

The Dreaded Snallygaster

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Every culture has its scary monsters. They stand in for people's fears about forces beyond their control, such as weather, disease, love, and death. They serve as warnings to children who might venture too far from home. They also give free rein to human imagination and our appetite for a thrill. In the early 1900s, a Western Maryland newspaper saw one such supernatural beast as a way to increase circulation.

As early as the 1700s, early settlers in the mountains of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and what is now West Virginia, had reported something half reptile and half bird with a terrifying screech. Some scholars point out the similarities to the Native American "thunder-bird" figure and to European mythological creatures. German-speaking people referred to the beast as the *schnelleregeist*, meaning "quick ghost;" this term eventually became Snallygaster. Only one possible predator could destroy the Snallygaster—the Dwayyo—a supernatural wolf that stood upright like a human. Tales of encounters between these two beasts were told in the area.

Superstitious farmers painted hex signs on their barns to ward off the evil of specters like the Snallygaster. A Confederate veteran described his experience in the valleys around South Mountain; because local citizens had been told that rebel military men were ravenous monsters similar

to a Snallygaster, they laid out bread spread with apple butter on fence posts in an effort to appease the soldiers. Some theorize that the mythological creature was popular with moonshiners as a way to explain the sounds of bending metal and explosions that might be heard in the hills, and to scare off Internal Revenue agents.

Still, the Snallygaster remained a relatively obscure item of local lore until 1909, when the *Valley Register* based in Middletown, Maryland, ran the frightening news that the Snallygaster had picked up a man, drained his blood, and dropped his lifeless body on a hillside. This inspired others to join in with lively descriptions of their own.

The Snallygaster soon acquired a twenty-foot wingspan, metal teeth in an enormous beak, a single eye in the middle of its forehead, eggs the size of barrels, tentacles, and the propensity for picking up farm animals, pets, and even small children. Its scream was described as "like a locomotive whistle." Reports arrived from Ohio, West Virginia, and other locales, but the Snallygaster seemed to be most prevalent around South Mountain in Western Maryland.

It was later revealed that these reports were concocted by *Valley Register's* George C. Rhoderick and Ralph S. Wolfe

to increase readership; nevertheless, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post* joined in the publicity. Readers avidly followed the newspaper accounts in February and March of 1909. Reportedly, the Smithsonian Institute offered a reward for the creature's hide and President Teddy Roosevelt considered postponing a trip in order to hunt the beast. Then the Snallygaster sightings dwindled, and it was assumed the monster had met its end, or at least retreated to some remote area of the mountains.

In 1932, a Snallygaster was again sighted near South Mountain. This Snallygaster's demise came from moonshine. Overly zealous investigators breaking up a still found a Snallygaster had been overcome by the fumes and drowned in the whiskey. Unfortunately, they destroyed the evidence, so no credible photographs were taken. However, people found this story plausible. If a Snallygaster lived about twenty years, which seemed reasonable, this poor drowned Snallygaster must be the offspring of one reported in 1909.

Eventually, people in the region moved on to other topics of interest, but the Snallygaster has never been completely forgotten. In 1952, Maryland writer Whittaker Chambers referred to Senator Joseph McCarthy as a "national snallygaster." Inspired by mention of the Snallygaster in a book of local folk tales, Pat Boyton wrote a non-fiction book, *Snallygaster: The Lost Legend of Frederick County*, in 2008, and a children's book, *Beware the Snallygaster*, three years later. Local filmmakers Geoff Prather and Jon Baldino told the story through the eyes of a Depression Era child in *The Snallygaster Tale*.

Maryland's Snallygaster is even part of the complex Harry Potter universe; it appears in materials such as the website Pottermore, the video game Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery, and the book *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Here fans learn that the Snallygaster is nearly as well-known as the Loch Ness Monster, that it is both curious and bulletproof, and that its heartstrings can be used in wand-making.

Artists who took part in 1920s and 30s *plein air* painting expeditions around Middletown were later dubbed the "Snallygaster School." An exhibition of their art, and of carved and painted wood sculptures of the Snallygaster by Frank Mish, was displayed at the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts in 2016. In Frederick, Maryland, Dragon Distillery makes Snallygaster blended whisky. The television show *Mountain Monsters* filmed an episode in which the monster hunters had a frightening near encounter with a Snallygaster.

No one knows for sure what grain of truth may be in this creature, but if you are traveling at the northern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains and see something very large and scaly flying overhead, or if you hear a cry that sounds like a locomotive, you may be in the company of a Snallygaster. Be careful—and be sure to save all the details you can for use around a campfire.

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