



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

The unicorn of the Cascades

The unicorn is a legendary creature, described since antiquity as a pony-like beast with a single long, pointed, spiraling horn projecting from its forehead. It was depicted in ancient seals of the Indus Valley People and includes one of the ancient Greek game animals by various writers, including Ctesias, Strabo, Pliny the Younger and Aelian. The Bible also describes such an animal — maybe.

Psalms 92:10: According to the context of the scripture, it is talking about a one-horned animal, “But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.” Notice how one can interpret the writer’s phrases “my horn” and “the horn” may mean things we’re not sure of. Well, anyway, that’s why the Latin Vulgate Bible says “unicornis,” because it’s talking about a one-horned animal.

In Deuteronomy 33:17, things get a little more interesting, “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.”

According to European folklore, the unicorn is often depicted as a white, horse-like (or goat-like) animal with a long horn and cloven

hooves (sometimes with a goat’s beard). In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was commonly described as an extremely wild woodland creature, a symbol of purity and grace, which could be captured only by a virgin. In the encyclopedias, its horn was said to have the power to render poisoned water potable and to heal sickness. In medieval and Renaissance times, the tusk of the narwhal was sometimes sold as unicorn horn.

Anyway, here’s what the finder of Oregon’s unicorn, Peter Esherick, has to say about his life-time of adventure in searching :

“While I’ve been hiking up to the saddle on Three Fingered Jack almost every summer for the last 60+ years, it was only two years ago that I first saw a mountain goat on the mountain, picked out by the sharp eyes of my granddaughter Camila. We weren’t sure at the time what we were seeing, which led to a spirited debate about whether those white specs in the distance were polar bears, goats, sheep or best of all, unicorns! So of course we consulted the local expert and, of course, Jim set us straight. ‘Mountain goats,’ he said...adding, ‘but then again...’

“Now, each year when we hike up there we are always on the lookout for mountain goats or unicorns, always hoping to get a close enough look to be able to tell for sure. So this time around my daughter Katrina and I got up early one Wednesday in July (too early for grandkids!) and made the hike to Canyon Creek Meadows and up to the saddle. Over to our right about 300 yards away, we could make out 12 mountain goats on the talus below the peak. With binoculars we could clearly make out nine adults and three babies!

“With that success we decided to take visiting friends up the next



PHOTO BY PETER ESHERICK

The Unicorn of the Cascades — discovered recently with others of its kind on the slopes of Three Fingered Jack.

Saturday. I had carried my long lens and big camera all the way up there and I was not going to be deterred, so back we went the following Wednesday, making sure to get an early start. We got to the moraine over the ice lake about 9 a.m. and scouted around: Not a mountain goat in sight! Dang!

“Well, maybe they’re on the other side again, I thought, so I continued on up towards the saddle while Katrina held back with some phony complaint about her feet hurting. Just as I came around a tree on the last knoll before the saddle, bang! There they were! Five

mountain goats quietly grazing and just laying around, no more than 70 yards away!

“So I fired off a bunch of photos with my 500mm zoom and contemplated getting closer. I figured it might not be wise to continue on the trail, which would have put me 10 feet below a goat who could have easily knock me full off the mountain with one head-butt, so I waited until he’d had enough of watching me and he wandered off.

“That let me continue up along the trail obscured from sight of the other goats. Popping over the moraine ridge a few minutes later I

was now only about 20 yards away from a... goat...? Or was it a...a...unicorn! True to Camila’s initial observations, I had found the unicorn! (Or, as her brother Samuel more correctly identifies it, a unihorn.)

“This fellow had one broken horn, but he seemed to be proud of it, so he posed for me for 10 minutes before wandering off to join the rest of his clan. I could probably go on, but as a good friend has said on occasion, ‘I’ve already told you more than I know.’ But we’ll be back next summer and continue the observations. See ya’ up there!”

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