
'Sea Monster' discovery on Glacier Island the buzz of old Cordova

Description

One of the strangest chapters in Cordova's history began on Nov. 10, 1930, when Jerry O'Leary and Charles Gibson discovered the carcass of sea creature floating in Eagle Bay on Glacier Island.

O'Leary, a fox farmer, and Gibson, his employee, were making their rounds to feed their foxes and spotted the carcass floating on its back amid the icebergs from Columbia Glacier, six miles to the north.

The head and tail sections were devoid of flesh. However, the midsection was mostly intact.

O'Leary and Gibson towed the carcass to shore and chopped off the meat and hung it in the smoke house, intending to use it as feed for the foxes. Gibson described the meat as „looking and smelling like horse meat.“

They saved the skeleton, which was described to be anywhere from 27 to 42 feet long, with a long tail and peculiarly shaped flat triangular-shaped head. They ventured to guess that it had been entombed in the Columbia Glacier before breaking off and floating in the sea ice.

Word of its existence reached Valdez and Cordova and sparked the interest of Charles Flory of the U.S. Forest Service and W.J. McDonald, the district forest supervisor of the Chugach National Forest. McDonald, Lee C. Pratt, Captain E.N. Jacobson, John V. Lydick, Howard W. Stewart and A.C. Faith launched an expedition to document the creatures' remains.

The Cordova Daily Times notified the Associated Press, and a reporter contacted Bernard Brown, a curator of the American Museum of Natural History.

Brown expressed his interest in the creature and said, „So far we know of no prehistoric animal of the dimensions given in the Alaska dispatches, but if the creature was encased in ice, it must have lived when the ice was formed.“

The prehistoric animals in Alaska are the mammoth buffalo and many small creatures, but none that would reach the dimensions of the lizard-like creature, which the description suggests.

It appears that the reptile is similar to the dinosaur, but they died out millions of years before the ice was formed. The only other possibility is that it would be a marine creature, such as a whale.

An expedition led by McDonald set out on the U.S. Forest Service launch Chugach on Nov. 25. The men took precise measurements of the skeleton, which measured 24 feet, 1 inch from tip to tip.

Its snout or beak from the tip to the center of the forehead was 3 feet 3 inches with a width of 11 inches at midsection and a circumference of 29 inches. Only the upper left jawbone was found, and it was described to be devoid of teeth.

The head was 4 feet 7 inches long and 3 feet wide at the widest part. The body section from the back of the head to the end of the rib cage was 6 feet 2 inches, and the tail was 14 feet long. The head attached directly to the torso with no visible neck. The skeleton's flippers were 3 feet 11 inches long with an average width of 8 inches.

The width of the skeleton at its widest part was 3 feet 2 inches, not including the flippers. It contained 37 vertebrae and it was thought that the skeleton was missing a few on the tail.

When the description was relayed to Brown, he stated, „The creature found imbedded in the ice near Cordova may be one of the smaller whales and undoubtedly is of considerable antiquity. The description given me convinces me that it is some marine creature, perhaps one unclassified as yet.“

Howard Stewart took numerous photographs, which were sent to the Associated Press. The skeleton was tentatively identified as that of a pike whale, but that did not stop one enterprising entrepreneur from Cordova from marketing the skeleton as „Alaska’s Prehistoric Monster.“

Tom Vevig, a taxicab company owner, purchased the skeleton for \$600 in January 1931. He planned to mount the skeleton and put it on display, first in Cordova and then in the Lower 48. By Feb. 12, 1931, the skeleton was reassembled and on display in the Seattle Room on First Street.

On Feb. 22, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Vevig boarded the steamer Yukon and took the skeleton to Seattle to begin a cross-country tour in a truck specially outfitted to carry the skeleton.

By June, the Vevigs were in Chicago and by August, they were ready to return to their home in Cordova. They had taken the skeleton on tour throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Their public exhibits were advertised as „Alaska’s Prehistoric Monster – Millions of years old. Nearly 30 feet long. Baffles the scientific world. Queerest monster ever found. Discovered in Columbia Glacier. Now on Exhibit. Here for a short time. Don’t miss it. 25 cents Adults, 15 cents, children any time.“

On Sept. 9, the Vevigs were once again back in Cordova without the skeleton. They reported that their skeleton drew big crowds in everywhere it was displayed, but they were homesick for Cordova and decided to come home.

The skeleton had been donated to the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Thus ended one of the strangest chapters in Cordova’s history.

John Vevig, Tom’s nephew, was kind enough to provide a photograph of the mounted skeleton.

I was able to confirm that the skeleton is in storage at the museum and has been identified as that of a minke whale. It is said to be one of better specimens owned by the museum and has been made available to researchers from around the world.

Dixie Lambert is the co-chair of the Cordova Centennial Committee.

Notice:

This is a republication of an article which Alaskan historian Dixie Lambert wrote for The Cordova Times (Lambert, D. (2008, May 2). ‘Sea Monster’ discovery on Glacier Island the buzz of old Cordova. The Cordova Times. <http://thecordovaitimes.com/news/show/2167>). We extend our gratitude to Dixie Lambert for granting us permission to utilize the material.