

COVER — UH

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Puerto

by Scott Corrales

Rican

Rainforest

Most people who have seen El Yunque cannot remember seeing the massive mountain rainforest and its majestic green pinnacles lacking their ever-present shroud of mist and fog. Yet on this particular day, the individual summits — Pico del Este, El Cacique, Mt. Britton, Los Picachos, Pico del Oeste, and El Yunque proper — rose in grandeur before our eyes as we headed down the road from San Juan, Puerto Rico’s capital. The dry, hot weather allowed us to view the peaks of El Yunque free of clouds and bathed in light. For an instant I was reminded of Mount Caradhras, which was described in Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Rings*: “There he stands, smiling in the sun.”

Not enough has been written about El Yunque. Its original 12,000 acres was first set aside by the Spanish crown as a wilderness preserve in 1876, and then added to the U.S. forestry service in 1903, where it became the first and only rainforest in American territory. Having grown to its present 28,000 acres, it encompasses a variety of delicately balanced ecosystems at elevations ranging from sea level to almost four thousand feet. The Caribbean National Rainforest, as the preserve is officially known, receives nearly 200 inches of rain per year and harbors over two hundred species of native trees, many of them exclusive to the area.

History is somewhat vague about this unique location. We do know that Puerto Rico's original inhabitants, the Tainos, held the cloudy summits in awe-inspired respect: They considered the mountaintops the abode of Yokahú, the creator-god of their pantheon. It was a place where strange lights could be seen, and where unwary visitors vanished without a trace. The Tainos lived in fear of the evil spirits, called *maboyas*, which haunted the region and left a pestilent stench of sulphur in the air when they disappeared.

What ufologists and paranormal investigators find amazing is the fact that so many strange events have transpired in this mountain rainforest. Diminutive, large-headed entities, hairy subhumans, and tall, ethereal Nordic types share the El Yunque region.

A fancy reception center named Portal del Yunque now graces the lower reaches of the rainforest, and signs direct the visitor to the numerous attractions found within. Vigilant rangers can be found at sensitive checkpoints, apparently for good reason: On September 9, 1996, Hurricane Hortense ravaged the rainforest. Massive landslides washed away entire roads and trails, leaving ruin in their wake. Access to Mount Britton, Pico del Este, Los Picachos and the other peaks was prohibited. In fact, access to the spectacular La Mina Falls (site of many supernatural events) was also denied. Visitors, even naturalists bent on merely walking the trails, were turned back, politely but firmly, by forestry service workers. Curiously, though, a number of vehicles — cars and small utility vans with smoked windows — were routinely waved through. Was there a double standard, or was paranoia beginning to take hold of my mind as we stared at the roadblock ahead?

Power Ranger

One of the older rangers, seated next to the barricade straddling the mountain road, tried to assuage our suspicions. "Hurricane Hortense did a number on the road up there," he said. "The rains undermined the road and washed it away right at La Mina Falls. No one's allowed up the road. It'll be a year before the damage is repaired."

"How come these vehicles are driving up?" one of us demanded.

The avuncular smile played on the ranger's face. "Those folks work here and they know their way around."

Did their cars have a special suspension that allowed them to negotiate a washed-out road, I wondered. Maybe I should get such a vehicle.

Other visitors to the Coca Falls area began to appear, clustering around the roadblock and wondering why they couldn't proceed on foot. The ranger gave them a different answer, leaning back in his rickety folding chair: "The government is terrified of lawsuits. If people should go up to El Yunque and roll down one of the landslide areas, you can imagine the lawsuits."

Sidling up to the barrier, I laid my cards on the table. "Sir, I've come from Pennsylvania looking for information on UFOs. I understand that El Yunque is particularly rich in sightings."

The ranger grinned broadly. "I've worked here for years and covered two hundred acres of rainforest on foot and I've never seen any UFOs. I wish someone would show me one if they found one!"

"What about reports of strange creatures?" I insisted.

"The only strange creatures are fallen angels trying to listen in on your prayers," the ranger replied with a wink. "That's why you should always pray in silence — so they can't listen."

My thrust was thus blunted by a brilliant parry. How could one argue religion without offending the other person? I laughed along with the ranger and realized that it was a dead end. The common wisdom was doubtlessly true. All workers at El Yunque had been drilled — rehearsed, even — regarding what to say about the question of UFOs.

Our conversation drifted into more commonplace matters as I noticed that another park ranger, a supervisor, his looks suggested, was glaring at the ranger talking with me. Not wishing to get him in hot water with his superiors, I bade him a happy holiday and walked away.

Nearby, a group of adolescents spoke loudly of having flouted the restrictions in order to spend a night camping in the "forbidden zone" beyond the Coca Falls checkpoint only nights earlier. Apparently, the teenagers had found nothing at all amiss with the road, despite the official protestations.

A ranger manning a makeshift information booth claimed never to have seen anything unusual in the rainforest, speculating that anything seen in the area "must certainly be experimental craft from Roosevelt Roads," referring to the massive U.S. Navy base on the eastern flank of El Yunque. "You may want to ask Doña Carmen," he volunteered helpfully.

Doña Carmen was an outspoken ranger who'd worked for a decade at the Roosevelt Roads naval installation before serving in the rainforest. "I can swear to you on the health of my three granddaughters that I've never seen anything remotely resembling a UFO," she said earnestly. "I don't doubt that strange airplanes are being tested at Roosevelt Roads and that people say they're UFOs. I don't believe they're Martians or anything, just craft flown by Americans or people from other countries."

Our questions on UFOs and paranormal activity must have touched a raw nerve, as we were "shadowed" by a security pick-



This rendition of a strange creature said to roam El Yunque aired on *Platillos Voladores Sobre Puerto Rico* (Flying Saucers over Puerto Rico), a 1972 television documentary.

up truck as we left El Yunque down a winding road.

Enigmatic Disappearances

Today, as it did centuries ago, the mountain rainforest possesses a dark side which involves human disappearances. In recent times, many of these unexplained events have been linked to the inordinate amount of UFO activity that takes place on the island. The only confirmation we have that nonhuman forces are involved in these happenings comes from the likeliest source: the ones that got away.

In his landmark book *Manifiesto Ovni*, investigator Sebastián Robiou Lamarche chronicled the perplexing case of Maria Esther Figueroa, an eight-year-old girl from Caguas who earned the sad distinction of being the first child to disappear in El Yunque under mysterious circumstances. The girl disappeared within view of her teachers during a school bus trip to the rainforest in 1965. Eight years later, a seven-year-old boy, José Alemar, disappeared while walking behind his parents as they strolled down one of the rainforest paths.

The account that follows, titled *Abductions in El Yunque: Are Aliens Responsible?*, by Hermes Rivera, appeared in a privately circulated newspaper. "About ten years ago, some 15 children disappeared in El Yunque while on a school trip. The teacher responsible for the kids committed suicide because the students were never found.

"A search team from the U.S., sent to the mountain to try to find the missing youths, ran into a short humanoid creature wandering around the bushes. As soon as the creature realized it had been seen, it ran and disappeared. The search was fruitless: No trace of the creature or of the missing children was ever found. The in-

volvement of Tupamaro revolutionaries was suspected, since they had long before threatened to kidnap children all over the U.S. and Latin America to sell them. Two Italian kids, about nine years of age, were also reported missing between 1976 and 1978. Their case was put on hold because of their father's involvement with the Mafia. The Colon brothers, who used to live on the road that leads to the top of El Yunque where the first UFO landed, were also reported missing without a trace about 25 years ago."

Campground Creatures

Following a dramatic UFO flap which included strange creatures, cattle mutilations, and Marian apparitions, an hour-long documentary, *OVNIS Sobre Puerto Rico: Documento Confidencial* (*UFOs over Puerto Rico: A Confidential Report*), was made by producer/publicist Jorge Marquina. It aired on Puerto Rican television in 1974, highlighting many uncanny events. One segment involved the account of a group of adolescents who had endured a nocturnal siege by bizarre creatures during a visit to the rainforest.

On the night of October 20, 1973,

nine campers — students led by three adults — had gone to El Yunque hoping to contact UFOs. They made camp high up on a mountain trail, preparing to spend a night that would turn out to be the longest in their lives.

Mr. Heriberto Ramos, the group's official leader, said that as they ascended the trail, they met three people heading down. There was nothing alien about the trio aside from the fact that they all dressed exactly alike and had similar features. One of the group members, who had stayed behind, took a photo of both the other group members and the three mysterious walkers, but only a patch of mist appeared on the developed film where the trio stood.

Five or six vaguely humanoid figures surrounded the campers that night, darting about the thick vegetation with claw-like hands and elongated ears. Some of the "monsters" blocked the trail that constituted the only way down from the mountain and back to the safety of their vehicles.

For endless hours — until the sky began to lighten — the beings remained in constant motion around the besieged campers. Terror led one of the students to bang himself repeatedly on the head with a flashlight, hoping to escape the situation by passing out. One of the other campers, seized by an inexplicable urge, expressed a desire to take a walk in the woods. Fearing for his mental state, one of his companions offered to walk with him. Before they'd taken more than a dozen steps, they found what could only be described as a glimmering, polychromatic "egg" lying on the ground.

While entranced by the curious flashing object, neither one felt brave enough to touch it. Later that night, they would see it in the claws of one of the nonhuman besiegers. Was it bait of some sort, its pulsating colors designed to mesmerize prey?

At sunrise, the campers made a mad dash for the cars they'd left parked at the bottom of the mountain. Not a trace of the alien intruders remained aside from their footprints, which were much larger

UFOCATS

than a human's and appeared to have been made by very heavy creatures, in comparison to the campers' smaller footprints. Their valor rekindled by the morning light, the campers made plaster-of-paris casts of the prints and photographed them. These materials were stolen by unknown parties months after the incident. The harrowing experiences of the party were published by the now-defunct Mexican magazine *Contactos Extraterrestres* and by Sebastián Robiou.

Who Can It Be Now?

While no satisfactory explanation for these strange activities has been offered, the fact remains that a vast menagerie of creatures reportedly inhabit El Yunque — ranging from the claw-handed entities seen in 1973 to the large-headed Greys and hairy, Big-foot-like creatures sighted in more recent times. The increasing volume of

UFO sightings over the rainforest has has some people believing an alien base lurks somewhere in the forest. Many of the vehicles are sighted above Pico del Este, one of the rainforest's peaks, which houses a JSS (Joint Surveillance System) radar and communications site attached to the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base.

The authorities' excuse that the mountain rainforest had been closed was eventually called into question by the media in early 1997, prompting a more cryptic response from forestry officials: El Yunque was closed because of military training exercises being conducted in the area.

According to *Claridad* (February 7, 1997), elements of the 427th Special Squadron of the National Air Guard, stationed in North Carolina, trained over the rainforest throughout the month of January. The newspaper reported that the

Cover-Up in the Puerto Rican Rainforest

National Air Guard had secured permission from the Department of Agriculture to conduct "terrestrial navigation" exercises, although the aircraft involved were fully armed.

Local residents informed reporters that the increase in the number of helicopter and fighter aircraft fly-overs increased dramatically from January 24 to 26, causing concern among the residents of communities like El Verde and Sábana (Luquillo). Some citizens remarked that the airplanes seemed to be looking for something.

The question remains: What is going on at El Yunque? ■

Scott Corrales is a frequent contributor to *FATE*, the author of *Chupacabras and Other Mysteries* (Greenleaf, 1997) and *Flashpoint: High Strangeness in Puerto Rico* (Amarna, 1998), and the editor of the *Samizdat* and *InterAlia* newsletters.

Hum, Sweet Hum by Kathie Farnell

Things are getting sticky at the Price house. Ever since 166,000 honeybees took up residence in the crawl space above their ceiling, their house drips honey. All Anne and George Price wanted was a house built of unfinished cypress wood. When it was built 25 years ago, the Bay Minette, Alabama, couple loved it. So did the bees.

Every spring, a low hum signals the arrival of the annual infestation. "We've caulked," sighs Anne. "We've sprayed. We've put vinyl coating on the house." Nothing helps. This year, a local beekeeper found two large hives in the crawl space over the first floor ceiling. Each hive was home to an estimated 166,000 bees. Honey drips steadily from holes the beekeeper drilled in the ceiling, like a homeowner with a more conventional leak; Anne puts pans around the floor to catch the sticky flow. It takes approximately two days to collect a gallon of perfectly good, if somewhat misplaced, honey.

The couple spend several hundred dollars a year to deal with their uninvited guests. In past years, beekeepers have been able to save some bees, but getting them all out alive would require demolishing most of the house. This year, Anne and George adopted a pit-tough policy; the beekeeper fumigated. Dead bees came pouring out of cracks in the ceiling and were accumulating in shallow piles. Anne, sitting watch over the traps, had a some remorse: "I do hate that we had to kill them, the bees, but it was them or us." ■

WAYOUT

GARY MILLS



Many ufologists believe that a race of "super aliens" are already living and working among us completely undetected.