

In Search of *Anas Rufus Oculus*, the Horror of the Pond

Shôn Ellerton, April 1, 2022

Unearthing the disturbing legend of one of Canada's most feared creatures.



It was many years ago when I knocked on the door of my good friend and wildlife researcher, Chuck Evans, in his little home nestled between two lonely hills on the north shores of Lake Athabasca near Uranium City in northern Saskatchewan. Being very tired after the long flight from Montreal via Saskatoon via Stony Rapids, and a relatively uncomfortable ride in an ageing pickup sent for me at Uranium City airport, I was much in need of some sleep. However, the excitement of catching up with Chuck again necessitated the need for him to bring out his coveted bottle of Last Mountain single cask whisky from out of the old oak cupboard in the corner of his cosy living room which was adorned with a fireplace, a suite of comfy chairs and featuring underslung beams on the ceiling. Very oldie world-like!

Having made my way halfway around the world from Australia, I was intent to catch up and reminisce on old times. We started to talk about family and whatnot, to which, Chuck started rambling on about short-lived relationships which never seemed to get off the ground. He had always preferred the solitude of being isolated and alone, although he had a couple of good local friends to hand. Halfway through the whisky, I wanted to start asking him about some of the mysterious events which have been taking place in the wilderness north of the lake. To note, the events pertaining to several missing people allegedly lost in the wilderness, but more perplexingly, the fact that no evidence had ever been found until very recently.

Chuck wound back the clock to a time when Janet and Jim Forrester, a local couple who moved to Stony Rapids for the summer months from their base in Toronto as part of an initiative Jim had been working for in his mining company. Being a short flight away, Jim regularly did the commute to Uranium City but often stayed with Chuck during the week. Janet, an adventurer and storywriter, enjoyed the change of scenery working away from the urban chaos of a big city. Now and again, she would hop in the little four-seater Piper Arrow plane with Jim to Uranium City so that they can both take in a little adventure and hike into the wilderness on Jim's days off. On one occasion, they were kitted out appropriately and told me they were off to hike to Tazin Lake, a smaller lake just to the north. Mind you, 'small' is a relative term bearing in mind that Tazin Lake is still well over fifteen kilometres in length! Hiking to Tazin Lake is no mean feat from Uranium City and requires two to three full days each way.

On announcement of their plans to hike the journey to Tazin Lake, they were given several warnings by the locals who voiced their concerns that there have been several unexplained disappearances from likewise others who challenged them on earlier ill-fated expeditions through the vast wilderness of deepest, darkest Canada. During Chuck's recount of these events, I grew more curious and prodded him with further questioning on this curious state of affairs. Surely, many an adventurer, from time to time, had come into disfavour with the local wildlife, notably bears or even possibly, an irate moose. Weather can be unpredictable as well. Getting lost would probably account for a good many of them although with today's technology, that reason is becoming less so.

Responding to my suggestion that bears are, perchance, surely to blame for these mysterious occurrences to which Chuck solemnly and defiantly assured me that they were not. Seasoned hikers take precautions whilst hiking; for example, sleeping away from food, hanging food in sealed bags off trees, and so on. Bears tend to attack if they or their cubs are threatened, and if so, a bear may fatally injure someone but not necessarily eat the body, especially so in the summer months when food is more abundant. In any case, bear sightings in this region have not been frequently observed.

Chuck delivered a more chilling explanation but also one of incredulity and bordering on the utter absurd. Every count of the disappearances that occurred on these hikes had an overnight camp involved. Furthermore, there was further evidence to suggest that those who disappeared chose to camp on the shores of

some of the smaller lakes and ponds on the western side of LeBlanc Lake, somewhere midpoint between Uranium City and Tazin Lake. Not to be confused with the much larger LeBlanc Lake in the south of the province. Camping artifacts were found including an assortment of tents and the remnants of open bonfires, but not a trace of any bodies.

After an appeal was sent to the wider community to assist with the conundrum, a local fisherman stepped forward, a wizened octogenarian who had fished the lakes for many a decade. He deliberated in detail that no one had any business to stay around the area west of LeBlanc Lake, particularly so, at night. Especially on the shore of any body of water.

Unsurprisingly, the fisherman started to draw a respectable number of people to hear him out.

The discourse went as follows.

The fisherman, driving around on an all-terrain vehicle on a rough obscure track, having lost his way on a foggy day, found himself forced to bed down for the night and resume once the fog lifted. Perhaps two to three hours slipped by, during which, the fisherman prepared a light supper from the consignment of foodstuffs contained in his truck. He then rested under a canopy. He was awoken late in the night as the temperature dropped and sought out one of his extra blankets only to find that the fog had lifted under a near moonless night. However, there was enough starlight, and a sliver of a moon left to reveal that he had been bunking down next to a pond, perhaps a couple of hundred metres long or less. He could see the outlines of the trees on the far shore. The surface of the water was motionless as was everything else. Quiet, except for the chirping of night insects, there was no wind and no sound of lapping water.

The fisherman, having been well-versed in local lore about the area in which he was travelling in, knew instinctively, that it was time to depart with haste. Seasoned wanderers rarely panic when something troubling arises out in the wilderness; however, discovering that he had, for some reason or another, removed the key from the ignition of this vehicle, he could no longer find it. It was only then he started to keep a keen eye out on the black motionless water looking for the tell-tale sign of the dark legend known only to very few.

With horror, the fisherman stood as still as a statue when his eye caught, what looked to be like, two or three very small red lights, small and faint like dots on

the far side of the pond. Perhaps, it was his imagination running wild; however, the illusion became real when more little red dots began to materialise. The first dots became brighter and started to make itself midway across the pond, to his direction. More alarmingly, *all* the red dots seemed to be converging to where he was standing. Our fisherman, at this point, was in desperation of finding his keys only to remember that he had them stuffed in his jacket pocket; a habit he developed when he once had his truck stolen by a local ten years prior. But where was his jacket now?

He then heard the sound coming from the middle of the pond. Legend has it that the animal is so freakish in design that it could gel even the hearts of the most taciturn and tough of men. The sound was none other than the sound of a common duck. And sure enough, the outlines of the creatures came into view near the water's edge. They looked like ducks no doubt, except for the brilliant red of the eyes shining in the thick of the darkness, but the fisherman wasn't fooled. Failing to find his jacket, he jumped into the cab and shut the doors. Looking out the window, he made out the outlines of the creatures waddling their way towards the truck. To all intents and purposes, they looked exactly and behaved like ordinary ducks ready to be fed from the hand; however, this was not a duck to be trifled with.

The fisherman described the legend of *anas rufus oculus*, the red-eyed duck. Very little known is about this odd species of animal save to say, that if encountered by one, every effort must be made not to be bitten by one. Nature has many surprises. For example, the male platypus, an insanely cute little animal looking like a cross of an otter and a duck has a rather venomous barb on its hind legs. Enough venom to kill a human being in a weakened state. *Anas rufus oculus* (the red-eyed duck) developed a special way on how to obtain its food. Using a far faster acting venom than what the Komodo Dragon has in its bite, the Red-Eyed Duck delivers its venom through its small set of sharp teeth in its bill. Once bitten, the victim quickly loses consciousness and lies helpless only to be eaten by a hoard of hungry ducks. Not a scrap of flesh is wasted. The most surprising behaviour they exhibit is the way they work together to discard any remaining teeth and bones by dragging them to the pond. This is, perhaps, the biggest mystery of the legend, which, unfortunately turned out to be true when recently, the bones of the disappeared hikers were discovered at the bottom of the pond.

Meanwhile, from inside the cab, the fisherman was safe. Despite the growing crowd of red-eyed ducks conglomerating just outside his cab along with their incessant quacking, the fisherman knew too well that red-eyed ducks are absolutely and totally benign, innocent creatures *only* during the day. He had only two hours left until daylight and, predictably, at the crack of dawn, the ducks red eyes reverted to the normal eye of a duck. Their behaviour completely changed although they were still quacking. Instead of being all eyes on the fisherman, they started to walk around aimlessly as most ducks seem to do, oblivious to the fisherman's actions. To anyone, they looked like ordinary mallard ducks. Our fisherman, knowing now that there was no harm, safely emerged from the truck, sidestepping the ducks who promptly got of his way and returned to the pond and disappeared to the other side, some of them doing what ducks do the best. Just floating around being all harmless and innocent.

But when that sun goes down and the eyes of the ducks turn red? Beware! And beware of anything you read written on April Fool's Day!