



These are just some of Illinois' fantastic beasts. (Phil Geib)

Planning to go trick-or-treating in the next few days? Planning to merely leave the house?

Not to scare you, but depending on where you live: There may be a giant humanoidlike creature on the loose; it has yellow eyes and black fur and was last spotted near Champaign by construction workers, bounding across a highway into the brush.

Not that you're safer in southern Illinois: They have giant birds that carry off livestock. Northwest Illinois? Wolfmen, for sure. In the Chicago area, since at least the 1970s, there have been police reports -- made by police officers -- of phantom kangaroos. (Yes, kangaroos.) Lately, since April, there have been sightings of long, thin, flying "Mothmen," soaring along the Calumet River, above Adler Planetarium and Willis Tower.

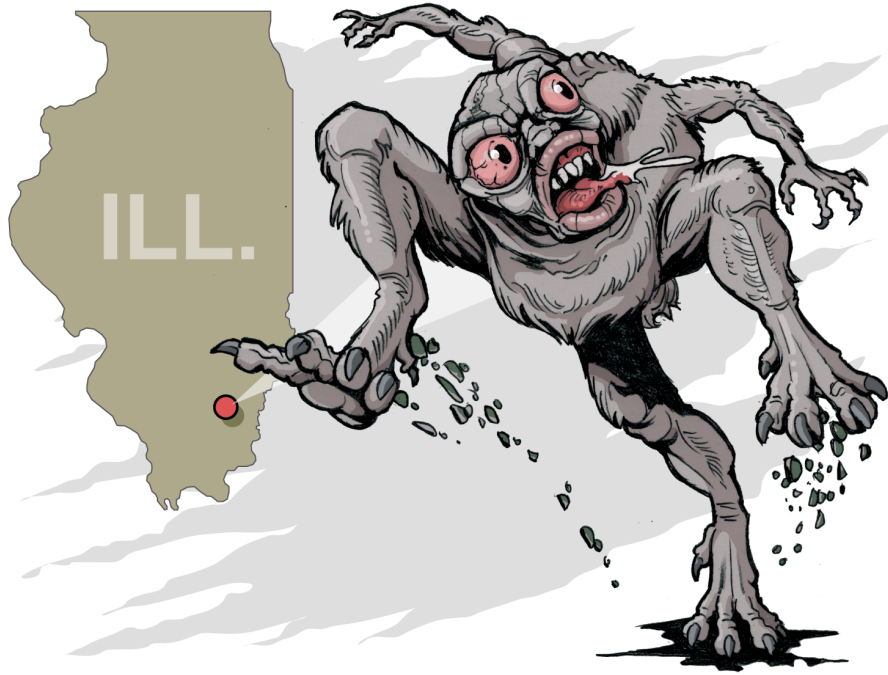
All of which is to say: For as long as it has been a state, Illinois has been abundant in cryptozoological species -- that is, mysterious, elusive monsters that have more basis in folklore and imagination than reality. Did you know, for instance, according to the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, which tracks "credible" reports of the legendary creature, Illinois has the fourth-highest number of sightings in the country? (Since 1967, in Cook County alone, there have been 16 Bigfoot run-ins.)

Illinois has so many fantastical beasts, you may want to know where to find them. What follows is a field guide to the state's most intriguing crypto-

creatures. After all, said Andy Snider, curator of herpetology and aquatics at the Brookfield Zoo, "history is full of creatures once considered crypto-species, now shown to exist. The coelacanth, a long-extinct fish -- found in 1938. Mammals are still being found, and even if a (beast) is not necessarily real, there is often a spark of truth there -- I would like to think there are things out there we still don't know about."

fig. 1

The Enfield Horror



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Southeastern Illinois

Lore:

In the 1940s, a leaping, simian-esque oddity was spotted in the small town of Mount Vernon. In the 1970s, a similar beast, now with three legs and eyes as bright as flashlights, was seen several times in nearby Enfield, by a young boy and his neighbor (on the same night), then later by a local radio news director.

Some say it was an escaped chemistry experiment. Some say it was alien. Loren Coleman, founder of the International Cryptozoology Museum in Maine (and a central Illinois native), investigated at the time: "It made quite a stir, and not so much now. Some saw a deformed kangaroo. I thought of it as a variation on an ape."

fig. 2

Lake Michigan Sea Serpent



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: About a mile offshore, roughly Wilmette to Hyde Park

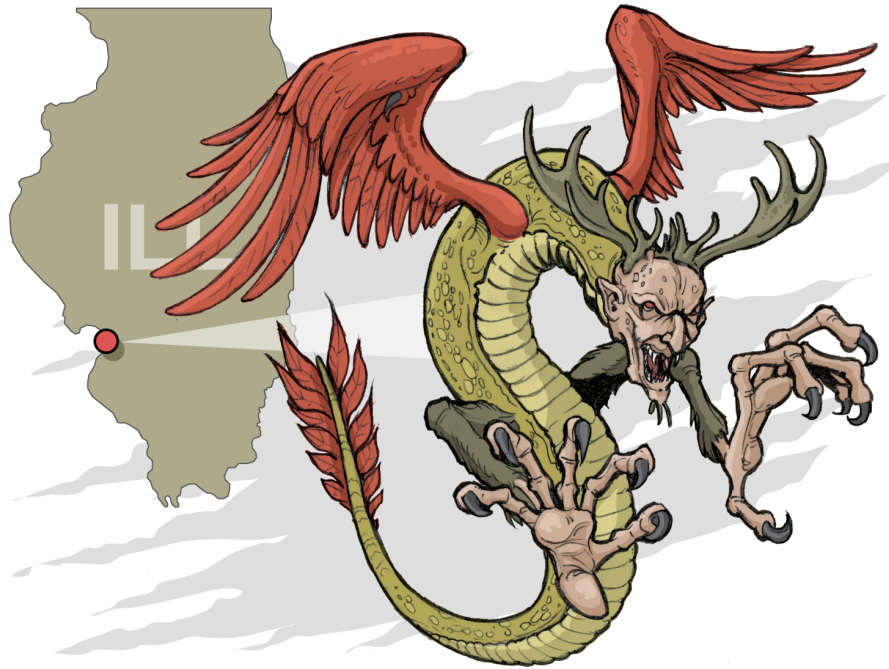
Lore:

According to an 1893 Tribune story, officers at Fort Sheridan on the North Shore (now the Sheridan Reserve Center) were so shaken by local sea-serpent sightings, they "signed a pledge to let liquor alone."

Chicago, however, signed no such pledge, and from the 1860s to the 1930s, reports of a Lake Michigan serpent were frequent. "I looked through my opera glasses and I could see it was not like a boat," a Lincoln Park resident told this newspaper in 1899. Though unlike Pressie (Lake Superior), Champ (Lake Champlain) or Bessie (Lake Erie), Lake Michigan's monster never had a clear identity.

fig. 3

Giant birds



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Central and southern Illinois

Lore:

In summer 1977, a 10-year-old boy outside Lincoln was attacked by giant birds; according to reports at the time, he was carried 30 feet and dropped. Farther south, in the town of Alton, 17th-century explorers once found an image of a dragonlike bird painted on a local bluff.

The Piasa, a Native American myth, has haunted the area ever since. Linda Godfrey, Michigan-based author of several books of American monster lore, said: "There's a group nickname for these large birds: 'Bigclaw.' But my favorite variation is 'Batsquatch.' Isn't that kind of terrific?" (She notes that an African marabou stork did escape briefly from the Brookfield Zoo, in summer 1977; but it likely was not the bird that attacked the child.)

fig. 4

Abominable Swamp Slobs



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Carbondale area

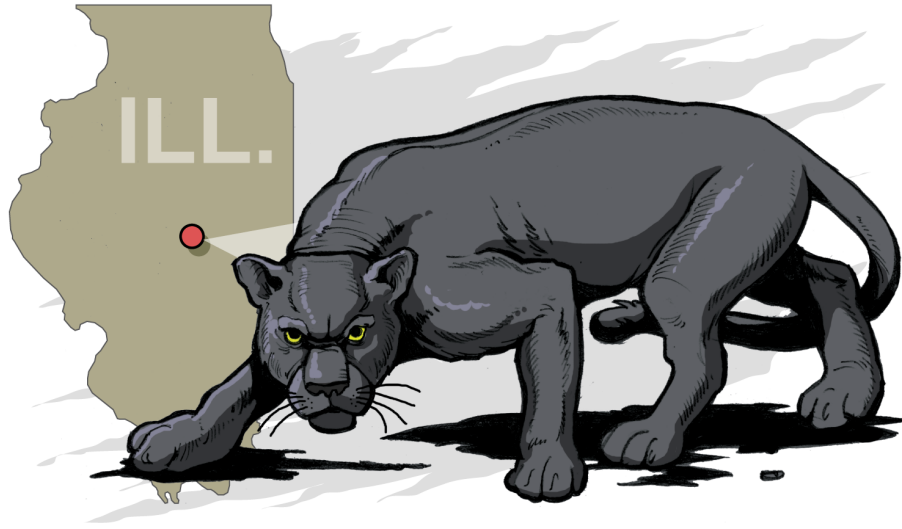
Lore:

Not to be confused with the Stump Pond Monster or Tuttle Bottoms Monster, the elusive A.S.S. -- as it was cheekily named by late lore expert John Keel (author of "The Mothman Prophecies") -- is occasionally associated with "vertically descending" lights, implying an extra-terrestrial.

If so, legend says it's a smelly alien. The most famous Illinois A.S.S is the Murphysboro Mud Monster, spotted throughout summer 1973. Witnesses included a four-year old boy who told his parents, according to the alt-travel guide "Weird Illinois," "a big white ghost" was in the backyard. (The neighbors saw it, too.)

fig. 5

Giant Black Panthers



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Decatur area

Lore:

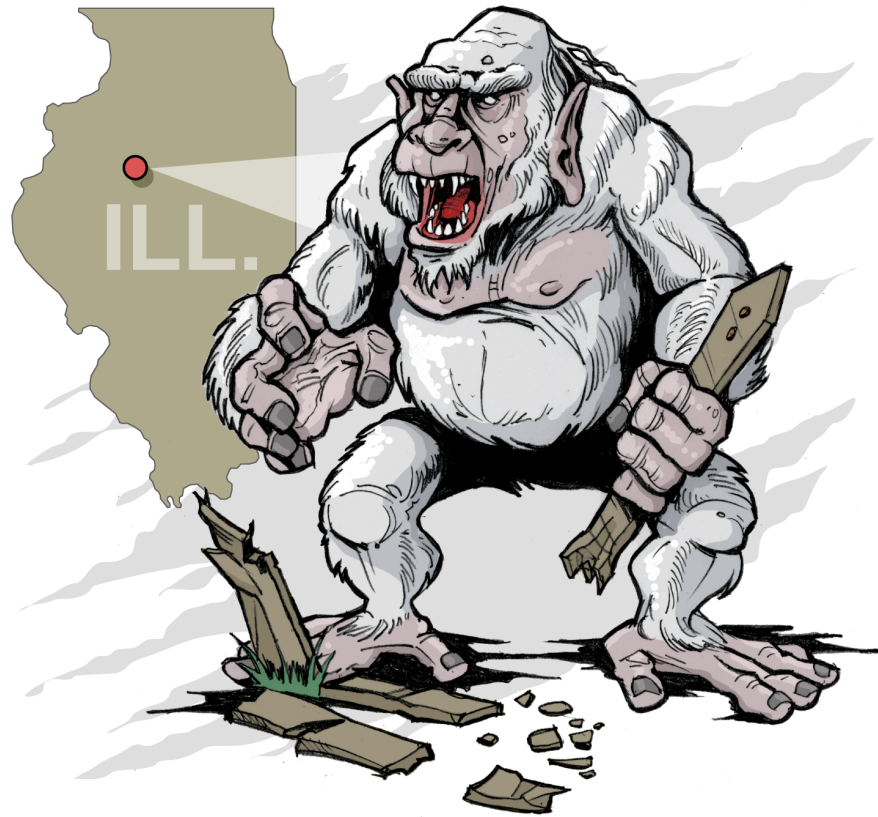
Of all the cryptozoological species in Illinois, this one is the least imaginary. For decades, Illinois has been rife with tales of large mysterious black cats racing through fields and slinking back into wooded areas. There's often a touch of "The Hound of the Baskervilles" to stories -- brutal lunges at throats and disappeared farm animals.

Coleman's "Mysterious America" -- the Bible of North American mythological creatures -- lists dozens of sightings, going back to 1917. Coleman himself said he saw one in 1969, and that he figures "one or two possible explanations": a strain of dark mountain lion ("yet to be confirmed") or an American lion, a massive cat that last existed during the Ice Age.

Snider of the Brookfield Zoo has a simpler answer: "Cougars are now regularly seen now throughout the United States, in places where you don't expect. Many of them moving into new areas, and I would be more surprised if there wasn't a cougar or two in Illinois."

fig. 6

The Cole Hollow Road Monster



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Peoria area

Lore:

Not to be confused with the similar Farmer City Monster. The Cole Hollow Road Monster -- or Cohomo, as locals call him -- was so popular in the summer of 1972 that more than 200 cars turned up at Cole Hollow Road to catch a glimpse. A month later, a 100-man search party set out to capture it, until a volunteer shot himself in the foot.

One of the first people to see Cohomo admitted to the Peoria Journal Star, decades later, that he never saw anything. And yet, Cohomo was last spotted in Kankakee County as recently as 2000, according to the Mysterious Heartland website.

fig. 7

The Wolfman of Chestnut Mountain



Phil Geib / Chicago Tribune

Habitat: Galena area (about 17 miles from Dubuque, Iowa)

Lore:

Not to be confused with the Dogman of McHenry (or the many dog-people reported throughout Michigan since the 19th century). "I don't believe this is a traditional medieval werewolf," said Godfrey, whose book "American Monsters" recounts a harrowing 2010 encounter between an Illinois behavioral psychologist and the beast. "I prefer 'unknown upright canine.'"

As a reporter in Wisconsin in the 1980s, Godfrey heard stories about a Wolfman, consistent with the 2010 tale: "The woman is driving with her fiance near Chestnut Mountain, they're on a backroad, they see a wolf walking on hind legs, it looks at them for a moment, then it leaps off at great speed. I think there are more sightings like that, but people don't want to be ridiculed. Some are in denial. They don't want to admit what they see."

cborrelli@chicagotribune.com

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