

BIGFOOT



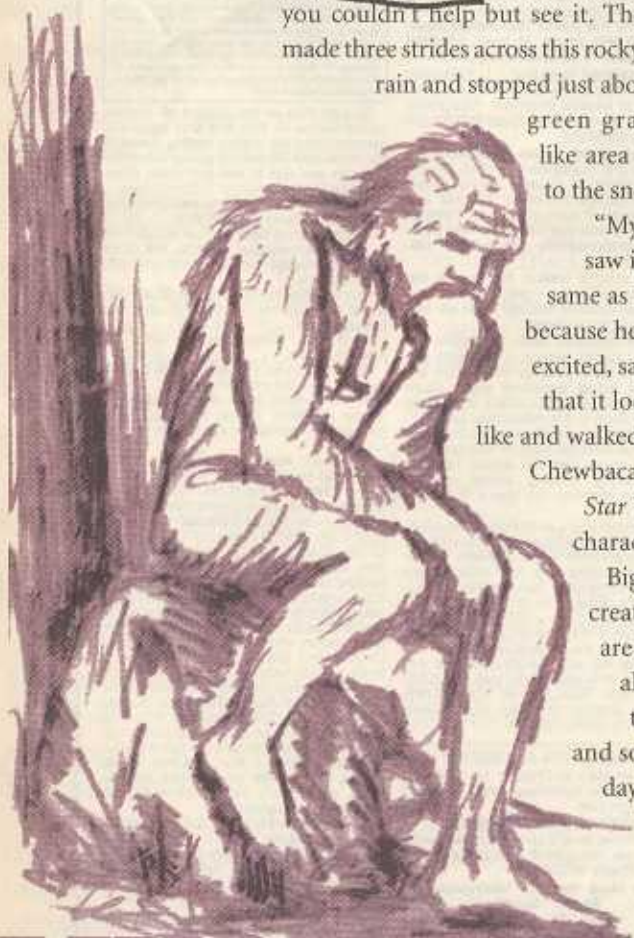
ON THE AFTERNOON of July 24, 1997, Amy Zumwalt and her family were leaving Yellowstone National Park in northwestern Wyoming when they saw something big, hairy — and unknown.

"As we were driving out of the park ... I was looking up the mountain to see if I could spot bighorn sheep," Amy Zumwalt reported. "I immediately noticed on the side of the mountain near the top a large triangular patch of snow — and walking in large strides, a tall eight- or nine- foot, hairy, upright, Bigfoot-like animal. It was so tall that you couldn't help but see it. Then it made three strides across this rocky terrain and stopped just above a

green grassy-like area next to the snow.

"My son saw it the same as I did because he was excited, saying that it looked like and walked like Chewbacca, the

Star Wars character." Bigfoot creatures are seen all the time, and someday one



may be killed or captured and then classified. If that happens, how will science name these beasts? What suggestions for a formal name have been made, and what do these proposed labels tell us about the present state of thought about the origins of Bigfoot? Simply put, what is the scientific name for Bigfoot?

Bigfoot, of course, is the post-1958 name for those unknown hairy hominids found in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. They seem to stand upright and leave large, human-like footprints.

Teacher J. W. Burns first coined the name *Sasquatch* in the 1920s after years collecting stories about the wild hairy giant from his Chehalis Indian friends. *Sasquatch* apparently combines several similar words used by various groups of Native Canadians to describe these creatures.

Scientifically inclined people and folklore researchers tend to use *Sasquatch* more often in recent years because it sounds more scholarly than *Bigfoot*. Nevertheless, both are popular names, not formal, scientific monikers.

Several formal names have been proposed. One of the fullest discussions of this topic can be found in Grover Krantz's 1992 book, *Big Footprints*.

Krantz notes that if his theories — which he has written about since 1986 — are correct, we don't need a new name. He believes that researchers have found footprints of surviving *Gigantopithecus blacki*, a thought-to-be-extinct giant hominid genus whose fossils have been found in Asia. If a Bigfoot is ever captured and the American creature is discovered to be a different species of this genus, then Krantz would name it *Gigantopithecus canadensis*. As Krantz has noted, *canadensis* "is a commonly used zoological name for species that are native to northern North America." A couple of examples are *Cervus canadensis* — elk — and *Ovis canadensis* — bighorn sheep.

Because of the standard rules of zoological nomenclature, the mere fact that Krantz has formally published and assigned possible names means that Bigfoot, if discovered to be of the species he has described, will have to be given one of them.

If Bigfoot creatures are not part of the *Gigantopithecus* genus, but are something entirely new, Krantz proposes labeling it *Gigantanthropus*, the name proposed by Franz Weidenreich in 1945. As Krantz points out, the name is still available for Bigfoot, having not been taken for any other creature. It is possible,

MYSTERIOUS WORLD

LOREN COLEMAN



BIGFOOT



Mysterious World

However, that an anthropologist or zoologist can make a good case that the genus discovered is so unique and unrecognized that a completely new name should be given to one of these species.

Krantz has also written about a few of the possible name choices if Bigfoot turns out to be related to a known species, such as *Australopithecus*. The *Australopithecus* are an extinct hominid precursor to humans. Krantz suggests that Bigfoot may be an *Australopithecus robustus*, but if the creature turns out to be a new species of the genus, it can be labeled *Australopithecus canadensis*.

Complicating this choice, however, is the fact that currently the *Australopithecus* fossils are being routinely relabeled with their older name *Paranthropus*. Amazingly, as long ago as 1971, Gordon Strassenburgh wrote that he believed Bigfoot to be related to *Paranthropus robustus*. He proposed the name *Paranthropus eldurrelli* specifically for the Pacific Northwest Bigfoot.

Strassenburgh's writings in the 1970s predate Krantz in suggesting *Paranthropus* as a scientific name for Bigfoot, and his choice would be selected if Bigfoot turns out to belong to this genus.

Other scientific names for unknown hairy hominoids (which include both cryptozoological hominids and anthropoids) have been proposed from fossil evidence. For example, Osman Hill suggested that the orang pendek is a modern representative of *Homo erectus*.

Beginning in 1973, I formally proposed during university lectures and then in print that the chimpanzee-like "skunk apes" and southern U.S.A. apes (which are not Bigfoot) should be assigned to the genus *Dryopithecus*.

For those interested in the complex questions about species relationships that need to be worked out before Bigfoot can be formally labeled, some final thoughts on scientific names can be found in the works of Mark A. Hall (see especially *The Yeti, Bigfoot & True Giants*). Hall writes that some areas of debate are beginning to produce clearer answers — namely, the belief that Bigfoot/Sasquatch's identity is perhaps *Paranthropus*. The larger creatures, called "True Giants," however, seem to be a form of *Gigantopithecus*, and one variety of yeti appears to be related to the *Dryopithecus*. So perhaps there are several different species and genera

lumped under the Bigfoot label.

Hall has raised some intriguing questions that he is still in the midst of answering — for example, what of the other hominids that seem to be in the mix? He also brings to our attention finds from Greenland that anthropologists have labeled *Homo gardarensis*, yet another creature.

Speculation about some so-called out-of-place, more human-looking Bigfoots may turn out to be based in fact. These may not be mere variants on the classic Sasquatch and we could find out they are part of the *Homo* genus. If this is the case we may have to use the name *Homo gardarensis*, as Hall suggests.

The history of already giving scientific names to these unknown hominoids exists. There probably will be other good ideas tomorrow. The answers about what to name Bigfoot are not all in, however, because we are just beginning to understand what questions to ask. ■

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ANIMALS

There's an Alligator in the Basement

United Press International recently reported that a family moving into a southwest Michigan home on Thursday, August 7, got an unusual housewarming gift: a three-foot-long alligator.

The menacing creature, apparently the forgotten pet of the previous tenant, was sleeping in the Kalamazoo house's basement. Animal control authorities, who were called to nab the unwelcome guest, say charges could be filed against the pet owner because exotic animal ownership is banned in Michigan. The basement pet was last reported resting peacefully at the Kalamazoo Animal Shelter.

Alligators, which belong to the family *Crocodylidae*, are modern dinosaurs. They have existed virtually unchanged for the past 65 million years. They are naturally found only in the southeastern United States and in Chi-

na. Capable of reaching lengths of 13 feet and weighing more than 600 pounds, alligator jaws have a crushing power of 3,000 psi. Despite their appearance, alligators are agile and quick.

The Kalamazoo creature wasn't the first alligator found in the Midwestern state. Between 1953 and 1968, nine alligators were killed or caught in Michigan, with sightings of others. In July 1970, a 10-inch alligator was killed coming out of a basement drain in Newton, Kansas.

For more about the phenomenon, see "Alligators in the Sewers" in *Contemporary Legend: A Reader*, edited by Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, and "Alligators in the Sewers" in my book, *Mysterious America*.

— Loren Coleman