

Denizens of the deep

Author gathers stories of lake monsters in Wisconsin



Submitted illustration

Author Chad Lewis had an artist sketch this drawing, which reflects a sea monster in Lake Koshkonong described by two fishermen who said they saw it in 1887.

TO LEARN MORE

The 162-page “Lake Monsters of Wisconsin” by Chad Lewis was published in 2016 by On the Road Publications. For more information, visit [chadlewisresearch.com/default](http://chadlewisresearch.com/default.html).html.



ANNA MARIE LUX
BETWEEN THE
LINES

On a cold November day in 1887, two hunters on Lake Koshkonong insisted they saw something other than ducks. The shocked men reported a snake-like creature that kept its head out of the water as it swam to the middle of the lake.

They estimated the unknown beast to be

up to 40 feet long.

By the time an Oshkosh newspaper reported the story, the creature had grown to 60 feet in the retelling.

Was it nothing more than a giant fish?

Writer Chad Lewis explores the story in a recently published book, “Lake Monsters of Wisconsin,” featuring lake-monster legends from all over the state.



Submitted photo

Chad Lewis is author of 'Lake Monsters of Wisconsin,' which gathers stories of sightings of water creatures in the state. A number of accounts of local sightings is included in the book.

Lewis, who is known for his books about the paranormal, has traveled worldwide in search of the unusual, including a trip to Scotland to search for the elusive Loch Ness monster.

But the Eau Claire man found material for his most recent project close to home.

"It's time for the classic images of Wisconsin—namely cheese, beer and crazy Green Bay Packers fans—to step aside and make room on the notoriety mantle for lake monsters," Lewis said. "No other state in the United States can claim as many different legends of sea serpents and monsters as Wisconsin."

People have reported strange creatures spanning two centuries in more than 40 lakes and

rivers in the state, he said.

Lewis found most of the monster accounts by searching local historical societies and newspaper databases naming real people.

“In many cases, newspapers put in the names of witnesses,” Lewis said. “They were some of the most prominent people in the area: bankers, mayors, police officers. People took big chances reporting what they saw because their reputations are everything.”

Lewis dedicates the book to folklorist Charles E. Brown, who spent years collecting Wisconsin lake-monster stories and published a pamphlet of 10 stories in the 1940s.

“The pamphlet was invaluable, but it is only a tiny portion of what is out there,” Lewis said. “A lot of what I dug up is not in any book.”

In addition to Lake Koshkonong, Geneva Lake, Delavan Lake and the Rock River have their own monster sightings.

In Geneva Lake, witnesses saw a creature described as a giant scale-covered sea serpent as recently as the 20th century, Lewis said.

On Sept. 29, 1902, The Janesville Gazette reported the sighting of a snake-like creature 65 feet long and from 8 inches to 10 inches in diameter. Townspeople even named the odd lake inhabitant “Jenny.”

By 1906, The Gazette actively sought reports of the monster when it asked: “Where are all the sea serpent and fish stories of the present summer? Both Lake Delavan and Lake Geneva so far have been free from the awful horror.”

Later articles called into question the sobriety of the witnesses and said that any large creature would have a hard time hiding in Geneva Lake’s crystal clear water.

Lewis found no clue of a sea creature when he visited Lake Geneva a few years ago.

“I finally departed without any substantial evidence of the serpent,” he said. “Yet even so, I continue to hope that somewhere out there Jenny is still scaring unsuspecting tourists.”

On Delavan Lake, a fisherman in August 1902 came home with a story about seeing a 45-foot creature covered in huge “yellow scales that shone like brass.” In the days afterward, curious spectators flocked to the lake’s shoreline hoping to see the monster.

Even the Rock River was not immune of strange-creature reports.

In September 1903, two brothers played alongside the river at Spring Brook when they saw a bizarre looking creature crawl out of the water and onto a log. They ran home and told their older brother, who quickly returned with a gun. He shot the animal, which turned

out to be a 3-foot alligator.

Lewis said the hardest part of writing the book was its conclusion.

“I am really left with more questions than answers,” he said. “If some of these sightings are unknown creatures, then why hasn’t somebody caught one? Why hasn’t a dead one drifted to shore?”

He speculates that some rivers and lakes may be the last places where strange creatures can survive.

“Part of me is happy I did not officially solve any of these cases,” Lewis said. “Maybe these legends are not meant to be solved. I love the folklore of it all. I love the idea that 100 years from now someone may be hesitant to dip their feet in the water because of a monster story.”

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