



# Legend of the Lake Champlain Monster

Termed "North America's Loch Ness Monster" and known affectionately as "Champ," the legendary Lake Champlain Monster reportedly haunts the waters of its namesake. Lake Champlain began roughly 10,000 years ago when an estuary of the Atlantic Ocean, the Champlain Sea, was transformed by receding glaciers into an inland, freshwater body (Zarzynski 1984). This lake—and some say the creature too—was "discovered" in 1609 by Samuel de Champlain. Since then, the 125-mile-long lake, situated between New York and Vermont (with six miles extending into Québec), has received much attention. In 1873 and 1887, showman P. T. Barnum offered huge rewards for the monster—dead or alive (Zarzynski 1984, 83). More recently, there has been much "cryptozoological" interest and the development of a burgeoning Champ industry.

Proliferating sightings, "theories" of self-styled monster hunters, and even a Holy-Grail photo of the supposed beast have spawned innumerable newspaper and magazine articles, books, entries in paranormal compendia, and radio and television segments, not to mention keychains, mugs, T-shirts, and

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other offspring, including "Champ-burgers" (seafood patties on sesame-seed buns). Such endeavors have made

while extinct creature. Champ seeker Joseph Zarzynski has even given it a name: *Beluaaquatica champlainiensis* ("huge water creature of Lake Champlain") (Owen 1982).

To assess the reputed phenomenon, SKEPTICAL INQUIRER managing editor Ben Radford and I launched "The 'Champ' Expedition" in the summer of 2002. We examined all aspects of the Champ legend, from its alleged inception, through the impact of a famous 1977 photograph of the creature, and beyond. Unlike some so-called investigations—which, while long-running, were largely attempts to collect sighting reports—we believe ours was the most wide-ranging, hands-on investigation of Champ ever conducted with an intent to solve, rather than promote, the mystery.

## Champ Expedition

Our investigation was multi-faceted. I made an advance trip (August 2–4, 2002) to take in the annual Champ Day celebration (August 3) in Port Henry, New York, interview various people, buy books, and, in general, scout resources and make plans for our subsequent two-man expedition, August 22–26.

In the interim we began to study the myriad articles and books on Champ and other alleged lake monsters. Ben did extensive work to ready experiments regarding the famous 1977 Champ photo by Sandra Mansi, while I located



Figure 1. Map of Lake Champlain, showing selected sites.

Champ the best-known lake monster in the United States and, except for British Columbia's "Ogopogo," in all of North America. "Few cryptozoologists deny the possibility of Champ's existence," states W. Haden Blackman in his *The Field Guide to North American Monsters* (1998), "and many openly accept the creature," believing it to be a plesiosaur, zeuglodon, or other unknown or erst-

her by phone, arranged for an interview, and (from photo expert Rob McElroy) borrowed a vintage camera like the one Mansi had used. We discussed options, drafted itineraries, obtained and readied gear, and made other preparations.

With my car fully loaded, we set out for Whitehall, New York. There we met friend and fellow skeptic Robert Bartholomew and his brother Paul (who is a cryptozoologist), and discussed many relevant issues with them. Then we began to explore Lake Champlain from its southernmost tip near Whitehall to its northern end in Québec (see map, figure 1). Our "base camp" for the next two days was Collins Cabins at Port Henry. Late the first afternoon we set up "Champ Camp I" at a boating ramp area just outside Bulwagga Bay (figure 2), the locale of a majority of Champ reports, and maintained a watch from 7 to 8:30 P.M.—a supposedly prime time for Champ sightings (Kojo 1991). Unfortunately Champ was a no-show.

We later conducted research at the Collins Cabins' bar—seriously! With Ben taking notes, I inquired of a group of men about a local signboard that lists Bulwagga Bay "Champ Sightings," six columns of names and dates (see figure 3). One man, William "Pete" Tromblee, quipped that it was "a list of the local drinkers." In fact Tromblee's own 1981 sighting is listed, although he assured us he was entirely sober at the time. He did admit that he did not know *what* he saw and volunteered that it might have been a large sturgeon—a refrain one hears quite often. The proprietor, Mrs. Rita Collins, rummaged through a drawer behind the bar and came up with some related newspaper clippings, including one with a photo of a "six-foot piece of driftwood that bears a striking resemblance to artists' conceptions of Lake Champlain's legendary monster, Champ."

The following day (August 24) we crossed the Champlain Bridge to Vermont. We explored the lake shore around Otter Creek, dropped in on the naturalist at Button Bay State Park, and then proceeded to Bristol to keep our appointment with Sandra Mansi regarding her famous snapshot of—well, that



Figure 2. Benjamin Radford maintaining a Champ vigil.



Figure 3. Champ monster sighting board at Port Henry, New York, the "Home of Champ."

is the question Ben addresses in his article elsewhere in this issue.

We subsequently rendezvoused with Norm St. Pierre, a veteran fisherman and lake guide who operates Norm's Bait and Tackle at Crown Point, New York (a few miles south of Port Henry). Outside this "One Stop Hunting and Fishing Supply Store" rests a giant hook, baited with a large rubber fish and waggishly labeled "Norm's Champ Rig." Norm was to be our guide, aboard his sonar-equipped Starcraft cruiser, to a major area of Champ's reputed lair.

The sonar (figure 4), which Norm uses to locate schools of fish, soon picked up a 12- to 20-pound catfish or

sheephead. However, on our entire tour of Bulwagga Bay and many miles beyond, we saw nothing, either visually or on sonar, that could be construed as Champ (with the exception of the "monster" in figure 5). That is not surprising, given that during more than four decades on the water he has *never* seen a giant unknown lake creature. He says he *has* occasionally encountered a wave on calm water that puzzled him, and, like others, will say there's "something" out there. But he is more likely to suggest a sturgeon than a plesiosaur. (More on all these matters presently.)

Early in the morning we closed out our base at Port Henry and, again crossing



Figure 4. Norm St. Pierre, veteran fishing guide, aboard his sonar-equipped boat.

into Vermont, made our way to St. Albans and beyond. We searched the areas of Maquam and Missiquoi Bays (again see map) in hopes of finding a landscape that could match the location of the Mansi sighting. Unfortunately her description of the location was so vague as to be almost useless, and the intervening years had perhaps changed the scene completely. This precluded one set of photographic experiments but we located a suitable area for others, near a boat launch. By wading into the water Ben discovered that it was surprisingly shallow for more than 150 feet offshore. This was fortuitous since we could avoid having to use our raft, but it raised an interesting point. A local man who had resided there for thirty years said that the general shallowness of the lake in the surrounding area made him doubt the presence of any leviathan there. Indeed, while the lake reaches depths of up to 400 feet, the maximum for all of Missiquoi Bay is fourteen feet. And for the eastern edge of Maquam Bay and the connecting area of lake, the offshore depth at Mansi's estimated sighting distance of 150 feet is twelve feet or less, as shown by a Lake Champlain hydrographic contour map (Lake n.d.).

The experimental work was time-consuming, but we were through by mid afternoon and continued north to the upper end of Lake Champlain at Venise Bay, Quebec. We stopped along

the way to explore and to photograph some driftwood that had piled up along the shore. We returned as far south as Burlington, Vermont, that night. Ben was glad to finally be able to wash up from his swim in Lake Champlain and to treat a cut foot—injured on sharp rocks during the earlier experiments.

Our final day, the 26th, was another long one. We took the ferry *Valcour* from Burlington to Port Kent, New York, traversing Lake Champlain at one of its widest places. We maintained a Champ watch, noting that some reported sightings had been made from ferries as well as other boats. A veteran deckhand told us he teased children to look overboard for Champ and instructed adults to “go below” to the on-board snack bar that serves beer and wine so they might also be able to see the creature.

Disembarking from the *Valcour*, we headed south along the west coast of Lake Champlain until we veered away on the interstate and headed for home. We had traveled over twelve hundred miles, and had obtained quantities of notes, photographs, videotapes, books, charts, and other research materials—all of which would now need careful study. Here are our findings.

### Sightings

Promoters of Champ's existence cite a major eyewitness. According to *Discover*

magazine (Teresi 1998), “The first recorded sighting of Champ dates back to July 1609, when Samuel de Champlain claimed he saw a ‘20-foot serpent thick as a barrel, and a head like a horse.’” This quotation from Champlain—which has been repeated, paraphrased, and embellished with Indian legends (e.g., Coleman 1983; Green 1999)—is, alas, bogus. Jerome Clark (who was once taken in by the claim [1983]) reports it “traceable to an article by the late Marjorie L. Porter in the Summer 1970 issue of *Vermont Life*” (Clark 1993).

Champlain's actual description is in volume 2, chapter IX, of his journal (quoted in Meurger 1988):

... [T]here is also a great abundance of many species of fish. Amongst others there is one called by the natives *Chausarou*, which is of various lengths; but the largest of them, as these tribes have told me, are from eight to ten feet long. I have seen some five feet long, which were as big as my thigh, and had a head as large as my two fists, with a snout two feet and a half long, and a double row of very sharp, dangerous teeth. Its body has a good deal the shape of the pike; but it is protected by scales of a silvery gray colour and so strong that a dagger could not pierce them.

As Champlain's actual account demonstrates, far from heralding a serpentine, horse-headed monster, he simply mentions a native species of large fish. It was almost certainly a gar (or garfish), one of the *Ganoidei* subclass (from the Greek *ganos*, “shiny”), which includes sturgeons and other varieties.

Supposed other evidence of an early Champ sighting comes from an old powderhorn bearing a Crown Point soldier's name, the year 1760 and various pictorial elements, including “a rather large dragon-like creature.” Zarzynski (1984, 52–53) suspects this is a “possible link” to Champ. However, the figure is merely a stereotypical dragon—complete with large wings. It is by no means evidence for the existence of a Lake Champlain leviathan.

In his *Champ: Beyond the Legend*, Zarzynski (1984, 152–205) catalogued 224 “Champ” reports. Putting aside Samuel de



Champlain's, which never occurred, the rest are from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The earliest is from 1819 and is still the most sensational description of Champ ever recorded. I tracked down the original account in the *Plattsburgh Republican* of Saturday, July 24.

The sighting was attributed to a "Capt. Crum" who was in a scow on Bulwagga Bay the previous Thursday morning. The black monster was said to be about 187 feet long with its flat head—resembling that of a "sea-horse"—rearing more than fifteen feet out of the water. The creature was some two hundred yards away (twice the length of a football field) and was traveling "with the utmost velocity" while being chased by "two large Sturgeon and a Bill-fish." Nevertheless, the captain was able to notice that it had three teeth, large eyes the color of "a pealed [*sic*] onion," a white star on its forehead, and "a belt of red around the neck." The incident has an outlandishness about it that suggests someone was pulling the reader's leg.

Hoax or not, *that* monster has not been seen since, or has apparently shrunk to a fraction of its former self and lost its distinctive markings, although not without gaining others. Anyway, according to the various reports Champ is between ten and 187 feet long, has one to four or more humps or up to five arching coils, and is black, or has a dark head and white body, or is gray, or black and gray, or brown, moss green, reddish bronze, or other colors, possibly being drab or shiny, scaly or smooth—even "slimy."

Moreover, it possesses fins, or a pair of horns, or "moose-like antlers," or "elephant ears," or a tan or red mane, or glowing eyes, or "jaws like an alligator"—or again had none of these. Overall it looked like a great snake, "a large Newfoundland dog," "a steam yacht" (although traveling too fast to be one), a horse, a Florida manatee, a submarine periscope, a whale, etc., etc. (Zarzynski 1984, 152–205).

Astonishingly, some writers have concluded that there is a "surprising degree of correlation between all the various descriptions" (Grant 1992, 115), that they are indeed "disturbingly similar"

(Vachon 1977). However, to the rest of us it appears that either Champ is a metamorphosing, contortionistic, chameleonesque creature, completely unknown to the natural world, or else eyewitnesses are viewing—and no doubt misperceiving—a number of different things.

Many of the sightings were from considerable distances—often a hundred yards or more, a few at between a quarter and three-quarters of a mile, four at one mile, and at least one at two miles away, although often the distance was unreported. (A dozen observations were made by the use of spyglasses or binoculars.) Since the apparent size of the creature depends on how far away it is, then mistaking either the distance or size will result in misjudging the other accordingly. If we consider other factors—such as surprise, poor visibility on several occasions (such as nighttime sightings and viewing the creature while it was entirely underwater), and other problems, including the power of suggestion—the sightings could obviously be fraught with error.

### "Expectant Attention"

One should not underestimate the power of what Rupert T. Gould, in his *The Loch Ness Monster and Others* (1976, 112–113), called "expectant attention." This is the tendency of people who, expecting to see something, are misled by anything having some resemblance to it. For example, a log may be mistaken for a lake serpent under the right conditions, especially in an area where reports of such a creature are common. Indeed, logs have actually been mistaken for the Loch Ness Monster. Gould (1976, 107) describes two instances of his own knowledge in which "a pair of binoculars resolved an apparent 'monster' into a floating tree-trunk" at the Loch.

Perhaps certain Lake Champlain monster sightings can be so explained. One from circa 1886, for instance, said the monster looked "like a long log or pole," while a 1954 report described the creature as "like a telephone pole in appearance." Photos of "monster"-shaped driftwood at Lake Champlain have been published (Zarzynski 1984, 99, 163, 171; "Champ unmasked" n.d.).

In this regard, local fisherman Tom Forrest told an illuminating story. In 1998 he was with a group of people who saw "Champ," and some were frightened. In time, however, it turned out to be a partially waterlogged tree trunk, bobbing and propelled by the current. It was nearly forty feet long with a root that resembled a monster's head (Forrest 2002).

A particular feature of Lake Champlain—an effect called a seiche—may help to produce just such sightings. A seiche is a great underwater wave that sloshes back and forth, even though the lake's surface appears smooth. The sloshing may dislodge debris from the bottom—logs or clumps of vegetation, for example—that bob to the surface as "monsters" (Teresi 1998).

Another likely candidate for some Champ sightings is a large fish. Samuel de Champlain's *Chausarou*—clearly a gar—is an obvious possibility. Tom Forrest has caught very large gar. When I spoke with him he had only days before witnessed a friend hook a Longnose Gar that—Forrest insists—was "monster" sized; it measured approximately 6 feet 4 inches long and weighed some 40–50 pounds. He calls this "the real Champ" and has dubbed it, appropriately, "Gargantua" (Forrest 2002).

Among other large fish in the lake are sturgeon which are now endangered. They are generally in the five-to-six-foot range but can grow to twice that size (Zarzynski 1984, 98–100; Meurger 1988, 47–48). In fact, one couple who saw a 6-foot creature in 1949 described it as possibly a large sturgeon. While a sturgeon's length is insufficient to account for some other Champ sightings, the size may easily be overestimated.

Multiple fish can appear as a single monster. On July 7, 1988, Walter and Sandi Tappan saw several creatures and videotaped one "series of small humps" they believe was a large creature. The video was included on a September 23, 1992, episode of NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*. Even monster enthusiast John Kirk (1998, 135–136), who acknowledges that the Tappans claimed to see the monster's head and neck, believes the video shows "fish feeding near the surface."

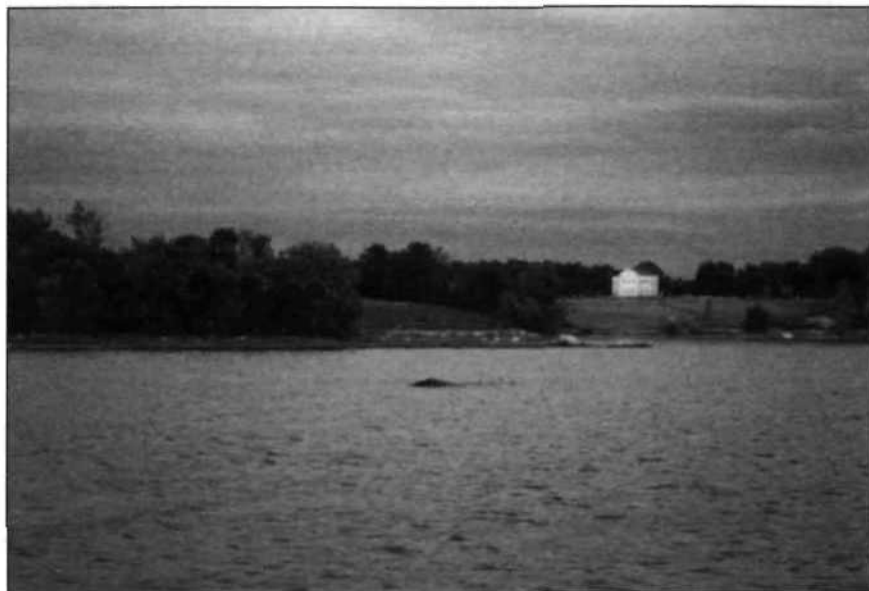


Figure 5. Monster or rock? You decide!

Ronald Binns (1988, 205–207) tells of a young man who spied a 50-foot sea serpent off England's Brighton beach in 1857; in later years, after he became a marine biologist, he realized he had actually seen several dolphins "swimming in line." In this manner, two or more large gar, sturgeon, or other fish could easily appear as a single multi-humped monster, accounting for numerous such sightings at Lake Champlain.

Otters, which are playful and enjoy "chasing each other" and "following the leader" (Godin 1983) are especially prone to creating this illusion and in general being mistaken for lake monsters, as I discovered in investigating other cases. For example, Jon Kopp, a Senior Wildlife Technician with New York's Department of Environmental Conservation, told me of a personal encounter when he was in a duck blind on a lake in Clinton County. It was dark, when suddenly, heading toward him was a huge snakelike creature making a sinuous, undulating movement. However, as it came closer, Kopp realized that the "serpent" was actually six or seven otters, swimming single file and diving and resurfacing to create the serpentine effect. "After seeing this," Kopp told me, "I can understand how people can see a 'sea serpent'" (Nickell 2001, 102).

Otters have been mistaken for monsters elsewhere, including Loch Arkaig and Loch Ness in Scotland (Binns 1984, 186–191) and, I believe, Lake Utopia in

New Brunswick, Canada, and Silver Lake in Wyoming County, New York (Nickell 2001, 133–135, 92–103), as well as many other lakes. The Northern River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*) measures up to 52 inches long, and is dark brown with a lighter, grayish throat and belly but "looks black when wet" (Whitaker 1996). While treading water with its hind paws, it can extend its head and long neck out of the water, inviting comparisons with the extinct plesiosaur, which is so often mentioned as a possibility for "Nessie" and "Champ" (Binns 1984, 186–191).

In light of otters, consider this Champ report. On June 15, 1983, several witnesses saw a 30- to 40-foot creature with four humps in Lake Champlain off the site of Fort Cassin. However, as one admitted to the Lake Champlain Phenomena Investigation (Zarzynski 1983), "It could have been one large creature or four smaller ones"—a concession that takes on new significance when we learn that this site was at the "mouth of the Otter Creek." (Although it is actually Vermont's longest river, it is otherwise aptly named as a habitat for the Northern River Otter.)

A few miles away, Button Bay State Park Naturalist Laura Hollowell showed me a drawing made by a young girl who had seen a "baby Champ." Hollowell (2002) believes this and other such infant-monster sightings may well be otters. She told me she believes "People

have seen otters and mink swimming in the lake and think they've seen Champ." She said she is "surprised at what unreliable reporters people can be in terms of wildlife sightings," adding, "I don't believe that there are any large, unidentified animals in Lake Champlain."

Keeping in mind eyewitness descriptions of Champ with horns, "moose-like antlers," or a head "like a horse" (Zarzynski 1984, 161, 165, 177), one cannot help but acknowledge other wildlife possibilities. Allowing for overestimation of length—which is especially easy to do if there is a wake—swimming deer come readily to mind. Even some believers among Loch Ness monster hunters considered this the probable explanation for "horned monster" reports in their bailiwick. Indeed, when one photo of Nessie was enlarged, "she" was revealed to be a deer (Binns 45, 191–193).

Still other possibilities for Champ (and many purported lake monsters elsewhere) include wind slicks and boat wakes. A deckhand on the *Valcour* ferry (out of Burlington, Vermont) told us that Champ reports had declined in the last fifteen years or so with the cessation of large traffic on the lake. A barge's wake often traveled across the lake, he said, mystifying anyone who might encounter it without seeing its cause. Thus some people could infer, or imagine having glimpsed, the fabled lake creature (Valcour 2002).

In other sightings and photographs, additional culprits—including other swimming animals and marine creatures, long-necked birds, even rocks (see figure 5)—may also pose as a lake monster, along with toy models and manipulated images (Binns 1984; Nickell 1994). Considering all such factors, there seems no compelling reason to postulate the existence of a hitherto unknown creature in Lake Champlain.

### Bandwagon Effect

I did an analysis of the 224 sightings listed by Zarzynski (1984, 152–205) (less the nonexistent 1609 sighting and nine completely undated reports). Interestingly, during the entire period before 1860 there was only a single

recorded sighting which, as I have indicated, was probably a spoof. After that, recorded sightings increased in the 1870s and 1880s (to fifteen and twenty-three respectively), then declined again before shooting up steadily in the 1960s (fifteen), 1970s (fifty-nine), and 1980s (seventy until mid-1984). The reason for the fluctuations is uncertain, but if there were several large leviathans in the lake prior to 1860 as proponents believe, why was there only one highly doubtful sighting? Why did not the Native Americans know about the creatures, and tell Samuel de Champlain about them rather than the comparatively mundane *chaousarou* (garfish)?

As to the modern rise in sightings (which is obviously much greater than a mere growth in population), that may well be due to heightened expectancy caused by an increase in articles, books, and other media reports on the subject. Loren Coleman (1983, 89) gives some credit to "the arrival on the scene" of Joseph Zarzynski, who gave those who had previously been ridiculed "a sympathetic ear." That seems only fair, but Zarzynski's and others' excessive credulity may have tipped the scales in the opposite direction, resulting in a still greater expectancy and thus helping to create something of a bandwagon effect.

This seems supported by the tendency of the reported imagery to subtly conform to the concept of the day. For example, the term "sea serpent" was used in several nineteenth-century accounts but was effectively dropped afterwards (except for a single journalist's use). The most prevalent descriptor overall was "huge snake" (or similar wording), but in modern times (after 1978) reports occasionally likened the creature to a "dinosaur" (Zarzynski 1984, 152–205). This probably reflects the popular notion—after the widely circulated 1934 hoaxed photo of the Loch Ness Monster (Nickell 1994, 171; 1996)—that such mythical beasts resemble plesiosaurs. Michel Meurger, in his *Lake Monster Traditions: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (1988, 39), concludes that "... Champ's modern fame is the product of local monster-enthusiasts in their efforts to promote their own legend along Lochnessian lines."

## Evaluation

Not only is there not a single piece of convincing evidence for Champ's existence, but there are many reasons *against* it, one of which is that a single monster can neither live for centuries nor reproduce itself. There would need to be several in a breeding herd for the species to have continued to reproduce over time ("Myth" 1972).

Zarzynski (1998) acknowledges this, theorizing that a colony of thirty or fewer plesiosaurs have inhabited Lake Champlain since its formation some 10,000 years ago. However, with so few individuals he worries that Champ is near extinction. Fellow monster hunter Dennis Jay Hall (2000, 15), on the other hand, insists: "There is a healthy population of these animals living in Lake Champlain. They are here for a reason; this is their chosen home."

But then where is a floating or beached carcass or other certain trace of the fabled creature? Although there are possible reasons why a Champ carcass might be rare (for example, most deaths could occur in winter, when the lake largely or completely freezes over [Zug 1981]), there is no question about the existence of sturgeon, gar, otters, and other Champ look-alikes. The *absence* of a Champ carcass "does not support the existence of such creatures either," according to the Smithsonian's Dr. George Zug (1981). And where are the bones that, as Gould (1976, 120) asked of Loch Ness, should have eventually covered the entire lake floor?

The burden of proof, of course, is on the claimants. Far from meeting that burden, however, the Champ defenders are instead promoting a mystery and—like so many paranormalists—are thereby engaging in a logical fallacy called arguing from ignorance: "We don't know what these people saw; therefore, it must have been Champ." One cannot draw a conclusion from a lack of knowledge, and so, until an actual specimen presents itself, the possibility that any large, unknown animal inhabits Lake Champlain remains somewhere between extraordinarily slim and none.

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