

## YETI, BIGFOOT AND OTHER APE-MEN

Of the many beliefs which are not yet accepted by the scientific fraternity, the existence of a primate species unknown to man is the one most likely to be justified. To prove there is no such creature would require clear felling all forests on Earth.

Creatures unknown to science are constantly being discovered. The depths of the oceans, previously unexplored, are delivering dozens of new species every year, including quite large animals. New mammals, as well as a myriad of invertebrates, are being found deep in forests which have been little explored in the past. To accept the existence of a creature still undescribed by science, however, there needs to be evidence. So what evidence has been found for the yeti, Bigfoot and other ape-like men?

### The yeti, or abominable snowman

The yeti is the name given to the human-like beast which some believe inhabits the Himalayan mountains. The local word, *metoh-kangmi*, means filthy or abominable snowman. Western climbers have reported sightings and the British climber Eric Shipton has even photographed tracks.

The mountain areas are worshipped as the home of the gods and yetis, so there is a rich mythology to draw on. The Sherpas have a festival to drive out evil spirits in which a

villager is adorned with yeti scalps. He represents the spirit of the yeti. One such scalp was given to Sir Edmund Hillary, an event recorded in a photograph of the great climber with the village elder Khumbo Chumbi, the keeper of the scalp.

Disappointingly, on testing the scalp was found to be made from the skin of a Himalayan goat. In 1966 Sir Edmund Hillary led a six-month scientific expedition of 22 scientists and mountaineers, funded by the *World Encyclopaedia*, to search for the elusive creature. They concluded the story of the yeti was a myth.

There has never been a photograph of a yeti, or any physical evidence that they really exist. The area is huge and inaccessible, so the possibility is there but, at the time of writing, the evidence is not. Despite many long and well-supported expeditions, not a single hair, dropping, bone or lair of this unknown beast has been found.

Lack of oxygen is known to contribute to hallucinations and humans are known for their sense of fun and tendency to hoax. Is this, mixed with an ancient mythology, the source of the beast's folklore?

Some fascinating theories have been proposed. Possibly the yeti is a relative of *Gigantopithecus*, a huge ape which lived in China and India millions of years ago but became extinct about 500 000 years ago. Maybe it is a Neanderthal who has somehow survived. Perhaps the yeti is a new species of great ape. However, it is unlikely a great ape could survive in the harsh conditions of the high Himalayas, where the temperature falls to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ . This is too cold for a primate. All other mountain animals hibernate or move to lower ground. It is possible, but seems pretty unlikely.

## Bigfoot

Bigfoot is the cause of thousands of reported sightings, the first being by frightened miners in Washington State in 1924. The term 'Bigfoot' was coined in August 1958, when the *Humboldt Times*, Eureka, California, ran a front-page

story about the huge primate footprints found in the forest by a bulldozer driver working for Ray L. Wallace's company, Wallace Construction. Wallace's death on 26 November 2002 has allowed his family to reveal the carved wooden feet he strapped to his own to create the footprints. He perpetuated the hoax for years, typical, his family say, of his prankster nature.

Bigfoot is best known from the images caught on film. The ape-like beast is seen disappearing into the forest, glancing back at the cameraman as he flees. Rodeo rider and amateur photographer Roger Patterson took the one-minute footage in Bluff Creek, North Carolina, in 1967. He was sent to that area by none other than Ray Wallace. Wallace's wife Elna, the family say, has admitted to being filmed dressed in a Bigfoot suit.

In 1969, it was loudly claimed, an American was attacked by a Bigfoot, shot it and had it frozen. Since then, the body has been displayed for all to see—at a price. According to the showman Frank Hansen, zoologists were convinced it was a genuine early human. Regularly exhibited since then, usually in shopping centres, Hansen—who charges an admission fee—claims he shows it for the millionaire owner, who doesn't want it destroyed by scientific investigations before people have had a chance to see it.

The story is spoilt by the family of the late Howard Ball, an expert modeller working for Disneyland, admitting he made it. Ball specialised in prehistoric creatures, but had nothing to do with the hoax.

A partly decomposed carcass was found in 1978 at Lewiston, New York State, near the Canadian border. Dismissed by locals as a decomposed bear's head, it made newspaper headlines across America in 1980 when a Lewiston teenager told Jon Beckjord, head of Project Bigfoot, of the photograph of the beast's strange protruding teeth. Scientific tests later showed it was the remains of a black bear which had been hunted in Canada, and the remains dumped in Lewiston. Decomposition can lead to distortions such as protruding teeth, giving the animal a

most unfamiliar look. Not surprisingly, this conclusion did not make the headlines.

In 1987 Bigfoot hit the headlines again. In Mill Creek, in the Blue Mountains of Oregon, footprints measuring up to 40 centimetres in length were found. Even more amazing, the prints showed dermal ridges, the foot's equivalent of fingerprints. They were clearly too detailed to be fakes. They had been discovered in 1982 by Paul Freeman, a forest service patrolman, and plaster casts had been made by Grover Krantz, an anthropologist at Washington State University. All pretty impressive stuff.

Wildlife biologist Rodney L. Johnson examined the casts and pointed out that pine needles had been brushed aside to allow the print to be made in the soil. Animals do not tend to do this. There was no sign of toe or heel slippage on the slope, which was a steep gradient. The prints didn't sink to the bottom of the mud, as they should have done if a heavy animal had made them. Joel Hardin, a US border patrol tracker, found the tracks suddenly appeared and just as suddenly disappeared. The prints were a hoax. Freeman had worked for an orthopaedic shoe company which created enormous shoes for men with oversized feet. He was certainly capable of moulding prints with dermal ridges. Reputable media, such as *Newsweek*, 21 September 1987, claimed 40 fingerprint experts agreed the prints were authentic, but these experts could not be located or their statements verified. Bigfoot enthusiasts were rightly upset. The most impressive set of prints to date was a fraud.

Not all strangely large footprints are the result of hoaxes. Many of the recorded footprints from America, Canada, Nepal and other sites are made in snow. As snow melts around a warm print, say that of a bear, the print becomes larger. A print left in the snow will thaw a bit during the day and re-freeze at night. This can lead to distortions of the original print. For this reason, snow prints are not reliable evidence.

## **Other ape-like creatures**

There are many ape-like creatures reported from around the world. Russia has the Alma and the Chinese have a Wild Man. Sumatra claims the Chang-pendek, whose shortness suggests there may be an unknown breed of orang-utan in the region.

Not to be left out, Canada has the more romantically named Sasquatch, a local native-American word meaning 'wild man of the woods'.

Australia has a beast, too: the Yowie. Its teeth marks are left in trees. Unfortunately these marks are indistinguishable from those left by the yellow-tailed black cockatoo.

This confusion of signs with those of other animals is a common problem with the ape-men hunters. Although many claim to be experienced bushmen, it takes expertise to recognise damage or remains from every animal in a given region, including feral species. It's hard to avoid genuine mistakes.

## **Why the doubters doubt**

Bigfoot, the yeti, and all his mates must have a community. Animals cannot breed alone, nor can they survive for as many years as these reports indicate without a population large enough to sustain the gene pool. A group of animals must leave evidence of their existence. They must defecate, die, be born, have shelter and eat. No species of the size we are talking about can do this and leave no trace of its presence.

Extremists like to claim that the lack of tangible evidence of Bigfoot relates to its paranormal existence, its alien origins or its psychic means of blocking detection. More rational Bigfoot/yeti/abominable snowman/Sasquatch/Yowie/Alma/Chang-pendek proponents search for evidence of a species as yet unknown to science. And they might just find it.