
'Mothman' Solved!

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A 2002 movie, *The Mothman Prophecies*, tells the story of a reporter (played by Richard Gere) who is drawn to a West Virginia town by eyewitness accounts of a flying monster. From November 1966 to November 1967, residents in the vicinity of Point Pleasant (near the Ohio state line) were frightened by "Mothman" (whose appellation was a reporter's takeoff on the then-current *Batman* TV series). The movie is based on a book of the same title by arch paranormal mystery monger John A. Keel (1975). Keel rounded up giant bird reports, both local and worldwide, and combined them with UFO sightings, visits by Men in Black, telephone predictions from alleged extraterrestrials and their "contactees" (precursors of the "abductees"), plus a tragic bridge collapse and sundry other elements.

"Mothman" was encountered one night about seven miles from town when two couples drove through an abandoned complex popularly called the TNT area (after its World War II use for making munitions). About 11:30 P.M. they saw the glowing red eyes of a creature, "shaped like a man, but bigger," one witness would say. "And it had big wings folded against its back." It was fur-

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ther described as greyish and walking on sturdy legs with a shuffling gait. As it took flight and seemed to follow them, it "wasn't even flapping its wings" but "squeaked like a big mouse" (quoted in Keel 1975, 52–53).



Soon others were seeing the winged enigma, including two Point Pleasant firemen who visited the TNT area just three nights after the couple's sighting. They too saw the red eyes and described the creature as "huge" but were emphatic: "It was definitely a bird" (Keel 1975, 56). Most reports described it as headless yet with large, shining red

eyes set near the top of its body. Not all accounts agreed, however: One woman stated that what she saw "had a funny little face" although she "didn't see any beak," just those "big red poppy eyes." Keel also describes some "gigantic birds" about seventy miles to the north, in Ohio, that had a ten-foot wingspan and heads with "a reddish cast," yet lacking "the famous glowing red eyes" (Keel 1975, 60–61).

Allowing for an exaggeration of size—perhaps caused by an overestimate of the intervening distance—the Ohio birds seem to fit the appearance of the common turkey vulture which can have a six-foot wingspan and an unfeathered red head (*Audubon* 1977).

But what about the red-eyed "Mothman" sightings? The creature at the old munitions area "had two big eyes like automobile reflectors," and others echoed that description, including one man who, alerted by his dog in the direction of his hay barn, spotted it with a flashlight (Keel 1975, 49, 52). Revealingly, according to Frank B. Gill's *Ornithology* (1994), "At night some birds' eyes shine bright red in the beam of a flashlight or automobile headlights. This 'eyeshine' is not the iris color but that of the vascular membrane—the tapetum—showing through the translucent pigment layer on the surface of the retina."

At this point it seems relevant to

consider a real West Virginia winged creature—one that has “nocturnal habits” and “large, staring eyes” of the type that yield crimson eyeshine, plus “facial discs” that can make the eyes appear even larger. It has a large head and (unbirdlike) is “monkey-faced,” but looks “quite neckless” (its very short neck sloping into its body so it could seem headless in silhouette). It has “oversized wings and long legs,” the latter being “powerful” and (unlike the spindly legs of many birds) covered with feathers, making them look relatively thick. Its flight is “noiseless” and indeed “mothlike,” although during flight it may vocalize a “loud, trailing ‘khree-i.’” Its broad range includes West Virginia, and it is a “widespread nester in human habitations”; in fact it “hides in old buildings” (like those of the TNT complex), as well as barns, etc. Because it is active only at night, it is “seldom disturbed or even seen by humans,” so when it is encountered it

has an unfamiliar as well as “sinister appearance” (Bent 1961; Cerny 1975; Coe 1994; Peterson 1957, 1980; Steward 1977).

Its name is *Tyto alba*, the common barn owl. While it is far from man-sized, due to its big wings (some forty-four inches) and long legs it nevertheless “appears deceptively large, especially in flight” (“barn” 2001; Coe 1994). Allowing for such deception—compounded by multiple unknowns (distance, true size, size of nearby objects for comparison), as well as darkness, surprise, fear, and other magnification factors—we have what I believe is the most likely candidate for “Mothman.” (Of course, given the many reports, there is unlikely to be a single explanation for all, and hoaxes, hallucinations, other birds, etc., may have been involved in the contagion.)

We are thus faced with a choice between a plausible, naturalistic explanation on the one hand, and a fanciful, incredible one on the other, the evidence

for which is based solely on the most undependable evidence: reports by excited eyewitnesses. I think we must choose the former, while realizing that the latter will be preferred by Hollywood producers and others bent on selling a mystery.

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