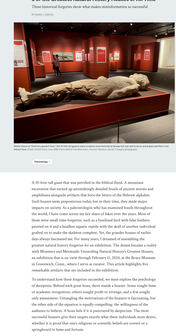
Science

ALEXANDRA HUDSON | 8 MIN READ

5 of the Greatest Natural History Hoaxes of All Time

Three historical forgeries show what makes misinformation so successful

FEATURE | SPRING



Cecil Jackson of Stockport (right) with his friend, Mr. Pritchard (pictured in a photo he showed his accomplice) in the Cardiff Giant, a fake ancient giant found in Cardiff, New York, in 1869. Jackson and Pritchard were Chicago, Illinois, natives. Pritchard's photograph is

Photo credit: Bettmann/Getty Images

A 10-foot-tall giant that was petrified in the biblical flood. A mountain excavation that turned up astonishingly detailed fossils of ancient worms and amphibians alongside artifacts that bore the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Such hoaxes were preposterous today, but in their time, their mark major impacts on science. As a paleontologist who has examined fossils throughout the world, I have come across my share of fakes over the years. Most of them were small-time forgeries, such as a fossilized bird with false feathers glued on to it. But I have also encountered a few that were so well-crafted and perfect in its tricks the dishonest complicit. So, the people hoaxers of years ago, always fascinated me. For many years, I dreamed of assembling the greatest natural history forgeries for an exhibition. The dream became a reality with Monsters and Mermaids: Unexpected Natural History Forgeries Curiosities, an exhibition that is on view through February 15, 2022, at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Conn., where I serve as curator. This article highlights five remarkable artifacts that are included in the exhibition.

To understand how these forgeries succeeded, we must explore the psychology of deception. Behind each great hoax, there stands a hoaxer. Same enough have or academic recognition, others sought profit or revenge, and a few sought only amusement. Untangling the motivation of the hoaxsters is fascinating, but the other side of the equation is equally compelling: the willingness of the audience to believe. A hoax fails if it is perceived by skepticism. The more successful hoaxers give their targets exactly what their individuals most desire, whether it is a piece of their religious or scientific belief, an current or a spotlighted in fame and fortune.

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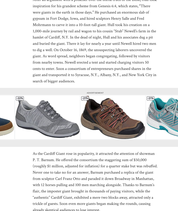
Exploring the Monsters and Mermaids exhibition, it is easy to watch at some of the forgeries and wonder how people could possibly have been fooled by them. Before we judge the deceived too harshly, however, we should recognize that technologies such as carbon dating and DNA testing were unimaginable when many classic hoaxes were perpetrated. We should remember, too, the mirror. We live in the age of modern disinformation, where technology has made a double-edged sword. Encyclopedias of information are in the palm of our hand thanks to smartphones, but throughout that same period, computational tips spread instantaneously, amplified by engagement algorithms. In the old days a real person had to scrap on grant carvout but to become Bigfoot. Today someone can generate a convincing video of the world's favorite cryptid species with little more than an artificial intelligence prompt. Studying the forgeries of yesteryear, the natural history hoaxes is worth the convenience—or just some age from the next big deception.

BERNARD'S LYING STONES

Bertrand Ly Lying Stones, or *Lógicorum* in German, are among the oldest surviving natural history forgeries. In 1725 Johann Bartholomäus Adam Beringer, a professor at the University of Würzburg, was suffering and walking from his house Ebrach Cloister to present date Kitzingen. Bernard had hired local teenagers to expand his operations. On May 31, 1725, Beringer's students brought him a piece of limestone with a perfect impression of a tiny image of Tanith. Two of the stones displayed incredible compass, and the third had a zodiac shape. All were exposed in her relief. In time, more enticing stones surfaced. Some presented incredible details, spiders sitting on shells, birds brooding eggs and even two frogs caught in the act of mating. Then the situation became truly outlandish. Stones emerged depicting stars, the moon, and letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Dismissing any misgivings, Beringer rushed bundling into writing his treatise *Lithographiae Wirceburgensis*. It stands as a masterpiece of literature.



In this 1726 edition, Johann Bartholomäus Adam Beringer recalls his discovery that he had created a work out of his own. Beginning a long, ever-expanded chorus, Tanith's Lithographiae Wirceburgensis. Tanith's Lithographiae Wirceburgensis. Tanith's Lithographiae Wirceburgensis.

England, silencing scholars from continental Europe who derided the scant English fossil record of human ancestors. British Museum curator Arthur Smith Woodward, whom Dawson enlisted to formally present the alleged fossil to the scientific community, benefited tremendously from the forgery, earning Knighthood in no small part for his work on Piltdown Man. Dawson himself was not so lucky. He died in 1916 without ever making it into the Royal Society.

BIGFOOT

No exhibition on hoaxes would be complete without Bigfoot. As a curator, my philosophy is that people visit museums to see "the real thing." Graphics and videos are all well and good, but the actual objects are the heart of the most successful exhibitions. With this in mind, I set out to find the holy grail of hoaxes: Bigfoot's feet.

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The legend of Bigfoot began when massive footprints started appearing along the Bluff Creek timber access road in northern California in the late summer of 1958. Bulldozer operator Jerry Crew made a plaster cast of one of the footprints and showed it to reporters. On October 6 *Humboldt Times* reporter Andrew Genzoli wrote an article that featured a photograph of the cast. In it, he coined the now famous name Bigfoot. Soon Bigfoot was being sighted all over the Northwest.

Prankster Ray Wallace created the original Bigfoot tracks by pressing these carved wooden feet into the ground. Credit: Feet on loan courtesy of Michael Wallace; Daniel T. Ksepka (photograph)

Ray Wallace, an inveterate prankster, created the original tracks by stamping carved wooden feet into the ground. Wallace was having fun while also trying to discourage vandals from messing around with his logging equipment at night. Little did he know that as he pressed the feet into the ground, he was creating a piece of Americana. I was fortunate to connect with Ray Wallace's son Michael and hear about Ray's love of the great outdoors, family and practical jokes. I shared a few stories of my own dad's hijinks as well, although none of them managed to spawn a legendary cryptid. Michael Wallace inherited the feet when his father passed in 2002 and generously loaned them for Monsters and Mermaids. The feet are carved from alderwood, with a leather strap for the top of the foot and a band of rubber to hold them on the back of the leg. As Michael Wallace put it, the feet may be a part of history to the public, but to him, they are a part of his dad.

Of the great hoaxers of history, Ray Wallace was perhaps the purest with his craft. He sought no accolades or money, only amusement. Did he also give his audience just what they wanted? I would argue yes. The chill of imagining some powerful beast, a species related to humans but still living the wild existence of our ancestors, has true campfire appeal. Ray Wallace is departed, but his spirit lives on. Over the 65 years since he first pressed those wooden feet into the ground, thousands of people have reported seeing Bigfoot. Even as I write, a video purporting to show Bigfoot ambling along a mountainside in Colorado is making the rounds on social media.

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