

SPORTS & OUTDOORS

THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2017

Alaska Dispatch News | www.adn.com

Section C

Lake Iliamna monster lore resurfaces with new sightings

PILE BAY — I was piloting a 32-foot Bristol Bay drift boat on Lake Iliamna enroute to the Iliamna portage to Cook Inlet near Pile Bay. A friend and his wife accompanied me in their vessel. The woman had little boating experience and was understandably nervous on her first trip across a large body of water. After all, Lake Iliamna may well have monsters.

The so-called Lake Iliamna monster has been in local lore for generations. The villages of Kakhonak, Newhalen and Pile Bay on Lake Iliamna all have their stories of an unknown creature of incredible size. There is an old Native tale of giant sea creatures that could move between the seen and unseen worlds.

Regardless of whether or not Iliamna monsters existed, when I first traveled to the country surrounding the lake as a boy in the 1960s, I heard the stories. Something big and potentially dangerous, lived in Lake Iliamna. Locals were nervous about crossing the lake in small craft, especially near the town of Kakhonak.



**JOHN
SCHANDELMEIER**
OUTDOORS

A few days ago, the unknown resurfaced near that village.

On June 19, some kids spotted an unrecognized creature the size of a large whale offshore near the town. A day or so later, others in Kakhonak also saw the creature. A village resident, Gary Nielson, gave Dillingham radio station KDLG the following account:

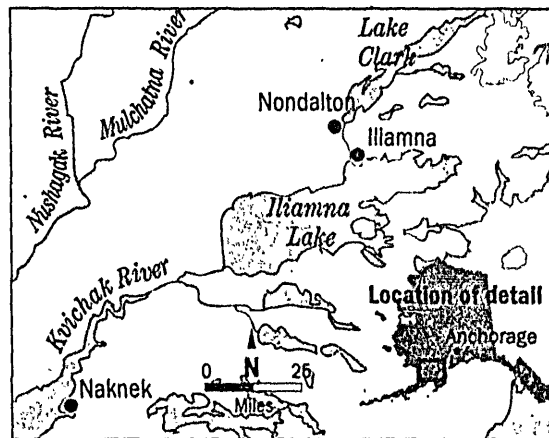
"There was more than one, at least three. The first was the biggest, maybe double the size of a 32-foot gillnetter. The animal either blew like a whale, or spit water from

his mouth or something. The smaller animals behind him did the same but not as dramatic. They were black or very dark gray. They surfaced like whales for maybe two to three seconds about a mile offshore. I am at a total loss as to what they could be."

There have been many sightings of a lake monster over the decades. This one stands out in that there were at least six adults and a number of children present. Two adults had binoculars. All agree as to what they saw.

Past sightings of the Lake Iliamna creature have led to guesses. Could it be a sturgeon? In the mid-1990s a couple of green sturgeon were caught in a subsistence net on the Naknek beach. Folks have long speculated that sturgeon could have easily made their way up the Kvichak River into Iliamna. However, sturgeon don't grow that big.

Iliamna is also home to a healthy population of freshwater seals. A surfacing seal spotted in a thinning fog could easily be magnified to the viewer. There was no fog on



KEVIN POWELL / Anchorage Daily News

the day of the Kakhonak viewing. Huge multicolored brown fish have been spotted. To me and others, this just sounds like a large lake trout.

Several decades ago, Stu Ramstead, who owned a guide camp near the head of the Mulchatna River drainage not far to the north, is purported to have laid out set lines for the mysterious Iliamna creature. Stu used several 5-gallon

Blazo cans for his floats, baited some large hooks and set his lines out near the islands above Kakhonak. A few days passed without activity. However, one day Stu flew over to check on his sets and found them gone. An extensive air search found his Blazo cans near an island beach crushed flat from pressure. We will never know what pulled those floats down deep enough to

crush them by pressure. Or was this just a story?

Ramstead's account may be a fisherman's story. The mystical monster of Native legend may be just that, but there is no doubt the recent sighting is not fictitious. Too many saw the same thing at the same time. All present agree that there was some sort of wake.

Fiction does not leave a wake that much of the town can see. The people reporting the most recent sightings are not tourists. They are experienced observers familiar with the country around them and the ways of Alaska's largest lake, the third largest lake that's entirely in the United States.

At first, I laughed when I heard folks say, "There be monsters." But I remembered that phrase and I am not chuckling any longer.

John Schandelmeier is a lifelong Alaskan who lives with his family near Paxson. He is a Bristol Bay commercial fisherman and two-time winner of the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race.