



Tracking the Swamp Monsters

Do mysterious and presumably endangered manlike creatures inhabit swamplands of the southern United States? If not, how do we explain the sightings and even track impressions of creatures that thus far have eluded mainstream science? Do they represent additional evidence of the legendary Bigfoot or something else entirely? What would an investigation reveal?

Monster Mania

The outside world learned about Louisiana's Honey Island Swamp Monster in 1974 when two hunters emerged from a remote area of backwater sloughs with plaster casts of "unusual tracks." The men claimed they discovered the footprints near a wild boar that lay with its throat gashed. They also stated that over a decade earlier, in 1963, they had seen similar tracks after encountering an awesome creature. They described it as standing seven feet tall, being covered with grayish hair, and having large amber-colored eyes. However, the monster had promptly run away and an afternoon rainstorm had obliterated its tracks, the men said.

The hunters were Harlan E. Ford and his friend Billy Mills, both of whom worked as air-traffic controllers. Ford

told his story on an episode of the 1970s television series *In Search of . . .*. According to his granddaughter, Dana Holyfield (1999a, 11):

When the documentary was first televised, it was monster mania around here. People called from everywhere. . . . The legend of the Honey Island Swamp Monster escalated across Southern Louisiana and quickly made its way out of state after the documentary aired nationwide.

Harlan Ford continued to search for the monster until his death in 1980. Dana recalls how he once took a goat into the swamp to use as bait, hoping to lure the creature to a tree blind where Ford waited—uneventfully, as it

happened—with gun and camera. He did supposedly find several, different-sized tracks on one hunting trip. He also claimed to have seen the monster on one other occasion, during a fishing trip with Mills and some of their friends from work. One of the men reportedly then went searching for the creature with a rifle and fired two shots at it before returning to tell his story to the others around the campfire (Holyfield 1999a, 10–15).

Searching for Evidence

Intrigued by the monster reports, which I pursued on a trip to New Orleans (speaking to local skeptics at the planetarium in Kenner), I determined to visit



Figure 1. Louisiana's pristine Honey Island Swamp is the alleged habitat of a manlike monster.

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the alleged creature's habitat. The Honey Island Swamp (figure 1) comprises nearly 70,000 acres between the East Pearl and West Pearl rivers. I signed on with Honey Island Swamp Tours, which is operated out of Slidell, Louisiana, by wetlands ecologist Paul Wagner and his wife, Sue. Their "small, personalized nature tours" live up to their billing as explorations of "the deeper, harder-to-reach small bayous and sloughs" of "one of the wildest and most pristine river swamps in America" ("Dr. Wagner's" n.d.).

The Wagners are ambivalent about the supposed swamp monster's existence. They have seen alligators, deer, otters, bobcats, and numerous other species but not a trace of the legendary creature (Wagner 2000). The same is true of the Wagners' Cajun guide, Captain Robbie Charbonnet. Beginning at age eight, he has had forty-five years' experience, eighteen as a guide, in the Honey Island Swamp. He told me he had "never seen or heard" something he could not identify, certainly nothing that could be attributed to a monster (Charbonnet 2000).

Suiting action to words throughout our tour, Charbonnet repeatedly identified species after species in the remote swampland as he skillfully threaded his boat through the cypresses and tupelos hung with Spanish moss. Although the cool weather had pushed 'gators to the depths, he heralded turtles, great blue herons, and other wildlife. From only a glimpse of its silhouetted form he spotted a barred owl, then carefully maneuvered for a closer view. He called attention to the singing of robins, who were gathering there for the winter, and pointed to signs of other creatures, including freshly cut branches produced by beavers and, in the mud, tracks left by a wild boar. But there was not a trace of the swamp monster. (The closest I came was passing an idle boat at Indian Village Landing emblazoned "Swamp Monster Tours.")

Another who is skeptical of monster

claims is naturalist John V. Dennis. In his comprehensive book *The Great Cypress Swamps* (1988), he writes: "Honey Island has achieved fame of sorts because of the real or imagined presence of a creature that fits the description of the Big Foot of movie renown. Known as the Thing, the creature is sometimes seen by fishermen." However, he says, "For my part, let me say that in my many years of visiting swamps, many of them as wild or wilder than Honey Island, I have never obtained a glimpse of anything vaguely resembling Big Foot, nor have I ever seen suspicious-looking footprints." He

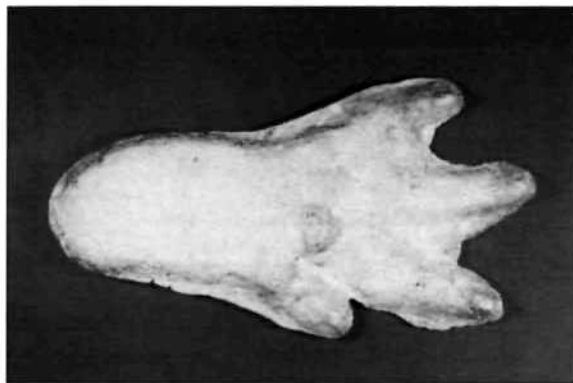


Figure 2. This plaster cast preserves an alleged Honey Island Swamp Monster track. (Photos by Joe Nickell)

concludes, "Honey Island, in my experience, does not live up to its reputation as a scary place."

In contrast to the lack of monster experiences from swamp experts are the encounters reported by Harlan Ford and Billy Mills. Those alleged eyewitnesses are, in investigators' parlance, "repeaters"—people who claim unusual experiences on multiple occasions. (Take Bigfoot hunter Roger Patterson for example. Before shooting his controversial film sequence of a hairy man-beast in 1967, Patterson was a longtime Bigfoot buff who had "discovered" the alleged creature's tracks on several occasions [Bord and Bord 1982, 80].) Ford's and Mills's multiple sightings and discoveries seem suspiciously lucky, and suspicions are increased by other evidence, including the tracks.

From Dana Holyfield I obtained a plaster copy of one of the several track casts made by her grandfather (figure

2). It is clearly not the track of a stereotypical Bigfoot (or sasquatch) whose footprints are "roughly human in design," according to anthropologist and pro-Bigfoot theorist Grover Krantz (1992, 17). Instead, Ford's monster tracks are webbed-toe imprints that appear to be "a cross between a primate and a large alligator" (Holyfield 1999a, 9). The track is also surprisingly small: only about nine and three-fourths inches long compared to Bigfoot tracks which average about fourteen to sixteen inches (Coleman and Clark 1999, 14), with tracks of twenty inches and more reported (Coleman and Huyghe 1999).¹

Monsterlands

Clearly, the Honey Island Swamp Monster is not a Bigfoot, a fact that robs Ford's and Mills's story of any credibility it might have had from that association. Monster popularizers instead equate the Honey Island reports with other "North American 'Creatures of the Black Lagoon' cases," purported evidence of cryptozoological entities dubbed "freshwater Merbeings" (Coleman and Huyghe 1999, 39, 62).

These are supposedly linked by tracks with three toes, although Ford's casts actually exhibit four (again see figure 2). In short, the alleged monster is unique, rare even among creatures whose existence is unproven and unlikely.

Footprints and other specific details aside, the Honey Island Swamp Monster seems part of a genre of mythic swamp-dwelling "beastmen" or "manimals." They include the smelly Skunk Ape and the hybrid Gatorman of the Florida Everglades and other southern swamps; the Scape Ore Swamp Lizardman of South Carolina; Momo, the Missouri Monster; and, among others, the Fouke Monster, which peeked in the window of a home in Fouke, Arkansas, one night in 1971 and set off a rash of monster sightings (Blackman 1998, 23–25, 30–33, 166–168; Bord and Bord 1982, 104–105; Coleman and Clark 1999, 224–226; Coleman and Huyghe 1999, 39, 56).

Considering this genre, we must ask: Why swamps and why monsters? Swamps represent remote, unexplored regions, which have traditionally been the domain of legendary creatures. As the noted Smithsonian Institution biologist John Napier (1973, 23) sagely observed, monsters "hail from uncharted territory: inaccessible mountains, impenetrable forests, remote Pacific islands, the depths of loch or ocean. . . . The essential element of the monster myth is remoteness."

Echoing Napier in discussing one reported Honey Island Swamp encounter, John V. Dennis (1988) states: "In many cases, sightings such as this one are inspired by traditions that go back as far as Indian days. If a region is wild and inaccessible and has a history of encounters with strange forms of life, chances are that similar encounters will occur again—or at least be reported." And while the major purported domain of Bigfoot is the Pacific northwest, Krantz (1992, 199) observes: "Many of the more persistent eastern reports come from low-lying and/or swampy lands of the lower Mississippi and other major river basins."

But why does belief in monsters persist? According to one source, monsters appear in every culture and are "born out of the unknown and nurtured by the unexplained" (Guenette and Guenette 1975). Many alleged paranormal entities appear to stem either from mankind's hopes or fears—thus are envisioned angels and demons—and some entities may evoke a range of responses. Monsters, for example, may intrigue us with their unknown aspect as well as provoke terror. We may be especially interested in man-beasts, given what psychologist Robert A. Baker (1995) observes is our strong tendency to endow things with human characteristics. Hence, angels are basically our better selves with wings; extraterrestrials are humanoids from futuristic worlds; and Bigfoot and his ilk seem linked to our evolutionary past.

Monsters may play various roles in our lives. My Cajun guide, Robbie Charbonnet, offered some interesting ideas about the Honey Island Swamp

Monster and similar entities. He thought that frightening stories might have been concocted on occasion to keep outsiders away—perhaps to protect prime hunting areas or even help safeguard moonshine stills. He also theorized that such tales might have served in a sort of bogeyman fashion to frighten children from wandering into remote, dangerous areas. (Indeed

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he mentioned how when he was a youngster in the 1950s an uncle would tell him about a frightening figure—a sort of horror-movie type with one leg, a mutilated face, etc.—that would "get" him if he strayed into the swampy wilderness.)

Like any such bogeyman, the Honey Island Swamp Monster is also good for gratuitous campfire chills. "A group of men were sitting around the campfire along the edge of the Pearl River," begins one narrative, "telling stories about that thing in the swamp . . ." (Holyfield 1999b). A song, "The Honey Island Swamp Monster" (written by Perry Ford, n.d.), is in a similar vein: "Late at night by a dim fire light, / You people best beware. / He's standing in the shadows, / Lurking around out there. . . ." The monster has even been referred to specifically as "The boogie man" and "that booger" (Holyfield 1992a, 14). "Booger" is a dialect form of *bogey*, and deliberately scary stories are sometimes known as "'booger' tales" (Cassidy 1985).

Suitable subjects for booger tales are numerous Louisiana swamp and bayou terrors, many of them the products of Cajun folklore. One is the Letiche, a ghoulish creature that was supposedly an abandoned, illegitimate child who was reared by alligators, and now has scaly skin, webbed hands and feet, and luminous green eyes. Then there is Jack

O'Lantern, a malevolent spirit who lures humans into dangerous swampland with his mesmerizing lantern, as well as the Loup Garou (a werewolf) and the zombies (not the relatively harmless "Voodoo Zombies" but the horrific "Flesh Eaters") (Blackman 1998, 171–209).

By extension, swamp creatures are also ideal subjects for horror fiction. The Fouke monster sightings, for exam-

ple, inspired the horror movie *The Legend of Boggy Creek*. That 1972 thriller became a box-office hit, spawning a sequel and many imitations. About the same time (1972) there emerged a popular comic book series titled *Swamp Thing*, featuring a metamorphosing man-monster from a Louisiana swamp. Interestingly, these popularized monsters predated the 1974 claims of Ford and Mills. (Recall that their alleged earlier encounter of 1963 had not been reported.)

The Track Makers

While swamp monsters and other man-beasts are not proven to exist, hoaxers certainly are. Take, for example, Bigfoot tracks reported by berry pickers near Mount St. Helens, Washington, in 1930. Nearly half a century later, a retired logger came forward to pose with a set of "bigfeet" that he had carved and that a friend had worn to produce the fake monster tracks (Dennett 1982). Among many similar hoaxes were at least seven perpetrated in the early 1970s by one Ray Pickens of Chehalis, Washington. He carved primitive seven-by-eighteen-inch feet and attached them to hiking boots. Pickens (1975) said he was motivated "not to fool the scientists, but to fool the monster-hunters" who he felt regarded people like him as "hicks." Other motivation, according to monster hunter Peter Byrne (1975), stems from the

“extraordinary psychology of people wanting to get their names in the paper, people wanting a little publicity, wanting to be noticed.”

Were Harlan Ford's and Billy Mills's monster claims similarly motivated? Dana Holyfield (1999a, 5–6) says of her

and Carl Dubois, reported sighting a hairy man-beast in a cypress swamp called Boggy Bayou in the central part of the state. Giant four-toed tracks and hair samples were discovered at the site, and soon others came forward to say they too had seen a similar creature.

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grandfather: “Harlan wasn't a man to make up something like that. He was down to earth and honest and told it the way it was and didn't care if people believed him or not.” But even a basically honest person, who would not do something overtly dastardly or criminal, might engage in something that he considered relatively harmless and that would add zest to life. I believe the evidence strongly indicates that Ford and Mills did just that. To sum up, there are the men's suspiciously repeated sighting reports and alleged track discoveries, together with the incongruent mixing of a Bigfoot-type creature with most un-Bigfootlike feet, plus the fact that the proffered evidence is not only of a type that could easily be faked but often has been. In addition, the men's claims exist in a context of swamp-animal mythology that has numerous antecedent elements in folklore and fiction. Taken together, the evidence suggests a common hoax.

Certainly, in the wake of the monster mania Ford helped inspire, much hoaxing resulted. States Holyfield (1999a, 11): “Then there were the monster impersonators who made fake bigfoot shoes and tromped through the swamp. This went on for years. Harlan didn't worry about the jokers because he knew the difference.” Be that as it may, swamp-monster hoaxes—and apparent hoaxes—continue.

A few months before I arrived in Louisiana, two loggers, Earl Whitstine

However, there were grounds for suspicion: twenty-five years earlier (i.e., not long after the 1974 Honey Island Swamp Monster reports), Whitstine's father and some friends had sawed giant foot shapes from plywood and produced fake monster tracks in the woods of a nearby parish.

On September 13, 2000, laboratory tests of the hair from the Boggy Bayou creature revealed that it was not *Gigantopithecus blacki* (a scientific name for sasquatch proposed by Krantz [1992, 193]), but much closer to *Booger louisiani* (my term for the legendary swamp bogeyman). It proved actually to be from *Equus caballus* (a horse), whereupon the local sheriff's department promptly ended its investigation (Blanchard 2000; Burdeau 2000).

Reportedly, Harlan Ford believed the swamp monsters “were probably on the verge of extinction” (Holyfield 1999a, 10). Certainly he did much to further their cause. It seems likely that—as long as there are suitably remote habitats and other essentials (such as campfires around which to tell tales, and good ol' boys looking for their fifteen-minutes of fame)—the legendary creatures will continue to proliferate.

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Note

1. Although Harlan Ford obtained tracks of various sizes, a photo of his mounted casts (Holyfield 1999a, 10) makes it possible to compare them with his open hand which touches the display and thus gives an approximate scale. This shows all are relatively small. The one I obtained from Holyfield is consistent with the larger ones.

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