

# Scientists to put 'yeti remains' to the test

Yeti, Bigfoot, Nessie: the world is full of so-called, 'cryptids,' mythical creatures that some claim are real. Now scientists have launched a project to test the evidence for these beasts.



## SCIENCE

**F**ootprints in the snow; mysterious humanoid remains; blurry images of a giant figure among the trees. Such is the 'evidence' for Bigfoot – a hulking, man-like creature, eight feet tall and covered in brownish hair.

Bigfoot's supposed stalking ground is the forested wilderness of America's remote northwest. But similar mysterious species are reported in every remote corner of the Earth: the Himalayan yeti, the Indonesian orang pendek, the almasty of Mongolia. Are we sharing our planet with a mysterious evolutionary cousin?

Almost certainly not. Such conspicuous beasts could hardly live alongside us without leaving some more definite evidence behind. Still, rumours persist. Now researchers from Oxford and Switzerland have decided to put them to the test.

Scientists are offering DNA testing kits to anybody in possession of suspected Bigfoot remains. If an unknown humanoid really was the source, the tests will show it.



Belgian cartoon character Tintin on the trail of the yeti.

The project will also welcome evidence for any of the many other creatures so far assumed to be a myth: reptilian 'goat-suckers,' for instance, or even the famous Loch Ness Monster. Such animals are known as 'cryptids.'

It is not unheard of for cryptids to be discovered in the real world. Giant turtles were once thought to be invented; as was the okapi, an African mammal with curious patchwork patterning. Reports of sea monsters may have been early sightings of giant squid; while some historians believe that the unicorn is simply a badly-described rhino.

Most mythical creatures, however, remain elusive. When new species are discovered they rarely bear much resemblance to myth. Still, many are astonishing enough in their own right.

This year alone, scientists have discovered over 200 new species. Plenty are bizarre enough to rival legend: perpetually sneezing monkeys, an electric blue tarantula, giant millipedes.

The world is full of creatures stranger than the monsters of our imagination. One species of mole has tentacles protruding from its nose; the yeti lobster is a hairy crab-like creature with claws twice the length of its body; the platypus combines a duck-like bill, a beaver tail and paws like an otter. It is one of the only mammals to lay eggs.

### NOT QUITE DEAD YETI

With all these wonders surrounding us, zoologists ask, why must we obsess over folk inventions like Bigfoot? Stop wasting time analysing fake video footage, they plead, and instead learn about the real riches the world has to offer. Many of them may soon be gone.

Bigfoot might be a longshot, admit more realistic enthusiasts; but that does not mean we should give up on it. Nature *does* contain unsolved mysteries, they say, and our fascination with them is healthy: it is a sign of enduring curiosity and wonder at the world.

## Q & A

**Q** If Bigfoot and yetis don't exist, how do you explain the pictures?

**A** Most sightings are probably mistakes. One recent video, for instance, was identified by a park ranger as 'a particularly mangy bear.' Other sightings are practical jokes. A more outlandish explanation is that they may be

surviving descendants of the *gigantopithecus*, an gorilla-like ape reaching 9 feet in height and extinct for 100,000 years.

**Q** But how can so many people make the same 'mistake'?

**A** Humans naturally interpret things that they see in ways that fit their previous beliefs – a phenomenon known as 'confirmation bias.' When Europeans first arrived

in the Americas, they came back overflowing with descriptions of fantastical creatures. The descriptions matched European folklore – but not American reality.

### SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'All legends contain a grain of truth.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Humanoid** – Anything that resembles a human can be described as a 'humanoid.' Often the word is used to refer to robots or androids, but in biology it often describes to the extinct relatives of *Homo sapiens* (our species), such as *Homo erectus* or neanderthal man.

**Evolutionary cousin** – Biology has a complex system for categorising species: those that share a recent evolutionary ancestor

might share the same 'genus', further back they split into families, orders and classes such as mammals. Humans are the only known species in the *Homo* genus that still exist.

**DNA testing** – DNA is a code contained within each living thing, which determines its unique characteristics. DNA evidence can link one species to another, or can determine what sort of animal a tissue sample is taken from. It was invented in 1984, and is now hugely important in investigating crimes.

**Goatsuckers** – The chupacabra is a mythical animal of the Americas, nicknamed 'goatsucker' because it supposedly feeds on the blood of livestock. It is reported to be the size of a bear, with spines on its back and possibly scales.

**Badly-described rhinos** – For instance, a famous Greek writer described an African animal with 'the head of the stag the feet of the elephant, and the tail of the boar, while the rest of the body is like that of the horse.' That is, a rhino – but many took it as evidence for the existence of unicorns.

### YOU DECIDE

1. If you were hunting and came across a Bigfoot, would you be justified in killing it in the name of scientific discovery?
2. Why are we so fascinated by mythical creatures like the Loch Ness Monster?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Write an imaginary news report describing the discovery of a fantastical new creature.
2. Research one of the animals mentioned in the article and write a factfile about it. Include its habitat, its distinguishing features and how it is adapted to its environment.

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 **NOTES**

