

In search of the Haggis

FOR years I'd been fascinated by rumours concerning the wild haggis (*Haggis scoticus*) persistently emanating from the Scottish Highlands. Unfortunately, the pressures of work had prevented further investigation.

One freezing November day, however, the kindly souls at the new Jeanne Marchig International Centre for Animal Welfare Education inadvertently provided the perfect opportunity.

They were hosting the autumn conference of the Animal Welfare Science, Ethics & Law Veterinary Association, at the gleaming new facilities of the Royal (Dick) School. The conference would provide a fascinating day of lectures summarising the latest scientific findings and thinking within the emerging fields of animal welfare science and ethics.

Even more importantly, however, for reasons that seemed known only to themselves, the school's planners had situated (apparently) the school in a remote corner of the Scottish wilderness.

As my bus travelled ever further from Edinburgh and civilisation, I was excited to see substantial mountains appearing all around. Such steep slopes have been instrumental in the divergent evolution of the two main *Haggis scoticus* subspecies, *leftus* and *ius*, which refer to the side of the dominant legs.

These small, shaggy creatures evolved to locomote across such steep gradients more efficiently than their ecological competitors, through the rare phenomenon of differential limb growth. The right-sided legs of the latter subspecies are longer than those of its left side, whilst the converse is true of subsp. *leftus*.

The behavioural differences are most apparent when they are observed running around hilltops. The former run in an anticlockwise, and the latter in a clockwise direction, when viewed from above. When males and females of opposite subspecies meet, amorous

liaisons are impeded because males attempting to mate typically lose their balance and fall over. Over time this has accentuated the differences between the subspecies.

English critics, however, who have few such remarkable cryptozoological species of their own, have postulated that haggis legs are actually of uniform length, and that any apparent differences are attributable to their habit of standing in bogs to confuse predators. But, as the Scottish have been quick to point out, such haggis would be unable to escape, seeing as how they are stuck in bogs.

The English are more likely to be confused than any Scottish predator,

ANDREW KNIGHT continues his occasional series on 'Continuing education with a difference' with a report on combining his search for mythical species with a conference in Scotland



they assert. Or haggis. Or even an inanimate bog. But at least the English are clearly less confused than Americans. Although only 33% of US tourists believe the wild haggis to be real, fully 23% reported they visited Scotland believing they could catch one (Carvel, 2003).

Perhaps, I reasoned, being neither English nor Scottish, and quite definitely not American, my independent perspective would allow me to discover crucial insights into this age-old debate. Obviously, I would first need to locate a haggis, preferably not in a bog.

Most common sighting...

Following my initial inquiries, an inscrutable elderly Edinburgh gentleman advised me that haggis were most commonly seen running around the top of Arthur's Seat. Unfortunately, this appeared to be the highest peak rising from the plain, and my limited time prevented me from mounting the necessary expedition to the summit in accordance with proper scientific protocols. It also appeared to be a great deal of hard work.

I resolved, therefore, to scale the noble, albeit significantly more modest, heights of Calton Hill, which nevertheless offered commanding views over the ancient city of Edinburgh. Although I failed to spot any haggis, I did spy an interesting walled cemetery. I was amazed to discover therein the crypt of David Hume, who was one of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy. Among other accolades, Hume was credited as the founder of cognitive science.

Yet there was more! Next I

discovered the imposing Political Martyrs Monument. For daring to campaign for parliamentary reform, under the influence of the seditious ideals of the French revolution, five of my forebears were sentenced to up to 14 years in Australia. Only one returned alive.

Given the Scottish climate, I strongly suspected it was against his will. I was nevertheless proud to see that my countrymen had been defying authority for well over 200 years. It's a tradition we take most seriously.

The other graveyards of this historic city appeared no less interesting. In Greyfriars graveyard I took some colleagues to the grave of Greyfriars Bobby – a Skye Terrier who lingered by the grave of his master for 14 years, until his own death in 1872. A statue was erected to honour a level of loyalty and devotion well beyond the ken of most humans.

Next, I took them to the grave of one Thomas Riddell Esq., in a far corner of the graveyard. Harry Potter devotees will recognise Tom as none other than the Dark Lord himself! JK Rowling wrote her novels in Edinburgh and it's often not difficult to discern her sources of inspiration.

My rather attractive female colleagues appeared less than impressed by my invitation to dance with me on Lord Voldemort's grave. I cling to the hope that neither were Harry Potter fans. My life is oddly cursed by such rare coincidences. Unfortunately, my search for the elusive wild haggis was little more successful. At least, however, I was able to meet a haggis of the culinary variety at the conference dinner, held in the legendary basement of Henderson's Vegetarian Restaurant.

Apparently Pictish fertility ceremonies once featured parades of particularly fecund creatures, of which the haggis – in impressive defiance of its ataxic tendencies – was one. However, the shyness and speed of haggis caused as many problems for the ancient Pictish priests as for modern American tourists.

Accordingly they improvised, instead using an inflated sheep rumen in their parades. At some point this tradition became corrupted by their disrespectful audiences, who filled the stomachs with offal mixed with oatmeal and spices, cooked and ate them.

Such disrespect of authority seemed similarly to strike a chord with the Scottish national consciousness, with the result that such haggis-eating soon became widespread. This was so successful that in short order it became the national dish, and was immortalised in poet Robert Burns' famous *Address to a Haggis* of 1787. Devout Scots



The author on Lord Voldemort's grave.

ceremoniously repeat his words, before carving up their haggis:

*Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin-race!
Aboon them a' ye tak your place.*

Or, for non-Scots: "Fair is your honest happy face, Great chieftain of the pudding race! Above them all you take your place." Several lengthy verses then extol the virtues of this disgusting concoction.

Needless to say, Henderson's and most modern dining establishments have dispensed to varying degrees with sheep rumens and other organs. I was pleased to discover that the vegan haggis they supplied was delicious and, crucially, that it still left room for dessert.

Sadly, however, my search for the wild haggis remained in vain. Yet I was determined to one day surpass the skill level of American tourists, no matter what it might take. I therefore resolved to scale the dizzying heights of Arthur's Peak itself, and to leave no summit stone unturned in my quest for this elusive beastie. The very instant they install a comfortable, heated, rain-proof chairlift with an on-board bar, in fact.

Reference

Carvel, J. (2003) Majestic haggis of the glens proves elusive for US tourists. *The Guardian*, 27th November.



The conference dinner at Henderson's.

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