

From Butterflies to Bigfoot

Book commentary by George W. Earley

"Something is definitely afoot in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Either an officially undescribed species of hominoid primate dwells there, or an act of self- and group deception of astonishing proportions is taking place. In any case the phenomenon of Bigfoot exists."

Thus does naturalist Robert Michael Pyle begin his current book, **Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide** [Houghton Mifflin; \$21.95]

Pyle earned a doctorate in ecology from Yale in the 1970's, writing his dissertation on the range and habitat of northwestern butterflies. He went on to write several butterfly books including **The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies**.

Now, a quarter of a century later, he has tackled a much larger topic, the possible existence of Bigfoot, the huge, hulking, and smelly creatures whose quasi-mythical existence predates the arrival of Euro-American settlers in the Pacific northwest.

Writes Pyle: "The impressive fact, especially in light of the many versions with their seeming contradictions, is that all of the original Northwest people have a strong Bigfoot tradition. And this continues into modern times..."

Unlike many writers, Pyle does not attempt to 'prove' the creatures exist by interweaving tales of sasquatch sightings and footprint finds with speculation and surmise.

"I've been looking into Bigfoot" he writes "but not looking for Bigfoot. Plenty of others are doing that -- true believers, whose hearts, souls, and wallets are on the line. I am not one of these. Even so, I felt the need to take my research to the hills, to confront the concept of Sasquatch on its own ground."

And so, a few years ago, his search fueled by a Guggenheim grant, butterfly net in hand and backpack in place, he set out to traverse Washington's Dark Divide, a largely roadless area of forest and lava bed lying between Mt. Adams and Mount St. Helens

In the wild country Pyle encountered [and lovingly describes] all manner of flora and fauna, pointing out as he does so that there is ample forage to keep the Bigfoot well fed. Twice he found tracks -- large ones -- he could not identify, though he does not claim that Bigfoot made either the tracks or the strange 'night sounds' that bore little if any resemblance to the cries of any wild animals he knows.

In more civilized surroundings, he met the 'true believers' and the simply curious who

make up the members of Western Bigfoot Society, talked with Native Americans [some reticent and some cautiously willing to share tribal beliefs of Bigfoot] and shared his concerns about Bigfoot and people with such Bigfoot experts as Canadians René Dahinden and John Green, ex-hunter Peter Byrne [who heads the Oregon-based **Bigfoot Research Project**] and Washington State University anthropologist Grover Krantz.

Many 'true believers' will likely dismiss much of Pyle's book, impatiently flipping past lyrical descriptions of field, forest and fauna while searching for the nuggets of Bigfoot lore that lie embedded like plums in larger pudding of his writing.

But to dismiss the pudding for the plums is to miss the point of the book. Pyle's concern is not so much with Bigfoot per se, but with the totality of the environment of which both we and Bigfoot are a part. "... everything we know," he writes, "tells us that if it [Bigfoot] exists, it is infinitely more peaceful and nonviolent than the other great ape occupying [this] continent." For as Pyle frequently and caustically points out, Bigfoot's impact on the forest environment has been far more benign than ours.

Which brings us to the major disagreement between sasquatch seekers: do we kill one or not? Peter Byrne has become the de facto leader of those who want to prove Bigfoot exists by passive observation and photographs. Professor Krantz says that's nonsense, noting that in an age of increasingly sophisticated photo fakery, science will only accept an actual Bigfoot, living or dead. And Krantz is willing to shoot one should the opportunity arise.

As for Pyle, he urges accepting the existence of the Bigfoot today so that, should one be eventually discovered, they will already be protected. But while saying that, he declines to take a stand on the question of its existence. "That's up to others. I am content to have walked where Bigfoot walks for a season or two."

Readers who walk the walk with him through this fascinating and immensely readable book will likely agree. I certainly do.

Maps and photos round out what may be the best Bigfoot book of the decade. ***

George W. Earley is a freelance writer who lives near Mount Hood and is one of many unsuccessful sasquatch seekers.

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