



EXOTIC ZOOLOGY

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REDISCOVERIES: SEARCH FOR THE WOOLLY SQUIRREL

The giant woolly flying squirrel (*Eupetaurus cinereus*) is one of the most amazing mammals most people have never heard of. A resident of the Himalayas, the woolly may be four feet (1.3m) long, including a two-foot (.6m) tail. It is not just the largest flying squirrel but the largest squirrel of any kind in the world.

The woolly squirrel was discovered in 1888, and almost completely vanished after that. Apparently only one was ever kept in captivity, and few specimens ever reached museums. By the 1990s, the animal hadn't been seen in decades. It was widely considered extinct.

A brief item on this "missing" animal in *Walker's Mammals of the World* fired the imagination of Peter Zahler, a New York writer and conservationist. At considerable personal expense, Zahler and his friend Chantal Dietemann traveled to Pakistan in 1992 and spent two fruitless months searching for the animal. The incredibly determined Zahler obtained a World Wide Fund for Nature grant, and the twosome returned in 1994. Zahler and Dietemann were nearing the end of this expedition when she found the first sign of hope - a squirrel's front leg, apparently dropped by a predator. Even this clue didn't lead anywhere until two local men approached them, saying they knew where to catch a woolly squirrel. Zahler was skeptical, but a mere six hours later, the Pakistanis dropped a bag containing a live specimen at his feet. He was so stunned he didn't know how to react. Finally he managed to say the obvious: "It's a woolly flying squirrel."

The Americans examined and photographed the creature, then released it and returned to the U.S. with their news. Mammologist Charles Woods, an expert on Pakistani mammals, was "flabbergasted," noting, "I've worked all through there...We've really scoured the area and never seen it. This is simply marvelous."

SQUIRREL (Continued):

Part of the squirrel's ability to disappear may have come from its choice of habitat. Given the universal predilection of other flying squirrels for homes in trees, one would hardly think to look for it living among caves and boulders. That, however, is where the woolly seems to reside, using its "wing" membranes to jump from one rock to another. (The Pakistanis who captured the first one reported they found it sleeping on a rock ledge, and all they had to do was throw a bag over it.) Another point in its favor is the remoteness and ruggedness of the terrain it prefers. "There could be a thousand of them 20 feet over my head, and I'd never know it," Zahler said.

The woolly is a bit strange in appearance, Zahler notes. Its body size and crouching posture tend to make it look more like a gray raccoon than a squirrel. The long tail is luxuriant and foxlike. Most adults weigh 6 to 7 pounds (3kg).

Zahler returned to Pakistan in 1995. Again he caught one squirrel, which he held overnight and then released. Now he hopes to return again to radio-collar some specimens and learn more about their habits. So little is known today about the species that even its diet is uncertain. The *Collins Guide to rare mammals* says, "believed to feed on lichens and moss." Zahler reports it apparently eats spruce buds. Either way, this explains the failure of his initial efforts to lure it into traps using honey, grain, and nuts as bait.

Zahler's goal now is to secure official protection for the animal. So far, there simply isn't enough information to get it into the IUCN's Red Data Book. While there is no way to know the animal's population, it certainly isn't common. It lives only in a limited region, and may exist in isolated populations even within that area, which is north of the town of Gilgit.

Sources: Burton, John, and Bruce Pearson. 1987. *The Collins Guide to the Rare Mammals of the World*. Lexington, MA: Stephen Greene Press. Yoon, Carol Kaesuk. 1995. "Woolly Flying Squirrel. Long Thought Extinct, Shows Up in Pakistan," *New York Times*, March 14 // Zahler, Peter. 1996. Personal interview, May 18.

MYSTERY ANIMALS: BARDIA'S GIANT ELEPHANTS

Earlier this year in *EZ* (Vol.3, #3), writer Ben Roesch reviewed the story of huge, strange-looking elephants reported from the Bardia National Park in northern Nepal. Colonel John Blashford-Snell, a British explorer, photographed what looked like Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) with two domes side by side on their heads and with strange nasal bridges reminiscent of extinct elephants called stegodonts.

Clinton Keeling, a correspondent to the publication *Animal and Men* who described himself as "a cryptozoologist since the 1950s," suggested that any claims of "living fossils" were overblown. He stated that the

GIANT ELEPHANTS (Continued):

domes on the skull had been reported before on older Asian elephants and that nasal bridges had been observed on at least two captive specimens.

A check of available elephant books has turned up only one such example. In Peter Byrne's *Tula Hatti: The Last Great Elephant*, he published video stills of the title character, a huge and undoubtedly aged beast that Byrne believed to be world's largest living Asian elephant. There, indeed, are the domes on the head, although they look less prominent than on the Bardia specimens. There is no nasal bridge.

There remains no precedent for an entire group of elephants displaying all three characteristics of the Bardia elephants (domes, nasal bridge, and huge size). These giant pachyderms stand an estimated 13 feet (4m) high, compared to 11 feet (3.3m) usually cited as the maximum for this species (Tula Hatti included).

As related in the London Times of May 15, 1996, a followup expedition has shed more light on the mystery. Blashford-Snell led another group, mounted on tame elephants, into the remote park region and collected more film along with dung samples. Preliminary examination of DNA found in the dung indicates the animals are in fact members of the species *E. maximas*. However, it appears that a very distinct race, perhaps meriting subspecific rank, has emerged in this isolated area. (**Comment:** If no one has beaten me to it, I propose the logical name *E. maximas bardia*.) The population of Bardia elephants has been estimated at around 100.

All this has to be heartening to cryptozoologists. Species or not, it is an amazing fact that we have, until now, completely overlooked a population of very distinct mammals weighing several tons each. It certainly lends at least moral support to the idea that there may be other such discoveries in the less-explored regions of this still-enormous planet.

Sources: Hawkes, Nigel. 1996. "Explorer finds giant elephants in Nepal," *London Times*, May 15 // Byrne, Peter. 1990. *Tula Hatti: The Last Great Elephant*. Boston: Faber & Faber // Keeling, Clinton. 1995. Letter in *Animals & Men*, Issue #7, p.39 // Shuker, Karl P.N. 1993. *The Lost Ark: New and Rediscovered Animals of the 20th Century*. London: HarperCollins. Thanks to Mark Bowen for the *Times* article.

MYSTERY ANIMALS: IS THE YETI STILL OUT THERE?

Forty years ago, the pre-eminent denizen of the cryptozoo was the yeti (also known as *meh-teh*, "abominable snowman," etc.). Prominent men like Sir Edmund Hillary went in pursuit of it, and well-qualified zoologists speculated openly about an unknown species of great ape.

Today, everyone seems to have lost interest. Why?

Researchers who still seek large unknown primates have mostly shifted their focus to the sasquatch, and, to a lesser extent, the

YETI (Continued):

yeti's neighbors, central Asia's *almas* and China's *yeren*. The most likely reason is that the sasquatch evidence is more recent and seemingly more solid. While there is still no carcass, there are more sightings, more footprints, more alleged films and photographs, etc.

The chief trouble with sasquatch is that it lives in a populated (though still largely wild) area. Skeptics have a hard time accepting that there's never been a specimen accidentally killed by a hunter or hit by a car. With the yeti, the problem is the opposite. There are high, forested valleys in the Himalayas almost untrodden by humans, but there is very little in the way of evidence. Yeti "scalps" have been proven to be imitations, and preserved "hands" to be from known animals (there is one possible exception - see below). While there is a rich body of local tradition concerning the animal, such beliefs are difficult for Western scientists to evaluate. Concerning sightings by Westerners, there are only two, by N. A. Tombazi in 1925 and Don Whillans in 1970, whose authenticity is not disputed. Both involved creatures seen for a short time at a considerable distance. (Tombazi had a "fleeting" glimpse of a human-like figure: Whillans saw an ape-like animal bounding across the snow at night.)

The only physical evidence that weighs in on the side of the yeti is a dessicated hand formerly kept at Pangboche monastery. The relic was reported stolen in 1991, and the monastery burned down a year later. However, yeti-hunter Peter Byrne claims to have stolen the thumb and phalanx of this hand in 1959. (**Comment:** Despicable, if true, and not justifiable in the name of science.) Tests on samples provided by Byrne allegedly identified it as primate but not human. (These results were reported on NBC's tabloid-ish *Unsolved Mysteries* but not published for scientific review.) Photographs show a human-like hand, too broad to have come from a langur. No one knows how old the hand was. Zoologist Ivan Sanderson suggested it was human but ancient, possibly Neanderthal.

The best evidence in the yeti file is a 1951 series of photographs by mountaineer Eric Shipton. These show a footprint that appears anthropoid, although its breadth, the long second toe (longer than the great toe), and the separation between the first two toes and the three smallest ones make it unique. Dr. John Napier, a primatologist, commented in his book *Bigfoot* that he would dismiss the yeti except, "The Shipton print...is the one item in the whole improbable saga that sticks in my throat." Noting that it looks like the print's heel had melted and refrozen somewhat, Napier tentatively suggested the print "was composite, made by a naked human foot treading in the track of a foot wearing a leather moccasin," with the sun melting the two together.

There are two problems with this theory. First, we are not dealing with "the Shipton footprint." Shipton reported a trail of identical tracks, which he followed for about a mile. Second, this editor, at the risk of being thought an idiot by his neighbors, has tested Napier's theory repeatedly, making tracks at varying angles to the sun with several types of footwear and then treading on them barefoot. It simply doesn't work. The toes never lengthen while the whole print widens, which is what would have to happen to get a Shipton-type print. The toes melt together into a blob. The print does expand all around, but never gets wide enough to resemble Shipton's track. The

YETI (Continued):

idea proposed by Marlin Perkins and others that the track is made by melting together of all four pawprints of a small animal meets the same objections. There is no chance of getting a trail of clear, identical footprints from such circumstances.

Zoologist Wladimir Tschernezky published an analysis of the footprint (in *Nature*, no less!) in 1960 in which he stated that a plaster reconstruction of the yeti's foot resembled a gorilla's more than a human's and suggested its features were "probably characteristic of early prehomnids" and concluded it belonged to a "huge, heavily built bipedal primate, most probably of a similar type to the fossil *Gigantopithecus*."

One cannot poke into the yeti business for very long without hearing the name *Gigantopithecus*. This presumably long-extinct animal is also brought up by believers in sasquatch. The reason is simple: this is the only primate known from the fossil record which is large enough to fit all yeti and sasquatch descriptions. It should be noted, however, that most yeti reports could actually fit an animal considerably smaller than the main species, *Gigantopithecus blacki*, which weighed an estimated 400-500kg. Interestingly, *Gigantopithecus gigantea*, dated to about 6.3 million years B.P., (5 million years before *G. blacki*) was only about half that size, although it apparently did not survive in this form but evolved into the larger species.

"Giganto" is usually thought of as resembling an oversized gorilla, although its closest living relation is actually the orangutan. It presumably had a fist-walking gait like the orang, but opponents point out that this can't be certain when the only remains of this primate are three jawbones and hundreds of teeth. While the fist-walking posture is assumed in the reconstruction of Giganto described by paleoanthropologist Russell Ciochon and his co-authors in *Other Origins*, the most authoritative book on *Gigantopithecus* (see RESOURCES section), anthropologist Grover Krantz still believes the animal was bipedal, as some of the earlier authorities on the subject had suggested. Professor Ciochon, however, points out that every known ground-dwelling ape is a quadruped, and there is as yet no evidence that Giganto was so unlike all his relatives. He believes Krantz infers far too much from the fossil jaws and teeth when he claims they indicate erect posture.

As noted, Tschernezky and others have suggested the Shipton footprint looks something like a gorilla's. However, this comparison was made using a mounted gorilla foot, which is not representative of the animal in life. (Comment: In preparation for this article, I paid a visit to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, where a young gorilla obligingly planted its foot flat against the glass of the primate house. My non-expert opinion is that the reconstructed yeti foot bears little resemblance to a gorilla's.)

Unfortunately, that is where the evidence trail peters out. Zoologist Edward Cronin, in 1972, reported smaller tracks that he thought might belong to a juvenile of the animal that left the Shipton prints, but the resemblance is debatable. There are plenty of other reports of footprints looking more or less like Shipton's, but no clear

photographs of anything definitely left by the same animal (assuming there is an animal). Reported hair and fecal samples have never been supplied for DNA analysis. Aside from an episode in 1988, where physicist Tony Woolridge thought he had photographed a yeti (he later agreed he had taken pictures of an unusual boulder), there just hasn't been anything solid. A film of uncertain origin and unverifiable authenticity, known as the "snow-walker" footage, has recently been shown on television. This was supposedly taken by Belgian hikers in the Himalayas, but the account so far is totally lacking in corroborating details (date, location, etc.) and so cannot be accepted as evidence.

So where does that leave the yeti? At best, the animal must currently be consigned to "reported but unproven" status. Until and unless we have new evidence, Shipton's footprints are inexplicable yet insufficient. They are, quite simply, a mystery.

Sources: Ciochon, Russell. 1996. Personal communication, August 17 // Ciochon, Russell, et. al. 1990. *Other Origins*. New York: Bantam // Coleman, Loren. 1989. *Tom Slick and the Search for the Yeti*. Boston: Faber & Faber // Krantz, Grover. 1987. "A Reconstruction of the Skull of *Gigantopithecus blacki* and its comparison with a Living Form," *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 6, pp.24-39 // Napier, John. 1972. *Bigfoot*. New York: Berkeley // Tschernezky, Wladimir. 1960. "A Reconstruction of the Foot of the 'Abominable Snowman,'" *Nature*, May 7, pp. 496-7. Thanks to John Moore, Loren Coleman, and Bufo Calvin for information and to Russell Ciochon for answering my query about *Gigantopithecus*.

NEWS AND COMMENT

In addition to the strange bear from Canada known as *Vetularctos inopinatus*, a.k.a. *Ursus inopinatus* or MacFarlane's bear, (see *EZ*, Vol.2, #3), reports of **other unclassified bears** still trickle in from around the world. A large white bear reported from **Siberia** is known to the locals as the *irkuiem*. In **Peru**, explorer Leonard Clark claims to have shot an all-black bear in 1954. This animal, locally called the *milne*, is larger than South America's only known bear, the spectacled bear. In addition, residents of **Columbia's Mucarena Mountains** report a bear with reddish fur. Unfortunately, only in the case of MacFarlane's animal do we have hard evidence. As Dr. Jim Halfpenny notes in a new article, the skin and skull of this specimen remain in the Smithsonian, and DNA testing might establish whether this "buffy whitish" animal is an odd grizzly-polar bear cross (known in zoos, but not from the wild), or something unique. The enormous, short-haired black bear reported from Kamchatka by Dr. Sten Bergman in the 1920s is generally accepted, but assigned to an apparently now-extinct brown bear subspecies, *Ursus arctos piscator*. **Source:** Halfpenny, Jim. 1996. "Tracking the Great Bear: Mystery Bears," *Bears*, Spring, pp. 39-44.

An intriguing item from South America: an Associated Press dispatch reports that an "unidentified" shark, 13 feet (4m) long and weighing 900 pounds (409kg), was caught by Argentine fishermen. The

NEWS AND COMMENT (Continued):

photograph accompanying the story is of such poor quality that it's hard to say anything except that it *could* be a strange-looking shark with a blunt snout and large mouth. A leading elasmobranchologist, Dr. Sanford Moss, reports that it might be one of two known species, the six-gill shark *Hexanchus griseus* or the seven-gill shark *Notorhynchus cepedianum* (these two species are so named because most sharks have five gill slits.) He notes that, if it was a seven-gill, it would be a size record. *H. griseus* is known to reach 4.8m, or over 15 feet. Since the experts making these suggestions were looking at the same poor photo, though, nothing is for certain yet. **Sources:** AP. 1996. "Looks Fishy," *Tulsa World*, July 4 // Moss, Sanford. 1996. Personal communication, July 29. **Thanks to** Thomas Cook for article and to Dr. Moss, Keith Wolf, and Jeffrey Carrier for answering my inquiries.

The most famous of "monsters," the alleged inhabitant of **Loch Ness**, continues to be reported. A June 1996 sighting by 16 people concerned a large object apparently moving just under the surface, causing a considerable wake. **Comment:** Unfortunately, reports of this kind just "add to the pile" without providing any new clues to determine whether Nessie is an animal, a mistake, or a hoax. **Source:** Anonymous. 1996. "Mysterious Object Ploughs Across Loch Ness," Reuters, June 14.

RESOURCES

BOOKS.

Ciochon, Russell, with John Olsen and Jamie James. 1990. ***Other Origins: The Search for the Giant Ape in Human Prehistory***. New York: Bantam. 262pp. This fascinating tale of scientific discovery collects and analyzes what we know about *Gigantopithecus* and recounts the authors' expeditions to Vietnam in quest of more fossils. The authors dismiss the various tales of surviving giant apes as myths, but show they have at least read the literature. There are occasional errors in their treatment of the subject (the Chinese "wildman" is the *yeren*, not the *almas*), but this is must reading for anyone interested in "unknown ape" questions.

READER RESPONSE: In reply to last issue's item on the giant squid which left claws 3cm long in the sonar dome of an American warship, Richard Ellis has written to suggest the culprit may not belong to an unknown species. He notes that *Moroteuthis*, which has a known length of 19 feet and does have claws on its suckers, is known to inhabit the waters off San Diego. However, the reference he found on *Moroteuthis* listed a claw size of .85 inches (2.16cm), so the USS *Stein* incident, at the least, may be evidence that this species grows larger than we know. Ellis is working on a new book on the large squids. After his superb *Monsters of the Sea*, I'll be looking forward to it.

EDITOR'S PAGE

PURPOSE: Cryptozoology is the zoological subspecialty of finding new or supposedly extinct species. The term has been misapplied by some to sensationalized "monsters" and even "ghost" animals. I hope that *Exotic Zoology* can help restore the word's proper usage: the name of a science devoted to collecting and studying evidence.

IN CLOSING: Some of the most important work in this field has come from the International Society of Cryptozoology. Unfortunately, we are unable to determine whether the ISC is currently active. Contact J. Richard Greenwell, Secretary, P.O. Box 43070, Tucson, AZ 85733.

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