

A knight goes in search of dragons

VETERINARY cryptozoology is a most demanding profession, I was forced to admit, as I reflected on my unfortunate series of failures to date.

My attempts to study these rarest of creatures – whom, indeed, are considered by mainstream biologists not to exist – had taken me to Loch Ness, the Alps (repeatedly), and to Mediterranean islands.

I'd journeyed to some of the murkiest corners of Ireland, and even to darkest London. Yet my deficiencies were not due to lack of dedication, in attempting to fulfil the continuing education obligations of my chosen speciality.

I had endured island beaches and alpine ski fields without complaint when, like any conscientious veterinarian, all I really wanted was to do was work. My bank accounts had similarly sacrificed, incurring appalling (although, I trust, fully deductible) costs, funding such essential scholastic trips.

Unfortunately, whilst I've not yet been able to convince my veterinary employers of the virtues of similarly sacrificing toward my education, this was not for lack of repeated attempts. And yet, my earnest efforts had all come to naught!

The closest I had come to actually encountering any of the reclusive creatures I sought had been a large pile of very old bones in London's Natural History Museum, and a spooky moment in its College of Psychic Studies, whilst researching phantom animals, and courses on animal communication and intuitive imaging.

Yet, it is precisely because veterinary cryptozoology is so demanding, that persistence is so important. Defeat is not an option for any cryptozoologist worth his or her salt. Perhaps I just needed a change of approach, and a species a little easier to find. Something somewhat larger and a bit more obvious, perhaps.

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Hatching a plan

And that's when it struck me! The Welsh Red Dragon has its home range right here in the British Isles, and Y Ddraig Goch is a cryptozoological species that not even the least observant of veterinarians could possibly miss! They are, after all, exceedingly large, inhabit massive rocky nests on mountain-tops, and are coloured bright red.

To top it off they're associated with intermittent smoke plumes – which should be easy to spot at a distance, given our increasingly clear, summer skies.

Obviously I needed to thoroughly search the Welsh mountains, and in particular, Snowdonia, where most of Wales' supposedly-mythical creatures have been reported.

Unfortunately, however, this was where things started to become complicated.

It turned out that there were 15 "proper" mountains in Snowdonia and any of them could prove to be the mountain(s) I needed. And hectic plans involving a series of essential scholastic trips to Mediterranean islands and the Alps had left me with little time to spare.

Fortuitously, however, the Extreme Vegan Sporting Association was running its "Vegan 15 Peaks Challenge" around that time. The aim was to showcase vegan fitness, and to demonstrate just how much fun the vegan lifestyle can be, whilst fund-raising for a bunch of very worthy animal charities.

Fortunately, as a vegan I was able to secure a place, and the expedition did indeed sound like fun. We would attempt to climb all 15 of Wales' 3,000 foot peaks in the same day, hiking around 43km whilst ascending some 4,000 metres. And to reach the start point of the official route on Mt Snowdon – Wales' highest summit – we would first have to climb Crib Goch, Wales' most feared knife-edged ridge, in the pre-dawn darkness.

Unfortunately, gripping the ridge might prove a bit problematic, because I'd recently broken my arm in a misadventure involving two bicycles, one blonde triathlete, and a lot of London traffic. But my sense of balance has always been good and, besides, the important thing was that

by searching what appeared to be all of Wales' mountains, I would have an excellent chance of locating the Welsh Red Dragon.



everyone with the courage necessary to ascend high up its jagged edge.

Additionally, the mountain was kind that day. The vicious winds that threaten to tear smaller hikers

from the ridge were reduced to the mildest puffs, and the sleet I recalled from previous exercises in "fun" here was remarkably absent. As we emerged from the mist, a silent, untouched world was revealed, bathed in the golden glow of dawn. The pinnacle of Mt Snowdon rose from the clouds ahead, and our knife-edge pathway appeared warm and inviting.

Soon, we revelled in unaccustomed solitude on the summit of Mt Snowdon, at 3,560 feet. Within hours it would be visited by thousands, but at dawn the world – and, apparently, the absent dragons – slumbered quietly somewhere far below.

The knife-edged ridge

Glittering in the depths was the legendary Lake Llydaw, home to the feared Afanc, a kind of demigod of the rains. Thankfully, he appeared to be holidaying abroad. Somewhere in his dark pool apparently lies Excalibur, where the dying King Arthur threw it before his body was carried away by the ladies of this haunted lake. In one of the surrounding caves his knights are still believed to remain sleeping, awaiting the call to arise once more to the defence of the realm.

And so it was that our ragged, sleep-deprived band gathered at the ungodly hour of 4am in Pen-y-Pass, Snowdonia. After meeting our fearless mountain guides from Lupine Adventure Co-operative, we headed off into the pre-dawn gloom.

Far too soon the edge of Crib Goch loomed sinisterly through the mist. Fortunately, however, the improving daylight combined with fear of public humiliation to infuse



The author on Carnedd Ugain (with Mt Snowdon in the background).

Given that some of our climbing would be at night, I might even encounter some sleeping Y Ddraig Goch, which was the recommended way to conduct dental (or indeed, any) dragon examinations. Being naturally cautious, however, I decided to pack earplugs, lest they prematurely awakened.

In times past their pained shrieks have been known to kill animals, cause women to miscarry, and plants to become barren; and unlike certain team-mates, I had not acclimatised myself with heavy-metal via walkman, whilst everyone else was attempting to sleep in our youth hostel dorm.

The knife-edged ridge

The Glyderrau range

Our long descent toward the valley hamlet of Nant Peris was enlightened by a lone cyclist, pushing his bike all the way up Mt Snowdon. It was refreshing to briefly feel relatively sane.

From the valley a brutal ascent of around 3,100 feet led us to the heights of the Glyderrau mountain range, which took nearly nine hours to cross. *En route* we admired the awesome Castle of the Winds, a spiny mass of rock rising some 200 feet into the sky, and posed for photos upon the Cantilever, a carefully balanced slab that appears precarious but has withstood the elements for thousands of years.

I carefully scanned the surrounding skies for smoke plumes, but they remained frustratingly blue. Indeed, global warming appeared to have provided one of the hottest Welsh days on record. The sun beat down mercilessly as we climbed the

rocky, dusty slopes, and soon we were all running low on water.

Unfortunately, one of our team had flown in from a country close to the North Pole and after bravely battling nausea for a prolonged period whilst completing the toughest part of the course, he nobly withdrew, to avoid slowing the team.

For the rest of us the notorious sheer summit of Tryfan loomed ahead. The spiny nest of rocks atop its jagged precipices appeared perfect for dragons, and so I keenly strove for the summit. Unfortunately, however, all we encountered there were two tall rocky pillars named Adam and Eve, and a bunch of sensible-looking day climbers.

Agile as a gazelle, a team-mate jumped from Eve to Adam. Feigning pain in my arm, I declined his invitation to follow. Any fall would last for a very long time, and we were on a schedule.

After descending what seemed a mile we finally reached Lake Ogwen, where our supply car waited with wonderful supplies of water and food. For those with the necessary intestinal fortitude it was also an opportunity to examine one's feet.

Next, we climbed 2,300 feet up the Carneddau mountain range. Our guides, who we suspect had been

sleeping before rotating onto this shift, were fresh and keen, but we heavily outnumbered them and forced them to slow down. Cliffs, rocks and endless mountains followed in an increasingly bleary haze. Although one mountain did appear oddly familiar, and certain rock piles in the dusk caused excitement, unfortunately the dragons remained determinedly absent.

As the landscape succumbed to darkness, we admired shards of golden light from the setting sun, piercing the purple evening clouds. Gaps in the silken mist revealed the twinkling lights of towns far below, stretching across the plains of Wales to a distant, half-imagined sea. Far above, a glittering swathe of stars was strewn across a velvety night sky.

A staggering run allowed us to complete the official course in 17 hours 30 minutes, after which an increasingly delirious six mile descent to the cars awaited us, followed by a nightmare journey along winding mountain roads at a particularly undesirable hour of the morning.

The absence of mead

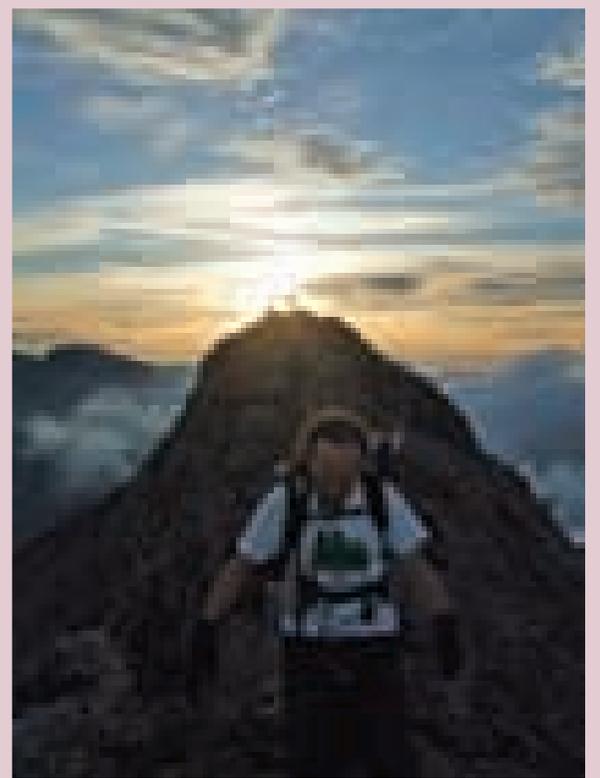
We had run, climbed and determinedly staggered onto every one of Wales' mountain summits. Due to a certain unfortunate

navigational episode we had even staggered onto one of them twice. And yet, not a single dragon had we found! Perplexed, I rechecked my cryptozoological texts, whilst carbohydrate re-loading with a large quantity of truffles.

Soon enough, an obvious flaw was revealed in my plans. In mediaeval times, dragons marauding across Britain were lured to large pits of mead, and after alcohol-induced slumbers were captured and humanely (or inhumanely, depending on your perspective) relocated to Wales. The solution, therefore, was clear. All I needed to do was to retrace my steps, whilst prominently displaying a sizeable quantity of dragon-quality mead.

Beverage of such quality would doubtless be exorbitantly expensive.

However, one does not succeed in the demanding world of veterinary cryptozoology without both sacrifice and dedication. I am therefore resolved to carry out my plan at the next suitable opportunity. And at least such scholastic expenses should be fully deductible.



Navigating Crib Goch's ridge (photo by Lupine Adventures).



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