



Searching for the Yowie, the Down Under Bigfoot

Like the fabled Yeti or Abominable Snowman of the Himalaya Mountains, and the Sasquatch/Bigfoot of North America, Australia's Yowie (or Yahoo, among many other names) is a supposed hairy man-beast that leaves strange tracks and wonderment wherever it ambles. Equated with an entity from Aboriginal mythology, also called *Dulagarl* (or *Doolagabl*, "great hairy man"), it was regarded as a magical being from the time of creation—what Aborigines call the Dreamtime. Interestingly, however, "[M]any early Europeans claimed to have seen the Yowie, many years before they came to learn about it from the aborigines" (Gilroy 1976, 9). It remains, according to cryptozoologist Loren Coleman (2006), "one of the world's greatest zoological or anthropological mysteries."

I first went in search of the creature in 2000 guided by skeptic Peter Rodgers. We ventured into the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, which—according to Yowie popularizer Rex Gilroy (1995, 212)—"continues to be a hotbed of Yowie man-beast activities—a vast region of hundreds of square miles containing inaccessible forest regions seldom if ever visited by Europeans." We drove into the Katoomba township bushland and took the world's steepest incline railway (originally built as a coal-mine transport in 1878) down into Jamison Valley rainforest where Gilroy



Figure 1. Yowie statue in Yowie Park at Kilcoy, Queensland, Australia [Author's photo].

himself once reported an encounter (1976, 10). We next drove to Jenolan Caves—which Gilroy (1995, 219) claims the Aborigines believed to be Yowie lairs—and bushwalked (hiked) through the surrounding mountainous terrain in a vain search for the elusive creature (Nickell 2001, 16–17).

In 2015, before and after the annual Australian Skeptics National Convention in Brisbane (of which I was honored to be a headliner) held October 16–18, I was able to resume my quest for the Yowie (and began several other investigations). I am indebted to Ross Balch for his tireless help in Brisbane and rural Queensland to the north, and to Kevin Davies and Nick Ware for their dedicated assistance in Canberra and the New South Wales countryside. I photographed a Yowie with a rather wooden personality, did research at an Aboriginal institute, and kept an eye out for any exotic creature in the wild. Here is some of what I found.

Will the Real Yowie . . .

My study began when Ross Balch drove Myles Power and me through scattered Yowie territory to Yowie Park at Kilcoy. There, with parrots flitting about, we took photographs of the cracked wooden sculpture of the fabled man-beast (Figure 1). As I did so I quipped, "It doesn't get more real than this!" I meant that, of course,

to apply to skeptics' sightings: Yowies seem not to appear to skeptics—even those looking for them, although it is obligatory for those who report encounters to insist they were previously skeptical.

But what about the Aboriginal elder who insisted, regarding the *Dulagarl*, “He only appears to Aboriginal people” (Mumbulla 1997)? Do the numerous non-Aboriginal sightings contradict him? Or is it possible he is talking about a quite different being—not the Yowie/Yahoo who today apes (so to speak) Bigfoot, but rather his people’s supernatural entity who could induce sleep and fly through the air to kidnap lone women from the bush, yet who—according to some tribal/regional traditions—contrastingly carried clubs, used fire, and ate men. Other creatures of Aboriginal lore included the Quinkins who, variously shaped, were generally quite small; however, the giant Quinkin, Turramulli, towered over tall trees, had three taloned fingers on each hand, and as many clawed toes on each foot (Healy and Cropper 1994, 116, 118; 2006, 6–12). None of these entities sounds like a Bigfoot type.

Indeed, just as Bigfoot was originally a “wild man of the woods” adapted from European tales and retrofitted onto Native American supernatural beings synthesized for the purpose (Nickell 2011; Loxton and Prothero 2013, 30–36), the Yowie/Yahoo is similarly derivative. Australian examples (from “A Catalogue of Cases” 2006) show that the earliest reports—the first in 1789 being acknowledged as “obviously a hoax,” and continuing well after the beginning of the twentieth century—were sightings of a “WILD MAN or monstrous GIANT,” a “Hairy Man,” “in appearance half man, half baboon,” “wild man of the bush,” “like a black-fellow [Aborigine] only considerably larger,” “hairy men,” “an old man . . . covered with a thick coat of hair,” “the hairy man of the wood,” and so on.

As an example, in 1871 a “little girl” reported an encounter that was part of a “wild man” tradition in the area. She described an old man having a bent back, a covering of hair, tremendously

long fingernails, and being about the height of her grandfather. He seemed to wish to avoid the girl (“A Catalogue” 2006, 207).

The term *Yowie* appears to have been used little if at all during this period, but the appellation “yourie” or “yowrie” appears by perhaps the 1920s, maybe after the Yowrie River or the nearby crossroads community of Yowrie, named by 1885. There was a Yowie Bay, but it was originally named Ewey Bay after the offspring of ewes called “eweys” (Healy and Cropper 2006, 13–143, 25), so the term *Yowie* may not be aboriginal at all (“A Catalogue” 2006, 217; Healy and Cropper 2006, 14, 25).

Yowie’s image may well up from the subconscious and be superimposed on the visual scene.

Yahoos

Moreover, if we consider the earlier, parallel term “Yahoo,” we must at once recall that it was used—indeed invented¹—by English satirist Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726, 343–351). It describes his race of hairy, goat-bearded, manlike animals. Swift’s Yahoos are brutes but, satirically, have human depravities.

By 1856 comes a report of a man-beast described alternately as a “wild man of the woods” or a “yahoo.” A case of uncertain date in the 1860s involved a twelve-foot-tall Yahoo that had webbed feet and belched fire. In the same decade a Miss Derrincourt encountered “something in the shape of a very tall man, seemingly covered with

a coat of hair . . . what the people here call a Yahoo or some such name.” Still another case of that period involved an encounter with a “hideous yahoo” near an abandoned village (“A Catalogue” 2006, 204–206).

Graham Joyner (1994) conducted an in-depth study of the issue, which he reported in *Canberra Historical Journal*. He found that Aborigines probably adopted the term *Yahoo* from settlers, rather than the other way around.

‘Littlefoot’

In addition to the “hairy giant” tradition, another type of Yowie is represented by the Aborigines’ *Junjudees* (among other terms). These are small, hairy, magical creatures comparable to European fairies, elves, and leprechauns. Still, they seem as real as any if we believe the stories of teenagers who encountered them in 1978–1979 on Towers Hill, near Charters Towers, Queensland. One teen was attacked but claimed to have fought off the three-foot-tall creature with a rock (Healy and Cropper 2006, 120–121). Among many other reports were multiple sightings of similar creatures in 1994 in the vicinity of Carnarvon Gorge in Queensland (Pinkney 2003, 31–32).

Some Aborigines emphasize the *Junjudees*’ supernatural powers, telling colorful tales about their exploits. For instance, they are guardian beings of certain places, are mischievous, and are attracted to honey. They are also a sort of bogeyman, used to keep children from wandering off, according to *Australian Folklore* (Ryan 2002, 137–138).

Yowie hunters, somewhat embarrassed by the little hairy folk, rationalize that they may be very young Yowies—no matter what Aborigines say about their “indigenous fairies” (as one researcher calls them [Povah 2006]).

What Manner of Beast?

Yowies are described in a widely diverse manner—beginning with height, which, based on 263 cases (“A Catalogue” 2006), ranges from about two to thirteen feet. The earliest-known record of an

Aboriginal sighting came in July 1871 when a “gorilla”-like creature was encountered, but we must keep in mind that due to their long isolation on the Australian island-continent, the Aborigines had no knowledge of primates other than man. It was the early settlers and journalists who began to describe man-beasts with terms such as “huge monkey or baboon,” “upright gorilla,” and so on—from 1849 to the present.

In the early 1870s, in New South Wales, prospectors saw what they thought were “hairy men creeping around their tents,” but a *Sydney Mail* correspondent concluded, “They were probably the large badgers or wombats which abound there” (“A Catalogue” 2006, 207). Wombats, marsupials that somewhat resemble (according to *American Heritage Dictionary* 1970) “small bears,” may well be responsible for a number of other Yowie reports.

The kangaroo and its cousins the wallaby and the wallaroo are also good suspects. When, in 1954, three Queensland youths reported an encounter with a six-foot-tall creature covered with hair, possessing a long tail, and having an “apron” draped from its waist, the latter detail was an obvious clue pointing to a marsupial pouch. Someone suggested that the boys had been scared by “a cranky old wallaroo” (“A Catalogue” 2006, 224). Again, other cases may be explained by such related marsupials.

In addition to animals, there are numerous other possibilities: hoaxes, including those of a diminutive man who wore a hairy suit with bicycle-reflector eyes (Healy and Cropper 2006, 168–169); claims made by persons with fantasy-prone personalities and by ubiquitous attention seekers; real wild men, like a bearded, naked, mentally disturbed man mistaken for a Yowie (“A Catalogue” 2006, 262); and many other possibilities, including simple hallucinations and apparitional experiences. For example, “waking dreams” that occur between wakefulness and sleep (Nickell 2012, 353–354) may explain some cases of persons waking to see a Yowie looking at them (see Healy

and Cropper 2006, 105, 170–171, 223). Again, like sightings of ghosts—typically seen when the percipient is tired, performing routine work, daydreaming, or the like—a Yowie’s image may well up from the subconscious and be superimposed on the visual scene (Nickell 2012, 345).

‘Bigfoot’

The American Sasquatch—after 1958 usually called Bigfoot (Nickell 2011, 68)—no doubt had an influence on Yowie sightings. That is especially so after 1967 when Roger Patterson’s famous hoax film greatly publicized that elusive manimal (Nickell 2011, 68–72).

Patterson’s “Bigsuit” (a modified gorilla costume) had pendulous breasts, one of several details found in Australian cases occurring (or being reported) only post-Patterson (at least as found in “A Catalogue” 2006). In addition to breasts, these motifs include Bigfoot’s legendary foul odor; large, clawless, human-like footprints; and possibly other features (cf. Bord and Bord 2006, 215–310).

The Yowie is becoming increasingly standardized in its appearance. It is sometimes said that it resembles “depictions of the American Bigfoot” or that “America’s Bigfoot would be an identical type” (“A Catalogue” 2006, 239, 271; cf. Nickell 2011, 225–229; 2013).

Even so, people I spoke with generally dismissed the Yowie. In 2000, for example, staffers at the information center at Echo Point in the Blue Mountains (Nickell 2001, 17) insisted the Yowie was only a mythical creature pursued by a few fringe enthusiasts, and this seems to remain the majority view. Several people laughed at my query, and a young bookstore employee in Canberra told me that, although having been born and raised in the Blue Mountains, she had never seen a Yowie or had reason to take the possibility seriously. Still, the wooden statue at Kilcoy stares vacantly on, a little monument to belief. ■

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Note

1. The invention of the word is credited to Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels*, 1726, by the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971).

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