

# Not so mythical creatures



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Mythical creatures are just that, mythical. In many cases, it is probably best for all concerned that they stay mythical. There are, however, a number of instances where mythical became reality, thereby exposing either the absurdity of the myth, or verifying it.

Take for example the mermaid. A mermaid is a mythical sea-dwelling creature, described as having the head and body of a beautiful woman, and the backside of a fish on the lower half. I remember the 1960s television show called DIVER DAN, that also featured Miss Minerva the mermaid. Disney has carried on the mermaid story with The Little Mermaid. movies.

The first recorded mermaid creature is Oannes, a Babylonian god from around 4000 B.C., who would leave the sea every day and return at night. People have reported mermaid sightings ever since.

Turns out, the mermaid is most likely based on a manatee. The manatee-to-mermaid theory hypothesizes that sightings of manatees by sailors and coastal inhabitants might have contributed to the widespread belief in mermaids.

Manatees are large aquatic mammals found in warm, shallow waters, and share certain physical characteristics with the mythical mermaids.



It makes me wonder what those sailors were drinking to ever confuse a manatee with a mermaid. (Photo courtesy of USFWS)

These gentle giants, often called sea cows, possess rounded, human-like faces, plump bodies, and flipper-like limbs, which, when observed from a distance under less-than-ideal conditions, could be mistaken for a human-like, mermaid-type creature.

The most famous mermaid sighting was revealed in Christopher Columbus' journal from 1493. He reported seeing mermaids off the coast of Hispaniola and described them as "not half as beautiful as they are painted."

What Columbus actually recorded was his first manatee sighting. I spent many years in the Florida Keys, interacting with manatees on many occasions. It is my contention that a sailor who thought these 1,000-plus pound creatures are half-woman, had to have been out-to-sea for too long, and had spent considerable time inside a rum barrel.

During the Middle Ages, the unicorn horn was all the rage. The twisting, conical horns were actually the tusks of narwhals, an Arctic whale hunted by Vikings who sold the tusks of narwhals at astronomical prices, but forgot to mention the animal they came from.

In 1577, an English explorer Martin Frobisher led a Canadian expedition where he happened upon a dead narwhal which he called a "sea unicorn." He later presented the tusk to the queen.

Elsewhere in the world, around the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder created another image of something he called a unicorn, when he painted them, and described them in his writings as, "It has the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, and makes a deep sound in lowing, and has a single black horn which projects from the middle of its forehead." It also hailed from India. Sounds an awful lot like the rhinoceros.

If you pad around in the woods long enough, you will eventually see something in the flesh, and still not be convinced it is real. Consider the story of Captain John Hunter, from the British Royal Navy. In 1798, while traveling in Australia, he stumbled upon something so weird, he sent the pelt of the animal, together with a sketch, to prove its existence.

The animal he found was a platypus, a sort of cross between a beaver,

otter, and duck. European naturalists didn't believe that such a creature could exist and accused Captain Hunter of spending too much time in the sun. Later, George Shaw finally described the animal in scientific literature, and was apologetic to Captain Hunter saying, "a degree of skepticism is not only pardonable, but laudable, and I ought perhaps to acknowledge that I almost doubt the testimony of my own eyes."

Don't get to feeling exempt from this nonsense because you live in Colorado, which happens to be one of the many homes of the hide-and-seek champion of all time, the Sasquatch.

Sasquatch, also called Yeti or Bigfoot is a creature with characteristics of ape and man and reaching enormous sizes. It is reported that Bigfoot stands 8 feet tall and weighs over 500 pounds. He is a very hairy and shy creature, trying to avoid contact with man at all costs.

Footprints are about the only recorded evidence found of his existence. Those footprints can reach 24 inches in length and 8 inches wide. There have been many plaster casts made of those prints

around the country. There are about a thousand sightings of Sasquatch each year around the country. About one third are in the Pacific Northwest, with the remainder scattered about the United States and British Columbia. Similar creatures have been sighted around the world for centuries. About a dozen sightings are reported each year in Colorado.

Most of the Colorado sightings occur near Colorado Springs. This area has been host to a large number of sightings, especially on the way up the road to Pike's Peak. There is an official Bigfoot Crossing sign posted on the highway up to the top of the peak because of the

500 pounds, has many human-like features, and has thick. Springy hair covering most of his body. And his footprint is twice the size of a human footprint.

Sounds like another mythical creature mystery solved. Except, how did an animal native to the rainforests of equatorial Africa find his way to the mountains of Colorado?

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Most of the Sasquatch sightings in Colorado occur near Colorado Springs. This area has been host to a large number of sightings, especially on the way up the road to Pike's Peak, where there is an official Bigfoot Crossing sign posted on the highway. (Photo/ Wikimedia Commons)

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For a lot of us, a souvenir statue is as close we will ever be to this creature. As far back as 500 B.C., explorers were telling tales of human-like monsters visiting their camps. It wasn't until 1847 that scientists officially identified the species. The gorilla. He is from Central Africa, weighs in at over

## RAT

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he said, RAT's top priority is to "take a breath" and focus on maintaining older trails before looking toward the future.

"What we'd really like to do is make sure we've got everything in tip top shape," he said.

But, he hinted, more expansion could be on the horizon. The chapter would like to expand adaptive trail access, and Hall said some trails on the backside of the RAT would lend themselves well to the necessary modifications, namely the wider clearance. He also said the chapter would like to add more connectivity

in the system, and is exploring the idea of adding a pit toilet to the premises, though this would require collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management.

For now, cyclists have plenty of new terrain to explore, and can mark their calendars for the June 6 RAT Race if they're looking to compete on it. Hall said parts of the newer trail segments were included in last year's race, and will be part of this year's as well.

More information: [copmoba.org/ridgway](http://copmoba.org/ridgway)

Season Opening Celebration Tickets: [sherbino.org/event/rat-season-opening-celebration-ridgway-area-trails](http://sherbino.org/event/rat-season-opening-celebration-ridgway-area-trails)



(Courtesy Photo/RAT) "ROUS" or "Rodents of Unusual Size" is one of the RAT's newest trails, with a wider tread that accommodates adaptive cycles.



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