The Jersey Devil

Legend says that, since 1735, a terrifying creature known as the Jersey Devil has haunted the wild, desolate area known as the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, USA. Witnesses say that the Jersey Devil is about 1.2 metres (4 feet) tall, with a huge head shaped like a horse’s head. It has yellow teeth and a pair of horns sticking out of its forehead, and is able to fly using a pair of small wings on its back. It usually appears out of the bleak landscape of the Barrens at night. It attacks livestock, tramples about on people’s roofs and appears at their windows. The Jersey Devil is even said to try to snatch small children if the opportunity arises.

Where did it come from?

There are several stories about where the Jersey Devil came from. All agree that it was the child of a woman named Mrs Leeds (the creature is sometimes called the Leeds Devil). Mrs Leeds had twelve children, and was horrified to get pregnant again. ‘I don’t want another child; let it be a devil!’ she exclaimed. When the child was born, it was horrible to look at; it crawled up the chimney and fled. In some versions of the story, the Jersey Devil stopped to eat its brothers and sisters before leaving; in others, the midwife died of shock when it appeared.

Why was it born?

Some versions of the story say that Mrs Leeds gave birth to the Devil because she had angered a priest; others claim that a gypsy’s curse was responsible. One story even says that the Devil was a punishment on Mrs Leeds because its father was not her husband but a British soldier.
Whatever the truth of its origins, the Jersey Devil haunted the Pine Barrens for the next five years, eating livestock and small children to stay alive. Finally, the legend says that in about 1740 a priest **exorcized** the Jersey Devil, sending it away for the next 90 years.

The next time the Jersey Devil was seen was during the 1830s and 1840s. The first documented accounts of the Jersey Devil date from about 1859, with further reports appearing in 1873 and 1880.

**Chupacabra**

The Jersey Devil is very similar to the *chupacabra* from Latin America. The *chupacabra* is also called the Goatsucker, because it attacks goats and sheep and drinks their blood. It is described as ‘a fanged, kangaroo-like entity with bulging red eyes’ and, like the Jersey Devil, it usually appears at night. Some people believe that the *chupacabra* can fly.

Often, people from a particular place take their stories about **supernatural** creatures with them when they move to another place. But when the Jersey Devil first appeared, people from Latin America had not moved to the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Because of this, the two creatures appear to be different, even though the stories of many witnesses say that they look very alike.

The *chupacabra* drinks the blood of a goat. Might this be a distant relative of the Jersey Devil?
Sightings
One of the earliest properly recorded sightings of the Jersey Devil was reported in a small Philadelphia newspaper in 1899. A loud, high-pitched screaming outside his house apparently woke a local businessman called George Saarosy. He got out of bed and pulled back the curtains – just in time to see the Jersey Devil fly past his window.

In 1909, the Philadelphia Record reported a rampage of Jersey Devil activity that peaked in the week of 16–23 January. More than 1000 people reported that their animals had been killed, strange noises had been heard at night and mysterious hoof marks had appeared around their homes. Also, several policemen reported taking shots at it.

Reward offered
Many people found the Jersey Devil sightings laughable. Even the Philadelphia Zoo joined in, offering a $10,000 reward to anyone who could capture it. The reward was intended as a joke, but then word arrived in Philadelphia that the Jersey Devil had been captured.
Norman Jefferies and Jacob Hope claimed to have caught the Jersey Devil together. But when investigators examined the creature’s body, they found that the ‘Devil’ was actually a kangaroo, on to which Jefferies and Hope had glued claws and a pair of wings. The reward went unclaimed.

Despite this hoax, further reports of the Jersey Devil continued. In 1951, a young boy apparently saw a creature with ‘blood dripping from its face’ at his bedroom window, sparking a rash of sightings. Then, in 1961, a farmer lost a whole barn full of animals to the Jersey Devil, including two fierce German Shepherd dogs. Like the other animals, the dogs had been ripped apart. Scattered reports of the Jersey Devil have continued into the 21st century.

**Devil or hoax?**

No one has been able to prove that the Jersey Devil doesn’t exist — but that is not the same as saying that it does exist. Most sightings have turned out to be hoaxes or mistaken identity:

- In the 250 or so years since the story was first told, no one has ever captured the Jersey Devil, or even taken a photo of it.

- The only captured ‘Jersey Devil’, in 1909, turned out to be a kangaroo with glued-on wings.

- Police investigating sightings of the Jersey Devil in 1951 followed its tracks, only to find a stick with a stuffed bear’s paw attached to it.

- More recent sightings have been of a creature about 1.8 metres (6 feet) tall, likely to have been a man named George Bishop, who lived wild in the woods. One local remembers: ‘He would freak people out when they saw him. George used to love hearing about people seeing him and swearing they saw the Jersey Devil.’