

The Search for Champ

A publication of the
Lake Placid/Essex County Visitor's Bureau
Read more about Champ and check out our
"Champ Cam" at
www.lakechamplainregion.com



Searching for Champ

Does Lake Champlain harbor a monster? Port Henry sure thinks so. They celebrate his existence with their Annual Champ Day celebration, the first Saturday in August.



A float from the Annual Champ Day parade

Our resident monster, affectionately known as "Champ" or the nickname "Champy," has been sighted for as long as people have been in this part of the Adirondacks.

Old stories of the Native American tribes that lived near Lake Champlain confirm that they believed a "horned serpent" lived in the lake. A possible theory regarding these beliefs centers around Split Rock, in Essex, New York, which features natural rock structures that resemble petrified snakes.



Lovely Bulwagga Bay, where time spent watching for Champ is never wasted

Modern sightings started in Bulwagga Bay, Port Henry in 1819. This remains an excellent place to launch a Champ search. If you are fortunate, you can place your name on the Big Board of Champ Sightings. In any case, you can always participate in the annual Champ Day, the first Saturday of August.



Samuel de Champlain starts the board in 1609, but experts dispute this one.

The year 1873 was quite a year for Champ hunting, with several sightings of Champ by a railroad crew, passengers of a steamship, and a small boy fishing. All of this publicity predated that of the Loch Ness monster, "Nessie," whose first modern sighting is considered to be July 22, 1933. A recent picture of Champ was taken in November of 2000, and of course there is the famous "Mansi photograph."



This famous photo of Champ was taken on July 5, 1977.
Image © Sandra Mansi

Champ Becomes a Celebrity

Things really heated up in the last half of the twentieth century. By 1992 sightings totaled 180, with approximately 600 people claiming to have seen Champ. The twenty first century saw a new wave of sightings, counting in the double digits each summer and prompting interest from Japanese television, the *Today* show, NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*, and Fox Network's *Sightings*.

In 2003, the Discovery Channel did a special on "America's Loch Ness Monster" in the wake of three new sightings by June of that year.

Champy is now protected by law on both sides of Lake Champlain.

- 1981 — Port Henry, NY declares their waters a safe haven for Champ
- 1982 — State of Vermont passes a House Resolution protecting Champ
- 1983 — In New York, both the State Assembly and the State Senate pass resolutions protecting Champ
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Port Henry has been seeing Champ for almost two hundred years.
It would be the place where Champ hangs his hat.
If he exists. If he has a hat.

Dennis Jay Hall has assumed the leadership of the Champ Search in recent years, keeping the world updated with his website, [Champ Quest](#). Check the website for tips on the best times to look for Champy. Mr. Hall has tracked not just time of day, which tends to be dawn and dusk, but also the best times on the calendar according to the moon.

Hall has also written an authoritative book on the subject, *Champ Quest 2000: The Ultimate Search Field Guide & Almanac for Lake Champlain*.

If you need to report a Champ sighting, please contact Mr. Hall at sighting@champquest.com.

Champ History

Both Native American tribes that lived near Lake Champlain, the Abenaki and the Iroquois, had their own legends about a large creature inhabiting the lake. It was called Tatoskok by the Abenaki.

Samuel de Champlain is often erroneously credited with being the first European to sight Champ, but readings of his accounts show that he saw something near the St. Lawrence river. This body of water was erroneously reported to be Lake Champlain in 1960.

The something he did see in Lake Champlain was ". . . [T]here is also a great abundance of many species of fish. Amongst others there is one called by the natives Chaousarou, which is of various lengths; but the largest of them, as these tribes have told me, are from eight to ten feet long. I have seen some five feet long, which were as big as my thigh, and had a head as large as my two fists, with a snout two feet and a half long, and a double row of very sharp, dangerous teeth. Its body has a good deal the shape of the pike; but it is protected by scales of a silvery gray colour and so strong that a dagger could not pierce them." Volume 2, chapter IX, of Champlain's journal (quoted in Meurger 1988.)



Historians think it was probably a garfish, a class that includes lake sturgeon, which are still living there today.

The next famous account appears in the *Plattsburgh Republican* of Saturday, July 24, 1819. Captain Crum was aboard a scow on Bulwagga Bay the previous Thursday morning when he reported a black monster, about 187 feet long and with a head resembling a "sea horse" that reared over 15 feet out of the water. He claimed the monster he saw had three teeth, eyes the color of a "a pealed [sic] onion," a white star on its forehead, and "a belt of red around the neck." This is a remarkable level of detail concerning an object that was, according to the witness, some two hundred yards away. Sea story or not, this account marks an official date and place for more modern Champ sightings.

1873 was a busy year for Champ. A *New York Times* story reported that a railroad crew had seen the head of an "enormous serpent" in Lake Champlain, with bright silvery scales that glistened in the sun. Both the men and the monster parted ways at that point.

In July that year the Clinton County Sheriff, Nathan H. Mooney, reported an "enormous snake or water serpent" he thought was 25 to 35 feet long.

In August of that year the steamship *W.B Eddy* encountered Champ by running into it. The ship nearly turned over, according to the tourists on board.



The famous showman, P T Barnum, who is credited with coining the phrase, "There's a sucker born every minute."

Never one to miss a trick, in 1873 showman P. T. Barnum offered a reward of \$50,000 for "hide of the great Champlain serpent to add to my mammoth World's Fair Show." Considering that year's interest in Champ, it's amazing he didn't just fake it, as he had his FeeJee mermaid (it was actually a stuffed monkey attached to a stuffed fish.)

Another group sighting came in 1945, when passengers of the *SS Ticonderoga* claimed to have seen a creature.

The best photographed and documented sighting yet was in 1977, while the Mansi family are picnicking on the shores of Lake Champlain.

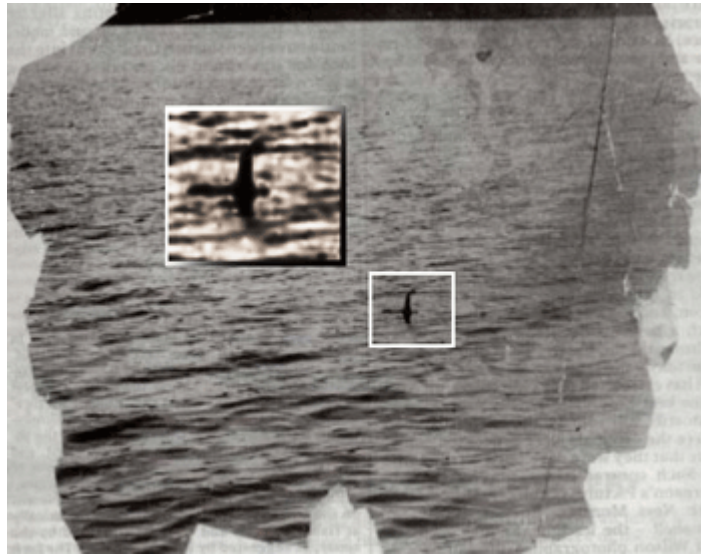


© Gamma Liaison/Sandra Mansi

The children were playing in the lake. While Anthony Mansi went back to the car, Sandra Mansi kept an eye on the children. What she described as "turbulence" in the water made her look more closely, and a huge creature with a small head, long neck, and humped back surfaced in the lake.

When Anthony returned, he made the children get out of the water and all retreated back up the six foot lake bank, but not before Sandra took an Instamatic photograph.

They later reported the whole sighting lasted six or seven minutes, until the monster was possibly startled by an approaching motorboat. When the picture came out, the Mansi's simply put it in the family album, lost the negative, and feared talking about it until a friend persuaded them to show it to Champ Investigator Joseph Zarzynski.



The rare full version of the so-called "Surgeon's photo" showing Christian Spurling's toy monster constructed from plastic wood and a toy metal submarine.

Placed at Loch Ness by Maramduke Wetherell and photographed by Ian Wetherell.

Photo fakery revealed to the world by Lt-Col.

Robert Kenneth Wilson, FRCS, Territorial Army, in April 1934.

Copyright Associated Papers 1934.

The Mansi account remains the most detailed encounter with Champ, or indeed, any lake monster. As you can see above, it is more plausible looking than the famous fake picture of the Loch Ness monster.

John Kirk's book, *In the Domain of the Lake Monsters*, writes that "The monster of Lake Champlain . . . has the distinction of being the only lake monster of whom there is a reasonably clear photograph. It . . . is extremely good evidence of an unidentified lake-dwelling animal" (Kirk 1998, 133).

Joe Zarzynski, author of *Champ: Beyond the Legend* (1984), considers the photo "the best single piece of evidence on Champ."

Jerome Clark, a well respected paranormal investigator, writes in his *Encyclopedia of Strange and Unexplained Physical Phenomena*, "By any standard the Mansi photograph remains a genuine mystery and a serious obstacle to any effort to reduce the Champ phenomenon to mundane causes." (Clark 1993, 67).

In 1984, the *Spirit of Ethan Allen*, an excursion boat which takes many trips across the lake, had aboard the captain and at least 80 passengers when Champ made another appearance.

The captain described a dark object about 25 feet long and three feet wide that paralleled the boat, its "three or four humps" causing a wake, until it was disturbed by an approaching speedboat.

"Then it turned 90 degrees to the left and dove, and the wake stopped," he said, "and that's what convinced me I saw something. As a [former] airline pilot, I'm trained to be observant, and I know what I saw."



Lake Champlain at sunset, a popular time to sight Champ

In 1981, a conference focusing on the existence of the aquatic reptile was held in Port Henry, New York, where Champ had long been protected by law. New evidence offered to prove Champ's existence now includes video and sonar findings.

No one knows what the future will hold for Champ.

The Possible Science of Champ



Could Champ be a plesiosaur?
They are believed to have become extinct at the end of the Cretaceous era.

The official title of such monsters are "cryptozoological creatures," indicating their maybe mythical status. If lake monsters do exist, the Loch Ness monster, "Nessie," and the Lake Champlain monster, "Champ," might be related.

Both Lake Champlain and Loch Ness in Scotland are freshwater lakes dug by glaciers over 10,000 years ago. Lake Champlain's maximum depth of 400 feet is enough to provide a monster with plenty of hiding room.

Both monsters share approximate size, comparative shapes, which feature long sinuous necks, and similar behavior, being seen often at dusk and dawn, and at night, confirming the belief of some that it is a naturally nocturnal creature.



photographer unknown

This apparent Plesiosaur washed up on Moore's Beach in Monterey Bay, California in 1925. The neck was described as being about 20 feet long.

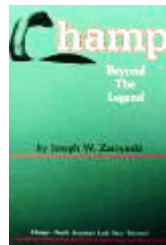
Perhaps the idea of an extinct creature surviving all this time without our knowledge isn't so strange. Everyone's favorite example is the coelacanth.



photographer unknown

The coelacanth was thought to be extinct for 70 million years until it was discovered alive and well in 1938. The fish is no longer on the extinct list since more than 200 have been captured since then.

The Investigations Get Real



Champ-Beyond the Legend by Joseph Zarzynski was the first book to study Champ in depth. So to speak.

A New York Social Studies teacher, Joseph Zarzynski, became a well-known and enthusiastic cryptozoologist in the 1970's. "Zarr," as he was familiarly known, was able to persuade many who had seen Champ but feared ridicule to finally come forward with their stories. Zarr founded the "Lake Champlain Phenomena Investigation" and was a prominent investigator through the 1980's. He uncovered the famous "Mansi photograph" of Champ, which remains the most indelible image of a sighting.



Image © Sandra Mansi

The famous Mansi Champ photo of 1977 has undergone two photographic investigations; by B. Roy Frieden, of the Optical Sciences Center at the University of Arizona, in 1981, and Paul H. LeBlond, Department of Oceanography at the University of British Columbia, in 1982.

Both concluded that the photograph was untampered with, but questions remained. LeBlond's analysis claimed there were still unknown factors: "Sources of error may appear at many stages of the estimation method, and this must be kept in mind when interpreting the results."



Dennis Hall, of Champ Quest, is always looking.

The latest leader in the Champ Hunt is Dennis Hall, who has personally encountered the creature on several occasions. His store of photographs and videotaped evidence is the most recent and can be viewed on his website, Champ Quest. (<http://www.champquest.com/>)

Dennis may have actually captured a Champ specimen. In the 1970's he discovered an 12-inch-long reptile in a marshy area bordering the lake that looked like no other living reptile, especially the forked tongue. Dennis' father thought the creature should be examined by the scientists at the University of Vermont. They declared it was unlike any living reptile in the catalog.

Unfortunately it simply deepened the mystery when the specimen was lost, like many another tantalizing example of a cryptozoological creature. Dennis Hall later recognized its image in a book on prehistoric reptiles.



Tanystropheus, extinct for millions of years, was the spitting image of Hall's 12-inch specimen.

The Champ Search Continues



E. W., 2000

This picture was taken by a Willsboro, NY resident on November 26, 2000 at around 7 am, near dawn.

(The white object in the foreground is a marker buoy.)

This picture appeared in the *Press Republican* on December 21, 2000. The witness reported her attention was first drawn to it by "the commotion all the seagulls were making out there. I thought, 'What's going on here?' and I looked out."

Since her summer residence is on an elevated piece of land directly on the water, she said, "That's how I could see it so well. He [Champ] lay there sort of still in the water for at least 15 minutes."

The ducks nearby would not approach the shape, she said. "The thing moved northward in a straight line. It humped up in the middle. Its skin looked just like crocodile skin; it was rough. As it moved, it left a little wake behind it.

"I've never seen anything like it." Her sighting was one of 16 so far that year.



The search continues...television station WRGB out of Albany films a segment May 15, 2003. From left to right: Dennis Hall of Champ Quest, TV reporter Stan Monroe, camera operator Marty Federici.

A camera crew hoped for the best during "Sightings Week" in 2003, a five day examination that ranged from Bigfoot to UFO's. Despite all this effort, Champ did not appear. When asked, Mr. Federici said doing the Champ segment made him a believer.

"You look out into the fog on Lake Champlain at dawn, and it's easy to imagine something is there. It makes you shiver."



It's calm. Too calm.

Of course, some people don't believe.

Skeptics point out that if Champ is real, there must be at least 50 adult creatures to meet the requirements of a breeding population, and as many as 500 for long term (as in centuries) genetic diversity.

Lake Champlain is the Adirondack Great Lake, the sixth largest fresh water lake in the United States. It stretches approximately 120 miles from the Canadian border to Whitehall, NY, with a width that varies from a quarter mile to 12 miles. The maximum depth is about 400 feet. This includes 435 square miles (1127 square kilometers) of surface water.

Not enough is known about Champ and his kin to speculate about how much room they would need.

Another explanation centers on how Lake Champlain is long, deep, narrow and cold. These conditions favor the formation of an underwater wave called a seiche that can throw debris from the bottom of the lake up to the surface. Many think this may explain many of the monster sightings.

Listening for Champ

The North Carolina-based institute, Fauna Communications Research, puts updates of its findings at their website under Lake Champlain Research. (<http://www.animalvoice.com/LakeChamplain.htm>)

Elizabeth Von Muggenthaler cautions that the results of the analysis may not solve the mystery.

"What we can say is that there is a creature in the lake that produces bio-sonar," she said. "We have no idea what it is."

Champ Day in Port Henry



One of the floats used in the Annual Champ Day parade

Champ Day is always the first Saturday of August in Port Henry, New York.

(<http://www.porthenry.com/>)

There's a parade, craft fair, goodies, games for the kids, a Library book sale, press coverage, and maybe, just maybe, an extra visitor will show up.

We hope to see you there!

courtesy Jack Woods, the man "inside" the myth

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