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Effort seeks to uncover lake's purported monster

By ALEX DeMARBAN Anchorage Daily News

May 15, 2019



In 2017, Mark Stigar, a retired colonel and former chief aviation officer for the Alaska Army National Guard, was using halibut gear on a lead line while fishing in Alaska's Iliamna Lake. Something ravaged his gear. Could it have been the Iliamna Lake monster?

Bill Roth/AP

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — The mysterious animal that people say they see in Iliamna Lake is dark, longer than 15 feet, and has a long head and tail and distinct fins. It isn't a whale or a seal, and it often vanishes quickly.

Fishermen have tried hooking it. The Anchorage Daily News once offered \$100,000 for proof of its existence. But so far, no one has photographed the creature some call the Iliamna Lake monster.

Palmer resident Bruce Wright, a former marine ecologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, hopes to solve the riddle once and for all this summer. He plans to sink an underwater video camera to the bottom of the sprawling Southwest Alaska lake that's the largest and one of the deepest in the state.

People call Iliamna Lake an inland sea. It's 80 miles long, with a rare population of freshwater harbor seals scientists believe moved in from the ocean long ago, and an old legend that something huge lives in its 1,000-foot depths.

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The TV series “River Monsters” featured it in 2010, piquing Wright’s curiosity and sparking his personal quest to find the animal. He was skeptical until two years ago, when a friend who put out baited hooks to catch the creature reported that something very big had shredded his fishing gear.

“This could lead to an exciting new discovery,” said Wright, senior scientist for a regional Aleut tribal organization.

Residents from lakeside villages say tales of the beast are not imaginary. Observations over the years are consistent — they’re of huge aquatic creatures, often sharklike in appearance.

“It’s just part of life out here,” said Gary Nielsen, owner of the general store in Kokhanok and a longtime fisherman. “A lot of old-timers refuse to travel on the lake because of it.”

Two years ago, he and other village residents saw what looked like a group of creatures swimming at the surface for a few seconds. They were about a mile away when he spotted them through binoculars. The longest was very large, maybe 65 feet long, he said. Others were slightly smaller.

“They were gigantic” but didn’t appear to be whales, he said. “I have no idea what we saw.”

There could be plausible explanations for some sightings, said Forrest Bowers, a biologist with the state’s commercial fisheries division. Maybe they’re beluga whales following salmon up the Kvichak River from the Pacific Ocean, he said. Or maybe they’re the seals, appearing extra-large because of visual distortions. Then again, who knows.

“It’s a big lake,” he said. “And there are likely things we don’t know about big lakes like that.”

Wright thinks the animals are large sleeper sharks that can grow to be 20 feet long and far outlive humans — like their better-studied cousins, Greenland sharks, which can live for more than 300 years. Some believe they’re sturgeon, which can also grow to be 20 feet long.

“There’s definitely something down there,” and it’s big, said Mark Stigar, a retired colonel and former chief aviation officer for the Alaska Army National Guard whose heavy-duty fishing gear was mangled by the mystery monster.

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