

Connemara Horse-eels

Connemara has become famous in cryptozoological circles for being home to so called *horse-eels*. These mysterious amphibious beasts appear to have been viewed locally and historically as very large eels differing from the common variety by virtue of having a *horse-like* head with a mane on their neck.

The term *horse-eel* became universally popular in the 1960s and 1970s following several investigations and expeditions by leading cryptozoologists and Fortean researchers of the day into the exact nature of the phenomena. Expeditions by The Loch Ness Investigation Bureau including researcher F.W. Holiday, cryptozoologist Roy Mackal and Irish naturalist and adventurer Captain Lionel Leslie are well documented. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when the term *horse-eel* became used colloquially to refer to such beasts but when Holiday interviewed some of the most prominent witnesses in Connemara it appeared to be a well-known description. However as Gary Cunningham has documented in *Mystery Animals of Ireland*, in fishing speak, the prefix horse can also be used to describe an unusual or abnormal catch simply denoting something out of the ordinary.¹ In fact the term *horse-eel* itself appears to be a modern one found only in Connemara. There are reports from historical literature describing *eels with manes like horses*, but despite an extensive background search into Irish literature, folklore and non-fiction works there is little if no evidence to suppose that it was one that has been used to describe a common phenomenon known in Connemara life for hundreds of years.

The only reference to such an animal documented prior to the 1960s, can be found in *Gaelic names of beasts (Mammalia), birds, fishes, insects, reptiles, etc. in two parts*, by Robert Fornes (1905), and refers to a *horse-eel* or *eel-horse* which only appears to have inhabited Loch Awe in Scotland, and which had twelve legs and eyes and was a type of lamprey.²

The horse-eel again is said to be found only in Loch Awe, and to have twelve legs! The appearance of this fish is so fierce-looking as to give it the name "Ulla or uile-bheisd," or monster; another name given it is "Biasd-an-da-shuil-deug," the beast of the twelve eyes; it is also said to have a hole right through its head. The "niney" is vulgarly supposed to be the one originating from a horse-hair.

The only reason it seems this entity was termed a *horse-eel*, was simply the fact that it was an eel *as big as a horse*.

To possibly confuse matters even more, fisherman in the north of Ireland (and presumably the south), had different names for different species of eel. Writing in the *Natural History of Ireland* vol. 4, 1849, William Thompson relates the following names which were applied by fisherman at Lough Neagh, one of the principle eel fisheries, in Belfast.³

The fishermen distinguish three species; this they call the Weed-eel ; the A. acutirostris they call Eel, Skull-eel, or Bann-eel, par excellence ; the A. latirostris they distinguish by the name of Gorb-eel, and Collach or Hunter-eel, on account of its comparative voracity.

In addition other names for eels in the British Isles are given as *frog-mouthed eel* and *bulldog-headed eel* (*The Freshwater Fish of the British Isles*, Tate, 1878).¹⁶⁷ All these names appear to be applied to eels at various stages in their life cycle however, rather than completely separate species.⁵

When investigator Ted Holiday interviewed local witness Tom Joyce, a local farmer, about the phenomena, Joyce described to him possibly the first instance of the term *horse-eel* being used by a local woman, a Mrs Whalen, who encountered the unusual creature in Lough Auna where Joyce lived.⁵

There is a well-known story known by the older people, imagine seventy years ago because the woman died a couple of years back. She was attending her turf as it grew sort of late in the evening and her bog, you must remember ran down to the lake shore and she happened to be working the end near the lake. Suddenly there was a commotion in the water and this thing which she told everyone was a Horse eel came out of the lake and right up on the turf bank beside her. And she got so scared she ran for her life. It had come up to within a few yards of where she was working. She described it its front appearance was something similar to a horse and it tailed off something like an eel. She called it a Horse eel. She was very scared. Although the animal was not on the attack she didn't stay any longer.

But these large eels, (perhaps the size of a horse, giving them their name), all seem to have legs and therefore cannot really be eels at all. As the authors have also suggested in their previous work, [*The Seal Serpent*](#), the grey seal, indigenous to Ireland is also known as the *horse-headed seal* due to its sometimes equine looking head. Although this term is of Canadian origin it is interesting to note that if you remove the word *head* you end up with *horse-seal*, so perhaps the real identity of these creatures (which subsequently spawned the name) has become confused by dialect. In fact writing in an issue of *Ireland of the Welcomes*, July/August 1970, Ted Holiday wrote a short article about his expeditions to Connemara which included a picture of a 400 year old wooden carving, part of a decorative chair, which reputedly showed a *horse-eel* (below). However this isn't an eel as it appears to depict a bulky, squat bodied animal with an extended fore-limb, an impression on the head of what might be ears and a whale-like tail.⁶



Text adapted from: [Irish Aquatic Monsters a Survey and Definitive Guide](#).

References

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