



## **CRYPTOZOOLOGY NEWSLETTER**

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### **NEW SPECIES: THE FISH FROM SIBERIA**

There are many fish species still awaiting discovery, and not all of them are hiding in the oceans. In 1993, a diminutive new sculpin was even identified in the Potomac River. However, finding a new fish may involve considerable travel and even hardship. Mikhail Skopets, a Russian fisheries biologist, wrote an article in 1992 about an extremely difficult fishing trip he undertook for science.

Skopets is a specialist in the salmonoid fishes, which include not only salmon but trout, char, and others. About thirteen years ago, he visited a remote area of Siberia north of the Sea of Okhotsk. The local inhabitants described to him an even more lonely spot, Lake El'gygytgyn, or White Lake, which held two kinds of char unlike those they'd found in other waters.

An intrigued Skopets made the arduous journey to White Lake, a body of water nearly 200 meters deep which fills an ancient meteoric crater. The water is never far above freezing, and the lake is frozen over ten months out of the year. Skopets spent weeks huddled in a tent beside the lake. He finally did capture a new species, the smallmouth char, which he described in 1981.

Skopets also caught a twelve-pound specimen of a known predatory char in the lake, and in its stomach were bones that couldn't be identified. It seemed to the biologist that the local fishermen definitely knew what they were talking about.

To follow up on this clue, Skopets and four colleagues once more crossed the icy tundra to the lake, 250 miles from the nearest village. Casting gill nets from an inflatable boat in the midst of an Arctic windstorm, Skopets got his fish: a deepdwelling char over 30 centimeters long and so unusual it had to be placed in a new genus. The longfin char, as it was named, is the most primitive char known.

## **SIBERIAN FISH (Cont.):**

As a final note on fish discoveries, consider the bizarre case of a new species being discovered on land. The animal in question is a red Brazilian catfish only an inch long. Discovered in 1984, it has abandoned the water world almost entirely. The fish, which looks more like a slug, is eyeless, scaleless, and, if put in water, immediately wriggles back onto the shore, where it breathes through its skin rather than its undersized gills. In zoology, it seems, truth really can be stranger than fiction.

**SOURCES:** Shuker, Karl P. N. 1993. *The Lost Ark*. London: HarperCollins // Skopets, Mikhail. 1992. "Secrets of Siberia's White Lake," *Natural History*, November.

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## **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...THE EASTERN COUGAR**

The cougar (or panther, puma, painter, catamount, mountain lion, etc.) is the largest feline native to the United States, excepting the jaguars whose range used to extend up into the Southwest. Classified as a varmint, the animal was trapped, shot, and poisoned almost out of existence.

Today, the western subspecies is out of danger. A second subspecies, the Florida panther, has been reduced to a dwindling, inbred population so small (probably under fifty animals) that it may not be viable despite desperate efforts to save it.

The once-numerous Eastern cougar has had even worse luck. Its extermination was for over a century a matter of government policy, and bounties were placed on the animal. Opinions on when this subspecies became extinct range from 1910 to 1946. A 1938 kill in Maine is one contender for the last specimen in the U.S.

A word is required here on classification. The cougar ranges all over the Americas, and dozens of subspecies have been proposed. Even the genus of the animal is a subject of some debate. It is usually lumped with the small (non-roaring) cats in the genus *Felis*, while the big cats like the lion are placed in the genus *Panthera*. Accordingly, the cat's most common description is *Felis concolor*, with the Eastern variety known as *Felis concolor cougar*. However, not everyone agrees with putting the cougar in the same genus as the common house cat. Since it doesn't fit well into *Panthera* either, a few zoologists have proposed giving it its own genus: Ivan Sanderson suggested *Neofelis*, and J. Richard Greenwell in 1994 resurrected the idea with the proposed genus *Puma*, which was apparently first proposed by William Jardine in 1834. The latest edition of the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals*, by John O. Whitaker, does place it in the genus *Panthera*, a classification for which I can find no precedent.

## **EASTERN COUGAR (Cont.):**

Whatever one calls the Eastern cougar, is it truly extinct? Maybe not. In 1958, a biologist in New Jersey reported observing a cougar in his headlights. Over the next 25 years, more than 300 sightings in the U.S. and Canada were reported to various authorities. One of these cases involved a female who left her tracks right on the outskirts of Montreal in 1959. A panther of unknown origin was killed in Tennessee in 1971. Tracks, hair, and droppings found in New Brunswick in 1992 were identified by that province's wildlife authorities as belonging to a cougar.

Eventually, the evidence grew strong enough to put the cat on the U.S. endangered species list. Tracks and droppings found in 1981 persuaded Robert Downing, author of the Fish and Wildlife Service's cougar recovery plan, that at least one cougar lived in the Virginia-West Virginia area. Based on eyewitness reports, Downing suggested the mountains of North Carolina also housed cougars. Finally, in 1994, droppings definitely identified by Vermont wildlife officials as cougar were collected after a sighting of three animals, a mother and two cubs, in that state.

Just the possibility the cougar still roams the Eastern forests is enough to lead researchers to devote years, in some cases, to tracking down reports. John and Linda Lutz have no doubts. They operate the nonprofit Eastern Puma Research Network, collecting sightings, publishing a newsletter, and strongly arguing the case for the cat's existence. The EPRN logged 435 sightings in 1993 alone. The Lutzes believe that state wildlife officials are too quick to dismiss cougar sightings and related evidence, perhaps due to the possible negative impact on outdoor recreation and tourism that could arise from confirming the presence of a potentially dangerous animal.



FRONT FOOT



HIND FOOT

*Cougar tracks. They can be distinguished from dog prints mainly by their size (over four inches wide) and the lack of claw marks. In deep snow, a cougar may leave tail drag marks.*

The Eastern cougar's survival is not certain. Many sightings are mistakes involving dogs, bobcats, etc. Others may represent escaped or released pet Western cougars. The question remains even if a specimen is taken: while Eastern cougars are generally smaller than Western ones, the subspecies is differentiated more on the basis of habitat than of morphology. Besides, there are no recent Eastern cougar specimens in hand to compare new finds to.

## **EASTERN COUGAR (Cont.):**

A final problem is that many reports (95 out of the 435 mentioned above, for example) involve all-black animals. While black panthers have been killed in Central and South America, there is not a single definite record (a carcass or film evidence) of a melanistic specimen from our own continent. The animal does sport a wide range of other colors, and a cougar with unusually dark pelage, although not actually black, was killed in Colorado in 1912. There is also some confusion of terms here: melanistic leopards (*Panthera pardus*), found in many zoos, are often referred to as "black panthers," even by some zoologists. (In this writer's opinion, a black leopard should be called exactly that.) Incidentally, 140 years ago the famed hunter John "Grizzly" Adams traveled to Nevada's Humboldt Mountains in search of the region's allegedly famous purple panthers. He was disappointed.

Bottom line: the majority of scientific opinion is likely to stay on the "extinct" side until the evidence - preferably live-trapped specimens - becomes unquestionable. That may take some time.

IF INTERESTED, CONTACT: John and Linda Lutz, Eastern Puma Research Network, P.O. Box 3562, Baltimore, MD, 21214, or call (410) 254-2517. EPRN collects sightings and publishes a monthly newsletter.

**SOURCES:** Allen, Thomas B. 1974. *Vanishing Wildlife of North America*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic // Dillon, Richard. 1966. *The Legend of Grizzly Adams*. New York: Tower Publications // Downing, Robert L. 1982. *Eastern Cougar Recovery Plan*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service // Lowe, David, et al. 1990. *The Official World Wildlife Fund Guide to Endangered Species of North America*. Washington, D.C.: Beacham Publishing // Lutz, John A. Personal communication, December 30 // Lutz, John A. 1994. "1993 Statistical Review of *Felis concolor* Sightings." Baltimore: Eastern Puma Research Network // McNamee, Thomas. 1980. "Chasing a Ghost," *Audubon*, March // Tinsley, J. B. 1987. *The Puma*. El Paso: Texas Western Press. Thornbeck, Jane, and Martin Jenkins, compilers. 1982. *The IUCN Mammal Red Data Book*. Gland, Switzerland: Intl. Union for the Conservation of Nature.

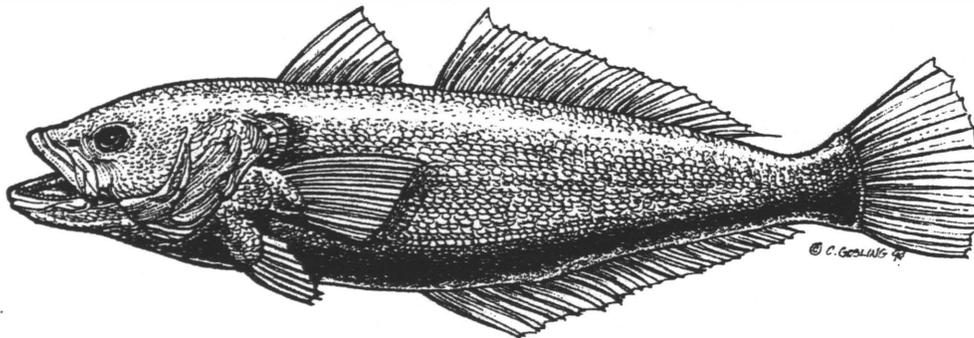
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## **UNCLASSIFIED: FISHING THE OCEANS**

Of the estimated 50,000 vertebrates yet to be classified (see "News and Comment," below), most are saltwater fishes. Sometimes we have had tantalizing glimpses of new species yet unclassified.

In 1888, the American research vessel *Albatross* was trawling off the coast of Chile. Its catch included a previously unknown, primitive-looking fish, about five feet long, with two dorsal fins. The scientists on the *Albatross* photographed the specimen, then left it unattended on the deck. A sailor on cleanup detail threw the fish overboard. We don't know whether the scientists threw the sailor overboard, but no one has seen the fish since.

## FISHING THE OCEANS (Cont.)



*Unclassified fish captured by the Albatross in 1888. Reconstructed from a photograph. Illustration copyright 1994 by Craig Gosling.*

Time and technology change, but undersea mysteries remain. Two researchers who manned the submersible *Deepstar 4000* on a 1966 probe of the eastern Pacific, for example, had an uncomfortably close encounter with an awesome denizen of the deep. They were motoring along at a depth of four thousand feet in the San Diego Trough when a dark-colored, mottled fish they estimated was 30 to 40 feet long swam right up to the 18-foot sub. The fish studied the craft with eyes "as big as dinner plates," then moved off, much to the relief of the startled aquanauts.

Automatic cameras lowered into the same area took pictures of a large fish identified as a rare Pacific sleeper shark. If that was what the *Deepstar* met, it would be, by far, the largest sleeper shark ever seen.

The witnesses, pilot Joe Thompson and oceanographer Dr. Eugene LaFond, aren't so sure their visitor was a shark. Both men described a round tail like a grouper's rather than a sharklike tail. Accordingly, this incident may have involved a new and gigantic species. Was it, as the description indicates, a bony fish or teleost? If so, it would be the largest member of the entire class Osteichthyes, easily outmuscling the current recordholders for length (a title given by Guinness to the oarfish (*Regalecus glesne*) at 25 feet-plus) and weight (the bizarre ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*) at nearly 5,000 pounds.)

There are many other mysterious deep-water fish, especially sharks. One odd-looking type, six feet long with bulging eyes,

## **FISHING THE OCEANS (Cont.)**

was reported from a French bathyscaphe off western Africa at 13,000 feet. A 1986 reference listed fourteen species of shark known from a single specimen each, and the difference between one specimen and none is mere chance. That was the case, for example, with the Antarctic sleeper shark, described in 1939 from a single eight-foot carcass that washed up on Macquarie Island in 1912.

What else may be waiting for us in the depths? Mac McCamis, pilot of the submersible *Alvin*, once reported a glimpse of something he didn't want to see any closer. He called it "this monster... kind of shook me up. This was a living creature... I seen at least 40 or 50 foot of it." Not a very helpful description, but certainly a tantalizing one.

Someday, when we have the technology to thoroughly explore the deep oceans, we will find these creatures... and many more.

**SOURCES:** Editors of Reader's Digest. 1986. *Sharks: Silent Hunters of the Deep*. New York: Reader's Digest Books // Kaharl, Victoria A. 1990. *Water Baby: the Story of Alvin*. New York: Oxford University Press // McCormick, Harold W., et. al. 1978. *Shadows in the Sea: the Sharks, Skates and Rays*. New York: Stein and Day // Ricciuti, Edward. 1973. *Killers of the Seas*. New York: Collier Books // Wood, Gerald L. *Animal Facts and Feats*. Sterling Publishing Co., New York, 1977.

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## **FROM THE ARCHIVES:**

The above-mentioned "Grizzly" Adams had another interesting story to relate, this one from California around 1854. The passage in Richard Dillon's 1966 biography *The Legend of Grizzly Adams* reads, "Grizzly narrowly missed killing or capturing the rarest, most bizarre animal he had ever seen. The beast, which looked like a hedgehog with the head and feet of a bear, escaped."

What is one to make of this? A freak bear with a bizarre skin condition seems the most likely suspect. Adams was not above telling a tall tale, but this doesn't sound like one: there is no colorful detail, just a brief sighting of a weird-looking animal.

A final incident from this biography sounds a caution for cryptozoologists. In the desert near Nevada's Walker River, Dillon writes, "The atmosphere here played tricks with the men, too. Once, Adams was astonished to see an immense animal ahead. It appeared to be bigger than a buffalo and Adams began to wonder if it were not an elephant, and, if so, what it was doing in the Nevada desert. Coming close, a mirage dissolved and the hunter found it to be just a normal-sized horse which had probably escaped from an immigrant train."

## NEWS AND COMMENT

The National Biodiversity Institute research institute in Costa Rica is **discovering 300 new species per month** in the course of its search for medically useful compounds. This work is detailed in an article on biodiversity in the December 1994 *Popular Science* (Langreth, Robert. "The World According to Dan Janzen," p.78). The author also quotes some interesting estimates of the number of animals yet to be discovered: 50,000 vertebrates, 150,000 crustaceans, 200,000 molluscs, 750,000 to 1,000,000 spiders and mites, and anywhere from 8,000,000 to 100,000,000 insects.

The first **release into the wild of Przewalski's horse** is a success. This primitive wild horse almost disappeared, but a small captive herd remained, and 19 of their descendants have now been freed in Mongolia. One foal has already been added to the group. The horse was believed extinct in the wild for decades now, but occasional reports have kept the question open. (Preiser, Rachel. 1995. "Back to Mongolia," *Discover*, January, p. 60.)

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## RESOURCES:

### BOOKS.

Ellis, Richard, and John E. McCosker. 1991. **Great White Shark**. New York: HarperCollins. 270pp. The ultimate white shark book. Ellis, a first-rate artist and writer on marine life (e.g., *The Book of Sharks*), along with marine biologist McCosker, has collected every known fact about the sea's most feared predator, sorted out myth and legend, and put the results in a thoroughly illustrated, referenced, and readable book. A chapter of special interest to cryptozoologists concerns the truth about the largest white shark ever caught (22-23 feet, if you must know: claims of larger sharks are shown to be undocumented at best, and sometimes outright frauds). Another chapter is devoted to the white shark's "evolutionary great-uncle," *Carcharodon megalodon*, and the claims for its continued survival. (The authors doubt it's still around, but they present the evidence evenhandedly.) Fascinating reading.

Krantz, Grover. 1992. **Big Footprints: A Scientific Inquiry into the Reality of Sasquatch**. Boulder, CO: Johnson Books. 300pp. Anthropologist Krantz, Sasquatch's most prominent scientific advocate, considers the reports on the alleged apelike creature and tries to deduce the animal's lifestyle and characteristics based on what he considers the most reliable information. It's a good effort, although necessarily speculative. Krantz weakens his argument by accepting partial evidence in two cases where some faking was involved. (If you're trying to prove such a challenging hypothesis as the existence of Sasquatch, *all* tainted evidence has to be excluded.) Must reading for those interested in the Sasquatch controversy.

## BOOKS (Cont.)

Walters, Mark Jerome. 1992. *A Shadow and a Song: The Struggle to Save an Endangered Species*. Post Mills, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co. Poignant chronicle of the decline and apparent extinction of the dusky seaside sparrow. (The title is slightly misleading, since the dusky was a subspecies.) Walters explains the human actions and inactions that led to the dusky's decline, until there was nothing left to do but hybridize the last few birds with a related subspecies. Walters also explores the controversial and still somewhat mysterious events that brought an end to these efforts.

## PERIODICALS.

Lutz, Richard A., and Rachel Haymon. 1994. "Rebirth of a Deep-sea Vent," *National Geographic*, November, p.115. The submersible *Alvin* revisits a vent devastated by a volcanic eruption and finds its strange fauna recovering quickly. Includes photo of a new type of octopus (observed trying to mate with another male).

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## IN CLOSING:

All serious researchers who are not already members should join the International Society of Cryptozoology, which serves as a clearinghouse for information and labors to make searching for unknown or presumed-extinct animals a respectable scientific specialty. Contact J. Richard Greenwell, Secretary, ISC, P.O. Box 43070, Tucson, AZ 85733. While this editor is a member of the ISC, *Cryptozoology Newsletter* is not an official ISC publication. The ISC produces its own newsletter and the annual scholarly journal *Cryptozoology*. It also hosts an annual conference.

I welcome comments, corrections, or clippings. Responses to the editor may be directed to my new permanent address at 3405 Windjammer Drive, Colorado Springs, CO, 80920, USA. Telephone (719) 592-9057. Newsletter subscriptions directly from the editor are available for \$15/year.

Finally, a reminder: my book, *Rumors of Existence*, reviewing recently discovered, maybe-extinct, and reported animals, will be out in spring 1995 from Hancock House Publishers, P.O. Box 959, Blaine, Washington, 98231-0959.

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Logo illustration: the mysterious dolphin *Delphinus rhinoceros*, described by French naturalists Quoy and Gaimard in 1819 and not reported since. Reconstruction by Craig Gosling copyright 1994.