

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

Nonfiction



IS THERE A MONSTER LIVING IN SCOTLAND'S LEGENDARY LAKE?

# The **Beast** of **Loch Ness**

**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

How convincing is the evidence that the Loch Ness monster is real?

BY LAUREN TARSHIS | ILLUSTRATION BY GARY HANNA

**O**n an April afternoon in 1933, Aldie and John Mackay were driving along the shores of one of Scotland's largest lakes, Loch Ness. (*Loch*, pronounced "lock," is the Scottish term for lake.) The road, the A82, was brand-new, and Aldie was enjoying the view from the car window.

The Scottish Highlands are often rainy, but this day was bright. The trees were vivid green, and even the murky waters of the lake seemed to sparkle.

Then Aldie saw something she would never forget. The water rippled, and a giant creature seemed to rise out of the loch. It appeared to be black, with a humped back. Aldie grabbed her husband's arm, trembling with fright, and pointed.

"Stop! The beast!" she gasped. John screeched the car to a halt. For several minutes, the stunned couple stared at the loch as the creature seemed to be "rolling and plunging," until the waters finally calmed.

For a few days, Aldie and John kept quiet about what they had seen. After all, who would believe them? A monster in Loch Ness? It sounded preposterous. People would think they were liars or,

worse, that they were insane. Ultimately, though, the couple couldn't resist sharing their remarkable story, and the news soon spread. As the Mackays had predicted, some people rolled their eyes and laughed. Many others listened with fascination, however. There had always been something mysterious about Loch Ness, something spooky. For centuries, people from nearby towns had whispered stories

about a creature living in the loch, a huge and terrifying beast that, according to some tales, lured children to their deaths. Another story, dating back to the sixth century, told of a water monster that tried to devour farmers working nearby.

Many locals avoided the surrounding woods because of these stories. To them, the Mackays' story was completely plausible.



# Loch Ness Monster Seen 21 Times in 4-Week Hunt

Over the next few weeks, more people claimed to have seen the creature.

"It was big as an elephant," said a local farmer.

"It was horrible," reported a schoolteacher. "It had a head like a cobra."

"My heart stopped," recounted a visiting businessman, who said he saw the beast while taking a walk. "It looked right at me."

But what was it?

## Fantastic Creatures

For thousands of years, people around the world have been telling stories of mysterious creatures. Some of these mythical beasts are obviously fictional, as fantastic as Norbert, Hagrid's pet dragon from the Harry Potter series, or the fairies from Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series. But some creatures of myth and legend have turned out to really exist.

For hundreds of years, sailors told stories of a hideous creature with a large round head, a jagged-edged beak, and enormous, powerful tentacles. They called this creature the kraken. Despite hundreds of eyewitness accounts, most people dismissed the kraken as a tall tale that sprang from the imaginations of homesick, sunstruck sailors. Then in 1873, a fisherman and

This 1934 *New York Times* headline grabbed some serious attention!

his son spotted one in the waters off Newfoundland, Canada. After what they said was a struggle with the creature, they managed to cut off a 19-foot piece of tentacle. This slimy specimen convinced skeptics that the stories were true.

Scientists gave the kraken a new name: the giant squid.

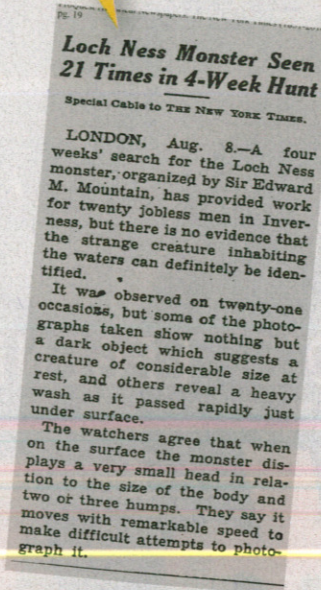
Years later, in 1912, a group of pearl fishermen landed on a small island in what is now Indonesia. The men were relaxing on the rocky shores when one of them heard something approach from behind. He turned and screamed as an enormous lizard, maybe 10 feet long, rushed toward them, its beady eyes glistening with menace. The men managed to escape, but when

they got home and recounted their close call, most people didn't believe them.

Still, there had been other reports of the giant lizard. In 1926, wealthy adventurer W. Douglas Burden organized an expedition with the American Museum of Natural History. Sure enough, he found a population of ferocious, meat-eating lizards

exactly where the fishermen said he would, on the island of Komodo. The creatures became known as Komodo dragons.

Incredible stories like those of the giant squid and the Komodo dragon have encouraged some men and women to devote their lives to the search for mythical and legendary creatures. These people call themselves cryptozoologists. (*Kryptos* is the Greek word for



"hidden" or "secret"; a zoologist is a scientist who studies animal life.) To most people, cryptozoology seems more like fantasy than real science, and it is usually

mocked in scientific circles. A few cryptozoologists, however, are respected scientists who are convinced that there are still astonishing undiscovered animal

species on Earth. One of those creatures, they say, could be lurking in Loch Ness.

## Finding Proof

Over the decades, several theories about the beast of Loch Ness have been proposed. One theory is that the beast is simply an unknown water mammal or an enormous fish. Or it may be a prehistoric creature—such as

a plesiosaur. These long-necked marine

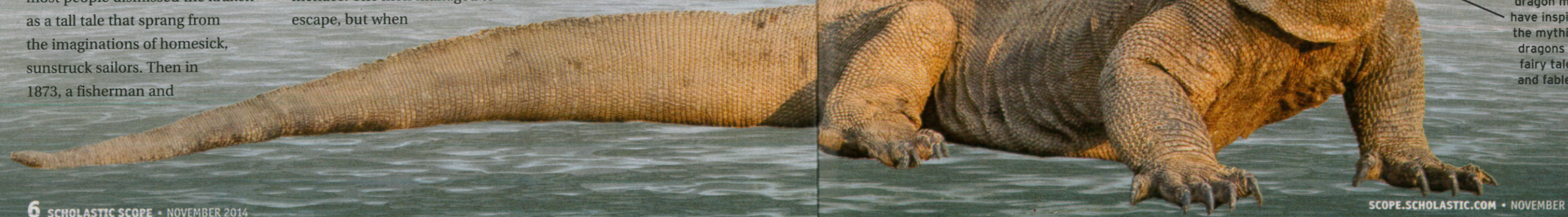
reptiles lived alongside the dinosaurs and died out 65 million years ago. Maybe a few survived, and one of their descendants is now living in the loch.

Or maybe not. These are just the theories of a few passionate believers, theories that most scientists reject and ridicule. The water of Loch Ness is freezing and so dark that few plants survive, let alone fish. What would the creature eat? And how could there be just one creature? There would have to be a family that breeds and raises its young. Is it really likely that a clan of giant animals lives in the loch, invisible to all but a few accidental witnesses?

Perhaps no person has been as interested in these questions as Tim Dinsdale. An engineer, he led 57 Loch Ness expeditions between 1960 and 1987. In 1960, Dinsdale saw a "long oval shape" in the water and captured



The terrifying Polyphemus (above) from Homer's *The Odyssey* was a mythical one-eyed people-eating monster known as a Cyclops. The Cyclops myth was probably inspired by skeletons of prehistoric elephants called *Deinotherium giganteums* (translation: really huge terrible beasts). The hole in their skull where their trunk attached resembled an eye socket.



The Komodo dragon may have inspired the mythical dragons of fairy tales and fables.



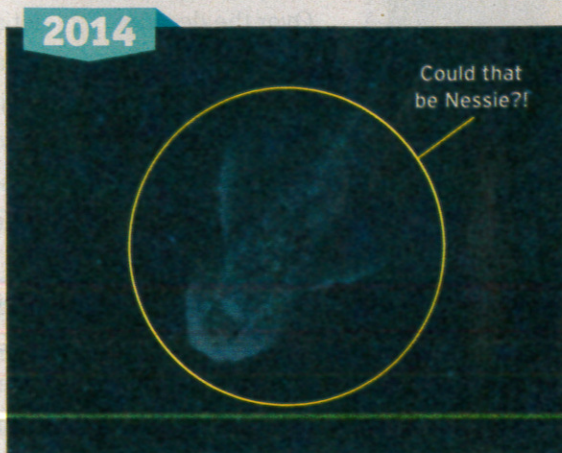
it on film for 60 seconds. The image was blurry, but Dinsdale was convinced it was the creature.

He gave the film to experts from the British government to **examine**. After **scrutinizing** the footage, they concluded that the object was probably alive and that it was between 12 and 16 feet long. Cryptozoologists cheered, but skeptics were unimpressed with the image of a murky blob moving slowly through the water.

Another respected Loch Ness investigator was the American scientist Robert Rines. In the 1970s, Rines used sonar equipment to help capture an image that seemed to show the flipper of a large underwater creature. As with Dinsdale's film, the image was too blurry to provide clear answers.

In 2003, British scientists **studied** the loch using sonar and satellites. They were hoping to prove the plesiosaur theory. They **investigated** the loch "shoreline to shoreline, top to bottom," said scientist Ian Florence. "We have covered everything in this loch, and we saw no signs of any large living animal," Florence said, his voice tinged with disappointment. "I think this might settle the question. There is nothing there."

Yet, there are still people who say that there is.



The photograph from 1934 supposedly proved that there was a monster in the loch. It turned out to be a hoax, just a creature made from a toy submarine and clay. The photo from 2014 was taken from Apple Maps. It circulated on Twitter earlier this year as new proof of Nessie's existence . . . and was quickly disproved.

### Imagination and Belief

In the eight decades since the Mackays took their fateful drive, more than 1,000 people have claimed to have seen some kind of creature in the water or on the shores of the loch. Certainly many of them are attention seekers or pranksters. But can they all be making it up?

Even skeptics admit it's likely that the Mackays really did see *something* on the loch that April day. Perhaps a log was caught in the waves, or an overturned boat was bobbing up and down.

Perhaps the glittering sunlight turned an ordinary object into a fantastic monster. The human imagination is powerful. So is our power of belief. And isn't it imagination and belief that have led to humankind's greatest scientific achievements?

On the other hand, Aldie Mackay managed a nearby hotel, and it's been suggested that her "sighting" might have been a ploy to attract tourists. In any event, she was far from the only one to benefit from Nessie's legend. To this day, the monster—real or otherwise—attracts thousands of visitors every year who help boost the local economy. The Chamber of Commerce's tagline is "seeing is believing." Aldie's old hotel now houses the Loch Ness

Centre and Exhibition. Visitors can take Nessie-watching boat cruises.

Speaking of his own hunt for Nessie, Rines once said, "If you don't have an open mind, in my judgment, you're not a scientist. If you don't have ideas, if you don't have adventure, you'll never make a discovery." Though Rines never did find incontrovertible proof of Nessie's existence, he believed until his death, in 2009, that a major discovery was waiting in the murky waters of Loch Ness.

Who knows? Perhaps one day, he'll be proved right. ●

## ESSAY

# Why We Believe

Nessie. Bigfoot. Mermaids. Why are we so eager to believe in creatures that (almost certainly) don't exist? **By Kristin Lewis**

**I** imagine you are living 4,000 years ago in the frigid Arctic. You and your dad are sitting outside your igloo, bundled in furs, roasting the fish you caught earlier that day. Staring up at the night sky, you admire a bright constellation.

"How did those stars get there?" you ask.

Your dad explains that three hunters on sleds once chased a polar bear into the sky. They rose higher and higher, until they all became stars.

Today, you might be tempted to laugh at this explanation. But it was only through incredible stories like this one that our ancestors were able

to interpret the world around them. What causes lightning? The ancient Greeks said it was a sign of the god Zeus. What are the sun and moon? According to a Chinese myth, the world was a giant man whose eyes became the sun and moon. A French legend has it that when people are attacked in the forests, a werewolf (not a wild animal) is to blame.

Today, of course, we don't need fantastical stories to explain our world; we have the tools of modern science. Satellites allow us to **explore** the surface of

the entire planet. Powerful microscopes give us stunning views of the tiniest particles while high-tech telescopes are helping us **probe** the far corners of our galaxy.

### Magic and Mystery

And yet, something in us still yearns for magic and mystery. Something in us *wants* the world to be full of gods and monsters, of wondrous events and creatures that science can't unriddle. Perhaps that is why so many people cling to the hope—or even the conviction—that cryptids like Nessie are real.

According to an Angus Reid opinion poll, 3 in 10 Americans believe Bigfoot "definitely" or "probably" exists. And

No, that is not Bigfoot. That is some dude in a furry suit.



in 2012, a fake documentary on Animal Planet convinced so many people that mermaids are real that the U.S. government posted a statement declaring that no evidence of "aquatic humanoids" has ever been found.

"We are fascinated with the strange," says Stephen Asma, author of the book *On Monsters*. "You think only lunatics are interested in cryptids, but then science drags something out of the depths of the ocean like the giant squid and we all pause and say, 'Wow, there is still a lot of stuff out there that we don't know about.'" And that stuff delights us.

### Firing Up Imaginations

Still, it can be hard to understand why so many people continue to believe in legendary creatures whose existence, after all these years, has not been proven. But consider this: It's much easier to prove that something definitely exists than to prove that something definitely does not. And that shred of possibility—however remote—fires up our imaginations. Dragons and mermaids and the Loch Ness monster may not be real, but they are undeniably cool. ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Why do people continue to look for the Loch Ness monster? Is the search for the monster a worthwhile pursuit? Support your answer with details from both texts. Send your answer to **LOCH NESS CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *The Riverman* by Aaron Starmer.

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