

In search of the leprechaun

DESPITE the best of intentions, not to mention persistent effort, my carefully-laid plans had come to naught.

Somehow I had failed to locate any sign whatsoever of the European yeti, *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*, among the snowy heights of Europe's tallest mountains (*Veterinary Practice* January and February 2010). Yet this was not for lack of trying.

I did locate a number of distinctly unusual creatures, including a large, shaggy beast on a mountain ledge one dark night, that closer examination revealed to be a misplaced hiker named Jacques.

Nevertheless, I feared neither Jacques nor the other odd creatures I met would satisfy the demanding definitions of "mythical" or "considered by mainstream biologists not to exist", necessary for inclusion within the specialised field of cryptozoology. And anyway, the RCVS or European authorities would surely require more case reports than these if I was to successfully qualify as the first veterinary cryptozoologist (DipCrypt) – the focus of my strenuous continuing education efforts.

Mythical creature bait

Climbers try to remember that, "Just because you love the mountains doesn't mean the mountains love you." Unfortunately, the same appeared true of the unusual creatures I sought.

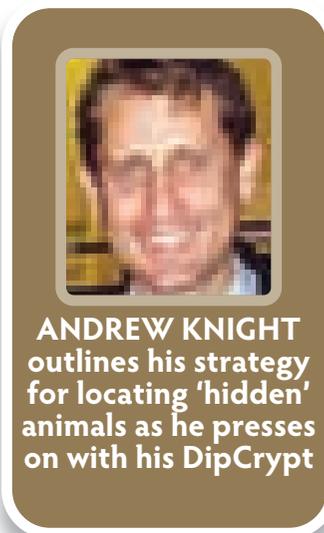
Clearly I needed some kind of "bait" that would reliably attract them. There was only one such creature in Europe I was aware of: the Irish leprechaun, or leithbrágan, whose attraction to pots of gold is well-known to be insatiable.

Regrettably, however, as an experienced veterinarian, I could barely afford to fill a modest-sized pot with copper. And although I still hope to

Andrew Knight, BVMS, MRCVS, an Australian graduate, announced his quest some months back to become the first RCVS-registered specialist in the medicine and surgery of supposedly mythical animals (DipCrypt). His efforts to study these animals have enjoyed little success to date but in this article he outlines what he considers a foolproof strategy for locating some of them. He is now seeking the necessary funding to implement his strategy.

invoice my employers for a pot of gold, disappointingly my veterinary contract does not yet appear to include allowance for such CPD expenses, despite their obvious necessity.

I will need to pursue this at a later date – perhaps after the establishment of the veterinary union.



ANDREW KNIGHT outlines his strategy for locating 'hidden' animals as he presses on with his DipCrypt

Hatching a plan

Fortunately, however, one solution remained: pots of gold can sometimes be found at the end of rainbows. Given the amount of rain in Ireland, this is doubtless why that country is infested with leithbrágan. Accordingly, with my long-suffering partner in tow, we took passage for the Emerald Isle.

To minimize our carbon emissions we chose the ferry, and to maximise our chances of rain, rainbows and leprechaun encounters, we carefully selected a period in the middle of winter.

Shockingly, it appeared at first that our carefully-laid plans had spectacularly failed. The first sunny winter's day in what appeared to be living memory brought hordes of excited Dubliners onto the city streets. As they rejoiced in shorts and T-shirts, I shivered in my mountain gear, anxiously searching for rainbows.

Needless to say, the sky remained unbroken blue. At least the Dubliners appeared deliriously happy under the pale rays of the winter sun. I theorised that years of exposure to such temperatures must have killed their peripheral nerve endings. It appeared some kind of secondary degeneration had spread to their brains, but the important thing was that they were clearly happy. Very, very happy, in fact...

Choosing Plan B

And so we retreated to the shadowed alleyways, and Plan B: scouring the historic nooks and crannies of Dublin for signs of leprechaun activity. From various mediaeval writers I knew to keep watch for three-foot-tall creatures wearing red square-cut coats, richly laced with gold, as well a distinctive cocked hat, shoes and buckles, who were possibly working as cobblers.

The most ancient structure around appeared to be the Dublin Castle, and so, infiltrating a commercial tour, we searched the grounds, and then the ancient Norman foundations, without success; although we did discover an

exciting underground river.

The hallowed grounds of Trinity College also seemed to offer potential, but all I discovered there was a university library in which the books were catalogued by size – meaning that unless students knew their precise dimensions, they had very little chance of locating them, an oddity about which they seemed particularly proud.

The leprechauns, however, remained determinedly absent, in defiance of the urgency of my scholastic needs. As I recalled their well-known penchant for mischief, I couldn't help wondering whether they were walking around balancing on each other's shoulders, cleverly disguised as Trinity students, who had, after all, seemed not a little strange.

But then I recalled that when engaging in particularly mischievous behaviour, leprechauns usually leap onto a wall, kicking their heels in the air, and spin on the points of their hats – which are reinforced for this purpose. I had to admit that Trinity's ancient walls appeared disappointingly normal, if other parts clearly were not.

Phylogenetic cousins

I consoled myself with the thought that at least I was not searching for far darrig or clurichaun. My cryptozoological texts had described the former cousin of the leprechaun as a "most sluttish, slouching, jeering, mischievous phantom, whom busies himself with gruesome practical joking", whilst the latter enjoy riding sheep and dogs at night.

I had enough to worry about just learning the basic medicine and surgery of these notoriously reclusive creatures, without having to consider their nocturnal roles as potential vectors in disease transmission among secondary species.

Furthermore, clurichaun are also known as "buttery spirits", plaguing drunkards. If the victim attempts to move away from his or her tormentor, the clurichaun will often hop into a cask to accompany them. If you treat them well they will apparently protect



A leprechaun spotted by Claire Fowler, RVN.

your wine cellar, but if mistreated they will wreak havoc on your home or practice, and spoil your wine stock.

Such issues might well be grounds for concern among colleagues practising in the homeland of Guinness, but only redoubled my resolve to drink very little and, particularly, to avoid owning a veterinary practice, especially in Ireland.

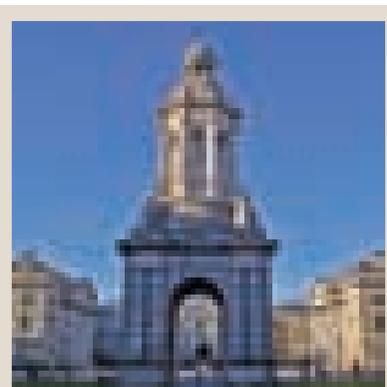
The nurse's triumph

Finally, I was forced to admit defeat. Other than a brief storm that nearly drowned us far from shelter whilst leprechaun-hunting in a wilderness area, the sky had remained paradoxically blue. No rainbows appeared, no pots of gold were unearthed and, worst of all, no leprechauns had been located.

But demonstrating that they are indeed neither "wholly good nor wholly evil", but merely "degenerate fairies", my nurse had no trouble locating them on her visit to Dublin shortly afterwards, smugly presenting me with her photograph of an apparently perfect specimen on her return.

Veterinarians must never be outdone by their nurses, however, and closer examination revealed its coat to be clearly green, rather than red, as well as lacking the necessary gold thread.

Given that the focus of my nurse's studies in Dublin had been rather more drinkable than cryptozoological, I surmised it must have been a clurichaun. But all is not lost for I now have photographic evidence of the existence of some of these Irish fairies that will provide invaluable support for my forthcoming CPD expenses claim for a pot full of medicinal quality gold!



Searching for leprechauns at Trinity College Dublin.