

## CHAPTER 18

### Yeti Hunter

I think you will agree that the title “yeti hunter” deserves some explanation and is a good way to start this book section, especially when the author makes so bold as to offer what looks like his professional advice on how to find a yeti. So, the obvious questions: What is his background in the phenomenon? What experience has he had? What field work has he done, and what does he have to show for it as a result? All of these questions lead up to the most important one: Can he be relied upon to truly give expert advice on solutions to the yeti mystery? Good questions which, in all fairness, the author feels he should probably answer, now, before he goes any further.

I first heard of the yeti from my father, telling me bedtime stories when I was a boy, back in the 1920s. As a result, I actually grew up with some knowledge of the creatures, plus a strong interest in the legend. In those days, of course, the name “yeti” was not commonly known or used. We called them the abominable snowmen. It was not until many years after I first heard about the creatures that I learned of the origin of this marvelous name.

The first Westerner to report the presence of a large unidentified primate in the Himalaya was the nineteenth century high-mountain British trekker, Colonel Waddell. One day, while high in the central Nepal ranges, he came across a set of big, wide, humanlike footprints with five toes and set in a pattern that suggested whatever made the prints was bipedal (walked upright on two legs). When he asked his Sherpa porters what made the prints they told him they were made by the *metah kangmi*. The words *metah* and *kangmi* are Tibetan. *Metah* means bad smelling or foul smelling, and *kangmi* means man of the snows, or snowman. A little later, after returning to India, Waddell wrote a short article for the *Calcutta Statesman* in which he described his find. He called the creature that made the prints the “abominably smelling man of the snows,” in accordance with what his Sherpas had told him. From this article, in time, came the name abominable snowman, and this is the name that we used when I was young. However, it was not until I was in my late teens

that I got my first chance to make a personal investigation into the great mystery.

In 1946 I was in Bombay, India, waiting for a ship to take me back to England after four years in the British Air Force, in South east Asia. An Air Force buddy, Peter Saunders, from Harlston, Norfolk, was waiting with me. Having plenty of time on our hands while we waited for the ship, we took a trip to Darjeeling, the old British hill station in the Himalaya. We planned to spend a month there together and do a trek in the Sikkim Himalaya and look for the abominable snowman. Unfortunately, Saunders fell and broke his ankle and had to be sent back to Bombay. I therefore carried on alone.

I spent just two weeks in the mountains, but I was enthralled with the incredible vistas presented by the magnificent ranges, especially those of the Kanchenjunga Himal. This is a magnificent peak—its upper ramparts make it the third highest mountain in the world. Also, hiking up the great Sandakphu ridge that separates India from Nepal, I was intrigued by the endless ranges of hills sweeping westward into Nepal—at that time an unknown country and, for foreigners, forbidden territory.

Before leaving Darjeeling I met with some tea planters who lived and worked there. Intrigued with their life style, I immediately began to investigate the possibility of getting into the tea business in India. After I returned to England, I realized my ambition was back in north India. To make a long story short, two months later (having spent just two weeks at home after four years) I was back in India working for a British tea company. Not only that, but I was stationed on a tea estate from which, on a clear day, the Sikkim Himalaya could be seen. The Himalaya, home of the abominable ones and for me, with their mystery, a challenge that had to be answered.

As a tea planter I was allowed home leave every fifth year. However, we were also allowed one month local vacation time, and as soon as my first year was concluded in 1949, I headed back into the Sikkim Himalaya. This time, for my second trip into the mountains, I had a month to spare. I used it to do a big circuitous search, starting from the capital of Sikkim, Gangtok, going north to Lachen and Lachung, on from there to Green Lake at the base of mighty Kanchenjunga, and then cutting west and coming down the great Nepal–India border ridge through Sandakphu and back to Darjeeling.

I made no finds on that second sortie but, using an interpreter, I picked up quite a lot of yeti lore and learned a great deal about the Himalaya and the people who live in them.

The next time I had an opportunity to get into the Himalaya was in the winter of 1956, by which time I had left the tea industry. Nepal still being a closed country, I went again into Sikkim. This time, however, I hiked a reverse circuit of the previous trip, starting from Darjeeling and going in the opposite direction. Ten days out from Darjeeling, I found some footprints in the scree of a glacier below Kanchenjunga. They were ten inches in length, very broad and with five toes. My two Sherpa porters told me they were yeti footprints and seemed to be quite frightened by the sight of them.

A couple of days later, searching in the northern end of the Rathong Valley, I met with a group of Sherpas from the Darjeeling School of Mountaineering. Among them was Tenzing Norgay of Everest, whom I knew from Darjeeling, and late that night, sitting around a big campfire and trying to keep warm in a bitter wind coming down off the snows of Kanchenjunga, he told me that he had recently met a man in Darjeeling who was very interested in sponsoring a full scale search for the yeti. The man's name was Tom Slick and he had left his address with Tenzing's wife.

Returning to Darjeeling I wrote to Slick, who lived in San Antonio, Texas, and after a few months of correspondence we met in India and then went into the Nepal Himalaya together—the country now being open to foreigners—on a reconnaissance that was to be a prelude to a major expedition. During that reconnaissance we both found footprints at two separate locations and this convinced Slick that a full scale search was warranted. I was to plan it and lead it and the first phase was to be for a year.

The first phase, for which I chose the upper regions of the great Arun Valley of central east Nepal, lasted right through 1957. I came down at Christmas for a week and then went back for a second year (1958), part of which was again spent in the upper Arun and part in the Lang Tang Himal. Returning to the mountains again in January 1959 I spent a third year. The three-year search came to an end in December 1959.

The author's experience and his right to consider himself expert enough in yeti lore to be able to give others advice on how to find one is hopefully evident. In summary: one short reconnaissance in

the Sikkim Himalaya in 1949; a first expedition, again in Sikkim, in 1956; and the three-year-long (total) expeditions in 1957, 1958 and 1959. With this as a background then, off we go into the wild blue yonder to look for the abominable ones. We will start by looking at where we are going to go, and how we are going to get there.