

IMAGINARY ANIMALS OF NORTHERN MINNESOTA

WHEN I WAS working on the North Shore of Lake Superior in 1927 and 1928, there were fantastic animals in the backwoods, even stranger than the moose and porcupines which startle the tourists from the south nowadays. Wherever I went that winter, by bus or fish truck on the highway or on snowshoes in the woods, wherever I camped the following summer, I heard stories of these strange creatures, the folklore of our north woods. Sometimes the storyteller hoped that I might believe in the animal, as in the past the young rangers and green lumberjacks had occasionally believed. Probably the creatures were originally created to fool the listener, a stranger to the country. They were fine stories, too, to tell the children, and most children of that countryside knew them as they knew the Paul Bunyan tales, from their fathers who were woodsmen.

Mr. William T. Cox, head forester of Minnesota twenty years ago and earlier, collected some of these stories and in 1910 published them in a small book, now out of print, called *Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwoods*. Mr. Cox had met the "agropelter" and heard the "hodag," but he had never seen the "wild teakettle" in the morning mist, nor met a "snow snake" in the drifts of an early blizzard.

My first experience with the snow snake was at Beaver Bay, in the very snowy December of 1927, when I was warned to look out for it whenever I went out into the drifts. A snow snake, I was told, is not large, but is active and dangerous, dashing around over the snow and biting into the hunter's boots. Snow snakes turn white in winter, just like snowshoe rabbits, and for the same reason of course—to match the snow and be less visible. A trapper's wife in the country back of Lutsen told me that a snow snake was "cer-

tain death to meet." The ranger at Four Mile, when he came in to Cross River in the early spring, reported that there had been a lot of snow snakes out there and as far east as Grand Marais. He said that the average snow snake was five or six feet long and just the color of snow, although in some lumber camps they claimed to have seen pale blue ones. If you go up to a snow snake it winds itself around you and kills you, and in this respect it resembles a Canadian animal, the "snow wasset," described by Mr. Cox, which comes out after the first howling snowstorm and attacks loggers from the deep drifts.

More information about the appearance of the snow snake was given me by some men who worked in winter on the roads near Beaver Bay, and it is peculiar, I think, to their locality. According to them, the snow snake takes in snow through its mouth and blows it out again through a hole in its head. Members of the crew of a Two Harbors snowplow, stalled in a blizzard, told me that they had seen several snow snakes during that storm and were not afraid of them because of the protection of the snowplow, but added that they would not want to run over one of the animals.

Another dangerous animal seen in the winter is the "whirling wampus," fortunately rare and only seen during blizzards. It comes whirling through the snow, grabs its victim, holds him tight, and often kills him. The head lighthouse keeper at Split Rock Light had heard of these animals when he was working as a young man in a northern Michigan lumber camp. The keeper it was who told his young daughters—and they told me while we were camping together—of the wild teakettle, an animal common in Michigan, but also seen along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Even in 1928 it was becoming rare, but it could be heard sometimes in the cutover and second-growth woods, hissing away like a boiling teakettle. In the scrubby woods which used to be called "the bush" it might be seen with the steam rising from its mouth, which was shaped like a spout. Like most of

these animals, it is shy, so that I could never get a fuller description of its looks. But it must have very odd feet, for in winter it leaves tracks in the snow that look like snowshoe tracks, but go in opposite directions — “one going east and one west, just to fool you.” The wild teakettle is not dangerous, but it seems to have a bad temper, and hisses loudly when angry. It is easy to see why this animal has never been trapped.

The lighthouse keeper also knew the animal called the “wild auger handle,” which leaves a single track in the snow. Many Minnesotans have heard of this creature, as it used to be known in all the logging camps and in the St. Croix Valley; men who were once lumberjacks remember it well.

Another animal with a wide range in Minnesota is the agropelter, which was well known on Lake Superior and is also reported by Mr. Cox as far south as the St. Croix Valley. By the rangers of Grand Marais and the Canadian border country, the agropelter was described as a small but very dangerous beast, living in hollow trees along the trails and portages. According to them, an agropelter will hide in a dead tree trunk and throw down big pieces of dead wood with such force as to knock out a passing ranger and seriously injure him. When a man is found hurt on a trail, this is said to be caused by “falling timber,” but the old rangers know better — it was the wicked work of an agropelter.

I heard a fine firsthand description of the animal and its ways at Grand Marais in 1937 from the famous woodsman Ed Mulligan, formerly of the United States Forest Service. Mr. Mulligan, who has spent many years in the north woods, once passed by an agropelter’s hiding place in a tree trunk, but, looking back, saw it peering out of a hole. He said it had “a mean little face,” but as the trail was in the thick of the forest and dark, he did not get a chance to see the animal very clearly, and it was careful not to climb out of the hollow tree trunk with people about. Mr. Mulligan and other woodsmen agreed that agropelters are nasty and bent on

trouble. Living in the same deep woods, but far less dangerous, is the "sliver cat" (also called the "splinter cat"), which breaks off pieces of wood with "slivvery" ends and throws them across the trails. The sliver cat looks a little like a porcupine with its spines pointing the wrong way.

In contrast to these well-known animals, there is a rare one sometimes seen around the smaller lakes between Lake Superior and the border, known as the "bog hop." I first heard of it from a trapper, our only neighbor when we were camping on a wild and lovely lake ten miles north of Lutsen. The trapper, passing our shore in a canoe, stopped to talk, and told the children who were camping with me about the animals he had seen, including the rare bog hop, which is half moose and half beaver. It has horns like a moose, but is much smaller; it swims like a beaver, but hops as well, and, when surprised by anyone in a canoe, it hops away into a swamp and disappears. Questioned further by the children, who wanted to know more about the bog hop, the trapper said that he had to be going along and paddled quietly off to his homestead at the far side of the lake.

We never saw any bog hops near that camp because we made too much noise for such a shy creature. Now I think that tourists are driving them farther back into the woods, so do not expect to see any on your next summer's vacation trip. Perhaps in the winter, however, if you were to go into the north woods, you might see the strange tracks of a wild auger handle or hear the whistling of a wild teakettle. And be sure to watch out for snow snakes.

MARJORIE EDGAR

MARINE ON THE ST. CROIX, MINNESOTA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).