

BEST EVIDENCE YETI

by

Tony Wooldridge - 2.9.86

There are few issues which have been the source of more controversy than the question of the yeti. This large mammal, alleged to exist in the Himalayas, was first reported in the West in 1832 but real interest was not aroused until 1921 when the first Everest reconnaissance reported seeing strange footprints. Since that time there have been innumerable reports of footprints and, very occasionally, reported sightings of the yeti itself. Nevertheless, the opinions of experienced mountaineers and scientists are still sharply divided as to whether the yeti really exists.

John Hunt who has twice seen footprints has consistently declared a belief in its existence. Similarly, the late Don Whillans was convinced that it had been a yeti which confronted him at night outside his tent on Annapurna in 1970. On the other hand, Edmund Hillary who spent 11 months on expedition unsuccessfully looking for the animal in 1961 declared his firm belief that the yeti is a myth. This view is shared by Heinrich Harrer who spent seven years in Tibet in the forties and who revisited the country in 1983.

When I visited the Himalayas in March 1986 I had little interest in the yeti, and although declaring an open mind on the matter, I was inclined on the sceptical side. Two weeks later I returned convinced not only of its existence but with photographs of the creature - something which had never before been achieved.

My motive for spending ten days in the Garhwal Himalayas of Northern India was to perform a 200 mile solo run and to raise money for a charity, Traidcraft. This organisation encourages employment prospects in developing countries by importing handicrafts and food from community-based projects.

On the fifth day of my run (March 6th) I set off up the Bhiundar Valley from its junction with the Alaknanda River and headed towards the lake of Nankund at 4200 metres altitude. In summer, the route is frequented by Sikh pilgrims but in early March the snow extends below 3000 metres and no pilgrims visit the lake. Footprints in the snow indicated that people had been as far as the bungalows at Gangaria (3048 metres) but there were no tracks beyond this point. The route above Gangaria climbs up steep wooded slopes and with the sun rapidly thawing the hard surface crust of the snow I was soon sinking in well above the tops of my training shoes.

Around 11,000 feet I was surprised to see strange animal tracks which came up a steep snow gully on the right and then went from bush to bush in the wood. Although curious to know what sort of animal was sharing the area with me, I took two quick photographs of the tracks and pressed on (Photographs 1 and 2). I was relieved to find that the tracks disappeared into the trees on the right a little higher up.

When I reached about 4000 metres, I was alarmed to see that a large and very recent avalanche had occurred right across my intended route. Studying this to consider the risks of crossing the slope, I noticed in the avalanche debris a large, smooth groove which came to a sudden stop. From this point tracks led away across the slope behind and beyond a small shrub. Behind the shrub a dark, hairy creature perhaps up to 2 metres in height, was standing erect on two legs. It had a squarish head and a long, powerfully built torso. (Photographs 3 and 4).

I was flabbergasted. In spite of my scepticism about the existence of the yeti I could not imagine what else it could be. It remained remarkably still although I once saw the branches of the shrub vibrate, and I approached as close as possible (about 150 metres) without venturing onto the avalanche-prone slope. After observing and photographing the creature for about 45 minutes it began to snow and I decided to head down lest my tracks should be obliterated. When I last looked back, the animal was still standing behind the shrub, apparently looking down the slope rather than at me. On the descent I noticed extensive tracks on the steep slopes between the wood and the region of the avalanche, and on reaching the footprints I had seen earlier I photographed them with considerably more interest than on the ascent. However, after some 3 hours of warm weather, they were already far less distinct than they had been in the morning.

My mind was in turmoil, wondering whether to bivouac at Gangaria, return the next day with a guide from Pulna or leave the yeti in peace. I felt so privileged and so undeserving to have seen on my first visit to the Himalayas what others had searched for in vain during long expeditions. Finally, feeling protective towards the animal, I decided to keep the news to myself lest it led to a yeti hunt. I resolved to say nothing to the local villagers but to continue with my sponsored run and contain my excitement until I had got the photographs processed and consulted with experts in Britain.

Zoologists, anthropologists and mountaineers have all been fascinated by the news. Dr. Bertram, curator of mammals at the London Zoo, was understandably cautious about a possible hoax, particularly as he was shown the photographs just before April 1st! However, he could suggest no known mammal which could be confused with the animal in the photographs and, in particular, he felt it could not be a bear. Dr. Myra Shackley, an archaeologist who has extensively researched the yeti, believes that this new evidence is very consistent with that of other sightings. John Hunt is fascinated by the news whilst maintaining a strong desire that nothing be done to prejudice the animal's well being and particularly that there be no attempt to capture it.

There have been suspicions of yetis in the Garhwal Himalayas for many years although my experience is the first reported sighting. Wing-Comdr. Beaumann reported tracks near the source of the Ganges, and H.W. Tilman saw tracks resembling elephant spoor extending for a mile over the Bireh Glacier in 1947. More recently, the late Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker who climbed Changabang in 1976, heard a low growl outside their tent one night and a pan was knocked over. When they emerged in the morning, strange animal tracks led away across the glacier. A few days earlier while they had been away climbing Changabang their food stores had been mysteriously raided and 36 Mars bars complete with wrappers had disappeared. Other climbers have since suffered losses of food in strange circumstances; Jenny Williams and her companions were robbed of food in 1977 at Changabang Base Camp,

It will be intriguing to see how far my experience influences the scepticism of many scientists about the yeti's existence. I have sympathy with these doubts, particularly as I shared them myself until so recently. What is important is that evidence which points to the yeti's existence (or otherwise) should be faithfully reported by those visiting remote mountain areas of Asia. Collation and scientific study of this evidence by those suitably qualified may then lead to real progress. It is significant that Professor John Napier, who is an expert on primates and author of the classic reference "Bigfoot", has changed his previously sceptical position and become convinced of the yeti's existence (BBC Wildlife Magazine, Sept. 1986).

What one should not do is attempt to convince the sceptics by setting out to capture the animal or even worse, to kill it. For the time being I prefer to reflect on Tilman's eloquent statement in his book "Mount Everest, 1938". "When the dust of conflict had settled the "Abominable Snowman" survived to pursue his evasive, mysterious, terrifying existence, unruffled as the snow he treads, unmoved as the mountains in which he dwells, uncaught, unspecified, but not unhonoured".

living and fossil non-human primates that the ratio of forelimb length to hindlimb

tory. Museum in London there are specimens of *P.e. schistacea* of approximately

and translated several books and papers by Konrad Lorenz.

AN INDUBITABLE YETI? By Professor John R Napier

I have read a report by Tony Wooldridge and carefully examined his photographs of footprints and one long-distance shot of the animal standing upright behind a small bush. My conclusions are remarkable but quite logical.

In my view, the creature in the photograph is a hominid. There is a remote possibility that the figure is that of a Sadhu—a holy man or hermit—and therefore *Homo sapiens*, but in my view it is not *human* in the general sense of the word, although it may belong to the genus *Homo*.

The figure is very similar to the hydrologist A G Pronin's report of the 'almas' of the Pamir Mountains, which lie to the west of the Karakoram Range. He made observations at Fedchenko Glacier of a man-like creature with long arms and

walking bipedally. There are many other reports in the same vein.

My conclusions are based on a number of facts. (1) Wooldridge's own opinion is expressed so lucidly and convincingly that you cannot help being impressed. After many years of doubt and part-disbelief, I am now a yeti devotee. (2) The creature cannot be anything but a yeti—it is obviously neither a langur (this has a long tail and no upright posture of the human variety) nor a bear (legs too long, muzzle absent)—unless we wish to invent a mysterious animal that is being mistaken for another mysterious animal! (3) The photographs of the footprints are disappointing, as all such photographs are. Bad images result from melting, direction of lighting, consistency of snow (soft as in recent

ing). Wooldridge's first close-up of a footprint is the best and shows some of the characteristics of a human footprint, but the snow looks soft and fluffy.

One interesting feature in the photograph of the hominid is the smooth groove that can be seen at the edge of the avalanche debris, suggesting that the animal had slid down on its front or on its back. □

Professor John R Napier is an anatomist and anthropologist. With Dr L S B Leakey and Professor Phillip Tobias, he was involved in the description and naming of one of the earliest human species *Homo habilis* from the Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania. He is also a leading authority on primates, author of the classic book *Bigfoot*, and co-author of *A Handbook of Living Primates* and *The Natural History of the Primates*.