

Meet Yeti, the so-called abominable snowman that science yet again says is just a bear

By Sherry Noik, CBC NewsPosted: Nov 28, 2017 7:01 PM ET | Last Updated: Nov 28, 2017 8:27 PM ET



A new study found DNA from purported Yetis actually belonged to Asian bears, including the Himalayan brown bear, pictured, the Tibetan brown bear and the Asian black bear. (Abdullah Khan/Snow Leopard Foundation)

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Long before internet hoaxes were a thing, people passed around grainy photos and blurry videos they claimed proved the existence of a so-called abominable snowman. But a new study says the mythical "Yeti" is nothing more than a bear.

"Our findings strongly suggest that the biological underpinnings of the Yeti legend can be found in local bears," lead scientist Dr. Charlotte Lindqvist said in a release about the research, which was just published in the prestigious U.K. journal *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*.

A now-famous photo of a giant footprint sparked "Yeti fever" in 1951. At the time, explorers raced to prove the existence of this hulking, shaggy man-ape. But after decades of reported sightings, no real evidence has ever been found.



Eric Shipton famous photo from 1951, taken near Mount Everest. The explorer claimed it showed the footprint of the abominable snowman, otherwise known as Yeti. (Topical Press Agency/Getty Images)

Yet the Yeti legend persists. It lives in [YouTube videos](#), Russian [news articles](#) and even an [upcoming Warner Bros. film](#).

Lindqvist, an associate professor of biological sciences at the University at Buffalo, says science is a useful tool in "exploring the roots of myths about large and mysterious creatures."

"Science does not (or at least should not) have an agenda, and I didn't set out to debunk the Yeti myth," she told CBC News by email from Singapore, where she is a visiting faculty member at Nanyang Technological University.

"Although we had a hypothesis that they could be bears, the samples we analyzed were of unknown identity to us and we didn't know what to expect."

8 bears, 1 dog

Lindqvist and her colleagues analyzed nine specimens said to be from Yetis. The artifacts — bone, tooth, skin, hair and fecal samples collected in the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau — were obtained from various sources including the [Messner Mountain Museum](#) and provided to her by the British production company Icon Films, which featured her in the 2016 TV special *Yeti or Not*.

One turned out to be from a dog; the other eight came from bears: either the Asian black bear, the Himalayan brown bear or the Tibetan brown bear.

The research builds on previous DNA testing of purported "Yeti" specimens.



A hair sample from a purported Yeti in Nepal, said to have been spotted by a Jesuit priest in the 1950s. DNA sequencing found the hair came from a Tibetan brown bear. (Icon Films Ltd.)

A 2014 [DNA analysis](#) out of the University of Oxford caused a stir when Prof. Bryan Sykes and colleagues claimed to have found two samples that were bear-like but did not correspond to any known modern creature.

Sykes et al felt their findings debunked the existence of a Yeti but instead suggested a previously unidentified, possibly hybrid bear species — a conclusion for which he was widely criticized.

Then two scientists who [replicated Sykes' research](#) found "no reason to believe that the two samples came from anything other than brown bears."



A femur bone from the decayed body of a purported Yeti found in a cave in Tibet. Biologist Charlotte Lindqvist tested DNA from the bone and found it belonged to a Tibetan brown bear. (Icon Films Ltd.)

Lindqvist says the data used in the Sykes study were "too limited."

"Our conclusions were based on much more DNA sequence data and rigorous analyses, including phylogenetic reconstruction of complete mitochondrial genomes from many black, polar and brown bear populations," she said. "This way, we could — with strong statistical support — place the purported Yeti samples among modern populations."

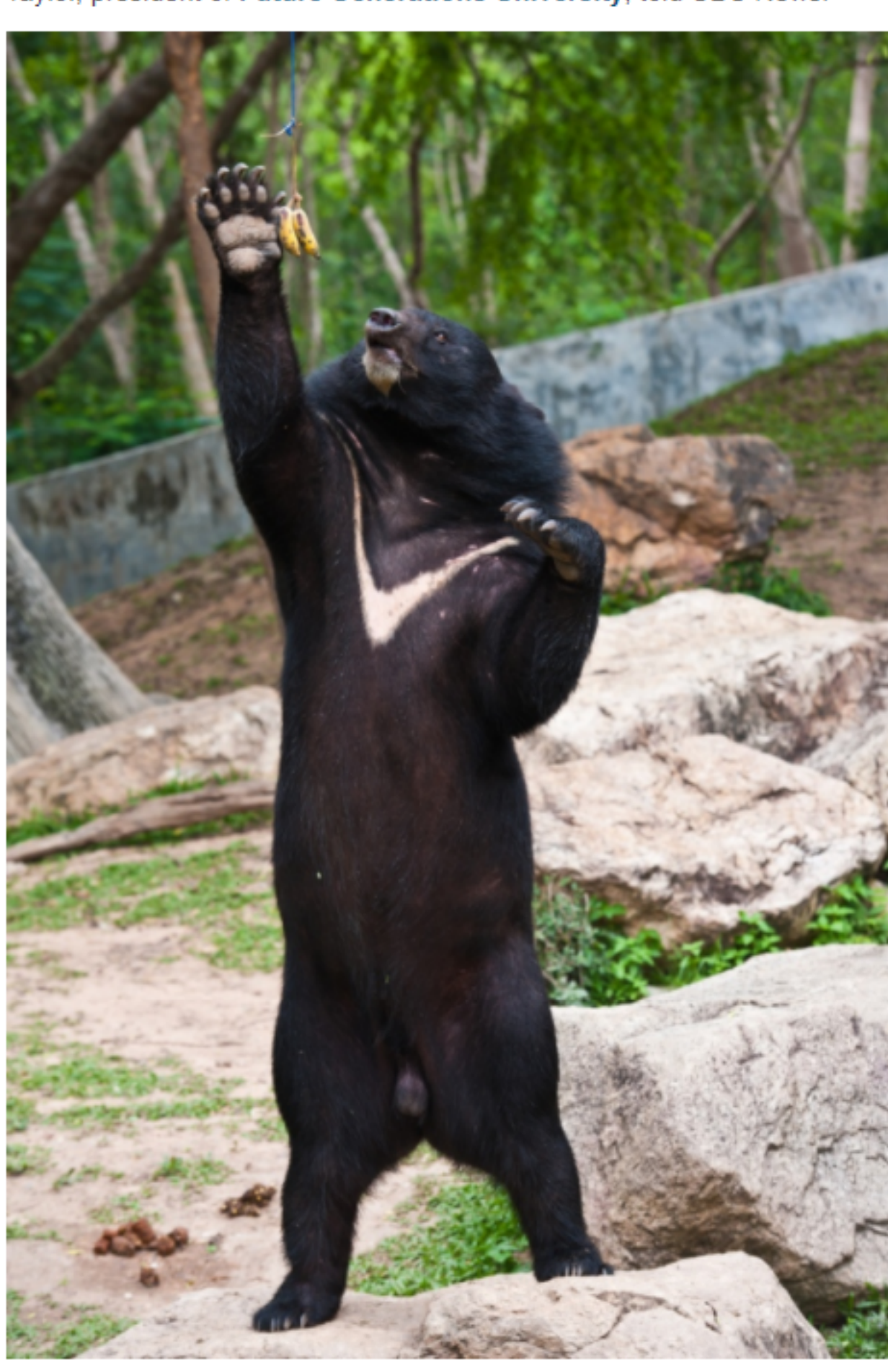
'Biological roots' of myths

Daniel Taylor has been searching for signs of the Yeti for 60 years, and he came to the same conclusion: it's a bear.

"The Yeti is unique [in that] people come forward with evidence," said Taylor, a lifelong conservationist who spent his childhood in the Himalayas and has helped establish several national parks in the region.

But Taylor isn't swayed by DNA testing: "How can you prove what a Yeti is if you don't have Yeti DNA in the first place? ... We've never seen the Yeti idea tied to a piece of skin, a bone or that sort of physical evidence."

Taylor, president of [Future Generations University](#), told CBC News.



An Asiatic black bear (*Ursus tibetanus*). Daniel Taylor recreated photos that claimed to be of Yeti footprints using the paw of such a bear, which he'd tranquilized. (tratong/Shutterstock)

Instead, he says, the most compelling evidence is footprints, the most "enigmatic" being the 1951 photo snapped by Eric Shipton in which the creature seems to have some sort of opposable thumb.

It took until 1983, but Taylor solved the mystery: the "thumb" belonged to what locals called a tree bear, a forest-dwelling bear that had adapted an "inner digit" to grip branches. As the years went on and more footprints appeared, he discovered that the variation in the sizes of prints could be explained by the particular way the bears' paws hit the ground as they ran.

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And he proved it. Taylor tranquilized an Asiatic black bear (*Ursus tibetanus*) from a Kathmandu zoo and recreated the footprint in Shipton and in every one of the photos that over the years had been held out as convincing proof — which he details in his recent book [Yeti: The Ecology of a Mystery](#).

So is the Yeti legend finally put to rest?

"I don't know of any scientific evidence that can prove the existence of a new hominid or primate-like creature," Lindqvist said.

"But the myth is important to the Himalayan region and local folklore, similarly to myths in many other cultures. Our scientific work can help explore such myths — and possibly their biological roots — but I imagine that they will still live on and be important in any culture."