

IN SEARCH OF THE FOUKE MONSTER

BY PAUL MCDONNOLD

THE FARM FIELDS OF THE RED RIVER FLOODPLAIN were table-flat all the way to the horizon. For nearly half an hour out of Garland City, I saw no other cars and just one tractor. It was a late morning in autumn, and clouds with rain-swollen underbellies hung in the distance. The fields were cut by shallow swales where water gathered, heavy and rushing during storms, but today pooled in disconnected puddles.

I was driving to one of the most natural parts of The Natural State—the lonely bottoms of the Sulphur River in far southwest Arkansas. Towns there, such as Fouke, are tiny and far between. More than 18,000 acres of wilderness, all protected by the state, stretch along the river. It's a jungle, peopled by coyotes, deer, gators and feral hogs, along with, some say, more sinister things.

Per the website of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission:

This area is remote, and access is limited. Maps and compass are needed for navigation, and users should be prepared for emergencies.

It was a place one went to disappear. The South's most famous Bigfoot—the Fouke Monster—had supposedly evaded capture there for decades. And as he figured into a novel I was writing, I felt obliged to do a little casting about for him before putting pen to paper. What I hadn't planned on was the possibility of clambering through the woods, miles away from civilization, with an escaped convict lurking behind the next tree. Just days before, a 35-year-old serving time for burglary in Texarkana had walked away from a work detail near Fouke, seemingly vanishing into thin air. He had yet to be seen, except on a security camera at the Fouke E-Z Mart where he purchased a Reese's and a drink.

I had debated with myself whether to go ahead with the trip. I didn't want to come across this presumably dangerous character in the woods. But on the other hand, the potential for danger might be good for my creative juices. And the news stories made it sound like the whole area was filled with cops, dogs and helicopters out scouring the countryside for the escapee. I'd be more likely to see them than the fugitive. So I decided to go ahead with the trip.

Turning onto U.S. 71, the landscape changed to rolling woodland. I crossed over the Sulphur River and turned west down a county road. Soon, the asphalt gave way to dirt, and I was in a place as infused with legend as Loch Ness in Scotland—the Fouke Monster's stomping ground.

He was made famous by the 1972 movie *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, which presented vignettes based on local sightings. The most frightening was that of the Ford family. In 1971, they had moved into a secluded house near Fouke. For two nights, the creature reportedly terrorized them. Bobby Ford had actually tangled with it briefly and been given a pretty rough time. It's a fact he was taken to the hospital the second night with cuts and symptoms of shock.

Continuing down the dirt road into the wilderness, I saw no signs of monsters. I also saw no signs of police. That was unsettling. I had been sort of counting on their presence as my safety net, but apparently they weren't going to be as present as I'd thought.

The road gained elevation, and when the trees broke, I could see out across the canopy of the jungle. Soon, the road descended back into it, and I rolled over Mercer Bayou, its black water coiling into the woods

like the back of a snake. A startled white heron climbed into the sky on gangly wings. The going became too rough for my small pickup, so I pulled off the road and debated what to do next. I was nervous about going on a hike like I'd planned. Should I just turn the truck around? Another internal debate, and once again, I was able to argue down the cowardly voice in my head—just enough to open the driver's door and continue into the forest on foot.

I was nervous because I didn't know what might jump out from behind the next tree, an angry cryptid or a desperate fugitive. My head was on a swivel, but all I saw was the quiet majesty of nature all around, and it calmed me down—a little. After a short hike, I headed back to civilization in one piece.

I stopped at a cafe in Fouke for a hamburger, where the conversation of some workmen from the electric utility company quickly caught my ear. The escaped convict had been captured that very morning, around 9 a.m., while hiding in a barn north of town. Ironically, the whole time I was in the wilderness, danger haunting my thoughts, he hadn't been around at all.

Meanwhile, the family who owned the barn had no idea he was there until police found him.



CAPTURE ARKANSAS/MIKE DANIEL

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