

The Lake Iliamna monster...

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calms down when he sleeps.

Adding a measure of credibility to the monster fables are reports from pilots, guides and fishermen who insist they have seen an enormous creature in the depths of the water. Many people say they have searched the lake by air and spotted the big, swimming beast.

LIKE THE Loch Ness monster in Scotland, the Iliamna monster is a myth many would like to preserve. The idea that there may be a creature of the deep in Alaska who stirs up storms and capsizes boats is mysterious and exciting.

"Every country has its monster," says outdoor writer H.M. "Mike" Hershberger, "and every monster adds a little color to the country. Because Alaska is wilderness country, I'm glad we have a fairly ferocious one."

ALTHOUGH doubtful that the monster is supernatural, Hershberger would hate to see the legend die.

The pilots and guides who swear to have seen the creature say it has been spotted in a number of places on the lake, which is nearly the size of Rhode Island. It covers an area of 1,000 square miles, and is the seventh largest fresh water lake in the world. Lake Iliamna is at least 80 miles long and more than 25 miles wide at some points. It is located on the Alaska Peninsula, and connected to Bristol Bay and the ocean by the Kvichak River.

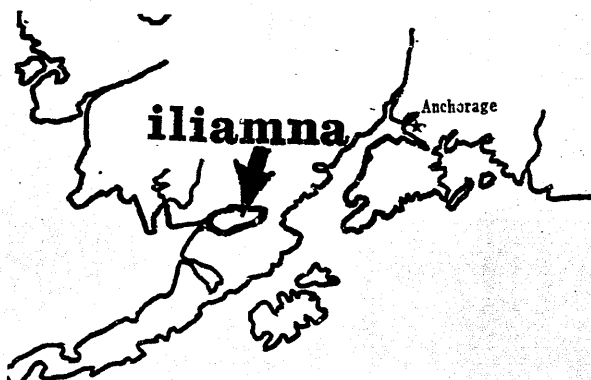
Children who grow up in the villages that ring the lake grow up in great fear of the Iliamna monster, giving it credit for the evil in their life.

They believe it drowns children who go close to the lake. Older believers insist too that it will snatch up caribou swimming across it.

ENTERPRISING sportsmen have tried to catch it with hook, steel wire and a huge chunk of meat for bait. In one story, an airplane strut was ripped when a baited line was hung from the strut into the water.

Another story is told by a man who says he tied a heavy line to a tree and baited the line with meat. When he returned the next day the meat was gone, and the tree had been pulled out of the ground.

"I don't know anyone who has ever seen the monster," says Ruben Gaines, writer and radio-television announcer who once lived near Lake Iliamna.



"But I've talked to lots of friends who say they have seen it."

WHEN GAINES lived near the lake, he was surrounded by Iliamna monster lore. The Kenai Indians, for instance, once believed that the monster was a harbinger of death.

"Their belief in the monster took the form of voodoo," says Gaines. "I actually talked to an old man who said he saw someone shrivel up and die after he had seen it."

Like all mythical, unseen fantasies, the monster is exciting for those with any kind of imagination. "It's the type of thing people like to believe in," Gaines says.

As recently as 1960 there were people living near the lake who wouldn't dare go out in a red-bottomed boat. Guides, such as Paul Carlson who lives in the village of Iliamna, remembers people who refused to get into a red boat. They insisted that the monster didn't like that color, and would destroy anything painted red.

DESPITE a love of fantasy, most people now assume that any monster in Lake Iliamna is actually an oversized fish (or maybe even a number of huge fish). No one has ever caught one, but theories debunking the monster superstitions say that it is really a monstrous-sized sturgeon or beluga whale.

According to Mike Hershberger, the Kvichak River linking the lake to the ocean could provide access for strange sea animals. Reports from pilots who have flown over the lake and claim to have spotted it say it is light colored and perhaps 12 to 20 feet long.

It could be a beluga whale, but Iliamna resident Paul Carlson doubts it. "I've never seen the thing myself," says Carlson, "but I would doubt it's a whale. Whales surface, and we'd be seeing one more often

than we do."

CARLSON, and others, theorize that it is a sturgeon — or a number of sturgeon — who could stay in deep water, propagate and never show themselves at all.

Carlson knows a number of pilots who say they have spotted the fish from the air when the water is clam and clear, and from their descriptions it is a world-record fish of some kind. Sturgeon could live in the waters of Iliamna and there have been sturgeon caught elsewhere weighing up to 2000 pounds.

Surprisingly, no dead sturgeon (or any other monstrous fish) has ever turned up on shore. But the water temperature at Iliamna is such that a dead one would not float, and would be devoured by other fish in the lake.

About 10 years ago a \$1000 reward was offered for the big fish, but there were no takers. There is no sport fishing in Lake Iliamna anyway (only in its streams) and only a few have ever had the desire or patience to try to bait the huge ones.

"Each year fishermen will end a season and tell me they plan to get the monster next year," says Carlson. "They never do."

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