

TELL IT

TO... Bud

ILIAMNA'S MONSTER: FACT OR LEGEND?

Dear Bud:

Second perhaps only to the famous "monster" of Loch Lomond in Scotland is the world famous "monster" of Lake Iliamna, here in Alaska. However, I have never heard it mentioned up here, and I am wondering if you have any information on the subject.

Gilbert K. Burgerhoff

Dear Mr. Burgerhoff:

The legend is ancient, and belief in it ranges from rejection to total acceptance.

Robert O. Bowen, in his "Alaska Dictionary," describes the monster as "a large creature inhabiting Lake Iliamna," some 30 feet long, according to descriptions by natives of the area. Says Mr. Bowen:

"Many Iliamna natives will not go out onto the lake in a boat painted red, nor will many old time natives show their faces over the side of a boat in deep water. . . . The monster has been explained away as a Beluga whale or a huge halibut or even a particularly vast pike, none of which it acts like. . . . Many white hunters have seen huge creatures swirling the surface like trout, but photographs of the monster show only a vague, dark shape. No authenticated record exists of the monster eating anyone, but many credible witnesses attest its existence."

Frank Stefanich, regional supervisor for the state's Division of Sports Fish here, suggests that almost every large lake has a monster—or at least the legend of one.

"There are Beluga whales at the mouth of the Kvichak River, and this may be what some people observe," says Mr. Stefanich. "There is also a possibility of sturgeon in the lake, as one was caught in Cook Inlet about five years ago by a commercial fisherman."

And he has his own view of the monster. So long as the condition of fishing in the area is not blamed on the monster, "I can see no harm in the story."

John Walatka of Northern Consolidated Airlines is a believer, if not in monsters, at least in the existence of large and unidentified fish in the lake. "I personally believe them to be either a species of shark or a small species of Beluga whale that apparently got into fresh water and never returned to sea. Others have different opinions," reports Mr. Walatka. "A certain pilot in the area also claims that a species of octopus lives in the lake, and fresh-water seals are known to abound and were extremely numerous in the upper island area of Lake Iliamna."

He also tells of a flight over the lake back in 1941 with a Fish and Wildlife man, the late C. M. Carson. "We spotted the huge mystery fish—about 10 or 12 of them—near a small island off the shore of what is known as Big Mountain. At the time we spotted the fish, we were cruising at an altitude of around 1,000 feet, and as we turned and slowed our aircraft down to get a better look, the big fish seemed to sink slowly into the deep water, but not before we had several looks at them."

Another view is reported by Alaska Sportsman magazine. "Hair seal or Beluga—maybe. Monster, no."

Bud

