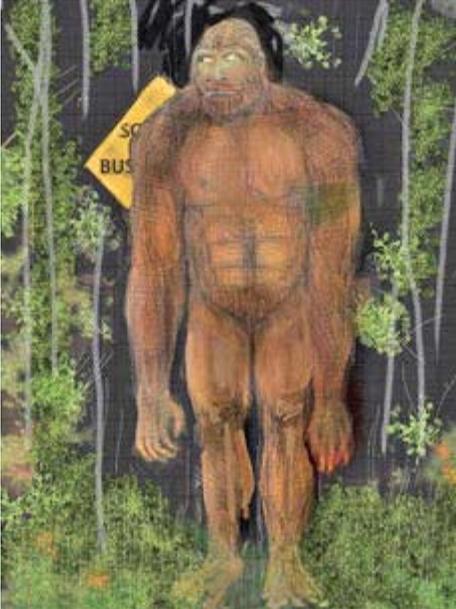


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In Search of Bigfoot

By JULIE BALL HAMBRICK
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Terry Thomas, Kentucky Bigfoot Research Organization

Kentucky Bigfoot Research Organization investigator and sketch artist Terry Thomas generated this image based on an eyewitness account of an encounter with an unexplained creature that occurred along a Trimble County road in 2007.



Kentucky Bigfoot Research founder Charlie Raymond voices a high-pitched call hoping to elicit a response from a Bigfoot.



Kentucky Bigfoot Research founder Charlie Raymond voiced a high-pitched call hoping to elicit a response from a Bigfoot. Fellow KBRO researcher Dana Fry (at left) joined Raymond and writer Julie Ball Hambrick for a hunt over the weekend.

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of -- or so Shakespeare wrote. Though the statement may be true, it seldom stops many of us from trying to find answers to elusive questions.

Members of the Kentucky Bigfoot Research Organization seek greater knowledge about the unexplained creature phenomenon called Bigfoot, also known as Sasquatch. During recent, frigid midnight hours, I joined KBRO founder Charlie Raymond and investigator Dana Fry, both of Prospect, Ky., for their first quest on the ground in Trimble County.

I had no expectations when we began our Sasquatch search. However, new information and an unexplained night happening of my own perked my interest in the legend and those who believe it.

Trimble County is certainly no stranger to its own "Bigfoot" reports. Residents who lived here during the summer of 1962 likely recall the sensation caused by odd livestock mutilations. First-hand Pattons Creek and Hickory Grove reports described a shaggy, unidentified nightwalker. The Associated Press picked up the creature story, and curious tourists swarmed Bedford for weeks.

Bigfoot accounts are prevalent throughout the U.S. and other parts of the world. Every year, hundreds of Americans report encounters with Sasquatch, and rumors rumble in many rural Bluegrass areas. According to KBRO's Raymond, the Commonwealth ranks third nationwide in Bigfoot sightings, following top areas Washington and Oregon.

No serious Squatcher believes there's only one or two of the creatures around, and Trimble's reputation for the unexplained may not be a thing of the past. I was surprised to learn KBRO has received four eyewitness Trimble County accounts. One Bedford encounter reportedly produced footprints 14.5 inches long, with a stride that measured over 54 inches between prints.

According to KBRO records, one veteran truck driver (who wishes to remain anonymous), traveled Hwy. 421 from Eminence, Ky., to Madison, Ind., late one night in 2007 -- as he had for six years without incident. However, according to the truck driver's statement, he encountered an unexplained creature in Trimble County.

The man claimed that just south of Bedford, a large, shaggy creature stood on two legs no more than three feet off the right-hand side of the highway, next to a traffic sign. The driver described it as "totally covered with hair ... his arms dangling down to his knees." Based on dimensions of the traffic sign, the witness estimated the creature stood 8.5 feet tall.

He said the sighting lasted about 30 seconds, during which the creature stood motionless on two legs and looked at him, eyes shining in his headlights. The driver worked with a sketch artist to recreate what he says he saw (pictured???) We

visited this location, near the road sign mentioned in his statement. The area features steep hillsides within feet of either side of the road for roughly half a mile.

These and other area reports got me curious about what Trimble residents might be seeing, what it's like to go into the woods with KBRO investigators and what keeps them motivated in their quest.

As we traveled together, I soon noticed one thing: these Squatch seekers take their pursuit seriously, and they're willing to go to great lengths. In spite of 20-degree weather, our trio traveled all over the area and got lost more than a few times. A Kentucky state trooper blue-lighted us because we were driving so slowly. However, when we explained we were looking for somewhere to turn around, he kindly gave us directions and sent us on our way.

We tramped through thickets and thorn bushes, over snow and slick ice, in pursuit of tracks (snow supposedly makes night viewing easier.) We dodged deer and endured coyotes' unnerving howls. Most of all, it was profoundly dark out there: no moon to speak of that weekend. Did I mention it was really, really cold? And every squeak in the snow made me uneasy.

I admit it: I prefer not to freeze or fear. I also like to see where I step. Despite four layers of clothes, I was soon ready to abandon our trek in favor of hot coffee in a warm, well-lit kitchen. But Raymond and Fry didn't seem to mind the conditions, and I was impressed by my guides' patience.

Some of our plans for one private-property stakeout fell through, but the hours we spent in search of were not wasted. While driving the county, Fry and Raymond brought me up to speed on area creature-related activity and shared popular theories about the unconfirmed big guys and gals.

Although Sasquatch supporters have collected no definitive evidence that proves or disproves the creatures' existence, most Bigfoot believers hold to core theories. Many believe Sasquatch prefer steep or hilly areas near a water source, remain non-aggressive toward humans, boast five keen senses – and perhaps a sixth, all combined with high intelligence and the ability to vocally communicate with humans and each other.

Skeptics argue their own points. Where do the creatures sleep? Why has one never been captured? And perhaps the most common argument: if they're really out there, where are the bones and fossils they must leave behind when they die?

Most pro-Bigfoot researchers believe the creatures are primates, related to chimpanzees and gorillas. "The ape fossil record is very sparse, especially chimpanzees," Raymond asserts. "Chimps, who also live in forests and jungles, are very common in Africa. But the first chimp fossils were just found in 2005.

"However, current DNA studies suggest Bigfoots may be much more closely related to humans. If that's the case, theories follow that the creatures may bury their own dead."

Sasquatch certainty seems to be a matter of two camps, and each chooses to hold to their opinions until the other is proven wrong.

While we traveled from one end of the county to the other, Fry and Raymond also talked about why they do this and why the Bigfoot legend fascinates them so.

KBRO lead investigator and founder Raymond's interest began early, while watching television documentaries as a child. "It seemed such a romantic idea that an unidentified hominid (human-related species) could live in our forests and remain undetected for centuries," he remembers. "And, based on research I've gathered, these things seem highly intelligent, have a family structure, and appear social among themselves."

He says he founded KBRO in 1997 “to prove the creatures’ existence and protect them – that’s my main goal.”

According to Raymond, KBRO has received 276 published and unpublished witness reports, some of which remain confidential. By comparison, he says the national Bigfoot Fry Research Organization (BFRO) – whose membership includes investigator Matt MoneyMaker of Animal Planet’s “Finding Bigfoot” – currently boasts 89 documented sightings.

KBRO members go Squatchin’ as witness accounts come into the official website: “We usually hop in a car, drive to the witness location and investigate their stories,” as well as any physical evidence. Currently, KBRO has 11 investigators in the group.

“We’re a non-kill, non-profit research group that actively seeks to prove and protect these creatures,” he says. “We take great care interviewing witnesses to validate the credibility and validity of each report -- and we don’t do it for any profit.” KBRO often conducts free public expeditions with several groups, including the Boy Scouts.

Although Raymond has never seen a Sasquatch in the flesh or fur, he reports he’s captured “multiple examples of proof through audio and FLIR,” short for forward-looking infrared thermal imaging cameras. These systems sense infrared radiation, typically emitted from a heat source. The cameras can pick up the body warmth of animals, humans and perhaps a Bigfoot, as he believes.

Fry, who also works with Raymond at their day jobs, says his enthusiasm intrigued her enough to join him on investigations. “Early on, I was a very ‘low-percent’ believer,” Fry admits. “I’ve not had a visual encounter in the daylight, but I’ve had a couple (at night) through thermal imaging. That’s when you rule out everything that you know it’s not.”

She says that as she listened to eyewitness reports, her belief that something’s out there grew. “I was amazed at these credible, reputable witnesses, from all walks of life,” Fry remembers.

“A gentleman in his 70s showed us photos of his own encounter, and they were the best visual evidence I’ve ever seen. He didn’t own or have access to a computer, so I doubt there was any Photoshopping going on there. Talking to him and seeing his photos made me 80% sure (Bigfoots) are out there.”

Fry says a visual event would fully complete her own certainty that the legends are true. “I would love to have an encounter of my own,” she says. “I would love to be one of those witnesses driving around a corner or hiking in the woods. I’ll believe 100 percent when I see it with my own eyes.”

Toward the end of our jaunt – when the woods were most quiet – we walked out on a Milton ridge top. Investigators tried to arouse any area creatures’ curiosity through signature calls and knocks. Bigfoots are rumored to howl to each other or as a warning to humans if they feel threatened. They supposedly knock rocks together or rap on trees with large branches to let a fellow Sasquatch judge the distance between them.

At this point, I was ready to pack it in. Secretly, I guess I’d hoped a Bigfoot would walk out during the first 15 minutes and shake my hand, so I would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they’re out there. I decided to just listen, enjoy the researchers’ company and this quiet night full of stars. There was no wind at all.

Raymond picked up his wooden club with a rawhide handle, which he carries on all his searches. When he whacked it once against a mature maple tree trunk, the sound of wood on wood cracked through the night. It was just short of 2 a.m.

Roughly 45 seconds later, we both heard a single loud knock. The sound was as clear as the crack of a baseball bat: wood on wood, coming from our left across the ravine. We both stood still for about 30 seconds, during which all the hair on my neck stood at attention.

Looking down into the ravine, I observed no lights below us. The little valley appeared to hold no houses, roads or streetlights. Raymond knocked again, this time many whacks in rapid succession. No answering knock came.

I asked him to demonstrate one of the “calls” used by Bigfooters to draw a creature’s response. He took a deep breath, held both hands to his mouth, and let loose. His call was high pitched, a long, continuous siren that rose slightly at the end. Although we heard no distinct call in response, the coyotes on the other ridge howled their approval.

We wrapped up the expedition around 2:30 a.m. I was freezing and a little unnerved. That night, I encountered no other sounds or sights that seemed Sasquatch-y to me. The single, distinct knock in response to Raymond’s was the only thing I came across that I could truly not explain away. However, it made me realize how a baffling chance encounter could spark someone’s quest for explanations. And I wonder, what’s wrong with that?

For more information or to report your own unexplained creature encounter, call Raymond at (502) 851-9295 or visit www.kentuckybigfoot.com.