



EXOTIC ZOOLOGY

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MYSTERY ANIMALS: THE CLASSIC MYSTERIES

In the voluminous files of cryptozoology, a handful of cases stand out. These are the reports of strange animals that cannot be easily dismissed, yet have never been solved ("solved" meaning either the animal involved was conclusively identified or a hoax was proven). They are mysteries, and some always will be.

The best example is probably Georg Wilhelm Steller's "sea monkey." Steller, a German naturalist sailing for Russia, was in the Gulf of Alaska in 1741 on board the *Saint Peter*, under the leadership of explorer Vitus Bering. In daylight in good weather, Steller observed a strange sea mammal. The creature was about 1.5m (5 feet) long. The pelt appeared "reddish and cow-colored." The animal had erect ears, drooping whiskers, a sharklike tail, and no visible front flippers. No one has ever been able to identify beyond doubt the animal involved in this sighting. Indeed, some aspects of Steller's description make no sense. There are no seagoing mammals without front flippers, and none with a sharklike tail. According to the fossil record, there never have been. And yet this account cannot be dismissed. Steller was one of the great naturalists of his day, and he kept meticulous records.

Steller's major biographer, Dr. Leonhard Stejneger, suggested the thing was a young fur seal (*Callotaria ursina*). There are several problems with this identification. One is that, while Steller may never have seen a fur seal before, members of his crew had. Another is that Steller later wrote about fur seals in great detail without ever identifying this species with his mystery creature.

CLASSIC MYSTERIES (Continued):

Aside from one report of what could be a similar creature in 1965, Steller's sea monkey has been in limbo ever since. One cryptozoologist, Dr. Roy Mackal, suggests that Steller saw a young specimen of an unknown Arctic seal similar to the leopard seal of the Antarctic. This species was presumably rare when Steller saw it and may now be extinct (although Mackal believes it could still exist).

Another interested cryptozoological researcher, Chris Orrick, has conducted an exhaustive investigation of this problem and offers a new theory. Orrick suggests Steller saw a very lost individual of a known species (known to us, not to Steller), the Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*). It would have been about the right size, and its behavior matches the inquisitive, playful animal Steller described. Ocean currents exist that could have assisted the wayward seal to the Gulf of Alaska.

This theory does assume that Steller made several errors in his observations. (In addition to the problems posed by the forelimbs and tail, the Hawaiian monk seal has no external ears). However, any solution to this mystery, excepting the possibility of an unknown species, must make similar assumptions. While Steller wrote that the animal was so close "we could have touched it with a pole," Orrick notes that the actual distance was probably a minimum of 5 meters (16 feet), depending on where on the *Saint Peter* Steller was standing.



Reconstruction of Steller's sea monkey by zoologist/artist Craig Gosling. This drawing was based on the assumption that all the details reported by Steller were correct.

Orrick has accomplished the most thorough reinvestigation possible at this late date, contacting experts on everything from ocean currents to the algae that might have affected the Hawaiian fur seal's normal grayish color (Orrick's thought was that algae sometimes found on Hawaiian seals could have died in the colder waters, imparting a brown shading to the seal's coat).

CLASSIC MYSTERIES (Continued):

Orrick's conclusions may well be correct. Without physical evidence, though, no investigation conducted centuries after the fact can be considered definitive. Unless a specimen of some new type of Arctic sea mammal is obtained, the status of Steller's sea monkey will always be something of a mystery.

Sometimes, that kind of evidence does surface. An example, noted in the last issue, was of the Beast of Gevaudan, which terrorized a French village until 1767, when it was shot - and apparently lost. Two hundred and thirty years later, a sample of its fur was found in a museum collection, allowing the animal to be identified as a hyena. What it was doing in France will probably never be known, but the cryptozoological portion of the mystery has been solved.

What other cases do we have in the "classic" file? The 1905 "sea serpent" sighting, obtained at close range by the well-qualified British naturalists Nicoll and Meade-Waldo, probably qualifies. One may search the archives in vain for any authoritative report, before or since, that describes an identical creature. The result is a frustrating case as difficult to ignore as it is to explain.

The "yeti" footprints photographed by Eric Shipton in 1951 are another long-lived conundrum. No one has ever suggested this eminent mountaineer and explorer was a hoaxer. Attempts to explain the broad, five-toed footprints as bears, goats, or composites of human tracks are all unsatisfactory. Yet, in four and a half decades of yeti-hunting, no one has ever brought back a photograph or cast of a track that definitely has the same origin - whatever that origin may be.

All cryptozoologists can do in these cases is review the original evidence and look for overlooked clues that might point to a solution. New theories can be propounded, as with Orrick's idea of a seal or Richard Ellis' suggestion of a partly-surfaced squid in the Meade-Waldo case. Often, the end result is fruitless arguing over the unprovable. While that is part of the fun of cryptozoology, it does not greatly advance the cause of science. It may be that these cases, in the absence of new evidence, should simply be filed away to let cryptozoologists spend their energy on more promising pursuits. However, cryptozoologists are an inexhaustibly curious tribe. Human nature being what it is, the classic cases may remain mysteries, but it's highly unlikely they'll ever be forgotten.

Sources: Orrick, Chris. 1997. Personal communications // Burton, John, and Bruce Pearson. 1987. *The Collins Guide to the Rare Mammals of the World*. Lexington, MA: Stephen Greene Press // Mackal, Roy. 1980. *Searching for Hidden Animals*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday // Raynal, Michael. 1997. Personal communication // Napier, John. 1972. *Bigfoot*. New York: Berkley // Ellis, Richard. 1994. *Monsters of the Sea*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

As mentioned in the last issue, *Exotic Zoology* will be changing. Beginning with Volume 6, No.1, (the first issue of 1999) *EZ* will be a shorter, four-page newsletter. Readers can choose mail or Email delivery. I hope to supplement the newsletter next year with a Web page for other material. The new newsletter subscription rate will be \$10 a year for U.S. mail and all Email subscribers, \$12 for airmail to other countries.

Cost for those who only want to renew through 5:6 (current format):

# of issues	U.S.	U.S. Student	Other Countries	Foreign Student
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2	\$6	4	8	7
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Please write or Email me if you have questions or concerns.

NEWS FLASH: NEW FINDS FROM SOUTH AMERICA

In the last few years, South America, especially Brazil, has produced an abundance of new species, including fish, birds, and monkeys. In *EZ* 4:5, we mentioned Dutch primatologist Marc van Roosmalen's description of a new primate, the black-headed sagui dwarf. This scientist is now writing the descriptions of two more new monkeys. After that, he has two more monkeys collected, plus a porcupine, awaiting descriptions. And after he's done with these **five new mammals**, he will look for two really startling animals he has seen but not yet collected - **a new tapir and a new jaguar.**

The new species awaiting description include:

- A monkey in the genus *Callithrix*, tentatively named the manicore marmoset. It's grayish with orange legs and a black tail.
- A monkey in the genus *Callicebus*. Reddish-orange with a gray-brown back, it weighs just over one kilogram (2.2 pounds). Local people have given it the delightful name of "zog-zog."
- A dwarf porcupine with soft-looking pale hair covering its spines.

All these animals live in a small region around the confluence of the Madeira and Amazon rivers. The location is only 300km from the large city of Manaus. **Source:** Associated Press, 1997. "New Monkeys Found in Amazon," December 28.

NEWS AND COMMENT

A rare and mysterious bird has been rediscovered after a 113-year absence. The Indian forest owlet (*Athene blewitti*) was photographed by American ornithologists northeast of Bombay. The last verified encounter with this species was in 1884. The owlet, a brownish, 20 cm (eight-inch) -tall bird with disproportionately large feet and beak, was first recorded in the 1870s. No specimens had been collected since 1884, although a bizarre episode concerning this species took place in 1914. A British birder, Richard Meinertzhagen, produced a "new" stuffed specimen in that year. However, his bird turned out to be an individual belonging to the British Museum. The specimen had been stolen and restuffed. After that, nothing was heard of the species except a few doubtful reports and a photograph allegedly taken in 1968. Now that it's truly been rediscovered, perhaps this enigmatic avian can be properly studied and conserved before it vanishes once more. Sources: AP, 1997. "Bird watchers spy rare owl for first time in 113 years," *Colorado Springs Gazette*, December 31 // Mountfort, Guy. 1988. *Rare Birds of the World*. London: Collins.

This isn't the only recent rediscovery of a presumed-extinct member of the owl family. Readers of *EZ* (Issue 3:6) already know of the 1996 rediscovery of the **Congo bay owl** (*Phodilus prigoginei*), which hadn't been seen since the discovery of the first specimen in 1951. Another success from 1996 was the confirmation of the continued existence of the **Madagascar red owl** (*Tyto soumagnei*). A press release from Conservation International stated this species had not been seen since the 1930s, although the International Council for Bird Preservation recorded a sighting report in 1973. Sources: Mountfort, *Ibid.* // *Conservation International News From the Front*, Vol. 2, No.4.

New species watch: First, a new species of bird has been found in New Zealand. A Department of Conservation team traveled to Jaquemart Island looking for a rare species, the Campbell Island teal. Instead, one of their bird-sniffing dogs flushed out an unknown species. About 10 specimens were located during the expedition. The new species of snipe, which awaits scientific description, is the first new bird from this country since 1930. Source: Dixon, Tina. 1997. "New Zealand Dog Team Helps Discover New Bird Species," *The Southland Times*, November 18. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, a **new species of ant** turned up on Green Island. The significance of this is that just one scientist, Dr. John Fellowes, has now described seven new species from this densely inhabited colony, with descriptions of several others pending. This particular ant, placed in the genus *Acropyga*, is described as only 4mm long with unusually small eyes. (Comment: This is a good example of what is sometimes called "microcryptozoology," and a reminder that not all the discoveries worth making are physically large.) Source: Holland, Fiona. 1997. "China: Threat to New Ant Species," *South China Morning Post*, November 21. Thanks to Paul Cropper for these items.

RESOURCES

BOOKS.

Broad, William J. 1997. *The Universe Below*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 432pp. Spellbinding story by a veteran science journalist of the recent discoveries under the sea. Broad's book covers oceanography and other matters not directly related to marine zoology, but there's enough about strange and new denizens of the deep to keep any cryptozoologist turning the pages. Most interesting of all is a comment from Dr. Bruce Robison of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute. According to Robison, **we have so far missed classifying at least one third of the large species in the sea.** "We may find that's conservative," he adds. "It could be half."

PERIODICALS.

The latest issue of *The Cryptozoology Review* (Vol. 2, No. 2), edited by Ben Roesch, offers an excellent 21-page summary of reported "sea monster" carcasses recorded through 1880. Loren Coleman's column in the January *Fortean Times* reviews the claims that Hollywood makeup expert John Chambers produced an ape suit used to hoax the 1968 Patterson-Gimlin "bigfoot" film - an allegation Chambers here denies. The January *National Geographic* offers a photo of a striking anomaly: a solid white (not albino) penguin. Standing in a group of its normally-colored fellows, the poor bird looks like it was invited to a party, but no one told it to dress formal.

INTERNET.

There is an impressive list of cryptozoology Websites maintained at <http://www.hist.unt.edu/09w-ar7o.htm>. It offers links to a total of 102 sites, with the largest group concerning sasquatch and related subjects. The most comprehensive of the sites listed is <http://pibweb.it.nwu.edu/~pib/cryptozo.htm>, maintained by Philip "Pib" Burns. Mr. Burns' site also offers a large collection of links, overlapping but not duplicating the list on the first site. Especially good are the collections of links to sites concerning sea and lake "monsters" and the maybe-extinct Tasmanian Tiger.

Scott Norman's Cryptozoological Realms Website is worth visiting at http://members.aol.com/mokele/cryptozoological_realms/html3.2/english/index.html. Some of the unique features of this site are biographies of leading cryptozoological researchers and writers and links to chat rooms and bulletin boards discussing cryptozoology. Norman is still working to fill in information for some entries on the site's list of reported cryptids.

Correction: There was a typographical error in the Internet address for Michel Raynal's cryptozoological home page in EZ 4:6. The correct address is <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/cryptozoo>.

EDITOR'S PAGE

PURPOSE: Cryptozoology is the zoological subspecialty of finding new or supposedly extinct species of all types and sizes. The term has, unfortunately, become associated largely with sensationalized "monsters" in the public mind. Some writers even use it to refer to "ghost" animals. *Exotic Zoology* is intended to help restore the word's proper usage: the name of a hard science devoted to collecting and studying evidence.

IN CLOSING: Serious researchers should inquire about joining the International Society of Cryptozoology (P.O. Box 43070, Tucson, AZ 85733). The ISC has resumed publication of its *Newsletter*, although correspondence and publications have been irregular.

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Logo illustration: Delphinus rhinoceros, described by naturalists Quoy and Gaimard in 1819. Drawing by Craig Gosling copyright 1994.