



CRYPTOZOOLOGY NEWSLETTER

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Matthew A. Bille, Ed.

Editor's note: This is a special issue: some regular features are omitted to allow a thorough discussion of Richard Ellis' book *Monsters of the Sea*. This new work by a respected science writer will undoubtedly be very influential in the public and scientific perception of cryptozoology, so the attention is justified.

RECENT DISCOVERIES: THE CARNIVOROUS SPONGE

Sponges, as a group, are about the most inoffensive animals imaginable. After all, they don't even move, and they make their living filtering tiny bits of organic debris from the water.

A discovery from the Mediterranean Sea has caught the attention of everyone who studies the phylum Porifera. A new and as yet undescribed species of sponge (*Asbestopluma* sp.) has abandoned filter-feeding and adapted to eating tiny crustaceans. Hook-shaped spicules resembling Velcro cover long filaments extending from the animal. Prey animals are entangled in these filaments and held as additional filaments grow over them and, over the course of a few days, consume them.

This tiny sponge, only about 15mm high, offers several puzzles. It has abandoned the basic body plan, optimized for flushing water through the system, which characterizes its phylum. In addition, its closest relatives are deep-ocean sponges living at depths of up to 8,800 meters. What is it doing in a Mediterranean cave only 18m down? Even though the cave's dark, cold water and limited water circulation make the environment similar to much deeper areas, how did the ancestors of this species get there? And, while feeding on larger prey (macrophagy) is a logical adaptation to areas where the flow of nutrient particles is inadequate, how did the sponge change so drastically?

CARNIVOROUS SPONGE (Continued):

Discoverers J. Vacelet and N. Boury-Esnault state, "Such a unique body plan would deserve recognition as a distinct phylum, if these animals were not so evidently close relatives of Porifera."

SOURCES: Kelly-Borges, Michelle. 1995. "Sponges out of their depth," *Nature*, January 26, p.284 // Vacelet, J., and N. Boury-Esnault. 1995. "Carnivorous sponges," *Nature*, January 26, pp. 333-5.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO... GILBERT'S POTOROO

Australia abounds with animals which have disappeared only to turn up again long after zoologists have written them off. Gilbert's potoroo (*Potorous gilberti*) is the latest example, and its recent rediscovery is one of the most surprising such cases on record.

Gilbert's potoroo is a miniature relative of the kangaroo family. (It is often classified as *Potorous tridactylus gilberti*, a subspecies of the long-nosed potoroo.) The potoroos are saddled with one of those Dr. Seuss names created when an Aboriginal term is rendered into English. Their other common name, rat-kangaroos, isn't much better. Less than 18 inches long, potoroos do somewhat resemble pudgy rats fitted with kangaroo-type hind legs.

This particular potoroo, with a distinctive black stripe on its face and a black tail, was known only from the two specimens taken in the last century by John Gilbert in Western Australia. Zoologists assumed the creature was rare then and vanished for good shortly after. Most modern references flatly list Gilbert's potoroo as "extinct," although the 1991 edition of *Walker's Mammals of the World* noted unconfirmed sightings a decade earlier that *might* involve Gilbert's potoroo. Introduced foxes and habitat destruction were blamed for the elimination of the species, which lived mainly around streams and in swampy areas.

In December, 1994, Environment Minister Kevin Minson announced the marsupial's reappearance. In a nature reserve some 250 miles south of Perth, five specimens of Gilbert's potoroo were live-trapped. The examples collected included two adult males, one juvenile male, and a female with a youngster in her pouch. The size and viability of the surviving population remains to be determined, but the species' continued existence gives us hope for other missing animals as well.

SOURCES: Anonymous. 1994. "Marsupial Thought Extinct is Found," Dayton (Ohio) *Dispatch*, December 8 // Day, David. 1989. *Vanished Species*. New York: Gallery Books. Nowack, Rowland M. 1991. *Walker's Mammals of the World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Thanks to reader Chad Arment for the newspaper article.

NEWS AND COMMENT:

Obituary: the first two captive specimens of the Vu Quang ox, known in its native Vietnam as the *sao la*, have died in Hanoi. The first specimen of *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis* ever captured, a female calf, passed away at the age of eight months after spending half her life in captivity. She outlived by one week the young male captured after her. **Source:** Weintraub, Boris. 1995. "First Look at a New Asian Mammal," National Geographic, January.

Reader Angel Morant Fores of Spain recently sent a clipping from the San Francisco *Examiner* concerning a **bizarre fish caught in California's Clear Lake**. About thirty inches long, it resembled a catfish, but with a strangely shaped head, thick, fleshy-looking fins, and - weirdest of all - a horizontal tail, something possessed by no known fish, living or extinct. Richard Moreno, a scientist with California's Fish and Game department, reports that the creature has since been identified as a bizarrely mutated channel catfish. Moreno agreed it is surprising such an extreme mutation survived to adulthood. He noted that catfish in Clear Lake are not native, but come from hatcheries, where mutations are more common than in the wild. So a potentially stunning discovery must be reduced to an interesting footnote.

Sources: Stienstra, Tom. 1993. "Dog-faced fish leaves 'em guessing," San Francisco *Examiner*, October 3. Moreno, Richard. 1995. Personal communication, February 15.

RESOURCES:

BOOKS.

Ellis, Richard. 1994. **Monsters of the Sea**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 429pp.

It is very rare for a book including cryptozoological subjects to come from a science writer well-respected for his previous work. Richard Ellis, who has authored and illustrated superb works on sharks and cetaceans, here turns his attention to humanity's fascination with "sea monsters" real, fictitious, and undetermined. The book is thoroughly referenced, expertly written, and generally fascinating. There are some specific points on which I believe Ellis' conclusions are in error, and these will be examined as we go.

Ellis plunges directly into cryptozoology in Chapter 2 with a review of the Loch Ness animals, whose existence he strongly doubts. Ellis next looks at sea serpents. Chapter 3 covers most of the famous cases, although some get too sparse a treatment. Ellis believes that some reports, like the repeated sightings off Gloucester in 1817, defy easy explanation.

On the 1917 sighting by HMS *Hilary*, Ellis accepts Gavin Maxwell's explanation that it was a basking shark, with the tail mistaken

ELLIS (Continued):

for a head and neck. While this hypothesis might explain a brief sighting in silhouette, the case involved an extended encounter during which the animal was observed from different angles. In addition, the animal "moved out of our way," as the *Hilary's* Captain Dean wrote. The supposed shark must have been swimming *backwards*, with its tail tip continuously out of the water, for the entire time to maintain the illusion. Captain Dean studied the animal end-on at a distance of 30 yards through binoculars before using it for target practice: it is hard to believe that he mistook an essentially two-dimensional tail fin for the three-dimensional head and neck at such close range.

There is one definite inconsistency in Ellis' review of this case. He suggests that Dean's description of an animal with "a strip of whitish flesh, very like a cow has, between its nostrils," could refer to a basking shark's snout, which is whitish on the underside. In the same passage, he endorses Maxwell's view that it was a shark's *tail* the witnesses mistook for a head and neck.

One remark Ellis makes in his review of sea serpents needs clarification. In mentioning possible candidates to explain sea monster sightings, he describes "The oarfish, or ribbonfish," as a "fragile, nearly transparent creature." Well, sort of. "Ribbonfish" is a general name for the suborder Trachipteroidei, which includes the families of the oarfishes, ribbonfishes, and crestfishes. Ribbonfishes are delicate: the species *Trachipterus articus* may be six feet long but less than an inch thick. The largest oarfish (*Regalecus glesne*), a rare silver-colored animal with a flashy red crest, may be over twenty feet long: it resembles an eel flattened side-to-side, but is by no means transparent. Its coloration usually makes it unmistakable, although it has occasionally been reported as a sea serpent by a startled lay witness. Some degree of confusion between oarfish and ribbonfish crops up repeatedly in books on sea creatures.

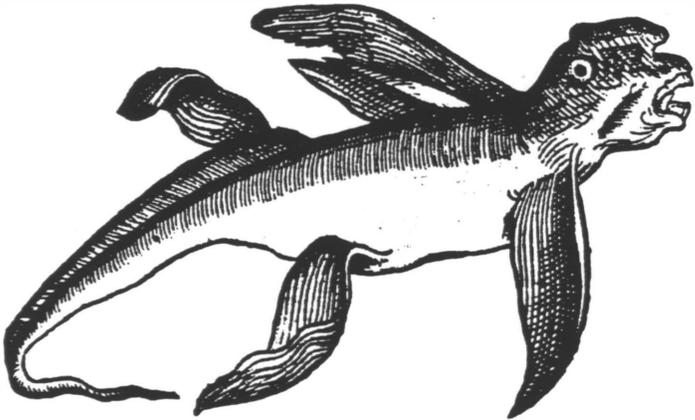
Ellis also surveys the modern reports of "Cadborosaurus" from the coastal Pacific off British Columbia and the northwestern U.S. He concludes, "...if I were a betting man, I would bet against it. (I would, however, like nothing better than to lose the bet.)"

On pp.97-98, in the chapter "Mermaids and Manatees," Ellis discusses the "sea ape" or "sea monkey" described by Georg Wilhelm Steller. He compares the description to the sea mink (*Mustela macrodon*, extinct ca. 1880), although he notes the sea mink lived in the wrong ocean. Ellis is not saying that the sea mink is what Steller saw, only that the two animals appear identical: "If Steller had spotted the 'sea-monkey' off the East coast of North America, there would be no problem with its identification."

Concerning this identification, Ellis seems to have relied mainly on Steller's comparison of his creature to the "Danish sea ape" pictured in a bestiary written by Konrad von Gesner two centuries before. In fact, Steller's description does not match this

ELLIS (Continued):

creature at all. Daniel Cohen, another excellent science writer of skeptical bent, has suggested Steller did not actually have von Gesner's book aboard his ship and was remembering incorrectly. This seems to be the case if you look at the illustrations below. On the left is Gesner's sea ape: on the right, zoologist/artist Craig Gosling's reconstruction based on Steller's description.



Gesner



Gosling, after Steller

Gesner's drawing looks like nothing on Earth, except possibly a "Jenny Haniver" made from a mutilated ray. Steller's description bears little resemblance to this and even less to the sea mink. A drawing in David Day's *Vanished Species* shows *Mustela macrodon* with non-webbed paws and an otter-type tail. This is impossible to reconcile with Steller's animal, which he thought had a sharklike tail and no visible front limbs. In addition, the largest recorded sea mink was 32" long overall, which makes it too small to be Steller's 5' animal. Dr. Roy Mackal's theory that Steller saw a young specimen of an unclassified seal-like animal which kept its front flippers pressed against its body may be a stretch, but the sea mink comparison is completely untenable, even if *Mustela macrodon* could have existed where Steller was.

In "The Kraken," Ellis tackles the giant squid. He offers an extensive review of this animal, including arguments about whether it is an active hunter or a passive ambusher. He also takes Peter Benchley to task for errors in the novel *Beast*. One of his points is that the real giant squid (*Architeuthis dux*) does not have claws around the suckers on the "clubs" of its tentacles. However, claws left in the rubber coating of the sonar dome on the U.S.S. *Stein* in the Pacific, Ellis notes, indicate the existence of another giant type that apparently does possess such armament.

According to Ellis, 55-foot specimens stranded in Newfoundland and New Zealand are the largest squid on record. In his book *Great White Shark*, Ellis exhaustively dissected records of alleged giant

ELLIS (Continued):

great whites. I had hopes he would do the same with the reports of 70-to 100-foot squid noted in Michael Bright's *There are Giants in the Seas*. I was disappointed that Ellis did not even mention these claims, although Bright's book is in his bibliography.

Ellis presents the sea's other great creatures, sharks and whales, in a thorough and readable fashion, covering their characteristics, behavior, and their interaction with humans. He provides a detailed study of the octopus as well. When Ellis comes to the giant octopus stranded in Saint Augustine, Florida, in Chapter 11, he makes the book's most important contribution. Ellis reviews with great thoroughness every account, drawing, and photograph of the massive lump. He concludes that there is no way to match it up with anything other than a genuine giant octopus. To buttress his point, he includes a previously unpublished photograph showing what certainly appears to be a tentacle extending from the body. To the cryptozoologist, this chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

Finally comes Chapter 13, "The New Mythology of Monsters." Here Ellis reviews the subjects he's covered, paying special attention to the sea serpent question.

On the famous sighting by HMS *Daedalus*, Ellis says it "looks a lot like a giant squid." In fact, he says the squid identification "leaps off the page." I must disagree.

True, there are odd things about the *Daedalus* report, such as the alleged creature's apparent rigidity and the way it completely ignored the nearby ship. However, Captain McQuahe's description of the *Daedalus* creature reported that its head and shoulders were continually kept about four feet above the surface of the sea. It is hard to imagine a soft-bodied squid keeping its front end held continuously well above water. McQuahe also mentioned that he was viewing the creature through a spyglass and that it passed close enough that "had it been a man of my acquaintance I should easily have recognized his features with the naked eye." Ellis may have a point when he suggests that witnesses to a giant squid, not recognizing the bizarre animal for what it was, could have filled in details like an eye and mouth subconsciously where they did not really exist, but does this sound like the case here?

Another officer's account mentions that "the eye, the mouth, the nostril" were all "most distinctly visible." Finally, the *Daedalus* animal reportedly maintained a steady rate of speed (a good clip of 12-15 knots) the entire time it was under observation. A jet-propelled squid must travel in a series of jerks, slowing and then speeding up again.

Ellis also examines the most authoritative "sea serpent" report, that made by naturalists M. J. Nicoll and E. G. B. Meade-Waldo from the yacht *Valhalla* in 1905. He suggests this animal, which Dr. Bernard Heuvelmans thinks was a giant eel (the known conger

ELLIS (Continued):

eel does sometimes swim with its head out of water) was another giant squid. He offers a sketch of a squid holding one fin out of the water while an arm projects above water as a "head and neck."

There are several problems with this identification. First, the witnesses reported seeing the eye and mouth. "The head had a very turtle-like appearance, as had also the eye," Meade-Waldo wrote. Could this have been imagined detail added to a squid's arm? Meade-Waldo also reported, "I could see, under the water to the rear of the frill, the shape of a considerable body." This is harder to explain as a mistake, and, if accurate, basically sinks the squid theory. The animal was observed as close as 50 yards through "powerful" binoculars. Nicoll's sketch (see below) shows a good-sized eye on a head and neck "the same color above as the fin (dark brown) but of a silvery-white below."



The *Valhalla* animal, after sketch by Michael Nicoll.

Meade-Waldo estimated the frill was about six feet long and the head and neck seven or eight feet. There was about "18 inches, probably more" separation between the neck and the frill. Even if we assume this distance to be, say, two feet, the proportions just don't fit a squid. Ellis' sketch on p.370 has to contort the squid in an unnatural fashion, and even then the distance between fin and "neck" doesn't match Nicoll's drawing. Moreover, a squid's fins are on the sides of its body: it would have to swim *sideways* to hold one above the surface. To imagine a squid behaving this way for several minutes is just too hard to credit.

The bottom line is that Ellis generally believes sea monster sightings are mistakes, often involving giant squid. He is undoubtedly right in some cases, but to me he is just too fond of the giant squid as an explanation.

Ellis' analysis of the *Valhalla* case notes that "there *may* be a possibility that these creatures (squid) swim with a tentacle out of the water" (*italics mine*). This statement is a very weak foundation on which to build a theory. Leaving aside the fact that his sketch shows an arm, not a tentacle, out of water, no one has ever reported a giant squid behaving this way. Indeed, as

ELLIS (Continued):

Ellis notes earlier (p.148), "no one has ever seen a healthy giant squid doing anything." What he ends up suggesting is that giant squid have been spotted at sea, but never recognized as such: they have been mistaken for sea serpents every time. As I said, this may be correct (as in the 1875 *Pauline* report, where the "sea serpent" was entwined around a sperm whale), but always? Even though we still know little of the giant squid, two naturalists in 1905 would have known basically what one looked like.

These disagreements do not change my basic view that Ellis has written an enjoyable and important book, whether all his conclusions are correct or not. The 28-page bibliography alone is invaluable and shows the kind of research only the best writers put into their work. Ellis tackles very controversial subjects and, in general, succeeds in presenting the evidence evenhandedly. Buy this book if you can, order it from your library, borrow it from a friend, or whatever, but read it. It's that good.

Sources: Bright, Michael. 1989. *There Are Giants in the Sea*. London: Robson Books // Cohen, Daniel. 1982. *The Encyclopedia of Monsters*. Essex, England: Fraser Stewart // Day, David. 1989. *Vanished Species*. New York: Gallery Books // Grzimek, Bernard (ed.). 1972. *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold // Heuvelmans, Bernard. 1965. *In the Wake of the Sea-Serpents*. New York: Hill & Wang // Mackal, Roy. 1980. *Searching for Hidden Animals*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday // Nicoll, Michael J. 1908. *Three Voyages of a Naturalist*. London: Witherby & Co. // Stejneger, Leonhard. 1936. *Georg Wilhelm Steller*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

IN CLOSING:

All serious researchers should join the International Society of Cryptozoology, which 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 an ISC member, *Cryptozoology Newsletter* is not an official ISC publication.

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