Searching for Bigfoot

What does a visit to the creature’s Northern California stomping ground reveal?

By Robert Earle Howells

It’s only 59 seconds of 16mm film, but those 954 frames are among history’s most-studied images. In 1967, Roger Patterson and Bob Gimlin, two rodeo cowboys from Washington State, rode packhorses into the Bluff Creek drainage about 50 miles north of Willow Creek, in Northern California. While there, they filmed a shaggy giant as it walked along a sandbar across the creek from where the men were positioned on horseback. Some say the film depicts a person in an ape suit. Others contend it’s footage of Bigfoot. No question which theory is more intriguing.

I wanted to meet this ambassador from an era when the world was wild, and huge, hairy, humanoid creatures were plentiful. Seemingly every locale has its resident numen, a spirit or a quality that represents the essence of the place—a mystery that hovers over the loveliest landscapes. Or strides through them—on very large feet.

In some places, this mythic creature is called Sasquatch; in the Himalayas, he goes by Yeti or the Abominable Snowman. But Bigfoot? He’s American. Although Bigfoot has reportedly been spotted in 49 states, California boasts the most sightings, and the world’s Bigfoot capital is the town of Willow Creek, near Six Rivers National Forest. Is Bigfoot real? Or the centerpiece of a giant hoax? I wanted to find out, so I packed my bags for Northern California.


FACT OR FAKE?

On the drive from Eureka up State Highway 299, the Trinity Scenic Highway, I ascended into the Klamath Mountains, then dropped into the dense conifers and steeped peaks that surround Willow Creek. On its face, the town seemed a pleasant little crossroads, with a four-block, tree-lined main drag. But the bucolic atmosphere didn’t fool me. Hints of Bigfoot were everywhere. Bigfoot Motel. Bigfoot Steakhouse. And, at the intersection of State Highway 299 and State Highway 96, the Bigfoot Scenic Byway, the swarthy specter of the big guy himself.

It was a “near life-size” redwood statue carved by artist Jim McClarin. A sign referring to him as Oh Mah—the name used by the local Native people, the Hoopa—explained that the statue is based on eyewitness descriptions, and added this: OH MAH REPORTS.

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I contacted two of those researchers—Rowdy Kelley, a location film scout, and Robert Leiterman, a retired researcher based on jaw and tooth fossils of a huge apelike creature called gigantopithecus, thought to be extinct for 300,000 years. Some think Bigfoot could be a gigantopithecus holdover.

The nearby Willow Creek-China Flat Museum touts its “Bigfoot Exhibit” with a larger-than-life Bigfoot out front (not to be outdone by its wimpy neighbor at the visitors center), a statue carved from charred redwood that depicts the creature as 25 feet tall and extremely hirsute. Inside, the exhibit tells the Bigfoot’s story through newspaper clippings, movie posters, videos, and plaster casts of his footprints. An 1886 report describes a 7-foot-tall creature seen near the Klamath River, and a timeline indicates that 1850s gold prospectors reported sightings of “hairy giants.” There’s a skull constructed by a Washington State University researcher based on jaw and tooth fossils of a huge apelike creature called gigantopithecus, thought to be extinct for 300,000 years. Some think Bigfoot could be a gigantopithecus holdover.

To see the real Oh Mah?

“Web reports published over 100 years ago are essentially the same as those being made today,” Leiterman said.

Did she report it?” I asked.

“No, she didn’t want people to think she’s crazy.”

The nearly 400-page book “Bigfoot: The Official Field Guide to Encounters with the World’s Tallest Humanoid” by the International Center of Hominology was brought to life by the Patterson-Gimlin film.

Researchers from the Bluff Creek Project spent three years dissecting clues from the 1967 film and matching them up with reality. Finally, in 2011, they nailed down the exact spot where Bigfoot “Patty,” as she has come to be known, walked. I wanted to get there.

“I contacted two of those researchers—Rowdy Kelley, a location film scout, and Robert Leiterman, a retired state park ranger—and they agreed to guide me to that fabled site. Kelley worked on four episodes of a 2011 Animal Planet series called Finding Bigfoot, and Leiterman was the Bigfoot consultant on one of the least-abominable Bigfoot movies, Willow Creek, released in 2014. We agreed to meet in two days, which gave me time to poke around town.

Amid the musty stacks in Bigfoot Books at Willow Creek’s east end, I found Steven Streufert, curator of some 30,000 used tomes (on all topics, not just Bigfoot) and who appeared as himself in Willow Creek.

He’s affiliated with the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization but is agnostic about the creature’s existence and often finds himself caught between true believers and scoffers.

“Bigfoot takes us back to times when things were unknown,” he said, “like when Lewis and Clark reported their discoveries and people wondered what else could be out there. People of sound mind have seen the animal right in front of them. They’re not all crazy. But a lot of young hipsters assume it’s all a joke.”

Next door, I ventured into the Early Bird, where a wall mural depicts Mr. Bigfoot, bouquet of wild daisies in hand, prancing toward Mrs. Bigfoot, who is roasting bagels on a stick above a campfire. I ordered the Bigfoot Burger, about 10 inches long and served, toes and all, on a specially baked Bigfoot bun. Tasty, but I left the toes.

No work of Bigfoot art compares to the build-outs (about 170 feet) mural on the side of Willow Creek’s Ace Hardware, painted by artist Duane Flatmo. Panels show Bigfoot planting saplings with the Hoopa people, helping a settler fell and mill trees, and framing...
a house with other carpenters.

Doubting that the real Bigfoot was as accessible as Flatmo’s version, I explored the territory. North of Willow Creek, the Trinity River flows alongside Highway 96, promisingly named Bigfoot Scenic Byway, and through the Hoopa Reservation, where dozens of sightings have occurred. At the Hoopa-owned Tish Tang Campground, on a wooded shelf above a broad stretch of the river, it was easy to imagine that a Bigfoot could emerge from the opposite bank. He’s said to enjoy fresh salmon, which spawn here. One Hoopa native reported first smelling, then seeing, a huge creature here, almost 10 feet tall, that “had a face like a Bigfoot, not a bear.” Its eyes were a deep, piercing orange.

A few more winding roads, a dead-end, a mile’s downhill hike, and we arrived at the hallowed Patterson-Gimlin film site—an area just above a fast-flowing, crystal-clear stretch of Bluff Creek, shaded by maples and Douglas firs.

Why was it so important to establish the exact location of the filming? “For one,” said Leiterman, the former park ranger, “if you can’t prove the location, it’s hard to accept the film as legitimate. It also helps us estimate the size of the animal.” That is, knowing the size of trees and landmarks helped researchers gauge Patty’s stature. Most researchers say she’s a dainty 6-footer.

“The Garden of Eden down here,” said Leiterman. “The sword ferns, the greenery. It’s always cool, even when it’s 110 up above.”

The hard work the men had done in authenticating the site was long over—the laying out of 30-foot grids, each tree and stump carefully compared against the film and a high-perspective photo. They’d already proven that this was the film site, however, and indifferent to any scorn for their obsession. “We have thick skin,” said Leiterman.

As we snacked, Leiterman gestured across the log-strewn forest floor and alluded to an overlooked aspect of the Patterson-Gimlin film debate. “Watch Patty walk in that film,” he said. “She never looks down. Imagine a guy in a suit doing that here. Imagine anyone doing it. You’d have to look down.”

That’s hardly proof of Bigfoot’s existence. But what would it be? And does it matter? To me, it’s like debating whether wonder and mystery and dreams exist. If we limit our attention only to what can be touched, quantified, and proven, we’ve lost a bit of the magic that makes life—and our travels—so endlessly fascinating.

As we started our hike back up from Bluff Creek, we noticed a scurrying of varied thrushes rising from the forest understorey back down where we’d spent the afternoon. Something had stirred them up. A presence in the forest. Unheard. Unseen.

A Foot

The Eureka-Humboldt Visitors Bureau has a wealth of information. (707) 443-5097; visitehowood.com/bigfoot.

LOGISTICS

United Airlines has nonstop flights from LAX to Arcata/Eureka. Willow Creek is about 44 miles east of Arcata via State Highway 299.

 Lodging and Camping

 Willow Creek Area

 China Creek Cottages offers furnished cabins in the woods. Rates start at about $89. (530) 629-3353; chinacreekcottages.com.

 Bigfoot Motel has rooms in the heart of Willow Creek. Rates start at about $80. (530) 629-2142; bigfootmotel.com.

 Boise Creek Campground in Six Rivers National Forest, 2 miles west of town. (707) 442-1722; tinyurl.com/sixriversboisecreek.

 Tish Tang Campground, about 9 miles north of Willow Creek on the Trinity River. (707) 442-6045; hoopaforestry.com/campground.html.

 Cluff Creek Area

 Klamath River Lodge features cabins on the Klamath River, about 4 miles south of Orleans. Rates start at about $142. (707) 834-8935; klamathriverlodge.com.

 Aikens Creek West and E-Ne-Nuck campgrounds have 10 sites each and are located 9 miles south of Orleans. Rates at about $140. (707) 834-8935; klamathriverlodge.com.

 Giant Fun

 Willow Creek celebrates Bigfoot Daze each August. This year’s event is August 31, 10 a.m.–6 p.m. tinyurl.com/bigfootdaze.