

FOOTSTEPS IN THE SNOW

By SQUADRON LEADER L. W. DAVIES, F.R.G.S., R.A.F.

IT was a very sceptical Air Force officer who wearily dragged himself from his sleeping-bag early one morning and trekked up the 13,000-ft. snow-filled Kulti Valley in search of 'yeti' footprints at the behest of his expedition leader. The officer was myself; the leader, Group Captain A. J. M. Smyth; the occasion, the 1955 R.A.F.M.A. Himalayan expedition to Lahoul.

Tony Smyth has already briefly described how he and Sergeant Johnny Lees came across some footprints in the Kulti 'hanging valley' on their way from advanced base camp to Camp I, how he later came to believe that the prints were made by a red bear that ran through our base camp area a few days later and how he sent a Ladakhi porter back three miles to base camp with a message for me to come up and investigate more closely while he and Lees pressed on to the higher camps.

The Ladakhi, Nawa Ram, and I had been up and down the valley on the previous two days without seeing any animal spoor. As we trekked up past the old terminal moraine of the glacier he told me that he thought the prints had been made by a 'balu' (bear). I was therefore far from enthusiastic at being called out on what looked like a wild-goose chase, especially as I had planned to take things easy that day whilst catching up on my correspondence as Transport Officer. When we reached the spot where Nawa Ram said that the spoor had been it was even more exasperating to find an indecipherable maze of vibram and nailed boot marks. We might, there and then, have abandoned the search and returned to camp but for the fact that I wanted to take some telephoto cine shots of our mountain tops.

This was just as well because a little further up the valley we came upon three large footprints on the edge of one of the snow islands that separated the meandering glacial streams to our right. A beast had evidently climbed out of the icy cold, swiftly running current onto the island. We tried to ford the stream but it was too cold and deep so we cast around to see where it had entered the water. We soon found that this was about a hundred yards upstream. From there we back-tracked up the steep western side of the valley whence the beast had come, keeping clear of, but parallel to its tracks. It had walked steeply downhill on its hind legs and, where the gradient was too steep for walking, had slid on its behind. Careful examination showed that it had used its fists, either to brake or to assist its descent. The span between the left and right fist-marks was about 3 yards. After measuring



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THREE FOOTPRINTS OF ANIMAL WHERE IT SWAM RIVER AND CLIMBED ONTO A SNOW ISLAND.



**THE LAST FOOTPRINT FOUND, HIGH ON THE STEEP EASTERN WALL OF KULTI "HANGING VALLEY."
TOE MARKS PARTLY OBSCURED BY LOOSE SNOW KICKED BACK BY BEAST.**

the dimensions of the footprints we trekked upstream to a snow bridge and returned along the far bank where, in due course, we reached the prints we had first seen. The water here was about 5 ft. deep—the current undercut the bank—and yet we could see no trace of forepaws or hands. Evidently, whatever it was that had passed this way had been extremely tall and had simply stepped out of the deep water onto the edge of the island.

Like his fellow Ladakhis, Nawa Ram had previously scoffed at the anti-‘yeti’ precautions taken by our Sherpas. These had consisted of traps and mystical spinning tops made from base-camp debris. Now however his whole attitude changed.

‘Zarur Sahib, yeh balu nay hai,’ he exclaimed. ‘Certainly this is no bear.’

The previous afternoon he had been assisting me with my cameras some 300 yards upstream and we found that our footprints had expanded by only one-eighth of an inch all round. The theory that ‘yeti’ footprints are merely enlarged bear pug marks could therefore be ruled out in this case. Furthermore, since we had left the area at about 3.30 P.M. the previous day, we knew that the creature had crossed the valley between that time on June 11 and early the following morning. Close study of the prints on the island edge showed that it must have climbed out of the stream when the snow was freezing hard; that is, during the night or early morning.

During my previous six Himalayan seasons I had often seen black and red bears and their pug marks, but these prints in the Kulti were quite different. Each foot had five broad toes and the big toe was particularly prominent on some of the prints which averaged 12 inches long and 8 inches wide. In places they had sunk 11 inches into the snow where my own boots, bearing over 14 stone, went in a mere 1½ inches beneath the noonday sun. Such deep impressions on hard snow indicate, therefore, a beast of great weight.

We spent several hours following the tracks, which extended for about half a mile. Our progress was made difficult by the numerous snow islands and icy cold streams. The beast had swum at least five of them before its tracks finally petered out on the rocky eastern wall of the valley. Nowhere had it walked on all fours and the average pace between its footprints was nearly twice that of my own.

When we finally gave up the chase and returned to base camp our Sherpas were convinced that we had seen the footsteps of a ‘yeti.’ We didn’t place much credence on this, however, because the Sherpas were highly ‘yeti’ conscious. Before setting off on the hunt our sirdar, Nima Sungay, had even tried to persuade me to take his kukri to defend myself. The following morning, when Nalni Jayal knocked on his tent at 3.30 A.M. before leaving for Camp I, Nima came to him in the

moonlight with blade flashing, in the mistaken belief that the shadow on his tent was that of a 'yeti.'

Nevertheless, I am sure that the strong belief in this legendary creature amongst the Sherpas is not all based upon superstition. Whilst trekking in Tibet in 1940 my head Sherpa, Lobchen—an old Everest 'tiger'—described in detail to me how he had seen one walking quickly uphill on its hind legs near his home in Sola Khumbu. He was a stolid, reliable fellow and I felt confident, at the time, that he was giving me a true account of what he had seen.

Swami Pranavananda has recently written an interesting thesis with the evident intention of scotching the 'yeti' legend once and for all. Unfortunately, he himself does not claim to have seen and examined its tracks at any time and he merely relates, at second hand, how various Tibetans have proved that what were thought to have been 'yeti' tracks turned out to be those of red bear. This, surely, is a fallacious argument; because the footprints of hare turn out to be those of a rabbit the existence of hare is not necessarily disproved.

It is significant that whenever a new species has been reported in the past there have always been plenty of experts who have been only too ready to come forward to prove the impossibility of its existence. Exactly a hundred years ago Paul Belloni du Chaillu, the French-American explorer, shot the first gorilla ever killed by a white man. For more than 2,000 years Europe had treated the gorilla as a legend, akin to the sea-serpent or the dragon. But when du Chaillu returned to Europe with his description of this formidable ape he was met with a storm of ridicule and it was many years before Europe accepted the gorilla as a fact. So it has been with later species such as the giant panda and the coelacanth. Experts have stoutly denied the existence of these unknown creatures until they have been confounded by the production of actual specimens.

The sceptics may ask why actual 'yeti' sightings have been so rare; and then mostly from the natives of the area. One might answer this question with another. In this small, densely populated island of Britain, how many people have seen a badger? In the vast, unexplored regions of the Himalaya the indigenous fauna have ample opportunity for observing without being observed. The fact that most of the reports have emanated from the local inhabitants is obviously because they live there and have far more opportunities of encountering 'yetis' than the comparative handful of European climbers who visit on climbing bent; and then usually in the hot weather when the snow-line is high and food is plentiful. In this respect it is interesting to note that the snow-line in Lahoul was exceptionally low in 1955, so much so that we had to abandon our original area of exploration, the Shigri divide, in favour of the Kulti Himal.

Wladimir Tschernezki, perhaps the first man to investigate the 'yeti' concept scientifically, has compared this mysterious creature with the now extinct Gigantopithecus and has suggested that it might well be ape-like man rather than man-like ape. He feels that the awe in which it is held by the local inhabitants, especially the Sherpas, is due to its predatory habits and its standard of intelligence which is probably second only to that of man. He has confirmed that our Kulti prints bore a strong resemblance to previous well-authenticated reports and photographs.

If I'm asked whether a 'yeti' crossed the Kulti that day I cannot say; I'm not an expert. I'm certain, however, that it was not a bear and I, for one, am convinced that the evidence of numerous sincere people—quite apart from the superstitious and sensation hunters and the wishful thinkers—is sufficiently strong to warrant the belief that this creature will one day be found. When it is, I hope that it will be well treated. For all we know it might be a cousin of 'homo sapiens', millions of times removed, and to shoot it could possibly result in a charge of homicide.