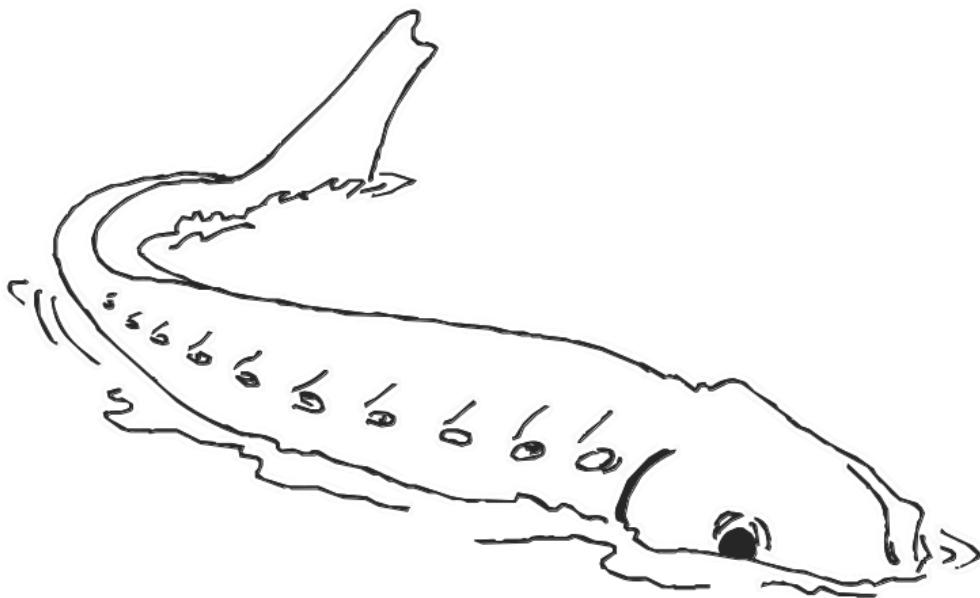


The Sanpoil River Monster

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My name is Carl Clemmons. I write a column for a weekly newspaper called The Installation. Don't get too excited, it's a four page coffee shop publication. My column is about Cryptozoology. I report on animals that aren't supposed to exist, like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. Today I am in the Inland Northwest searching for the Sanpoil River Monster.

I received an email from a man named Eli Moses, who works for the Tribal Reservation's fish and wildlife department. After a few emails back and forth and a phone call I agreed to come investigate his claims. I flew in to the nearest large airport on a late spring morning and drove west about an hour and half, crossed a river ferry and drove some more. Eventually I came into the small town that was nearest the sighting of this river monster and pulled in to gravel parking lot of a country store where we arranged to meet. There was nobody to be found. My cell phone signal strength flickered at one bar. I watched a gray speckled dog trot across the parking lot. It

stopped and stared at me as I leaned against my rental car then it continued walking. I went in to the store and bought a bottle of water and some jerky. When I exited the store a maroon pickup with a diamond plate truck bed toolbox was parked next to my car. getting out the truck was short man in a T-shirt and jeans. He wore a cap that said Vietnam veteran and two long black braids with streaks of gray ran down his back. His glasses had tinted in the sun. We stared at each for a few seconds then I walked over and extended my hand.

“Eli?” I asked as he took my hand and we shook.

“Yup.” He replied.

“I’m Carl. We spoke on the phone two days ago. I saw the river driving in. It’s gorgeous country.”

“Yup.” He replied. I got the impression that Eli was a no nonsense kind of guy.

“Well, let’s start with the incident with the dog you reported. Can you take me there?

“Sure. you can park your car at my cousin’s”

We pulled in at his cousin’s house, but nobody was home. I noticed the same speckled gray dog from earlier was laying on the porch under a wooden bench. He looked at both of us with what seemed like disinterest as we walked up then went back to sleep. The dog was not impressed.

“Is that your cousin’s dog?” I asked Eli.

“No.” He said.

Heading out, we turned off the main road, then onto gravel and finally we drove down a dirt road that turned into two tire tracks in the grass. We stopped on the edge of a meadow and walked through the trees to a sandbar on the river. The water was still fairly high and fast from the spring runoff, but a small inlet cut into the bank and the water formed calmer pool.

“Here is where it happened.” Eli said as he fished a zip lock baggie out of his pocket. The

baggie held a tuft of gold covered fur.

“The Wilson kids were playing round the bend about hundred yards upstream and the dog was down here. They heard yelping and splashing and saw the dog pulled in. They claim they saw a large silver flash roll over the top of the dog and then it all went under the water. The sand was all scratched up right here when I first came down, but the water washed it away.”

I crouched down and looked south. The river was narrower up here. It got much wider when it flowed a mile further downstream due to the river being inundated. A little swampy then it broke into open water. The widening was due to flowing into the Columbia river and the water backing up from a hydroelectric dam. This isolated incident by itself was not much to go on.

“Does Fish and Wildlife have a boat we can use to go into the water with a fish detector?

“Sure, but they won’t let us, I’ve been put on administrative leave.”

“Oh... Sorry to hear that. You didn’t mention it over the phone.”

“Just officially happened yesterday.”

“Mind if I ask why?”

“Shot somebody.”

“Wait, what? ...You shot a person?”

“He’s not dead. It was just a .22.”

“So it was just an accident?”

“Naw, he deserved it.”

“Uh, well, here’s to a painful recovery I guess. Sorry to hear about your work trouble.”

“It’s okay, I’m almost ready to retire.”

I changed the subject. “The dog attack was something, but I need more. I need to get out onto the water. I suppose I can rent a boat somewhere around here.”

“I have a boat. We can take it out after lunch.”

I helped load Eli's twelve foot fiberglass boat into the back of his truck. He lived forty-five minutes over the mountains and we had went to his place for a lunch of baloney sandwiches. He also gave me some elk jerky that was a million times better than the pre-packaged teriyaki stuff I had bought at the store.

"We need to stop at Gary's house and pick up my boat motor. It's on the way." Eli said as we drove back over the pass.

"Everything is a long drive over the winding roads on the hills around here." I said.

"Yup. I hope you don't get car sick."

"As long as I don't read in the car. So, this river monster. You called it the Red Eyed Bass?"

"I didn't come up with that, they've been calling it that for at least thirty years around here."

"You know, there is an actual fish called the red eyed bass in the south. It's not a remarkable or giant fish. Rock bass have red eyes too."

"I don't think it's really a bass. That's just what they call it. Too big to be a bass."

"So what do you think it is?"

"Dunno. Maybe nothing. Catfish? Carp? Dinosaur? Aren't you the expert?"

"Enthusiastic novice. From what I have read, there are several large fish in these waters. My best guess is a pike, carp, or sturgeon."

"Those are some possibilities, but this fish seems to be different. Sometimes Tribe Fish and Wildlife has us running a gillnet in the river when they are doing inspections, tagging, and removals. They do some electrofishing and then release the native fish back into the water."

"What is electrofishing?"

"We have these prongs sticking out the front of the boat and they have a frame hanging a

bunch of wires down into the water. we zap the water and the fish float to the top. That way we can inspect them and release without killing. We want to thin out the non-native predator fish that eat the fry of the native fish, like trout.”

“...Fry are baby fish?”

“Yup. My point is we have never seen any evidence of the Red Eyed bass come out of the river. If it’s a common fish like pike or sturgeon or catfish, then it isn’t really a monster. Not really one of your Bigfoots then.”

“Well, my column takes a more skeptical view, I don’t try to over sensationalize. Some people expect me to write Elvis and Alien sightings like a supermarket tabloid. What interests me about this is the dog attack. That makes it unusual. This is the first time it has eaten something off the shore?”

“First time with witnesses I believe. Hang on, we’re here.”

We pulled off the highway onto a dirt road and across a cattle guard. Five minutes up the road we came across a house and barn with several cars parked out front.

“Why don’t you stay in the truck, I’ll go get my boat motor.” Eli got out and walked towards the barn by the side of an empty corral.

I went over my notes while I waited and scribbled down the information Eli had told me. A shirtless man with receding reddish-blond hair was outside my window. He leaned his right arm against the mirror. His left arm was tucked close to his side. He apparently didn’t want to move it because of the large bandage that was taped to the his left front shoulder. A dried spot of blood was in the center of the bandage.

“So, what you doing sitting in Eli’s truck?” he asked with a grin.

“Oh hey, Eli came to get his outboard motor.” I replied, looking around to see where Eli went.

“Oh shoot! hang on, I stole the spark plug out of it. lemme steal it back.”

“Hey Gary.” Eli said walking up behind him.

“Hey there Eli, let me go grab that spark plug. It’s in a mower behind the house.”

“How’s your shoulder?”

“Pretty good. They got both the bullets out. Bone is fine.”

“Is Nancy keeping you clean and sober?”

“Yes she is and yes I am.” He pointed at his shoulder. “It may hurt, but only aspirin for me from here on out.”

I got out of the cab and followed Eli and Gary around as they retrieved the spark plug and took it back to the barn to bring the motor back to life. It was attached to the side of a half full fifty gallon drum with the prop sitting in the water.

“So, you’re the big city monster hunter. You going to try to catch a Stick Indian or just going fishing?” Gary asked me as he worked.

“Not really big city, but I am writing a story about your quote-unquote river monster.” I said with a smile.

“It’s gonna to be a tough one to track down, considering it’s got the Columbia river clear up to B.C. Canada to swim up and down. Course, on the other hand, I’ve only ever heard people talk about the red eyed bass here on the San Poil, not on the Columbia or Kettle river, so the monster must live around here.”

“Well, I’ve been up and down the river with sonar for years, but never seen anything but logs.” Eli said as we carried the motor to the back of his truck.

“It only seems to show up every so often. I guess it gets frisky ever few years. You know who you should be talking to? Old man Binkowski!” Gary said.

“Ted Binkowski is not all there anymore.” Said Eli as he started his truck.

“Anymore? He was always crazy! He’s all hopped up on it again now that people have claimed to seen it recently, and he wants to catch it. He used to say the Red Eyed Bass tried to eat a bear. He’s your expert on the red eye river monster!” Gary yelled as we drove away.

It was day three as Eli and I cruised down the lake again. Nothing conclusive had come up on the fishfinder and I was getting sick of Baloney sandwiches. Eli seemed to be endlessly patient.

“Maybe we should go talk to this Binkowski fellow. It would be good for my article.”

Eli shrugged. “All you’re going to get are tall tales and onions.”

“Onions?”

“Ted always smells like onions.”

We brought the boat to shore and drove around some more back roads to a faded blue single story house with a garage of the same color. A sixteen foot bass boat sat on a trailer next to the garage.

Eli turned off his truck and looked at me. “I’d rather wait in the truck, but I suppose you want an introduction.” He said.

“Well, the ‘No Solicitors’ sign on the fencepost tells me it would be a good idea.”

We walked to the front door and rang the doorbell. After a minute a white haired man with wild eyebrows and wild eyes answered the door. He looked at Eli.

“Eli! you finally came to take care of that pack of wolves?”

“You have no wolves, Ted.”

“Then tell me what has been eating all the cattle?”

Eli leaned my direction and said, “One old cow was found dead a couple years ago, I think it died of a heart attack and the coyotes chewed on it.”

I spoke up “Hi, my name is Carl Clemons. I’m writing an article about this Red Eyed Bass here in the river. I understand you have some information about it attacking a bear.”

A grin broke out across Ted’s face. “Well, well, well. Finally somebody listens! Come on in and have a seat and I’ll tell you all about the Red Eyed Bass. You boys want a beer?”

We both shook our heads. Ted led us inside and we all sat down at a kitchen table piled with papers and magazines.

“Mind if I take notes?” I asked as I pulled my notepad out of my pocket.

“Go right ahead.” Ted said as he sat down across from me. He did smell like onions.

“People ‘round here have been talking about a fish with red eyes for decades. Fishermen would see it near the surface sometimes when they were out on the river. Some claimed it would steal the fish right off their hooks. Just see that fish being reeled in and swoop up and grab it, snap the line, and bloomp!” Ted closed his hand into a fist a twirled it in the air.

“Somewhere along the line, they start calling it a red eyed bass. I think my nephew Pete said he it had a mouth as big as a largemouth bass when he saw it.”

“So, your nephew saw it?”

“Oh yeah, several people seen it. Pete and Grant, Eli’s cousin Heather, Bob Rivers said it had eyes the size of a softball. Everybody’s seen it! I remember it rolled up out of the water just out a ways from the campground. I would estimate it was thirty feet long if it was a foot!”

Eli snorted in contempt, his arms crossed. “Bob said the eye was the size of a golf ball.”

Ted scowled for a moment then grinned again. “Eli here thinks I’m crazy, but we both know the Red Eyed Bass is real. Someday, I’m going to catch it. That’s why I have this sixty five pound test line. I’ve been getting serious about trolling for it the past several years. I think I hooked it once, but it got off. I’m known for my close calls, you know. Back in, what was it? seventy three? We were logging up around Curlew and I had a run in with cougar. It came up on

me when I was by myself and I didn't have anything on me but a pocket knife. It came at me and I had to think fast and move faster. I swung my fist as hard as I could and bopped him on his nose. The cat was so startled he took into the trees and I didn't see him again!" Eli snorted again, obviously not believing the story.

I tried to get Ted back on track. "So, a fellow named Gary mentioned something about the Red Eyed Bass and a bear? What can you tell me about that?"

Ted nodded and got up, going down the hall. He returned in a moment with a cigar box. So way back when, I was down near the creek early in the morning and I heard some thrashing and bellowing coming from near the water. I went back to my truck and pulled out a shotgun that I kept in the gun rack of my truck. I eased through the brush and found bear tracks and a little blood on the rocks. I looked around a bit but saw no more sign of the bear or anything else. A few weeks later I was down at the river and you know what I found?"

He held up his cigar box. Opening the lid, he pulled back a cloth wrapping to reveal several bones. Looking at the bones, they looked a bit like human fingers, except with long claws on the end. They were from a bears paw.

Ted looked at our faces with a big grin. We stared back at him.

"Don't you see? The Red Eyed Bass swam up the creek, saw a tasty bear paw and latched on, he ripped the paw off and ate it!

I raised my eyebrows. Eli stood up to leave, he had enough.

"Tell me, if the monster ate the bear's paw, how did it end up on shore?" Eli asked.

"It spit up the bones!"

"How'd it jump out of the water and bite with enough strength to rip off the paw?"

"Maybe it has a big snapping jaw with teeth like a crocodile!"

I stood and followed Eli to the door. "Thank you for your time. I appreciate your

information on the Red Eyed Bass. Would you mind if I called you again if I have more questions?"

"Will I get credited in the story?"

"If you like."

"Go right ahead, but fair warning, I plan on catching it before you do, then they'll write all their stories about me."

"Well, that's probably true. That is If you catch it." I probably shouldn't hassle this man, but he was irritating me. I could see why Eli didn't like him.

"I'm going to be out there every day and every night, you can bet on that!"

We left the place and drove out to the highway.

"Well, what do you want to do now?" I asked Eli.

"Well I sure ain't stoppin now. That crazy old man has got me fired up!" I think this was the first time I had seen Eli get excited about anything.

"Well my return flight is open ended and my motel room is cheap. I say we hit it hard."

"We can go back on the water, but this time I'm bringing a fishing pole."

We went on the water again freshly armed with a stout fishing pole designed for ocean trolling and a large bag of elk jerky. After about an hour, Eli hooked a Walleye and I netted him into the boat.

"I think the Red Eye likes something of substance." Eli said as he clubbed the walleye and attached it whole to a five inch fishing hook. Let's see what we can catch with this. This Walleye is one of the fish I mentioned before that's eating the trout fry. I wonder how many trout and kokanee the Red Eyed Bass has eaten?"

We took another pass down the river, hitting all the inlets and deep spots we could find. Several hundred yards ahead of us, I saw a sixteen foot bass boat. I pointed it out to Eli.

Eli pulled out a pair of binoculars from his tackle box. "That looks like Ted Binkowski, and the second guy is his nephew Pete."

I pulled out my camera and took a few pictures of their boat in the distance.

"How crazy is Ted, anyhow? Is he going to do anything stupid?"

"Maybe."

Over the next three days We spent as much time as possible on the water. Late evening and early morning were our targeted times. I slept at my motel room during the day and we prowled the waters while it was dark. Ted was on the water as much as we were, if not more so. Any time we got close he would speed off. If we were headed to a desired spot on the river, he would open his motors up full boar and beat us to the location. This had turned into strange race where nothing happened. I had voicemails from my editor asking about the story. I didn't want to call him back until I had a satisfactory ending.

On the eighth night something happened. We were slowly trolling near the north end of the inundated part of the river, Eli dragging the bait as close as he could to bottom without getting it snagged. There was a sudden lurch in the boat and the reel spun as the drag let out line. Eli grabbed the pole and let out some more line. I grabbed my camera and made sure the flash was ready. The line headed north then swung around and went under the boat I looked at the fish finder. There was a giant blip going across the screen just under the surface. The night went from pitch black to bright white. I squinted into the light. Ted's boat had pulled up nearby and Steve was shining a spotlight directly at us.

"Are you catching my fish?" Ted yelled across the water.

"Shut up" I yelled as I ducked under the fishing line as Eli swing his pole to the other side of the boat, following the fish. A large boom came from Ted's boat and splashes rippled across the water between our two boats. He was firing a shotgun into the water. I began snapping

pictures of anything and everything. Eli rolled around in the boat, reeling in as hard as he could. I grabbed the sides of the little boat as rolled back and forth in the water. Ted's bass boat was now only a few yards away. Ted fired his shotgun into the water again, stray pellets hit the side of Eli's boat. I felt a sting in my leg below the knee.

"Are you crazy?" I yelled.

The water erupted into a splash between the two boats and large silvery white mound burst out of the water. It rose several feet above the water line. I snapped pictures as fast as my finger could push the button. The creature crashed down, hitting the side of Eli's boat. The boat rocked backwards. I felt myself tipping back over the side. I threw my camera towards the boat to keep it from going into the river and felt my back hit the water. I sank under the water and it was suddenly dark.

"Well, this is one way to go, eaten by a monster fish." I thought to myself as the light on surface got smaller.

I sat on a log near the boat shore with a towel around my shoulders, sipping a cup of coffee from a thermos. I had a bandaid on my leg where I dug out the bb from the shotgun. The sun was coming up over the trees. Near the water, Ted and Steve Binkowski argued loudly with tribal police. I was hoping they would get tasered. Eli walked up next to me.

"You almost had it." I said

"Eh, it was a close encounter before she slipped the hook. Here, maybe you made out better than I did." He handed me my camera. I flipped through the pictures. Most of them were a blur of water and boat. I stopped on the last picture. It was blurry like the rest, but in the middle you could make a flash of a red eye. I held the camera up to Eli so he could look.

"There's the shot. That's the one that is going with my column. I don't think it would hold

up in a court of law, but there's the proof." I said. Eli chuckled.

"Shoot, let's take you back to your car. so you can drive back and sleep" he said.

As we drove down a dirt side road back to his cousins house. I spotted a golden retriever mutt walking along the road. It was dirty and limping. I pointed it out to Eli.

He stopped and stared the laughed. "You know what? I think that is the Wilson's dog."

He whistled and patted his knee. The dog looked up and came over. Eli opened his door and the dog hopped in the cab. It was happy and licking both of us.

"I guess the Red Eyed Bass didn't eat it." I said.

"Guess not." Eli replied

We pulled into his cousin's place and the golden retriever mutt jumped out as soon as we stopped. The speckled gray dog on the porch ran down the steps and they joined each other tails wagging as they ran around the back of the house.

"Huh. Now isn't that weird." I said to Eli.

"Yup." he replied.