

Loch Ness Monster

By [Matt Blitz](#) Nov 21, 2019

A small column in a local newspaper 86 years ago inspired a monstrous myth. The May 1933 *Inverness Courier* article explains how a well-known businessman and his wife were driving along the north shore of Loch Ness when they witnessed a “tremendous upheaval” in the water. Upon stopping, they saw an enormous creature with a “body resembling a whale” sending out “waves that were big enough to have been sent out by a passing steamer.” Stunned, the couple waited around almost half-an-hour in the “hope that the monster (if such it was) would come to the surface again.”

It didn't, but the modern legend of the Loch Ness Monster was born.

Over the years, the obsessive search for a long-necked, dinosaur-looking aquatic creature with has turned up only doctored photographs, murky water, and movie props. But earlier this fall, the mystery got a new wrinkle when a long-awaited study using environmental DNA made a splash with some surprising conclusions about what actually may be in the loch.

“Environmental DNA is a powerful new tool to understanding our world,” Neil Gemmill, University of Otago geneticist and team leader for the project Loch Ness Hunters, tells *Popular Mechanics*, “And we are building a relatively accurate picture of life in the loch. While no reptiles were found, it is plausible that there are [other creatures] of unusual size in there.”

ANCIENT ORIGINS

The Loch Ness is a murky 22-square-mile loch (Scottish Gaelic for “lake”) with an official maximum depth of 754 feet in the remote Scottish Highlands. That makes it the largest body by volume of freshwater in Great Britain. But unexplained phenomena involving Loch Ness predates that fateful drive in 1933. In fact, humans have seen something lurking in its depths for millennia.

A first-century Pictish stone carving depicts a large-headed animal with flippers that some have said looks like a swimming elephant. “The way humanity works is that we rationalize and revise mythologies,” says Adrian Shine, leader of the Loch Ness Project and long-time researcher.

In various 1,500-year-old texts, sea serpents, water horses, and water kelpie were all observed in Scotland's waterways. The earliest written sighting comes from a 7th century biography of the missionary St. Columba, the saint responsible for converting Scotland to Christianity in the mid-6th century. In this text, St. Columba meets a group of locals burying a companion killed by a water beast. By tapping his staff, St. Columba brought the man back to life. Then, the saint ordered one of his disciples to swim across the loch to retrieve a boat for the men. As the disciple swam, he was pursued by the same water beast. But St. Columba, with the help of prayer, persuaded the monster to leave the man alone. The beast plunged back into the water and the thankful locals converted to Christianity on the spot.

The fact that there are stories of a creature in the Loch Ness that dates back 1,500 years and continues through today is proof enough that there really is something down there says Gary Campbell who, with his wife Kathy, created the Loch Ness Monster sightings register.

“If this was in a court of law and there were over 1,000 eye witnesses saying roughly the same thing, the verdict wouldn't be in doubt,” Campbell says.

Recent sightings do have similarities to those from long ago. Campbell had his encounter in March 1996. “This small black hump came out of the water about a quarter of a mile away,” says Campbell, “Then, it happened again.” Wanting to provide a report, he discovered that was no real list or registry devoted to Loch Ness Monster sightings. So, he created his own.

More than two decades later, Campbell's register has 1,111 sightings in its database. Some of them are historic accounts, like the one from St. Columba, which were found by combing through centuries-old texts. Others are modern sightings drawn from direct reports, newspaper articles, and other sources. According to Campbell's registry, there've been 18 sightings this past year alone (the most since 1983), including a recent one from September 29th, 2019. It involved an unusual angular wake disturbance appearing to be much larger than one created by a duck.

Campbell says that most of the sightings reported are actually things that are easily identifiable, like boat wakes or water-diving birds. After an initial investigation, only about a third of the sightings actually make it onto the registry—and even some of those sightings aren't necessarily monstrous.

“We never say that it's a Loch Ness Monster, rather that it's something unexplained in the Loch Ness,” Campbell says.

A MONSTROUS FAKE

On Campbell's register, there are hundreds of amateur photos to go along with the submitted sightings to provide supportive photographic evidence. Many of these photos are fuzzy, out of focus, indistinguishable, and otherwise unconvincing. In other words, they are nothing like the "Surgeon's Photograph".

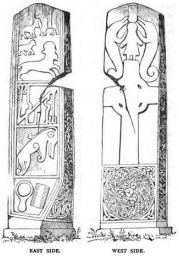
After the initial 1933 coverage, the Loch Ness Monster became a media sensation, showing up no fewer than 55 times in *The New York Times* alone over the next 18 months. Then, on April 21, 1934, the London Daily Mail ran a photo that forever changed how we saw Nessie.

Supposedly taken by respected London gynecologist Robert Wilson, it shows a half-submerged creature with a long slender back, craned neck, and pointed face. It looks a lot like a plesiosaurus, a long extinct massive marine reptile with flippers that lived during the Jurassic era. And it set off a craze unlike any other in cryptozoology's history, sending tourists to the Scottish Highlands to see for themselves the 65-million-year-old dinosaur-like creature swimming in the Loch Ness.

Sixty years later, it was finally established the photo was a hoax. In 1933, *The Daily Mail* had dispatched filmmaker and self-assured big game hunter Marmaduke “Duke” Wetherell to capture the first evidence of the creature. He returned claiming victory alongside footprint casts of a “a very powerful soft-footed animal about 20 feet long.” While initially excited, *The Daily Mail* sent them off to the Natural History Museum for further analysis. They were of a powerful, soft-footed animal all right, but that of a hippopotamus (similar to

one that Wetherell had shot in Africa). The publication called Wetherell out on his bluff, and he went back to London embarrassed.

A Brief History of the Loch Ness Monster



The Maiden Stone's "Sea Beast"

A first century Pictish stone carving shows something a bit different than a serpent or a horse. It depicts a large-headed animal with flippers that some have said looks like a swimming elephant.



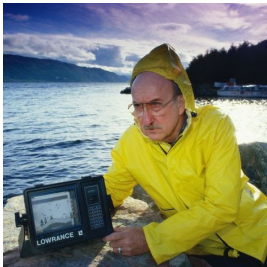
St. Columba and the Picts

A Dark Ages' biography says St. Columba confronted a water beast that was terrorizing a local community, thus converting the population to Christianity.



Inverness Courier and the Surgeon's Photograph

The Inverness Courier reports the first modern Nessie sighting. The Loch Ness frenzy culminates in with the next year's 'Surgeon's Photograph,' the most famous image of Nessie debunked years later.



Operation Deepscan, led by Adrian Shine, utilizes state-of-the-art sonar technology to see if there are any giant creatures in the Loch Ness. They get only false positives, interference, and the possible seal.



The Loch Ness Hunte

Professor Neil Gemmill announces that the environmental DNA study conducted in the Loch Ness the previous summer finds no reptile DNA but an abundance of eel.

NEW ARTICLE

Loch Ness Monster may be a giant eel, say scientists

By BBC NEWS 5 September 2019

The creatures behind repeated sightings of the fabled Loch Ness Monster may be giant eels, according to scientists.

Researchers from New Zealand have tried to catalogue all living species in the loch by extracting DNA from water samples. Following analysis, the scientists have ruled out the presence of large animals said to be behind reports of a monster. No evidence of a prehistoric marine reptile called a plesiosaur or a large fish such as a sturgeon were found. Catfish and suggestions that a wandering Greenland shark were behind the sightings were also discounted.

The aim of the research was not to find Nessie, but to improve knowledge of what plants and animals live in Loch Ness.

European eels are among the creatures in the loch, and whose DNA was picked up by the new research.

Juvenile eels, known as elvers, arrive in Scottish rivers and lochs after migrating more than 3,100 miles (5,000 km) from the Sargasso Sea near the Bahamas, where the animals spawn and lay eggs. Prof Neil Gemmell, a geneticist from New Zealand's University of Otago, said: "People love a mystery, we've used science to add another chapter to Loch Ness' mystique.

"We can't find any evidence of a creature that's remotely related to that in our environmental-DNA sequence data. So, sorry, I don't think the plesiosaur idea holds up based on the data that we have obtained." He added: "So there's no shark DNA in Loch Ness based on our sampling. There is also no catfish DNA in Loch Ness based on our sampling. We can't find any evidence of sturgeon either,

"There is a very significant amount of eel DNA. Eels are very plentiful in Loch Ness, with eel DNA found at pretty much every location sampled - there are a lot of them. So - are they giant eels?

"Well, our data doesn't reveal their size, but the sheer quantity of the material says that we can't discount the possibility that there may be giant eels in Loch Ness. Therefore we can't discount the possibility that what people see and believe is the Loch Ness Monster might be a giant eel."

DNA from humans, dogs, sheep, cattle, deer, badgers, rabbits, voles and birds were also identified by the researchers.

The Loch Ness Monster is one of Scotland's oldest and most enduring myths. It inspires books, TV shows and films, and sustains a major tourism industry around its home. The story of the monster can be traced back 1,500 years when Irish missionary St Columba is said to have encountered a beast in the River Ness in 565AD. Later, in the 1930s, The Inverness Courier reported the first modern sighting of Nessie.

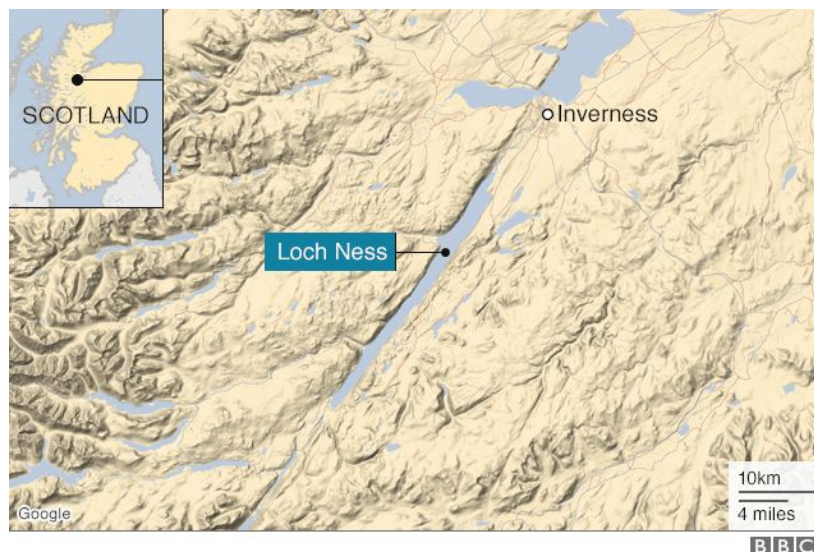
In 1933, the newspaper's Fort Augustus correspondent, Alec Campbell, reported a sighting by Aldie Mackay of what she believed to be Nessie. Mr Campbell's report described a whale-like creature and the loch's water "cascading and churning".

The editor at the time, Evan Barron, suggested the beast be described as a "monster", kick starting the modern myth of the Loch Ness Monster.

In 1934, highly respected British surgeon, Colonel Robert Wilson, claimed he took a photograph of the monster while driving along the northern shore of Loch Ness. Known as the "Surgeon's Photograph", 60 years later it was confirmed as a hoax hatched in revenge after a newspaper ridiculed journalist Marmaduke Wetherell for finding "Nessie footprints" on the shore.

The "monster" caught on camera was apparently a toy submarine bought from Woolworths, with a head fashioned from wood putty. The hoaxers then gave the photo to Wilson, a friend who enjoyed a good practical joke. Explanations for the monster offered in the past include it being **swimming circus elephants**.

In his research of Nessie, Glasgow-based palaeontologist Neil Clark found fairs and circuses were a common occurrence in the Inverness area, particularly from the early 1930s. He said elephants may have been allowed to swim in the loch while the travelling carnivals stopped to give the animals a rest.



Another theory is that large **fallen branches** floating in the loch are the cause of monster sightings.

Steve Feltham, who is recognised by the Guinness Book of Records for the longest continuous monster hunting vigil of Loch Ness, is not convinced the scientists have yet identified the creature behind the sightings. Mr Feltham, who made childhood visits to the Highlands and moved from Dorset almost 30 years ago to look for Nessie, said the research had not ruled out other animals such as seals being mistaken for the monster.

The presence of eels in the loch was no big surprise, he added. He added: "A 12-year-old boy could tell you there are eels in Loch Ness. I caught eels in the loch when I was a 12-year-old boy."

Gary Campbell, keeper of a register of Nessie sightings, receives on average 10 reports a year of something unexplained being spotted in the loch's waters.

He welcomed the latest research and hoped more scientists will examine what lives in Loch Ness.

Mr Campbell said tourism that has developed around the story of the monster would be unaffected by the new study. He said: "The Loch Ness Monster has evolved into a world-wide icon."

Chris Taylor, of VisitScotland, said he expected the myth of the monster would continue to bring tourists to the loch.

He said: "This scientific investigation, led by Professor Gemmell, into the inhabitants of one of Scotland's largest lochs has once again shone a spotlight on the Highlands.

"Its findings will provide further insight into what lies beneath but questions still remain, and visitors will, no doubt, continue to be drawn to the loch to seek the answers for themselves."

Loch Ness expert Adrian Shine said the new study had provided researchers with a new list of species to compare against records going back 40 years.