

# Nessie and the Sasquatch

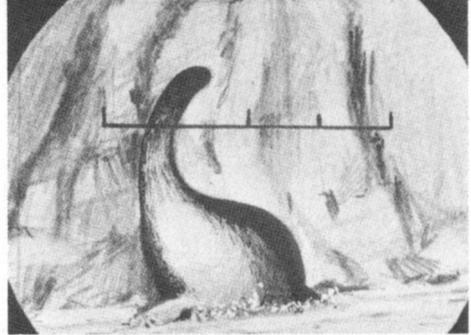
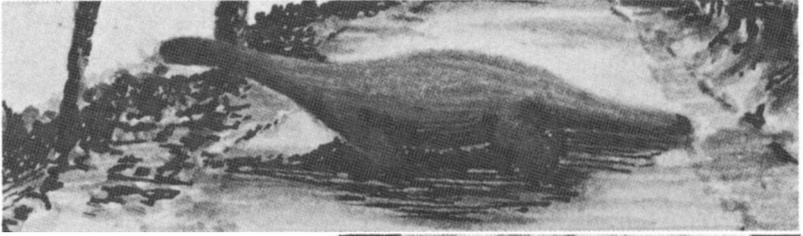
Richard Fitter

It was the great French zoologist Cuvier who forthrightly declared, at the beginning of the last century, that no further large animals remained to be discovered, anticipating the saying about a Victorian Oxford don, 'What I don't know isn't knowledge'. Since then we have had the okapi, the giant squid (fiercely contested to the last ditch by zoologists) and the coelacanth. But still the zoological establishment remained embattled in that last ditch, hoisting Cuvier's banner, whenever the great sea serpent, the Loch Ness monster, the abominable snowman or the sasquatch were under discussion.

A few cracks, however, are now at last appearing in the façade. Dr John Napier, who certainly ranks as a member of the zoological establishment, adopted the scientifically respectable course of suspending judgment on the sasquatch in his book *Bigfoot*, published in 1972. Leading zoologists at the British Museum (Natural History) have conceded that Dr Robert Rines's 1972 Loch Ness photographs are genuine photographs of a large moving object in Loch Ness (and considering what some of their predecessors said, that is a very great concession). We seem now to have arrived at the position where most people, including many zoologists, admit that these four phenomena are not spoofs or hallucinations, but genuine unknown animals. It would be churlish to ask for more at present, because the amount of non-circumstantial evidence for all four is still minimal.

Human psychology in relation to these unknown animals is fascinating. Why, for instance, have all four been such a lure to practical jokers? Time after time have spoof Loch Ness monsters and sasquatches been paraded before the public. Partly it seems to be a desire on the part of practical jokers to take the media down a peg. Partly, perhaps, a desire to get into the limelight themselves. Certainly sometimes a desire to make money. Partly even a measure of frustration at being unable to get a genuine sighting after many hours of searching or watching. Whatever the causes, and they are probably multiple, the jokers have set scientific investigation back by many years. Ridicule is the most powerful instrument of human social control. Fear of ridicule has held back witnesses, choked off scientific investigators, and led scientists to overreact with suggestions as grotesque, if not more so, than those of the animals' overenthusiastic champions. A Mexican scientist, for instance, asked to account for a mysterious carcass cast up on his shores (which soon turned out to be a sperm whale much decomposed) apparently (for he may, of course, have been misquoted) suggested it might have been 'a sea creature from the age of dinosaurs, preserved in the Arctic ice, and subsequently released'. After that Dr Maurice Burton's mats of rotting vegetation, which have actually been verified for a single Norwegian lake, seem rather tame.

Three books on unknown animals have recently appeared, which together with John Napier's already mentioned, make two each on the monster and the sasquatch: Peter Costello's *In Search of Lake Monsters* (Garnstone Press, £4.25), Nicholas Wichell's *The Loch Ness Story* (Dalton, £3.80), and Don Hunter and René Dahinden's *Sasquatch* (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, \$7.95). All bring us a little, but very little, nearer a solution of the intriguing identity problems.



Drawings based on the original reports and sketches of three land sightings of 'a strange animal' on the shore of Loch Ness, reproduced from Nicholas Witchell's *The Loch Ness Story*



We are not told Mr Costello's qualifications for surveying the tangled evidence for the existence of lake monsters in most temperate, and a few tropical, parts of the world. He is evidently not a zoologist, and is clearly partisan. He has amassed an impressive body of evidence for his thesis that most reports of lake monsters refer to an unknown long-necked pinniped. The reader should perhaps also have been told that such an unusual pinniped would at the very least have to be allocated to a new family, and perhaps to a new sub-order. But the animal (for there can be no question that it is an animal that causes the lake monster phenomena) must be a very unusual one, so there is no reason why it should not – indeed there is every reason why it should – belong to a family hitherto undescribed by science.

It is perhaps unfair to complain that Mr Costello does not really address himself to the two central mysteries of the lake monster phenomena: why is it never (or almost never) seen by a qualified scientist actually looking for it? (It is of some interest much the same question can be asked about the thylacine *Thylacinus cynocephalus* of Tasmania, whose former existence is not in doubt although its continued existence is.) And why has no body, not even so much as a bone or a piece of rotting flesh or skin, ever been made available

for scientific examination? Any solution to the problem must attempt to answer these two difficult questions.

Mr Costello's book, incidentally, is the worst proof-read that I have ever encountered in thirty years of reviewing. We may know who or what 'Siegfried' and 'the Niebelugen' are, but when this kind of carelessness is rife, how can we be sure of Tasek Bera, the waitoreke and Tanjong Keruing?

Mr Witchell has a much more sober, balanced and unemotional approach (being a student of law), and deals with Nessie alone, providing a most useful historical account of the investigations so far. It is quite impossible to read his book without becoming convinced of the reality of Nessie. Even though no more than Mr Costello does he grapple with the two central mysteries, this is the best book on Nessie since Constance Whyte's classic seventeen years ago. And who could have believed, after all the effort that has been put into the search since then, that its identity would still be unrevealed? The Rines underwater photographs, one published here for the first time, are the most satisfactory piece of evidence so far that in the depths of Loch Ness there is a large animal that is patently not a member of the known fauna of Scotland or indeed (I suspect) of the world. There is still room for a dispassionate evaluation by a zoologist of the photographs and sonar evidence in the light of the numerous eyewitness accounts, the great majority of which appear to be of the same phenomenon (a large animal). This would pave the way for a fresh assessment of the pros and cons of the various solutions that have been suggested for the identity of the beast.

Sasquatch or bigfoot is the North American equivalent of the abominable snowman, although the scope for argument as to its identity is smaller than with the lake monster/sea serpent complex. Whereas the latter could conceivably be any one of four classes of vertebrate, or even an invertebrate, sasquatch is indubitably a primate. The 64,000 dollar question here is how human a primate? Again, reading the book by Hunter and Dahinden, as earlier in reading Napier's, one has the irresistible feeling that despite all the hoaxes there is a real phenomenon here too. But once again, the two key questions arise. Why is it always seen by unqualified eyewitnesses, and why, even when a chance does present itself of analysing some physical evidence, does nobody take it? There was even a captive sasquatch (in the last century), and more than once a chance of settling the matter has apparently been let slip. Now one hears that a proper scientific expedition is being manned. If it can only avoid the Scylla of no sightings, one may be reasonably sure that it will not be wrecked on the Charybdis of wasting its specimens.

## **Livestock Removed in Ethiopia**

'An important milestone in Ethiopian conservation' is how the Ethiopian Wildlife Society's *Bulletin* described the action of the Provisional Military Government in removing the nomads and their considerable flocks of sheep, goats, and camels out of the Awash National Park and settling them outside. This was part of a programme drawn up several years ago but never acted upon. Obviously domestic animals have no place in a national park. The disturbance, overgrazing and monopoly of the waterholes that result have kept the wildlife numbers in the Awash from expanding and seriously affected especially lion (reintroduced), leopard, cheetah and Grévy's zebra.