



## Pop goes the cryptid

**SHARON HILL** ponders the fate of old school cryptozoology in the age of TikTok and

Observers of the modern cryptozoological scene cannot fail to notice the trend towards the inclusion of more fantastical, folkloric, unnatural and supernatural beings labelled as “cryptids”. There is no shortage of stories (and AI depictions) of nightcrawlers, pale crawlers, dog-men, goatmen and shapeshifters. What happened to cryptozoology as a scientific-minded search for “hidden” animals? The 21st century happened. That’s what.

There has been a definable slide away from “cryptozoology” of the Bernard Heuvelmans type and a huge rise in the popularisation of “cryptids”. Fewer professional scientific voices now advocate for the zoological reality of cryptids compared to an uncountable number of media creators promoting them as mysterious monsters. The modern popular use of “cryptid” has expanded to signify any weird sentient thing that people claim to see or experience. The idea of a cryptid having a zoological foundation has diminished. These new “pop cryptids” appearing within modern digital media are exaggerated, magical, supernatural and sometimes wholly invented. To see for yourself, look at digital platforms popular with the under-30s like TikTok, Instagram, Etsy, and the cryptids subreddit.

In North America, the most popular cryptids still are Bigfoot, and its regional relations, and lake monsters; but the pop cryptid that soared highest in the last 20 years has been Mothman, with its internationally known celebration, the Mothman Festival. Mothman became popular with

younger generations, who adapted the creature to their modern needs: as a superhero, a caring boyfriend, a cute toy, a cosplay character and an icon for social weirdness.

Mothman creates conflict regarding its inclusion as a “cryptid”. The camp that views cryptids through a zoological, potentially scientific lens will assert that Mothman has little or no basis in zoology and represents a paranormal entity carrying significant fictional, supernatural baggage. As such, it does not represent an animal that would qualify as a “cryptid” (though there are sound reasons to think that an unusual animal sighting sparked the Mothman flap in 1966). The cryptid populist camp embraces any weird entity that exists in folklore, legends or spooky depictions of any kind, including “creepy-pasta” tales, and believes they qualify as “cryptids”. Mothman is a pop cryptid all-star. These arguments about the boundaries of cryptid inclusion illustrate a critical rift in the field of cryptozoology.

Some obvious influencing factors played a part in the drift away from the zoological foundation of cryptids and the populist trend. First, the professional efforts of cryptozoology collapsed. The International Society of Cryptozoology failed to establish the field as scientifically reputable before it folded in 1998. The ISC did not even succeed in establishing a useful methodology different from or superior to that of traditional field zoology. New species are still discovered all the time, but blockbuster mystery animals were not discovered through cryptozoological efforts. And it can be argued that the evidence for animals such as Bigfoot, the Yeti or Nessie has got progres-

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sively worse over time.

The rise in amateur involvement in subjects relating to the paranormal – including investigating hauntings, UFOs, and cryptozoology – coincided with growing distrust of scientific authority in society. An enthusiast never had to be a zoologist to call themselves a “cryptozoologist”. The term is used by or applied to self-publishing authors, artists, online personalities or TV show participants. There is no accredited degree programme for cryptozoologists.

With no scientific society as a gatekeeper, the field was left to eager amateurs using worldwide platforms for information exchange and self-expression. This expansion into the public consciousness was key to generating interest in cryptids and ultimately creating a large population of casual cryptid fans, some of whom also called themselves researchers.

One effect of the mass popularity of cryptids was for towns to promote their local folklore and history in the form of tourist attractions and festivals. While the original process of cryptozoology was to downplay and exclude the supernatural or weird characteristics of cryptids in order to discover the zoological reality, now the weirdness is embraced and emphasised because that attracts visitors.

The world has become a much smaller place for canonical cryptids to remain hidden, but the human imagination is bound-

less: new pop cryptids are created and old tales resurrected with regularity. Modern efforts in cryptozoology are frequently less about solving a mystery and more about fashionably performing one’s values, beliefs and identity through the examples of mysterious creatures. The 21st century cryptid enthusiast wants to take “legend trips”, to cosplay (“be” the cryptid) and experience the spookiest tales.

The cryptid scene is far more open to diversity today, with several cryptids embraced by the LBGQT community: being the “other” who wishes to remain outside mainstream culture or societal norms is celebrated through cryptids.

The trajectory of cryptids from their original zoological framing to that of malleable pop cultural material is convoluted, but instructive. The pop cryptid is strongly rejected by those who insist that a narrow, zoological view of cryptozoology is the only correct one. I believe that narrow view is a dead end. It is not possible to lock such a culturally fruitful idea into a small box. Exploration and research into the vibrant field of cryptids (in terms of sociology, folklore, media studies, historical zoology and more) appears exciting and promising.

In the broad context, the idea of a “cryptid” has escaped the sphere of cryptozoology and now lives in the popular mainstream. The founders of cryptozoology as a field of study could not have anticipated that the scope and popularity of cryptids would explode into a cultural and media bonanza. But it has. The pop cryptid idea looks forward into a vibrant future and not backwards to an idealistic past.

➔ **SHARON HILL** is a lifelong enthusiast of cryptids and other anomalous natural and unnatural phenomena. Visit the “Pop Goes the Cryptid” page at [sharonahill.com](http://sharonahill.com) for more on this topic.

