*Pusa hispida pygmaea*). It was described from a specimen held at the beginning of the century at the Hamburg Zoo. The pygmy seal only measured seventy-three centimeters. Bands of three hundred seals are formed, which is not the case with other ringed seals. In addition, this subspecies is very alert, hence the names ‘seal-phantom’, or ‘seal-gnome’ that the sailors give it. Is its small size due to undernourishment? And why this change in behavior? These questions remain unanswered.” It turns out that the *P. h. pygmaea* specimen was at Carl Hagenbeck’s zoo and described in 1914. This subspecies appears to have been synonymized with *P. h. hispida* (Scheffer 1958). Images of the original 1914 living specimen can be seen in the paper, “Beitrag zur Kenntnis von *Pusa hispida pygmaea*,” available online at http://www.zobodat.at/pdf/Archiv-Naturgeschichte_87A_10_0183-0199.pdf.

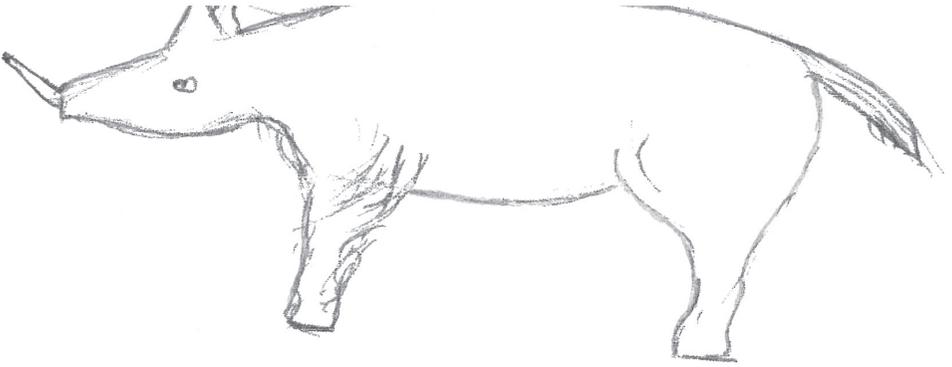
Arment, Chad. 2004. *Cryptozoology: Science & Speculation*. Landisville, PA: Coachwhip.

Scheffer, Victor B. 1958. *Seals, Sea Lions, and Walruses: A Review of the Pinnipedia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

MANITOBA ‘PIG WITH A TUSK’

John Warms has collected a wide range of cryptozoological reports from his home province of Manitoba (Warms 2015). One that caught my attention involved a “pig with a tusk” that was reported primarily in northern Manitoba (hunters from both Pukatawagan and Nelson House being familiar with the animal). It is reported to be pig-like in basic form, black, but not as thickly coated with hair as a wild boar. It did not have split hooves, but rather left a flat round track. A seven- to eight-inch horn protruded from the end of the snout. Habitat-wise, it seemed to be found in areas with water nearby that reportedly didn’t freeze.

Pigs have cloven hooves, and leave distinctive tracks, and obviously don’t have horns on their snouts. I’m not a fan of pushing unverifiable



“Pig with a tusk” sketched by an eyewitness.
(Courtesy John Warmes)

identities on biological unknowns, but there are small fossil rhinos in the North American fossil record that show similarities to this overall description. (*Menoceras*, for example, was pig-sized. Interestingly, it and the related genus *Diceratherium* had small paired horns at the end of their snouts.) Unlike the cold-adapted woolly rhino, these smaller fossil rhinos were known from warmer climates, though as Karl Shuker notes in his recently revised *Still in Search of Prehistoric Survivors* (2016), it is difficult to gauge from the fossil record exactly what adaptations an organism might present if its descendents survived to modern times.

Shuker, Karl. 2016. *Still in Search of Prehistoric Survivors*. Greenville, OH: Coachwhip.

Warmes, John. 2015. *Strange Creatures Seldom Seen*. Greenville, OH: Coachwhip.

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