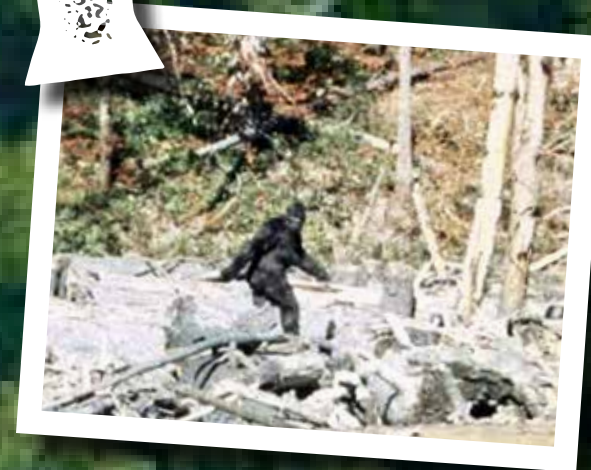


SEARCHING FOR BIGFOOT

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 PUBLISHED OVER 100 YEARS AGO ARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME AS THOSE BEING MADE TODAY.

In the Willow Creek visitors center, I asked a helpful gal named Rose what she tells people who ask where they can see the real Oh Mah.

"He'll see you before you see him," she replied. "But you might smell him. He's got an odor stronger than a skunk, people tell me." I asked Rose if there had been recent sightings. "Oh, yes, lots. My niece saw him in her backyard."

"Did she report it?" I asked.

"No, she didn't want people to think she's crazy."

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.

A large photo in a corner of the room caught my eye. Bigfoot is striding gracefully along a sandbar, short arms swinging, face turned directly toward the camera. There was something unusual about it. Something—real.

The photo is a still (frame 352, to be precise) from the 1967 footage shot by Patterson and Gimlin. In 2005, the International Center of Hominology put up a \$100,000 reward for anyone who could debunk the

film. The reward remains unclaimed.

Exhibit signage reads: "This creature, covered with black, shiny hair, appeared to be a female walking upright like a human instead of bent over like an ape. She left prints in the sandbar of Bluff Creek, copies of the casts made by Patterson and Gimlin that day are displayed here."

Bigfoot is a she!?! Why not? Bigfoot in the film clearly has breasts. Besides, there's obviously no single Bigfoot; sightings have reported males, females, and juveniles.

CREATURE COUNTRY

For many years, the exact location of the Patterson-Gimlin film was in dispute. 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 building-length (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



HOW BIG IS BIGFOOT?

Bigfoot footprints average 15.6 inches long. He has five toes. His shoe size would be about a 22. Adult Bigfoots are generally 7 feet, 3 inches tall and weigh about 650 pounds.



FILM SITE

The Patterson-Gimlin film site is an hour's drive from Orleans via rough and narrow roads. Directions are on the Bluff Creek Project website, bluffcreekproject.blogspot.com. Its advice: Travel in groups in high-clearance vehicles.

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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.

INTO THE WOODS

When I met up with Kelley and Leiterman, we drove north on the Bigfoot Scenic Byway to the confluence of the Trinity and Klamath rivers, where we continued northeast into Six Rivers National Forest. Near the tiny town of Orleans, a turn north put us on a narrow winding road, and we climbed gingerly into Bigfoot's backyard.

It was easy to understand why Bigfoot frequents these parts: This is magnificent country, with soaring Jeffrey pines, clear-flowing streams, and placid lakes. The understory is alive with dogwood and rhododendron blossoms.

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.

"It's 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 site, but they whipped out their "treasure map" and delighted in pointing out key landmarks—stumps called Smiley Face and Big Stump, trees called Bent Maple and Laurel and Hardy—all the while showing me how map, film, and reality matched up.

The men had placed a number of motion-sensitive cameras around the site, and they needed to check footage and batteries. All manner of creatures showed up on the footage we reviewed: black bears, mountain

lions, foxes, and to everyone's delight, rare Humboldt martens—cute as can be, and a highly threatened species. But no Bigfoot.

After our map tour and camera checks, we picnicked beside the creek, very close to the spot where Bigfoot Patty stood in frame 352 and stared for a moment directly at Patterson's camera. Leiterman and Kelley have never seen Bigfoot in person, nor through their trail cameras. They remain open to Bigfoot's existence, 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 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 understory back down where we'd spent the afternoon. Something had stirred them up. A presence in the forest. Unheard. Unseen.

Longtime *Westways* contributor **Robert Earle Howells** writes for *National Geographic Traveler* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* and has average-size feet.

A FOOT

INTEL

The **Eureka-Humboldt Visitors Bureau** has a wealth of information. (707) 443-5097; visitredwoods.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) 629-3355; 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) 442-1721; tinyurl.com/sixriversboisecreek.

Tish Tang Campground, about 9 miles north of Willow Creek on the Trinity River. (707) 672-6018; hoopaforestry.com/campground.html.

BLUFF CREEK AREA

Klamath River Lodge features cabins on the Klamath River, about 4 miles south of Orleans. Rates start at about \$140. (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. (707) 442-1721; tinyurl.com/sixriverscamping.

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.



LISTEN IN

Tune in to our Podcast featuring leading Bigfoot expert Adam Davies at AAA.com/tkktk.