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The Legend of Nessie



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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
The Loch Called Ness	6
Monster Sightings	8
Fact or Fiction?	11
Conclusion	15
Glossary	16



Word Origins

The word *loch* means lake or a narrow arm of the sea that stretches inland. It comes from the language of Scotland, called Scottish Gaelic (GAY-lick).

Introduction

Is the Loch Ness Monster a myth or a **legend**? People have described seeing something strange emerging from the dark waters of Loch Ness in Scotland. They describe an animal similar to the descriptions of ancient dragons or sea serpents. The monster has a dark body, long neck, sheep-like head, and two or more humps on its back. The monster, called Nessie, is named after the *loch*, or lake, in which it lives.

Strange creatures of the sea are found in many legends, myths, and stories. Scottish myths have been passed down about a water spirit, called a *kelpie*, that looks like a horse. When sailors first started sailing beyond the sight of land, they talked about seeing monsters at sea. Some of those monsters were described as being so large that they could swallow a ship! According to legend, these huge, horrible beasts guarded treasure at the bottom of the sea. Could Nessie be one of these monsters of myth or legend?



This monster of legend lived in the "Sea of Darkness."

The Loch Called Ness

The body of water that is rumored to be home to the legendary Loch Ness Monster is large. In fact, it's the largest body of fresh water in the British Isles. Loch Ness is 24 miles (39 km) long, only 1 mile (1.6 km) wide, and over 800 feet (244 m) deep in some places.



It's much deeper than the seas that surround the British Isles.

Loch Ness was formed during the last ice age. At that time, the land now called Scotland split in two, and earthquakes made a trench. Then glaciers covered that trench until

about 12,000 years ago. When the ice melted, it filled the trench with water to form a loch.

Loch Ness's water is very cold. **Peat**, a layer of dead plant material, is thick in the water of Loch Ness. The peat allows light to travel only as deep as a few yards. As a result, sunlight can't warm the water, making it too cold for people to swim in. The top 100 feet (30.5 m) warms up to 54 degrees Fahrenheit (12°C) in the summer. The rest stays at 42 degrees Fahrenheit (6°C) all year round. Because of this, most life in the loch, such as fish and seals, stays close to the surface.



A gray seal might be mistaken for a monster when seen in a loch.

Monster Sightings

For over 1,400 years, curious people have taken Nessie sightings seriously. Scientists have even used NASA's computers, along with underwater cameras and other equipment, to test the loch. But long before this testing began in the 1970s, other sources saw the "monster" in the loch.

The first recorded sighting was in AD 565 by an Irish missionary named Saint Columba. The report says he asked his servant to swim across the loch to get a boat. A creature came to the surface, roared, and opened its mouth. Columba commanded it to go back, be quiet, and not touch the man. It did, and every sighting since then has been quiet and peaceful.



This man, who lives on Loch Ness, claims to have seen Nessie more than once.



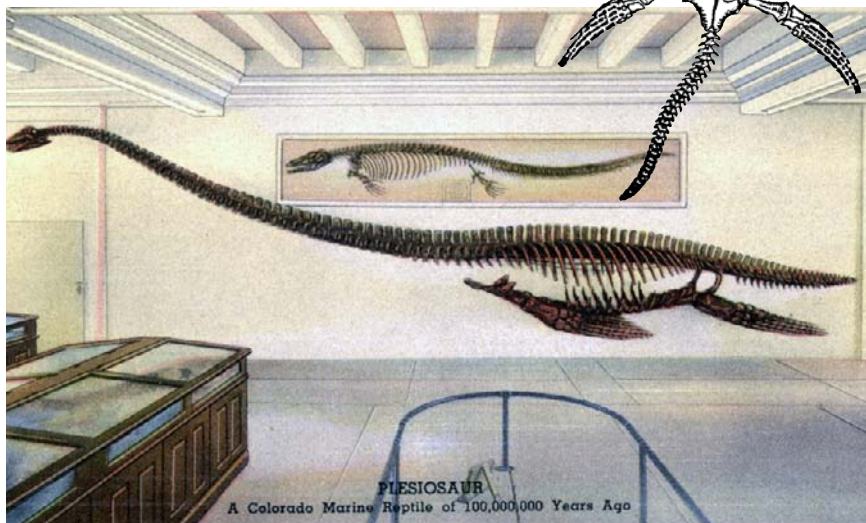
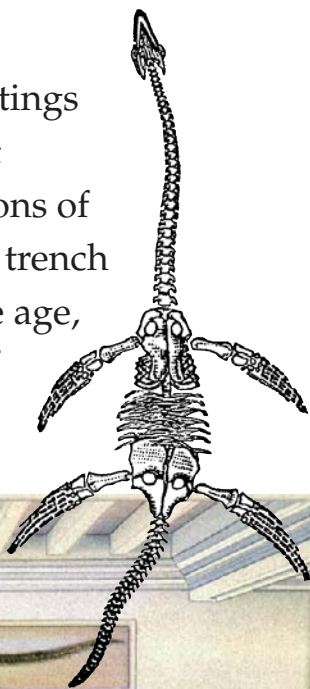
Urquhart Castle overlooks some of the deepest known parts of Loch Ness.

People kept Nessie sightings quiet until the 1930s, when cameras became popular. Nessie hunting took off with a flash. People wanted to catch Nessie, at least in a picture.

Thousands of people who live in the area have signed a statement promising that they've seen the monster. Most sightings have occurred near the Urquhart (ER-kert) Castle ruins. The castle ruins are located near the midpoint of the loch, where the water is deepest.

Sightings of strange water creatures are not unique to Loch Ness. People have reported seeing similar creatures in at least 265 lakes and rivers around the world. Some people think the creatures must be a type of saltwater mammal or fish.

Some think the Nessie sightings are of a prehistoric reptile that somehow survived over millions of years. They say that when the trench was created during the last ice age, a prehistoric beast or group of beasts became landlocked.



Some people believe the Loch Ness Monster might be related to the plesiosaur, which lived millions of years ago and is now extinct.

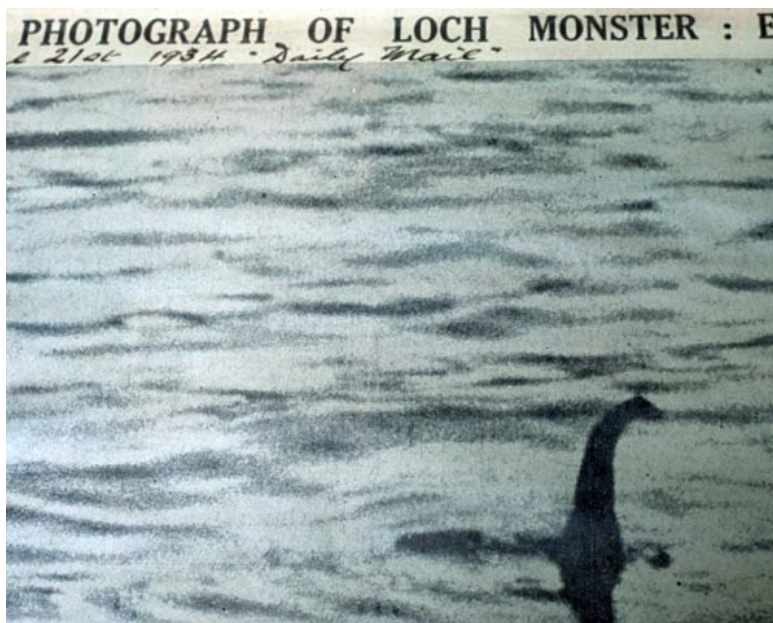


Operation Deep Scan used boats lined up across Loch Ness to search for evidence of the legendary monster.

Fact or Fiction?

Some accept the reports of Nessie as fact. The believers cite the similarity of descriptions of Nessie, the number of eyewitness reports, and possible **sonar** evidence. Others think of the reports as legends to keep children away from the deep, cold waters of the loch. The nonbelievers cite the lack of hard scientific evidence that proves Nessie is real.

Some people have tried to make the world believe Nessie is real by creating **hoaxes**. These hoaxes are tricks that keep the legend of the Loch Ness Monster alive.



This photograph was printed in a newspaper in 1934, but later, people learned it was a hoax.

A few of the most famous hoaxes are based on photographs. People thought a photo of three humps was the real monster. It turned out to be a picture of three **bales** of hay covered in black tar. A famous photograph from 1934 turned out to be a fake sea-serpent head attached to a toy submarine.

Another hoax in 1934 got people excited when they saw a giant footprint in the mud on the banks of the loch. A man had used a stuffed hippopotamus foot to make the footprint.

Scientists got involved, despite all the hoaxes. They wanted to learn whether Nessie was real and put an end to the mystery. There was enough consistent evidence that people couldn't explain. For example, sonar picked up a long object moving 480 feet deep in the loch. That is too deep for most fish. They decided to map the entire loch.

In 1987, scientists launched "Operation Deep Scan." They used 24 boats to map the bottom and sides of the loch with sonar equipment. Sonar uses sound to identify the shapes of objects. A sound is sent out from a sonar machine. When the sound hits an object, the sound bounces back as an echo. Scientists measure the time it takes for the sound to bounce back, which helps them create a picture. A sonar machine used in the loch shows objects that can't be seen under the murky water.

Some sounds from "Operation Deep Scan" were echoes from the loch's steep sides. But they could not explain at least one echo from a "large and moving" object 200 feet down. No one knows for sure what the object was. Was it Nessie?



Divers launch this “creature camera” into Loch Ness to try to capture underwater photographs of the legendary monster.

Studying the loch has turned up other findings. In 1981, the Loch Ness Project found fish called red-bellied Arctic (ARK-tick) char. They had been living at a depth of 700 feet (213 meters) for over 12,000 years—since the last ice age. Experts had thought the waters were too cold for life below a few hundred feet. The discovery of red-bellied Arctic char surprised them.



Do you see Nessie?

Conclusion

Maybe the Loch Ness Monster will one day lose its legendary status. It might someday be identified as a new **species** (SPEE-sheez) of fish. But for now, Nessie remains a mystery. That mystery might be its greatest appeal. The legend continues to capture people's imaginations.

Glossary

bales (<i>n.</i>)	tightly wrapped bundles (p. 12)
hoaxes (<i>n.</i>)	tricks played on people to try to make them believe something is real when it is not (p. 11)
legend (<i>n.</i>)	a historical story that is believed to be true, but cannot be proved (p. 4)
peat (<i>n.</i>)	brown, soil-like material used in gardening and as fuel (p. 7)
sonar (<i>n.</i>)	a system to find objects under water and to measure water's depth by making sounds and measuring their echoes coming back (p. 11)
species (<i>n.</i>)	a group of animals that are similar to one another and may have babies with each other (p. 15)

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