

The truth is out there

Sasquatch. Yeti. The Loch Ness Monster. The eastern cougar. At a conference in Maine, cryptozoologists search for answers and respect

BY JOE FITZGERALD

"To begin with, I emphasized that the animal was prehistoric, and marshaled all my facts in support of this. I mentioned the Siberian sand-bars that abounded with ancient mammoth bones... 'All fossils,' I concluded, 'found in the midst of debris deposited through countless ages.'

'I remember when I was a kid,' Thomas Stevens sniffed, 'that I saw a petrified water-melon. Hence, though mistaken persons sometimes delude themselves into thinking that they are really raising or eating them, there are no such things as extant water-melons?'"

— Jack London, *A Relic of the Pliocene*

It had been a pre 9/11 world the last time I had driven to Maine, and when I was on my way there last October, I approached the border with some trepidation. The customs official told me to pop the trunk and, seeing nothing inside, looked at the case that was sitting on the back seat. "That your computer?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Where are you going?"

"To a symposium."

"What kind of symposium?"

I stammered, then nervously blurted the truth: "A cryptozoology symposium."

The customs official cocked his head, pondering my response. My profile

obviously didn't raise any red flags. "You're all set," he said, after a brief pause.

I drove quickly through Calais and onto lonely Route 9, where Stephen King could have conjured most of his tales (and probably did). I was inclined to associate the scenery with creepy overtones because it was Halloween weekend and I was travelling to meet Loren Coleman, one of the world's foremost cryptozoologists.

Cryptozoology is the study of hidden animals, or animals that have not been scientifically proven to exist. The most famous of these creatures includes Bigfoot, or Sasquatch; the Loch Ness Monster; and the Abominable Snowman, or Yeti. Although the "big three" get

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cryptozoology



“You have to remember that animals such as the gorilla, okapi, and rhinoceros were all new to western science as recently as 100 years ago”

— Loren Coleman, cryptozoologist and author

most of the press, many other animals that have eluded human capture, whether physically or on film, are rumoured to live around the world. Among others, these “cryptids” include chupacabras, giant snakes, mystery felids, the mothman, and thunderbirds.

Coleman is the author of more than a dozen books on the subject, including *Cryptozoology A to Z*; *The Field Guide to Lake Monsters, Sea Serpents, and Other Mystery Denizens of the Deep*; and *The Field Guide to Bigfoot, Yeti, and Other Mystery Primates Worldwide*. He has been a consultant on NBC-TV's *Unsolved Mysteries*, A&E's *Ancient Mysteries*, History Channel's *In Search of History*, Discovery Channel's *In the Unknown*, and other reality-based programs. Over the years I had read some of his work, and I was looking forward to speaking with him.

I connected with Interstate 95 in Bangor and continued south to Lewiston, home of Bates College, whose Museum of Art was hosting the symposium. I checked into a cheap motel off the interstate that night and leafed through

Coleman's books. I contemplated the weekend's events and drifted off into a phantasmal bestiary where the boundaries of science dissolved.

The next day I drove to Bates College, its quaint campus dozing in autumn splendour. I walked into the Museum of Art, a simmering cauldron of biology, art, and mysticism. At first it was difficult to get a grasp on the direction the event was headed, but I eventually let the symposium's theme—Out of Time, Place, Scale—take effect. Cryptozoology is a marginalized science, and, rather than trying to legitimize the field, the symposium was favouring a return to the organized mayhem, wonder, and delight—and spiritual and intellectual adventurism—of pre-Enlightenment curio cabinets.

That evening Coleman, the keynote speaker, addressed the symposium. He talked about the real discoveries that were being made in the field, two of which were the inaugural capture on film of a giant live squid off the coast of Japan and the discovery of the remains

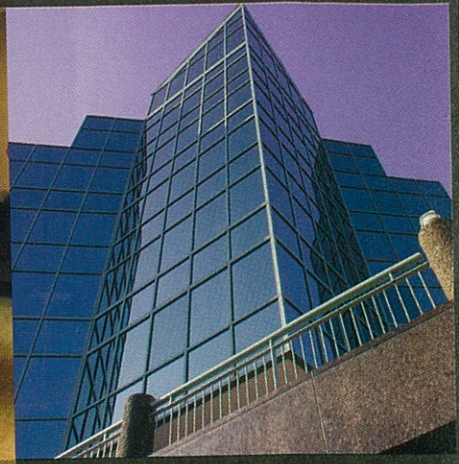
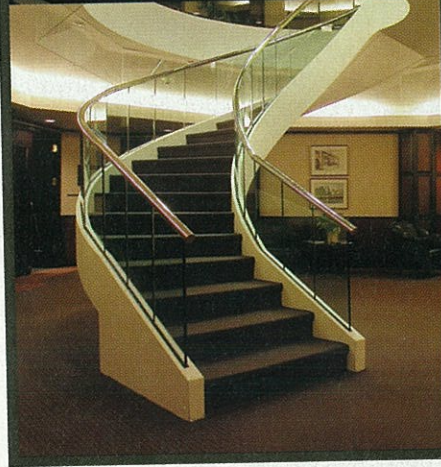
of a new hominid, *Homo floresiensis*, on the island of Flores in Indonesia. Nicknamed The Hobbit, the remains lend credence to the legends of the "small people" referred to by local residents and fuel speculation that perhaps some still exist.

I asked Coleman how these discoveries had affected the field in general and its image as a fantastical quest. "They are reminiscent of the discovery of the coelacanth," he said, referring to a primitive fish once thought to have been extinct for 60 million years. "That was a boon to cryptozoologists because it was a living fossil. You also have to remember that animals such as the gorilla, okapi, and rhinoceros were all new to western science as recently as 100 years ago."

At that moment a voice piped up beside me, asking Coleman about the progress being made on the capture of Bigfoot. The questioner was 16-year-old Carl White from Orono, who had, according to his mother, read Coleman's latest book "to pieces." I asked White how he felt about the cryptids in Coleman's book. "Well, I'm a little iffy on thunderbirds," he admitted, "but I think Bigfoot is real."

Therein lies the dilemma of cryptozoologists: most of their enthusiasm and support comes from children. Many evolutionary biologists will tell you the same thing—that they grew up reading about dinosaurs and speculative creatures such as the Loch Ness Monster and Sasquatch, then matured into the concrete world of evidential science. Watching Coleman, 59, signing books for young fans made me think of a man drawing on the vigour of hopeful youth.

During a panel discussion about the scientific work being conducted, I asked June Pusbach O'Neill, the author of *The Great New England Sea Serpent*, if she had heard of Cressie, the giant eel of Lake Crescent in Newfoundland. In the 1980s, it was reported that RCMP divers trying to recover the body of a drowning victim were attacked by eels as thick as a man's thigh. Throughout the last 50 years, local residents have reported sightings of a huge serpent-like creature. "Conger eels can get quite large," mused O'Neill.



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Tim Cassidy encountered Bigfoot in 1996 while working as a naturalist in Indiana. He was with another naturalist at the time. "She quit the next day," he said

Although those eels are marine animals, the ponds and lakes of the area are rumoured to be connected to the ocean by underground tunnels and rivers, so perhaps some natural anomaly akin to Loch Ness is at work there.

Back on land, I spoke to Tim Cassidy, a Bigfoot hunter who encountered the creature in 1996 while working as a naturalist in Indiana. He was with another naturalist at the time, and he says she wouldn't discuss the incident. "She quit the next day," he said. Cassidy believes that, unlike most theories, Bigfoot lives all over North America and has a complex social structure. "Is it an ape or a hominid?" I asked. Said Cassidy:

"I can only say it's a primate."

I was tempted to dismiss Cassidy's testimony, except that I noticed his hands were trembling when he described his encounter. "If we capture a Bigfoot," he said, "it will give more support to conserving wild habitat." I asked him how the capture of a Bigfoot would affect society if it were a hominid and what rights it should have. "I don't go there," he said tersely.

At the end of the symposium, I sat down with Coleman to talk about the weekend's events. He looked tired as he confided, "You know, in the beginning I had to constantly defend my work, but now I feel like the conservative."

Coleman was leaving the next morning for New York to appear on a Fox News Halloween special. I felt guilty, for I, too, had come here expecting a campy experience and realized that people such as Coleman must bow to the jocular demand for entertainment in order to stay in the vanguard for real progress in the discovery of unknown animals. "The joy is in the pursuit," said Coleman. "I believe the next 10 years are going to bring a flood of new discoveries."

Coleman predicts that big discoveries will happen in the near future, and although they may not include the classic creatures, their identification will be exciting nonetheless. "I think you'll see a new ape discovered in Southeast Asia," he said, "and new expeditions are being organized to search for dinosauria in central Africa and Yeti-like creatures in the Himalayas." Other possibilities include unknown whales, giant octopi, new monitor lizards, and the Stellar's sea cow. In Atlantic Canada the most famous cryptid is the eastern cougar. In recent years this animal, which was once thought to be extinct, has been spotted in New Brunswick, and reports of sightings continue in Nova Scotia.

That night at the motel, I remembered the excitement I had felt as a boy seeing a salamander or deer for the first time in the wild. I remembered wandering through the local museum, staring at dusty old dioramas and imagining a primeval world. I remembered reading books of distant forests, jungles, mountains, and seas and the incredible creatures that inhabited them.

On the drive home I scanned the trees lining Route 9, half expecting Bigfoot to peek out from between the pines. Like Coleman said, the joy is in the pursuit, the expectation, the wonder. Whether or not Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Abominable Snowman really do exist, one thing is for certain: For Coleman and others like him, the truth is out there to discover. 🌐

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