Legend of lake monster Shuswaggi lingers on

Stories of creature in Shuswap Lake resurfaced with 2018 'sighting'

Jodi Brak
Salmon Arm Observer

As far back as 1904, sightings have been reported of a strange creature dwelling in the depths of Shuswap Lake.

The creature is known as the Shuswaggi.

The Shuswaggi has been described in various ways, ranging from a large, furry mammal resembling a bear to a lengthy, grey-black aquatic creature similar to a giant eel.

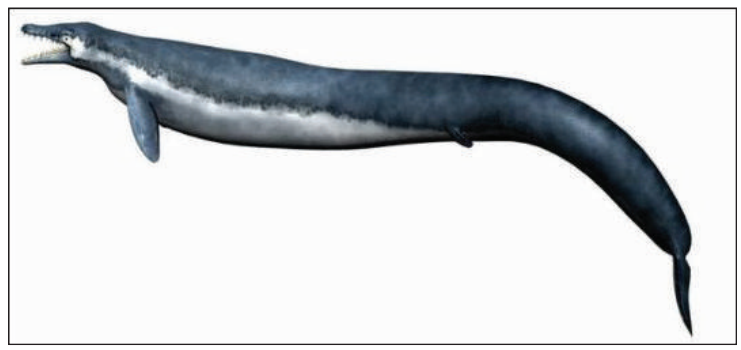
Stories of Shuswaggi do share a common theme, however, revolving around boaters encountering an unknown creature.

According to Adam Benedict, cryptid researcher and author of the Pine Barrens Institute archives, he first encountered the tale of Shuswaggi while looking for obscure creature legends.

"After grabbing all my other books regarding water monsters, I started looking for both the name of the creature and the name of the lake. Slowly, I started coming across a handful of different supposed sightings over many years," he said.

The earliest recorded encounter with the creature was from a Secwepemc First Nations hunter in 1904 who claimed to have killed and skinned a strange creature in Shuswap Lake.

George Eberhart expanded on this tale in his book, Mysterious Creatures: A Guide to Cryptozoology, saying the creature was believed to be a "Ta-zam-a," which Eberhart says roughly translates to mean "Water Bear" in the Salish language.



An illustration of a Basilosaurus, which cryptozoologist Karl Shuker theorized could be hidden in Shuswap Lake, contributes to the legend of Shuswaggi. (Image contributed)

The hide was reportedly taken to the nearby trading post in Enderby, where it was sold for $60 (over $2,000 when adjusted for 2019 inflation).

It was said to be furry, as large as a grizzly bear with 12-inch long feet resembling an aquatic mole.

While books describing the Shuswaggi suggest it stems from First Nations folklore, Neskonlith Coun. Louis Thomas says tales of lake monsters are not especially common among the Secwepemc.

The next recorded sighting was not until 1948, when a man fishing on Shuswap Lake claimed a massive creature swam under his boat, clipping the bottom and nearly capsizing it.

In 1970, a family hosting a birthday party near Shuswap Lake reported seeing a long, grey-green object moving under the lake water that appeared to move quickly before rising out of the water, turning around and heading away.

In 1984, the most well-known sighting occurred. Linda Griffiths and her children were said to be out on the lake when she reported grabbing her binoculars and watching a serpent-like creature swim in front of the boat.

While sightings have been few and far between, Benedict says a message he received in 2018 renewed his interest in the Shuswaggi.

"What helps push the legend of Shuswaggi into the legit creature camp for me is a witness sighting I received last year," he noted.

"The lake is filled with various fish, but these wouldn't be mistaken for something reported to be upwards of 50 feet. Perhaps early accounts mistook a young moose swimming in the lake."

British cryptozoologist Karl Shuker theorized the Shuswaggi could be a surviving zeuglodont, an aquatic dinosaur, but Benedict disagrees with this idea.

While perhaps not as well-known as the Ogopogo of Okanagan Lake, the story of the Shuswaggi does still hang on in the Shuswap region in some small ways.

The Barking Dog Food Truck at the Anglemont Marina serves a massive breakfast wrap called the Shuswaggi, and the Shuswap Coffee Company carries a dark roast blend named after the creature.

"I had lived here all my life, and I had never heard of it," said Tara Shantz, with the Shuswap Coffee Company.

"The girls who had the company before us named the blend. They were trying to be funny with it, like it's this dark, mysterious blend."

She says customers often ask about the name and are fascinated upon hearing the tale.

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