



Ogopogo: The Lake Okanagan Monster

Among the world's lakes reputed to host a great unknown creature is Lake Okanagan in the Canadian province of British Columbia. Known as Ogopogo, the leviathan is said to be "one of the most thoroughly documented unidentified lake creatures," second only to Scotland's Nessie, and "possibly the most famous North American monster aside from Bigfoot" (Blackman 1998, 69). Noting that Ogopogo has been dubbed Canada's Loch Ness Monster, cryptozoologist John Kirk (1998, 4) counters that the description ought to be the reverse: "Since the appearances of the Canadian beast predated those of its Scottish cousin, it ought to be said that Nessie is Scotland's Ogopogo."

But does such a monster exist? Benjamin Radford and I have long been interested in the alleged Okanagan Lake denizen, and we resolved to look into the mystery. As luck would have it, National Geographic Television was also interested. (Ben's analysis of the Ogopogo phenomena appears in this issue, page

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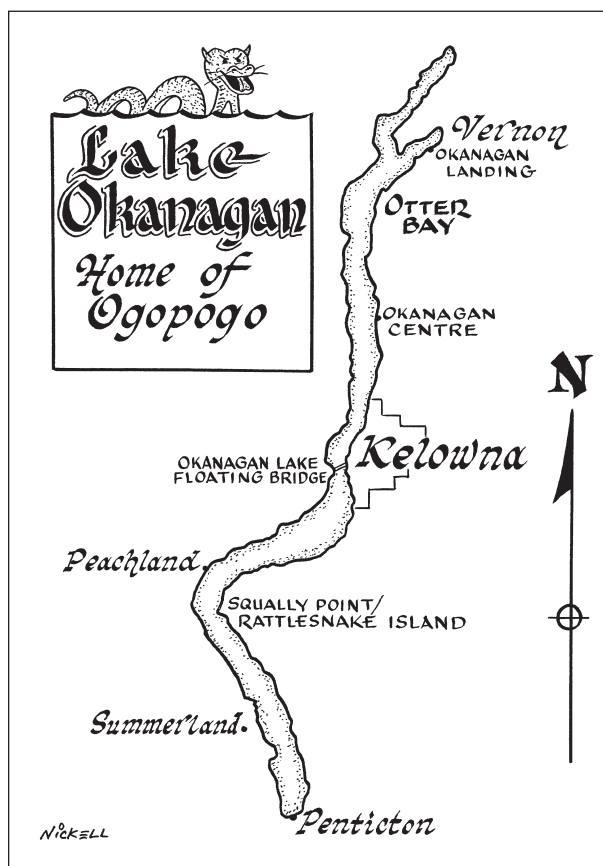


Figure 1. Map of Lake Okanagan illustrates selected sites.

41.)

The Monster's Lair

Okanagan is the largest of a group of five interconnected lakes in the Okanagan Valley of south-central British Columbia. Named for the local forest-dwelling Native Americans, the Okanagan people, the narrow fresh-water lake stretches for some seventy-nine miles from its southern extremity at Penticton to its northern tip near Vernon (see figure 1). It is thus over

three times the length of Loch Ness and, at a maximum depth of 762 feet,¹ slightly deeper as well. Formed from an ancient valley, it was filled by waters from glacial melting which was complete about 10,000 years ago (Roed 2005).

Okanagan is only one of many Canadian lakes reputed to provide a home to leviathans. At least thirty-nine of the lakes in British Columbia alone reputedly have such "aquatic anomalies," according to John Kirk, author of *In the Domain of the Lake Monsters*. However, he singles out Okanagan as "the lake of mystery" (Kirk 1998, 28, 11).

The scenic lake rarely freezes over—only about four times in the twentieth century (Okanagan 2005a)—and it is famous for its sandy beaches, campsites, and resorts. Fishing charters promise "big fish," which in-

clude rainbow trout and kokanee (Okanagan 2005b). Okanagan Lake is within the range of such aquatic mammals as beaver, muskrats, and otters (Whitaker 1996), and waterfowl including ducks, mallards, geese, and many others (Bull and Ferrand 1994). Some of these creatures might provide food for a giant lake creature, if such indeed existed.

According to folklore attributed to

the native culture, the monster was a demonic entity called N'ha-a-itk, and its home was Rattlesnake Island or a cave beneath it or adjacent to Squally Point (Gaal 2001, 113, 122–123; Kirk 1998, 47). The arrival of white settlers continued to spark interest in the Okanagan monster though not always with high seriousness.

The palindromic name Ogo-pogo² came from a 1924 music-hall song. Titled “The Ogo-Pogo: The Funny Fox-Trot,” the song was about a banjo-playing water-being from Hindustan (Shuker 1995, 100). It was performed at a luncheon in Vernon, B.C., on August 23, 1926. As a result of the catchy song—according to an account I discovered at the library in Kelowna—“the guests left the Kalamalka Hotel to spread the fame of Ogo-pogo far and wide” (Brimblecombe 1930).³

The Ogie Expedition

National Geographic Television (NGTV) invited the two of us on an expedition to Lake Okanagan—a week’s quest to find the fabled creature, or to explain the monster phenomenon. Apart from travel, we spent more than four days on site, investigating the mystery: interviewing eyewitnesses and studying photographic evidence; conducting historical and other research (much of it in advance of the expedition); performing an experiment regarding one recorded sighting; and traversing the lake and its shores by foot, auto, sonar-equipped boat (with professional divers on board!), and seaplane.

Accompanying us for much of this grueling work was Canadian cryptozoologist John Kirk. We were also assisted by Arlene Gaal, whose book *In Search of Ogo-pogo* was never far from our fingertips. In her home in Kelowna, she made available for study many of the photographs, films, and videos that purport to depict Ogo-pogo. Our relationship with these two monster hunters was so respectful and cordial that NGTV producer Noel Dockstader seemed to wish for more sparks between us.

The second full day of our expedition—Saturday, February 5, 2005—was the most exhausting. After an early breakfast, we boarded a houseboat at



Figure 2. Divers with the National Geographic Television expedition search for caves beneath Rattlesnake Island.

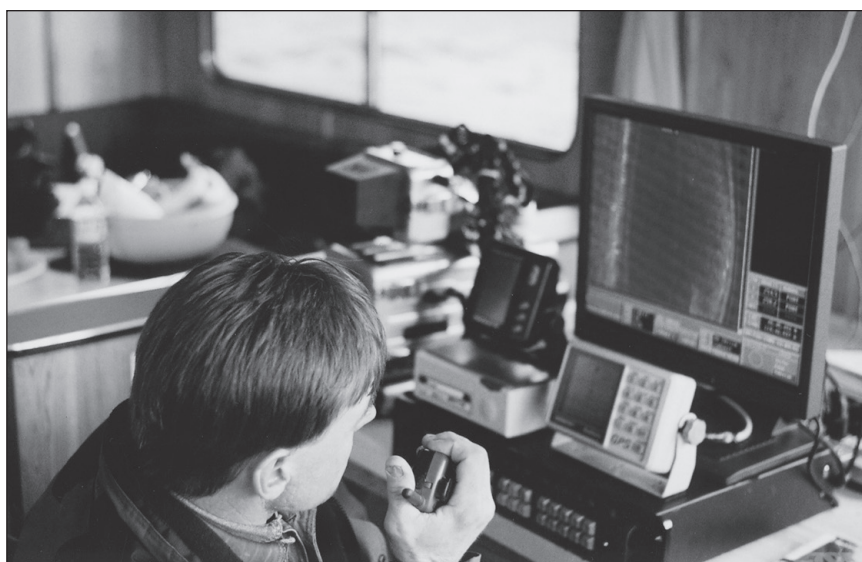


Figure 3. Side-scanning sonar search of a portion of the lake revealed no leviathan.

the Grand Okanagan Lakefront Resort (where we roomed). We were loaded for monster hunting: In addition to the TV crew of four, were the two of us and John Kirk, as well as the boat pilot and his relief, two men in charge of sonar, and a diving crew of three—some thirteen men and one woman (Brook Holston of NGTV) plus an impressive amount of gear and equipment. We also towed a motorboat, which served many practical uses, including filming, and was available in case of any mishap.

We covered much of the southern half of the lake, giving special attention to Rattlesnake Island (a.k.a. Monster Island) and its environs. Two divers went down to search for the caves that are legendarily

home to Ogo-pogo (figure 2), while Ben, John Kirk, and I motorboated to the island and scrambled onto the rocks. These searches yielded only underwater fissures too small for a leviathan and an island devoid of bones or other traces of Ogo-pogo’s supposed prey.

Darryl Bondura searched the depths with side-scanning sonar, which also turned up nothing of significance (figure 3). He says he has scanned several square miles of Okanagan’s bottom—once identifying an ultralight plane at about 100 feet deep—but has never seen a large lake denizen or even the skeleton of one (Bondura 2005).

Two days later, Ben and I flew over the same area in a seaplane (figure 4) scouring the waters for any sign of Ogo-pogo.



Figure 4. Rattlesnake Island is viewed from a seaplane. Photos by Joe Nickell.

Despite the excellent viewing the plane allowed, Ogie was still a no-show.

Much of our assessment of the Ogo-pogo phenomenon thus necessarily depended on the reports of eyewitnesses—including Gaal and Kirk. We also analyzed the numerous sightings chronicled in Gaal (2001, 185–208), and we studied original photographs and film and video footage.

The Sightings

In preparing for the trip to Okanagan, I studied the approximately 330 eyewitness sightings—ranging from the eighteenth century to 2001—listed in

the “Chronology” to Gaal’s *In Search of Ogo-pogo* (2001, 185–208). Mentally, I rounded up the usual suspects: wake effects, bobbing logs, beavers, otters, schools of fish, and many others. Although sturgeon represented a probable candidate for some Lake Champlain sightings, at Okanagan their presence has not been established; indeed, rewards of up to \$10,000 have failed to produce a single sturgeon (Gaal 2001, 19).

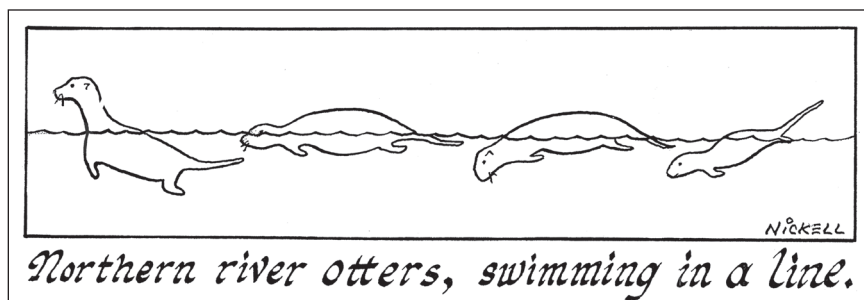
Since Mrs. Susan Allison’s sighting of 1872—the first by a white settler—eyewitness reports of Ogo-pogo have proliferated. Blackman (1998, 69) and others overstate the uniformity of descriptions

of Ogo-pogo, whereas they actually seem quite varied.

For example, the *color* ranges from light to dark green, dark brown, brown-black, blackish gray, to jet black; at least one source mentioned a white underside, and the *skin* was smooth, snakelike, or shiny. The *height* out of the water is variously stated as in the three- to seven-foot range, with estimates of up to fifteen feet. The *length* is exceedingly variable, and includes small creatures dubbed “Ogo-pups” and larger animals of some eight to seventy feet long. The *head* has been likened to that of a snake, sheep, cow, deer, or horse, with protrusions said to be horns or ears, and with beady eyes and whiskers. The *body* is said to resemble a log or great snake, featuring “saw-edged coils” or one to several humps. *Appendages* reportedly include various fins, or flippers or webbed feet; sometimes it has a forked tail. The creature’s *movement* is often described as “undulating,” but it frolicks, splashes, swims rapidly, slaps the water with its tail, and so on (Gaal 2001, 185–208).

It seems extremely unlikely that eyewitnesses were seeing a single type of creature—let alone that it was a plesiosaur, zeuglodon, basilosaurus, or other extinct or unknown creature. However, by picking out some of the more common features and allowing for misperceptions and exaggerations, I was able to produce a composite drawing of Ogo-pogo (figure 5) and show its similarity to the otter—actually *otters*, swimming in a line (figure 6). As with other lake monster habitats around the world, Lake Okanagan coincides with the habitat of otters, in this case the Northern River Otter, *Lutra canadensis*, as shown in the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals* (Whitaker 1996, 782–785).

Of course, not all sightings are of otters, just as not all UFOs are weather balloons. However, they may well be responsible for some of the best sightings such as one in 1989 by John Kirk (1998, 52–53) and others: The animal was an estimated thirty-five to forty feet long and consisted of “five sleek, jet-black humps” and a lashing tail. It was moving very fast—perhaps, the eyewitnesses



Figures 5 and 6. Author’s composite drawing of Ogo-pogo (top) is compared with otters swimming in a line (after Gould 1976).

thought, twenty-five miles per hour. Such an estimate is probably inaccurate, based as it necessarily is on multiple unknowns (i.e., size of “animal” and distance from viewers). It should be noted that “Otters are among the fastest swimmers of all animals,” having a six-miles-per-hour cruising speed and the ability to go “much faster” (Otter 1993).

On Film and Video

Photographic evidence of Ogoopogo is generally poor, as we found from perusing Arlene Gaal’s collection at her home in Kelowna. However, she showed us three film/video sequences that were of interest:

- *The Folden film*: This footage was shot by Art Folden in August 1968. Driving along Highway 97 with his family, he saw something moving in the water and pulled off the road to record the object with his 8-millimeter movie camera. The result is what resembles a fast-moving log. Most observers think it is a swimming creature, although I think it could be two, one swimming behind the other. Folden estimated the object as 300 yards offshore, and Ogoopogo enthusiasts have concluded the object was very large and moving quite fast (Gaal 2001, 46–52; Kirk 1998, 47–48).

Ben sold NGTV on the idea of doing an on-site experiment regarding the Folden film. This we accomplished on Sunday, the day after our boat excursion. We selected a site south of Peachland that Ben, John Kirk, and I agreed was either Folden’s original site or a nearby one consistent with it. Briefly, the experiment involved placing a boat at varying distances from the shore, established by a surveying crew. The three of us agreed on an approximate off-shore distance we thought was about where Folden’s creature would have been. The results demonstrated that the distance was far less than Folden had thought, and therefore estimates of the object’s size and speed had to be reduced accordingly.

- *The Thal film*: On August 11, 1980, some fifty tourists watched as Ogoopogo performed for about forty-five minutes off the beach at Kelowna. Larry Thal of Vancouver shot some 8-millimeter

film of the event (Gaal 2001, 52–55). Unfortunately, the footage is only about ten seconds long, and “a large dark appendage that moves out of the water” (Gaal 2001, 54) appears to be one of many defects of the old film. Gaal (2005) conceded to me that the film might depict two creatures rather than just one; if so, I would suggest a pair of otters.

- *The DeMara video*: On July 24, 1992, Paul DeMara videotaped, off Kelowna, “something or some things” that were “traveling just below the surface of the water at a fairly good speed, estimated at five miles per hour.” Suddenly a boat appeared, towing a water skier, and crossed the line of movement, whereupon the skier tumbled into the water. About five minutes later, DeMara saw and filmed what he termed “a similar anomaly” (Gaal 2001, 64), estimated by Gaal at thirty feet long and composed of three sections. Several minutes later came a third sighting of something moving under water (Gaal 2001, 62–67).

Gaal (2001, 62–66; 2005) agrees there were several “creatures” (she counted seven) in the first video sequence, and I think they look remarkably like otters. I also believe the second and third sequences do not represent a single three-section creature but rather otters swimming in a line.⁴

Yet another videotape, shot by Ken Chaplin on July 17, 1989, has been dismissed by wildlife experts as “most likely a large river otter or beaver” (Gaal 2001, 71), and John Kirk is among many who agree (1998, 64).

Conclusions

Despite many sincere eyewitnesses, a critical look at the evidence yields no proof of a large unknown creature inhabiting Lake Okanagan. Mundane explanations can account for the reports, and the very best sightings may be of Northern River Otters swimming in a line. They imitate the very look of a serpentine creature—an image inherited from sea-monster tales and Native American legends—that people now expect to see, and some indeed do perceive, on “the lake of mystery.”

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Greater depths have been claimed, e.g., “nearly 1,000 feet (305m)” (Gaal 2001, 14).
2. A palindromic word, phrase, etc., that reads the same forward or backward.
3. The facts regarding the song have often been misreported. For example, Blackman (1998, 71–72) says W.H. Brimblecombe wrote the song, and Gaal (2001, 88) that it was sung at Vernon in 1924.
4. An alternate skeptical view comes from an FBI video specialist, Grant Fredricks (2005), who analyzed the DeMara video and concluded that what he saw was “very consistent with debris from a fallen tree in the water . . . the objects very slowly bob up and down.” He also pointed out, as we did, that the objects don’t react to the approaching boat or skier, nor does the skier seem at all alarmed by the objects. This suggests that the skier recognized whatever was in the lake and knew it was not unusual, nor a threat.

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