

The Loch Ness Monster:



Nessie has made beautiful Loch Ness in Scotland famous. Proof of the monster's existence rests on shadowy images such as this one.

The cold waters of Loch Ness, Scotland's longest lake (38 kilometers or 24 miles), are home to one of the most enduring legends of our times—the Loch Ness Monster. Nessie, as the monster is commonly called, was first sighted as a “water beast” in the 6th century. Since then, it has been called a serpent, a dragon, a water-horse, and a prehistoric animal. But scientists call Nessie a myth of monstrous dimensions.

Let's cut to the chase. In the 1,500 years that Nessie's been around, there has been no solid evidence of its existence—nothing, say, like a corpse. We do have more than 3,000 eyewitness accounts, some poor-quality photographs, a movie clip showing an animated “blip,” and some other

equally obscure evidence. None of it is convincing. So how can we explain 1,500 years of monster sightings? It's always best to investigate the original source of the legend.

Origin of a Myth

The Loch Ness Monster can be traced to A.D. 565, during the life of St. Columba, an Irish monk trying to convert the Scottish people into Christians. The story goes that St. Columba had witnessed the burial of a man killed by a “beast” in the Loch. Then he saw the monster rush another swimmer “with a great roaring and with a wide open mouth.” St. Columba drove away the “beast” by making a sign of the cross and urging it to “think not to go further, touch not that man.”

After translating and studying the original Latin text recounting St. Columba's experience, Charles Thomas, a professor at the University of Exeter, England, concluded that the “beast” was probably something like a walrus or a seal. Have you ever called your sister or brother a “beast” or a “monster” when they've done something bad? The “beast” in the Loch got its name the same way. End of story? It should have been, but . . .

The Footprint and the Photo

By 1933, stories about the Loch Ness Monster were accepted as myth—something fun to tell around a campfire. But in December 1933, Marmaduke Arundel Wetherell, a big-game hunter, discovered two footprints “less than a few hours old” on a beach at the Loch. Wetherell deduced that “a very powerful, soft-footed animal about 20 feet long” created them. Finally, evidence of a monster? Not at all. Plaster casts made of the footprints and studied by researchers of London's Natural History Museum revealed that the tracks were created by a hippo foot, not a mysterious creature. Someone created the footprints with a replica of a hippo foot, a common item used in

Anatomy of a Hoax



Divers deploy the “creature camera” to search for Nessie.

decorating in the early 1900s. The footprints were a hoax. Hopes for a monster sank like a stone dropped in the Loch.

The story would have ended there, but three months later the monster was captured “clearly” for the first time on film. The April 19, 1934, issue of London’s *Daily Mail* published a photograph taken by Robert Kenneth Wilson, a respected London surgeon, which shows the monster’s long neck and tiny head emerging out of the Loch’s murky waters. That photo, known now as the “surgeon’s photo,” caused a wave of Nessie Fever. People no longer came to the Loch just to relax; they came to see the monster. The surgeon’s photo was a boon for the tourist industry and the local economy. Nessie sightings, naturally, increased.

The Search

Scientists looking at the surgeon photo concluded it was indeed a photo . . . but of what? The grainy, shadowy form had nothing near it for scale. It could have been anything from gas bubbles to an elephant—and this remained the best photo. Then, in 1960, Nessie was filmed swimming. But when the Royal Air Force analyzed the film, they concluded only that something, probably a motorboat, was moving in the water.

Two ambitious scientific efforts to nab Nessie took place in the 1970s. Rob Rines, director of

the Academy of Applied Science in Boston, and Harold “Doc” Edgerton of MIT went to Scotland to photograph the monster underwater using automated cameras and side-scanning sonar—the same device used to discover the sunken *Titanic*. The sonar was so sensitive that it could detect objects hundreds of meters away on either side of the boat. The results? Merely shadows.

And the other expedition? In 1976, *National Geographic* placed highly sophisticated camera gear below the surface of the Loch and used recorded beeper sounds to attract the beast. They found, saw, and photographed . . . nothing.

The Confession

Nessie hysteria continued through 1994, with the surgeon’s photo still the best evidence for a prehistoric animal in the Loch. But on March 12 of that year, *The London Sunday Telegraph* revealed the truth: The surgeon’s “monster” was a small model made of plastic wood attached to a 35-cm toy submarine. The person who made the model, Christian Spurling, confessed that and more on his deathbed in 1993.

The “monster,” he revealed, took eight days to make. The photo was not even taken by Dr. Wilson but by Spurling’s stepbrother—Ian Wetherell, the son of the creator of the hippo-foot “monster footprints.” Marmaduke Wetherell asked Spurling to make the model after the footprint fiasco; he was determined to give the public “their monster.” Wilson was let in on the hoax because Wetherell knew Wilson’s trusted name (not his) would give the photo credibility.

The hoax was done in “harmless fun.” No one expected it would turn into a worldwide sensation. The situation got so out of control that all involved in the hoax decided to remain quiet about it. Wetherell and Wilson died with their mouths zipped shut. But Spurling had to clear his conscience. In doing so, he “killed” Nessie and 1,500 years of mystery.

Maybe it’s best to end with a quote from the late astronomer, Carl Sagan: “There are wonders enough out there, without our inventing any.”

Adapted from an article by Stephen James O’Meara