

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction
but it's all true



IS THERE A MONSTER LIVING

The Beast of Loch Ness

 **AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:**

How convincing is the evidence that the Loch Ness monster is real?

On an April afternoon in 1933, Aldie and John Mackay were driving along the shores of one of Scotland's largest lakes, Loch Ness. (*Loch*, pronounced "lock," is the Scottish term for lake.) The road, the A82, was brand-new, and Aldie was enjoying the view from the car window.

The Scottish Highlands are often rainy, but this day was bright. The trees were vivid green, and even the murky waters of the lake seemed to sparkle.

Then Aldie saw something she would never forget. The water rippled, and a giant creature seemed to rise out of the loch. It appeared to be black, with a humped back. Aldie grabbed her husband's arm, trembling with fright, and pointed.



IN SCOTLAND'S LEGENDARY LAKE?

Loch Ness

BY LAUREN TARSHIS | ILLUSTRATION BY GARY HANNA

"Stop! The beast!" she gasped. John screamed the car to a halt. For several minutes, the stunned couple stared at the loch as the creature seemed to be "rolling and plunging," until the waters finally calmed.

For a few days, Aldie and John kept quiet about what they had seen. After all, who would believe them? A monster in Loch Ness? It sounded preposterous. People would think they were liars or,

worse, that they were insane.

Ultimately, though, the couple couldn't resist sharing their remarkable story, and the news soon spread. As the Mackays had predicted, some people rolled their eyes and laughed. Many others listened with fascination, however. There had always been something mysterious about Loch Ness, something spooky. For centuries, people from nearby towns had whispered stories

about a creature living in the loch, a huge and terrifying beast that, according to some tales, lured children to their deaths. Another story, dating back to the sixth century, told of a water monster that tried to devour farmers working nearby.

Many locals avoided the surrounding woods because of these stories. To them, the Mackays' story was completely plausible.



Over the next few weeks, more people claimed to have seen the creature.

"It was big as an elephant," said a local farmer.

"It was horrible," reported a schoolteacher. "It had a head like a cobra."

"My heart stopped," recounted a visiting businessman, who said he saw the beast while taking a walk. "It looked right at me."

But what was it?

Fantastic Creatures

For thousands of years, people around the world have been telling stories of mysterious creatures. Some of these mythical beasts are obviously fictional, as fantastic as Norbert, Hagrid's pet dragon from the Harry Potter series, or the fairies from Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series. But some creatures of myth and legend have turned out to really exist.

For hundreds of years, sailors told stories of a hideous creature with a large round head, a jagged-edged beak, and enormous, powerful tentacles. They called this creature the kraken. Despite hundreds of eyewitness accounts, most people dismissed the kraken as a tall tale that sprang from the imaginations of homesick, sunstruck sailors. Then in 1873, a fisherman and

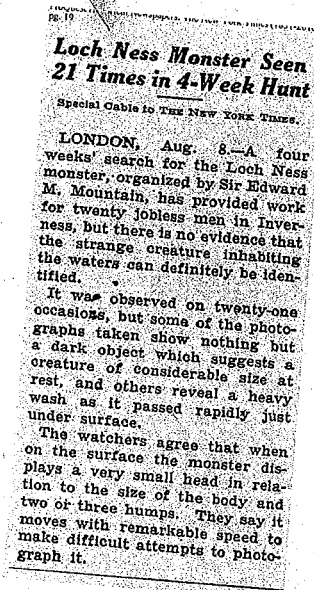
Loch Ness Monster Seen 21 Times in 4-Week Hunt

This 1934 *New York Times* headline grabbed some serious attention!

his son spotted one in the waters off Newfoundland, Canada. After what they said was a struggle with the creature, they managed to cut off a 19-foot piece of tentacle. This slimy specimen convinced skeptics that the stories were true.

Scientists gave the kraken a new name: the giant squid.

Years later, in 1912, a group of pearl fishermen landed on a small island in what is now Indonesia. The men were relaxing on the rocky shores when one of them heard something approach from behind. He turned and screamed as an enormous lizard, maybe 10 feet long, rushed toward them, its beady eyes glistening with menace. The men managed to escape, but when



they got home and recounted their close call, most people didn't believe them.

Still, there had been other reports of the giant lizard. In 1926, wealthy adventurer W. Douglas Burden organized an expedition with the American Museum of Natural History. Sure enough, he found a population of ferocious, meat-eating lizards

exactly where the fishermen said he would, on the island of Komodo. The creatures became known as Komodo dragons.

Incredible stories like those of the giant squid and the Komodo dragon have encouraged some men and women to devote their lives to the search for mythical and legendary creatures. These people call themselves cryptozoologists. (*Kryptos* is the Greek word for

“hidden” or “secret”; a zoologist is a scientist who studies animal life.) To most people, cryptozoology seems more like fantasy than real science, and it is usually

mocked in scientific circles. A few cryptozoologists, however, are respected scientists who are convinced that there are still astonishing undiscovered animal

species on Earth. One of those creatures, they say, could be lurking in Loch Ness.

Finding Proof

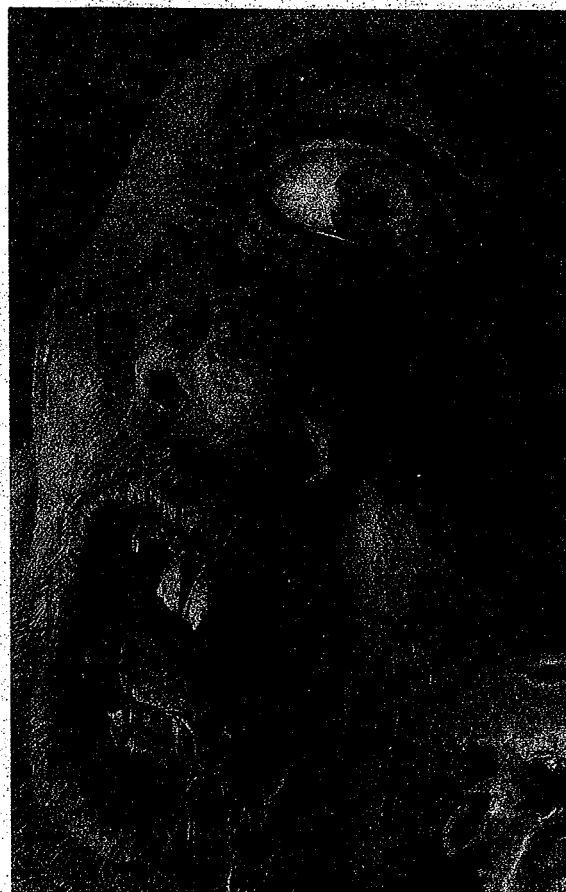
Over the decades, several theories about the beast of Loch Ness have been proposed. One theory is that the beast is simply an unknown water mammal or an enormous fish. Or it may be a prehistoric creature—such as a plesiosaur.

These long-necked marine

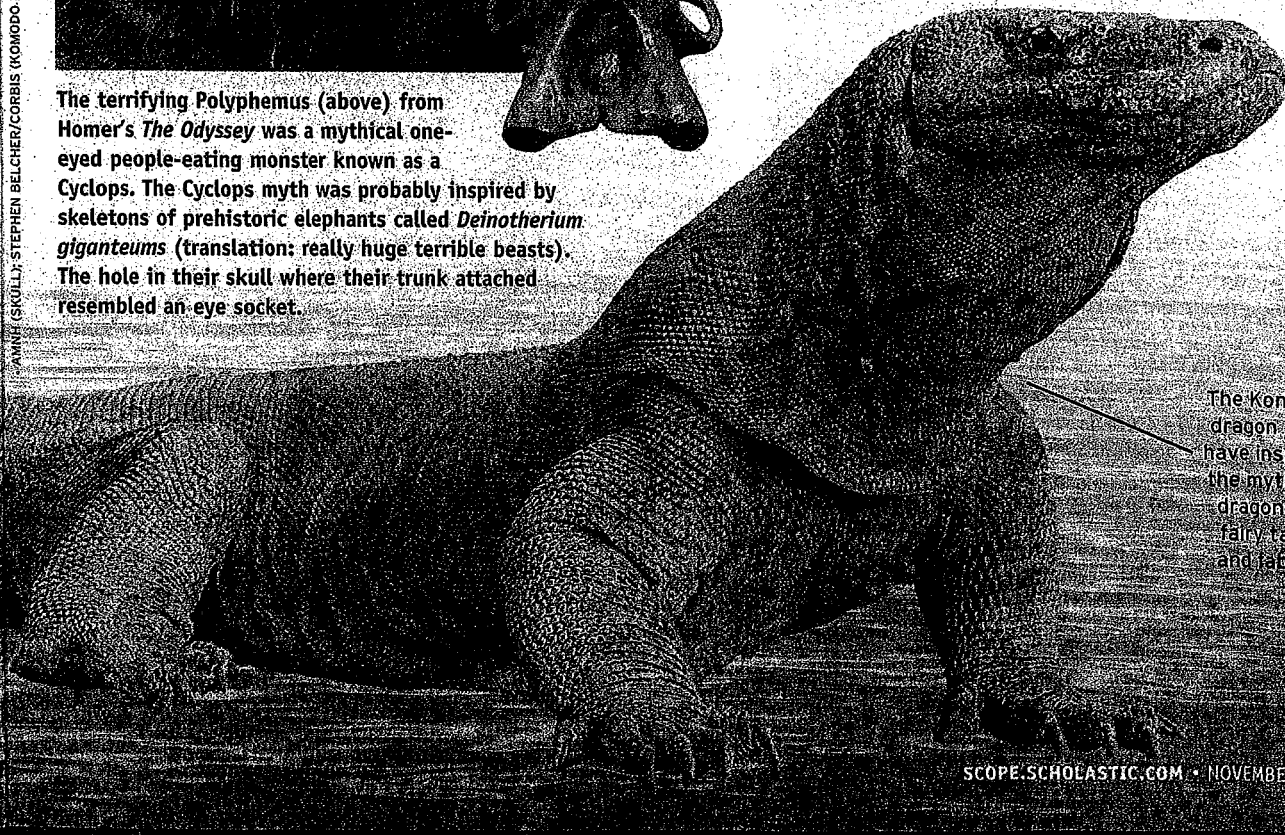
reptiles lived alongside the dinosaurs and died out 65 million years ago. Maybe a few survived, and one of their descendants is now living in the loch.

Or maybe not. These are just the theories of a few passionate believers, theories that most scientists reject and ridicule. The water of Loch Ness is freezing and so dark that few plants survive, let alone fish. What would the creature eat? And how could there be just one creature? There would have to be a family that breeds and raises its young. Is it really likely that a clan of giant animals lives in the loch, invisible to all but a few accidental witnesses?

Perhaps no person has been as interested in these questions as Tim Dinsdale. An engineer, he led 57 Loch Ness expeditions between 1960 and 1987. In 1960, Dinsdale saw a “long oval shape” in the water and captured



The terrifying Polyphemus (above) from Homer's *The Odyssey* was a mythical one-eyed people-eating monster known as a Cyclops. The Cyclops myth was probably inspired by skeletons of prehistoric elephants called *Deinotherium giganteums* (translation: really huge terrible beasts). The hole in their skull where their trunk attached resembled an eye socket.



The Komodo dragon may have inspired the mythical dragons of fairy tales and fables.

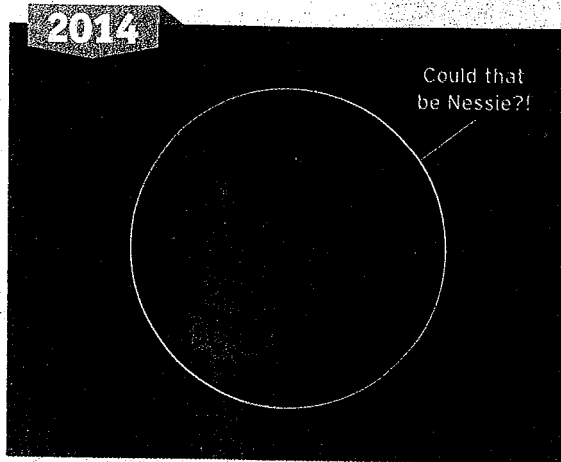
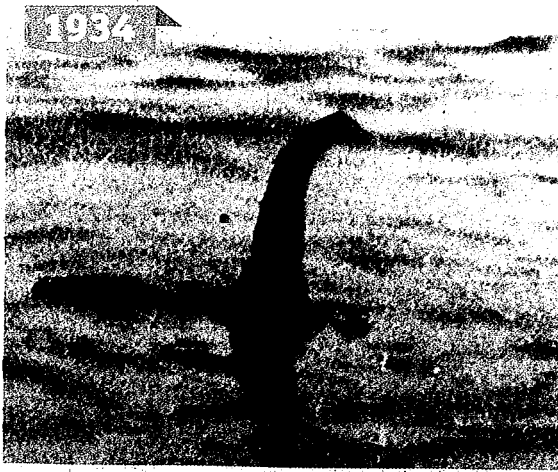
it on film for 60 seconds. The image was blurry, but Dinsdale was convinced it was the creature.

He gave the film to experts from the British government to examine. After scrutinizing the footage, they concluded that the object was probably alive and that it was between 12 and 16 feet long. Cryptozoologists cheered, but skeptics were unimpressed with the image of a murky blob moving slowly through the water.

Another respected Loch Ness investigator was the American scientist Robert Rines. In the 1970s, Rines used sonar equipment to help capture an image that seemed to show the flipper of a large underwater creature. As with Dinsdale's film, the image was too blurry to provide clear answers.

In 2003, British scientists studied the loch using sonar and satellites. They were hoping to prove the plesiosaur theory. They investigated the loch "shoreline to shoreline, top to bottom," said scientist Ian Florence. "We have covered everything in this loch, and we saw no signs of any large living animal," Florence said, his voice tinged with disappointment. "I think this might settle the question. There is nothing there."

Yet, there are still people who say that there is.



The photograph from 1934 supposedly proved that there was a monster in the loch. It turned out to be a hoax, just a creature made from a toy submarine and clay. The photo from 2014 was taken from Apple Maps. It circulated on Twitter earlier this year as new proof of Nessie's existence . . . and was quickly disproved.

Imagination and Belief

In the eight decades since the Mackays took their fateful drive, more than 1,000 people have claimed to have seen some kind of creature in the water or on the shores of the loch. Certainly many of them are attention seekers or pranksters. But can they all be making it up?

Even skeptics admit it's likely that the Mackays really did see something on the loch that April day. Perhaps a log was caught in the waves, or an overturned boat was bobbing up and down

Perhaps the glittering sunlight turned an ordinary object into a fantastic monster. The human imagination is powerful. So is our power of belief. And isn't it imagination and belief that have led to humankind's greatest scientific achievements?

On the other hand, Aldie Mackay managed a nearby hotel, and it's been suggested that her "sighting" might have been a ploy to attract tourists. In any event, she was far from the only one to benefit from Nessie's legend. To this day, the monster—real or otherwise—attracts thousands of visitors every year who help boost the local economy. The Chamber of Commerce's tagline is "seeing is believing." Aldie's old hotel now houses the Loch Ness

Centre and Exhibition. Visitors can take Nessie-watching boat cruises.

Speaking of his own hunt for Nessie, Rines once said, "If you don't have an open mind, in my judgment, you're not a scientist. If you don't have ideas, if you don't have adventure, you'll never make a discovery." Though Rines never did find incontrovertible proof of Nessie's existence, he believed until his death, in 2009, that a major discovery was waiting in the murky waters of Loch Ness.

Who knows? Perhaps one day he'll be proved right.