

# monsters among us

THINK BIG: BC AND ALBERTA ARE HOME TO A LAKE SNAKE, AN APE-MAN AND DINO-DIGS

by Lindsey Lewis and Sheri Radford



# a

huge water beast. Prehistoric stingrays on the prairie. A furry ape-man. These are not characters in the latest science fiction novel; they are inhabitants of Western Canada. Maybe.

## the ape debate

Is the sasquatch a case of mistaken identity? Some believe it's a member of the great ape family, perhaps a *Gigantopithecus*, long presumed extinct. It might be a descendant of Tibetan yeti, the "Abominable Snowmen" that crossed the Bering Land Bridge to North America several millennia ago and decided to stay and soak up the West Coast sunshine. First Nations tribes from Alaska to California have legends dating back centuries that describe ape-like creatures and "wild men of the woods," and the name "sasquatch" is derived from a Native

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word meaning “hairy giants.” The Chehalis people even use a stylized sasquatch image as their symbol. Sceptics dismiss the creature as a hoax, the product of gullible witnesses and pranksters in gorilla suits.

When speaking to a believer, it’s easy to get caught up in the fervour. Cryptozoologists are a zealous group. They write books, build websites and host conferences, exposing themselves to ridicule from non-believers. They spend days schlepping through mud and brush, looking for a footprint, a clump of hair or a nest. Some have been studying the creature for years without ever glimpsing it. Ray Crowe, director of the International Bigfoot Society, enthuses, “After the initial mystery is solved, then we can go on to study the living creature as [Dr. Jane] Goodall would study a chimpanzee.”

If the whole thing is a hoax, then the jokers are uniform in their methods. Startled campers and spooked lumberjacks give strikingly similar descriptions of hairy, human-like creatures at least two metres (seven feet) tall, walking upright, stinking like rotten eggs and emitting haunting cries. The most famous evidence is a grainy film shot in the United States by Roger Patterson and Robert Gimlin in 1967 — but more than one person has subsequently claimed to be the costumed actor who portrayed the creature.

So if you venture into BC’s wooded areas, keep an eye out for a mysterious creature hiding in the trees. Could be a joker in a gorilla suit — or could be a sasquatch. — SR

## the reptile report

Ogopogo bit Daryl Ellis last year. He swears it did. Ellis, a resident of Vernon, BC, was completing his seventh annual swim to raise money for cancer and diabetes at the time. “It was actually stalking me,” claims Ellis, “This thing grabbed my left foot. Another time it rubbed up...on the inside of my right leg.”

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Okanagan Lake is perhaps most famous for its enormous, green, biologically unclassified snake-like creature. The lake shares the same latitude as Loch Ness — and the infamous Nellie. It’s also surrounded by “non-stereotypical flora and fauna,” according to Tourism Kelowna’s Catherine Frechette, “that you wouldn’t necessarily think of as being in BC.” If there are weird plants and animals around the lake, there could be weirder ones inside it; or so the logic goes.

Locals agree. Kelowna’s *Daily Courier* runs at least one really big-reptile report per year. In August 2004, Darren King said he saw a “snake-like” creature with a “prehistoric head” and Joel Barnes reported seeing “three- or four-foot waves” and a “blackness” under the water. In May 2006, Al and Elaine Wagner told the *Courier* they felt shivers down their spine after seeing three dark shapes moving through the lake.

Robert Young of the University of BC Okanagan campus says the hubbub is hogwash. The associate professor of earth and environmental sciences argues old Ogie would have frozen his scales off during glaciation cycles that buried the lake in ice. Young adds there are no records of ancient, wiggly water creatures Ogopogo could have evolved from, and, unless he’s actually a she-he, lack of a horizontal-mambo buddy makes reproducing impossible. And the strange lake ripples often believed to be caused by Ogopogo could be just layers of water at different temperatures switching places, most common in the spring and fall.

Though Young says the likelihood of Ogopogo’s existence is “near zero,” he does admit there is a “wild chance that something could have swum up here and into the lake from the ocean.”

Is the legend of the lake true or false? Take a dip and find out for yourself. Just keep an eye on your ankles. — LL

FEET

6 INCHES



HUMAN



BIGFOOT



GORILLA



BEAR

The Chehalis First Nation’s logo, opposite page, is a stylized sasquatch image. It’s no wonder the hairy, human-like creature’s nickname is inspired by its feet; bigfoot tracks, below, dwarf all others



courtesy Tourism Kelowna

Kelowna, BC sits lakeside on a body of water, left, perhaps best known for what Tourism Kelowna calls a “friendly lake monster.” An Ogopogo artwork, above, on Bernard Avenue

## digging for dinos

If you thought the prairie was flat and empty, think again. Aptly named Dinosaur Park, two hours east of Calgary, boasts 150 complete dinosaur-skeleton discoveries. Both Phillip Currie and Don Brinkman have made finds worthy of Indiana Jones. Brinkman, head curator at the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, discovered a 76-million-year-old *Mylodon* freshwater ray, similar to today’s Amazon stingray, preserved as a complete skeleton. Currie’s coup is a 77-million-year-old *Hypacrosaurus* duckbilled-dinosaur egg complete with embryo, buried in a hillside — just one of the reasons he’s professor and Canada research

chair in Dinosaur Paleobiology at the University of Alberta.

Other Albertan bone-hunting hot spots range from Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park and Grand Prairie to downtown Edmonton. Why is Alberta such a great place to stake a skeleton claim? Give all the credit to Mother Nature. Seventy-five million years ago, much of Alberta’s climate, particularly in Dinosaur Park, resembled today’s coastal plains of the southeastern United States. Think of the Louisiana Bayou and you’re on the right track: hot and humid; ideal conditions for lush vegetation crawling with turtles, crocodiles and sharks.



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A Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton, far left, is one of many housed in the Royal Tyrrell Museum. University of Alberta's Dr. Phillip Currie, left, in Dinosaur Provincial Park

ing dead dinosaurs, preserving their skeletons, or pieces of them, for millions of years.

Both Currie and Brinkman can boast other discoveries. Dinosaur footprints in the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains, trekking from Alberta into British Columbia, that show dinosaurs interacting — walking side-by-side and chasing one another. Partial duckbill dinosaur skeletons that decorated the North Saskatchewan River, running right through downtown Edmonton. A Tyrannosaurus Rex that tramped around the Crow's Nest Pass; and in Dinosaur Park, a new Ceratopsian — or horned dinosaur — that bridges the gap between two other Ceratopsians in Western North America.

More bones are popping up all over the place. The rocks in the Alberta badlands erode at the rapid rate of 1.27 centimetres (0.5 inches) per year. "The amount of material that you see in such a relatively small area is really phenomenal," says Brinkman. "There's new stuff coming up all the time."

Better watch where you walk. — LL **jw**

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