

Seeking a new speciality

IN today's competitive job market, it's useful to have a unique angle – a certain special skill or interest no one else possesses. And whilst I do have a broad range of skills, unfortunately most of them are mediocre.

I'm not much good at orthopaedics, nor at reviving the near-dead. Not even my impressive ability to attract bites from otherwise unconscious animals has yet saved a life – although it has occasionally jeopardised mine.

I therefore decided to specialise in a species no one else knew much about. Something exotic, perhaps, but which one? Eighteen RCVS registered specialists already specialise in zoo and wildlife medicine. Clearly my species would need to be particularly rare and unusual.

And then it struck me: inspired, perhaps, by the close proximity (in Australian terms) of the Alps, I decided to become the first RCVS registered specialist in cryptozoology (DipCrypt – the study of “hidden” animals).

I decided to start by gaining expertise in the medicine and surgery of the abominable snowman, *Gigantopithecus modernis yetii*. Given that most of us back home live on or near the beach, this would be a particular coup for an ex-pat Australian!

I keenly scanned the continuing education providers for suitable courses. Unfortunately, however, these appeared oddly lacking. Clearly, I would

need to take responsibility for my own education. After all, as a veterinarian I accepted a life-long obligation: the continual improvement of my professional knowledge and competence.

The first course I needed would have to enable me to survive in a high altitude environment. Such skills would be fundamental, should I be required to conduct home visits – and would doubtless

also broaden my understanding of basic Gigantopithecus husbandry, nutrition and physiology.

Accordingly, last July I signed onto a five-day mountaineering course, aimed at climbing Mt Blanc. Despite melting a little lower each year because of global warming, at 4,807 metres, Mt Blanc remains Europe's highest mountain. Obviously, if I could reach its summit, I'd be able to visit sick yetis throughout the Alps.

Starting well...

All went well, at first. The Eurostar train connections were smooth and comfortable, and minimised my carbon impacts, which I further neutralised by purchasing a conservation portfolio at www.CarbonNeutral.com. The fellow Londoners I met on the final shuttle to Chamonix had flown from London a mere three hours after my departure.

With mounting anticipation I soon arrived in Chamonix, the world capital of alpinism and extreme sports. I was thrilled to discover that, like most vets, climbers are similarly underpaid, and most of them appeared to be sharing my budget hostel!

Fit-looking people festooned with a scary array of hardware filled every room, and climbing club flags from around the globe adorned the walls. In such an environment, I must surely become brave and skilled on the precipices, simply through osmosis! It was with a light heart that I tiptoed past ropes, helmets, ice-axes and snoring climbers to my bunk, later that night.

Day one of the course found me roped to five strangers, with the unfamiliar weight of an ice-axe in my hand. A cog train carried us high into the mountains, to the edge of a cliff, high above the famous Mer de Glace glacier.

Echoes of London's rush hour soon returned, however, as our group of roped beginners jostled with numerous others, all descending the few narrow ladders and even narrower ledges towards the glacier, some 50

metres below. The effect resembled a vertical race between giant, slow-moving, heavily-equipped and multi-coloured millipedes, albeit less graceful.

Nevertheless, we soon reached the glacier, where we dextrously donned our crampons. Or, not quite so dextrously in the case of those who, unlike myself, had not furtively practised the night before, in the privacy of our hostel rooms. Unfortunately, I had forgotten to practise with my gaiters, and spent the day wearing them back to front.

We blundered about the gentlest portions of the glacier, learning to walk horizontally, downhill (into small crevasses) and, finally, uphill (using a strange combination of sideways and backwards moves). Impossible slopes were rendered merely frightening through judicious use of our ice-axe poles. Crevasse rescue was excluded from our budget course so we tried not to fall into these too deeply.

The second day we split into smaller groups and caught a two-stage cable car to Aiguille du Midi, the famous “Needle of the South”. At 3,842 metres, this pinnacle was twice as high as most other valley lifts. It was time to start acclimatising.

Our first challenge was to negotiate the Needle's infamous East Ridge. A steep, twisting knife-edge of snow and ice led downwards for some 200 vertical metres, to the start of the glacial plain. Other than abseiling straight down the cliff face, there was no other way to access the vast array of mountains and glaciers that filled the landscape, from horizon to horizon – a perfect environment, it seemed, for yetis.

Visibility almost nil

The ridge was steeply vertical for stretches, and just over a foot in width. It was frequently swept by winds gusting anywhere from 60 to 120 km/hr – during which time snowdrift rendered visibility almost nil. Immediately beneath, steep, icy slopes fell away on both sides.

Possible death awaited any who fell to the right, where a slide of several hundred feet was terminated by minor crevasses. The slide to the left was only about 40 feet, but thereafter turned vertical, for thousands. There were no visible handholds. I resolved to fall to the right, should I slip.

ANDREW KNIGHT resumes his series on 'CPD with a difference' with an account of his preliminary search for the yeti



Andrew Knight on top of Mt Blanc and (below) acclimatising to this rigorous form of CPD.



It was time to see if the osmosis effect of the climbing hostel was working. We donned crampons and ice-axes, roped up, and joined tens of other climbers gingerly descending the ridge. This time the millipedes were slowly chasing each other, forming a single, snaking line.

We'll never fall alone...

The ropes don't actually stop most falls, of course, but it's always comforting to think that should any of us slip, we'll never fall alone. This time, however, the wind was light, and no one fell, beneath or, particularly, above me, and we all made it to the glacial plain.

Next morning we headed to Petite Verte, a minor peak accessible from the top of the Grand Montets lift, at around 3,300 metres. The steep, icy slopes rose some 500 metres higher to the summit. However, I noted that only the last 90 metres were vertical, with a rocky ridge to the right providing an easy route. Not for us though, I was soon to discover.

“Today will be a very good test,” our guide informed us. Did I detect a touch of malice in his voice? Whilst every other climber on the mountain headed for the ridge, our guide informed us our route would be straight up the middle of the face. “Righto,” we said, with no idea how this would be accomplished. Ignorance can sometimes be a good thing.

Our tough alpine guide scorned protection and headed vertically, some 30 metres, as far as his rope would stretch. Vigorous kicking motions sent showers of ice rattling off our helmets, after which he summoned us upwards.

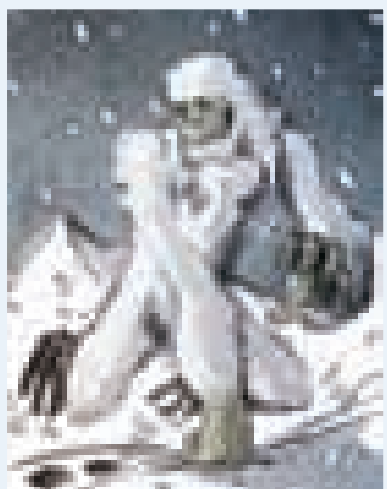


Illustration of a yeti by Philippe Semeria.

Andrew Knight, BVMS, MRCVS, a London based ex-pat Australian, is not the most dextrous of climbers, but if he can survive long enough he hopes to become the first RCVS registered specialist in yeti medicine and surgery.

It was time to put the new ice-axes to the test.

Thirty scary metres above, we soon crowded onto a ledge large enough for perhaps four small pot plants. Our guide clipped us to ice screws and disappeared vertically once again.

His request that I belay him floated down from above, but perhaps because non-French speaking clients weren't his favourite, he hadn't bothered to provide instructions, although I had dim memories of previous caving experiences to fall back on.

His fall, if I could hold him without being torn off the wall, would be a maximum of 60 metres – should he slip. For entrusting their lives to strangers such as me, these alpine guides receive modest daily fees. I resolved to complain less about my job, in the future.

In this way we proceeded up the wall. Unused to dealing with threats greater than needle-pricks, I struggled to keep fear at bay. Sixty metres up I heard the clattering roar of a rescue chopper hovering close behind us, but I dared not take my eyes off the wall.

No looking down

At no point did I allow myself to look down. Fear certainly provides added strength, but it was nevertheless with muscles screaming protests at such novel exercise that I finally reached the safety of the rocks.

Grudgingly, our guide conceded we were ready to try for the summit. And so I dressed my growing blisters before dawn the next morning, and prophylactically took a powerful painkiller, left from those I was prescribed when I once checked too closely on an unconscious Rottweiler. The weather was superb, meaning that sunburn hazard was high, so I covered my face with white "clown paint", or what I thought was super-strong sun cream.

Duly prepared, I lugged my array of climbing hardware through the Chamonix dawn, scaring the odd stray cat. The 6.30 cable car was packed tight as a London tube, with the addition of ropes, poles and ice-axes sticking out in every direction. Oddly, no one else was painted white.

Had I read the French sun cream label correctly? At least my gaiters were

on the right way.

Novel method of waking up

Once again we negotiated the Eastern Ridge of Aiguille du Midi – a novel but highly effective means of waking up – and hiked across the glacial plain to the base of Mt Blanc du Tacul. I kept a keen eye out for signs of Gigantopithecus activity.

Far above us, tiny, brightly-helmeted dots zig-zagged over crevasses and beneath teetering snowy cornices. Occasional slab avalanches sweep this face clean without warning, which is why most choose to cross such regions in the early pre-dawn hours, when everything is frozen solid.

My guide, however, dismissed the dawn sunlight with a shrug, and so we ascended ever higher up the massive face.

The next slope was even steeper than the last. At 4,465 metres, Mt Maudit is not called "death mountain" for nothing. The final 40 metres over its shoulder was a near-vertical ice climb, assisted by a few rocks and old fixed ropes. No yetis were above us – I dared not look anywhere else.

Finally, only the looming bulk of Mt Blanc itself remained ahead of us. We stopped very briefly in the col below the summit, but there was little time to eat, for time was at a premium.

My feet were a dull ache of blisters and my fingers were alternating between numbness and a tingling, burning sensation. There was no time to attend to either, so I mostly just sat and drank all I could – dehydration being a major danger at altitude.

A few short minutes later we ascended into a rising 60 km/hr wind, which blew snow and ice under my sunglasses, impeding my visibility and frustrating my search for Gigantopithecus spoor.

Suddenly, some 200 metres below the summit, I experienced the strange sensation that I was sleep-walking. After six hours of almost constant stepping upwards through snow I was starting to become exhausted, and the rarefied atmosphere didn't help.

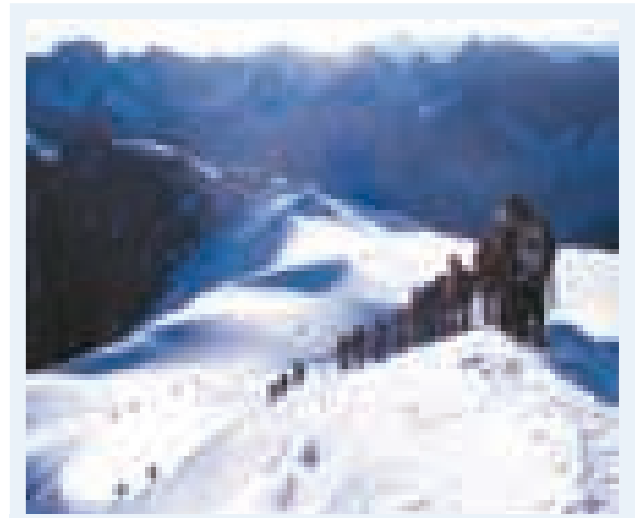
Soon I discovered I could go no further. And so I sat, oblivious to the gale, bringing to a sudden halt my roped guide, who eloquently expressed his displeasure with a few choice words.

And yet, we remained ahead of schedule, the weather was good, and with a couple more short, involuntary stops, we soon reached the summit.

I staggered around, gazing in stupefied fascination at the peaks and valleys fading to the horizon in all directions, roped to my suspicious guide. At last there was nowhere higher I could go. I was on the top of Europe! On a broad, safe-looking, snowy ridge.

Yet I knew that previous climbers had fatally stumbled, sometimes with their roped partners in tow, into either Italy or France, depending on which side they fell. Indeed, I later learnt that Mt Blanc kills more climbers than any other mountain – because it is attempted by more than any other comparable peak.

Or perhaps because it's a mecca for clumsy Australians, and other novices from the four corners of the Earth. I wasn't sure which. I carefully avoided learning such details before my climb.



Traversing the Aiguille du Midi ridge.

The experience certainly put life more in perspective, I reflected afterwards, as I floated along the valley trails in my super-comfy running shoes, re-growing the skin on my heels, nose, lips and face, whilst searching for yetis. Perhaps the clown paint had indeed been just that. Nevertheless, it was deeply sobering to be in a place that really could kill, and where life hung by fairly fragile threads.

And yet the views were among the most beautiful I've ever seen.

Veterinary medicine can sometimes be demanding, but the hidden rewards, like certain of our patients, can be amazing!

Free blood testing services for ewes

INTERVET/Schering-Plough Animal Health has launched its complimentary blood testing service that allows practitioners to investigate one of the main infectious causes of early embryo loss in sheep flocks.

The annual subsidised Barren EweCheck diagnostic scheme is available until 31st March for breeding ewe flocks. The service establishes whether *Toxoplasma gondii* is potentially implicated in any empty or aborting ewes.

Data from the 2009 scheme showed that 69% of flocks had been exposed to the toxoplasma parasite at some point before blood sampling. For further information and the 2010 Barren EweCheck pads, call 01908 685685.

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