

Like other supernatural manifestations, black dogs are phenomena that have to be seen to be believed. Those who have not seen them and who need to rationalize their skepticism can always counter, if not with entire accuracy, that black dogs have to be believed to be seen.

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### Chupacabras

Between February and July of 1975 farm and domestic animals began showing up dead in Puerto Rico. The killings took place usually in the early morning hours, leaving victims with odd wounds in the neck, which looked as if they had been punctured with a sharp instrument. Some owners claimed that they heard screeching sounds, flapping wings, or hums that only later, when they found the slain animals, they connected with the killings. In the meantime other people on the island reported sightings of what they thought were strange-looking birds.

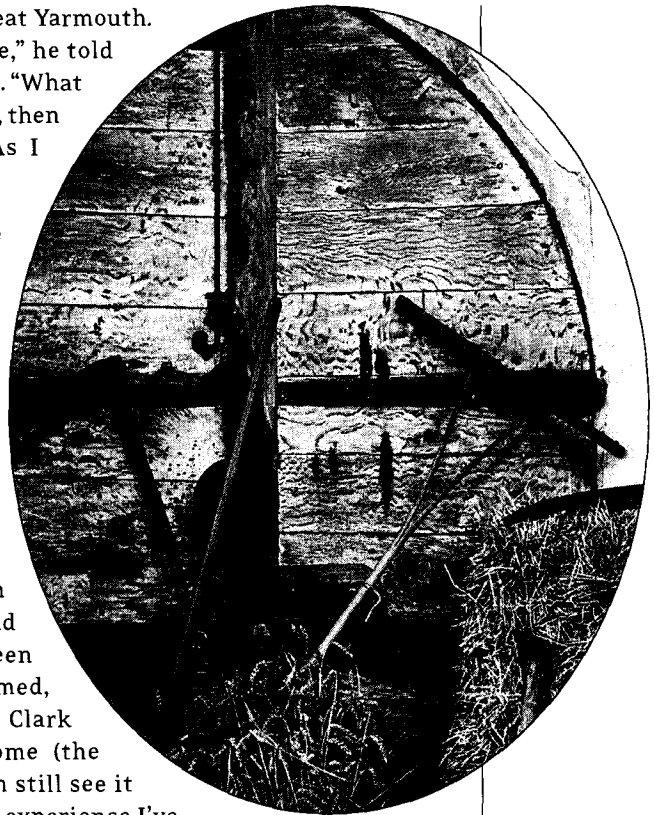
black hound-type dog on the beach" at Great Yarmouth. "It was about a quarter of a mile from me," he told the *London Evening News* (April 27, 1972). "What made me watch it was that it was running, then stopping, as if looking for someone. As I watched, it vanished before my eyes."

Witnesses often mention the creature's glowing eyes. In fact (or in allegation), they sometimes see little more than the eyes but infer for one or another reason that they belong to a ghostly dog. In the early 1920s young Delmer Clark of La Crosse, Wisconsin, saw "something that looked with shining eyes, with the face of a dog"; in the darkness he thought he could make out vaguely a "dark black body." When he saw it again a week later in the same location near his home, he kicked at it, only to find his foot inside its mouth as if it had been anticipating the action. When he screamed, the creature vanished. In 1976, when Clark recalled the incident for his son Jerome (the author of this book), he remarked, "I can still see it clearly as I talk now. It was the strangest experience I've ever had."

Black dogs, or creatures much like them, occasionally are reported during mystery-cat scares. In the spring of 1974 some residents of the English counties of Hampshire and Cheshire halved the difference; they said the creature looked "half cat, half dog."

In the curious (or inevitable) way in which seemingly separate categories of anomalous phenomena have of overlapping at the edges, the UFO literature contains a small number of reports in which black dogs are linked, directly or circumstantially, with flying saucers. None of these cases, it should be noted, is especially compelling or notably documented, but they do tell us something about the persistence of the black-dog image.

Among the circumstantial-link cases is one reported from South Africa in 1963. Two men driving at night on the Potchefstroom/Vereeniging road observed a large, doglike animal crossing the highway in front of them. Moments later a UFO showed up to buzz their vehicle several times, sending them on a frantic flight from the scene. Probably this *was* a large dog, and only coincidence tied it to the UFO. Several Georgia youths asserted a more direct association a decade later, when they claimed to have spotted "10 big, black hairy dogs" run from a landed UFO and through a cemetery in Savannah.



A black dog made these marks on a Blythburgh church door in Suffolk.

(Courtesy Fortean Picture Library.)

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On March 31, 1991, a Palmarejo, Puerto Rico, couple heard their two Dobermans, a male and a female, howling in fright as a weird sound – like a phonograph being played at the wrong speed – moved around their house. The couple did not step outside, however, until one of the dogs screamed and everything turned silent. Stepping out to investigate, the husband encountered two beings on his patio. They were, he told investigators, “some three to four feet tall, of gray color, big heads, big black eyes, and almost imperceptible nose, and with a mouth like a little cut.” As soon as they saw him, the beings ran off.

A few minutes later the man found the female dog unharmed, but the male was dead and horribly mutilated, “empty, with nothing inside. It was as if all had been sucked out through the eyes. It had empty eye sockets, and all the internal organs had disappeared. It had only the bones inside the skin. It was hollow.” He tossed the remains into a ravine, where investigators could not locate them when they searched several months later.

These episodes constitute the closest anyone can come to a precedent for the weirdness that descended on the Caribbean island in the spring of 1995 and did not subside until sometime into the next year, leaving barely a satisfyingly answered question in its wake. All that can be said with certainty is that the chupacabras (Spanish for “goatsucker”) would become the best-known allegedly real monster since Mothman.

Arguably the story proper begins near Orocovis in Puerto Rico’s mountainous interior, where a variety of animals were killed by unknown assailants. On one occasion, according to a reporter for a San Juan radio station, two police officers were investigating sheep slayings on Enrique Barreto’s property when one spotted a three- to four-foot humanoid figure with orange-yellow eyes watching them from the shadows. When the officer tried to chase it on foot, he was rendered helpless by the sudden onset of nausea.

At about 6 a.m. not long afterwards, on March 26, at the same location, UFO enthusiast Jaime Torres, who had come to investigate, reportedly saw a similar creature, though with black eyes, resting on a tree limb. Though its face was dark gray in color, the creature had a chameleonlike appearance, its body color changing from purple to brown to yellow – a feature destined to be described by many eyewitnesses. As the witness watched, the figure shook its head and hissed, a sound that for some reason made him feel faint. The creature then fled into the surrounding jungle. Supposedly a neighbor observed the same or a similar entity through binoculars a day or two later.

Other encounters were reported in island media over the next months, including a particularly incredible tale that asserted that on the evening of May 11 a rat-eating “gargoylesque creature” with claws menaced onlookers at a bus stop in the middle of the San Juan metropolitan area. One witness, a police officer, approached the creature with a billy club, only to see it snatched from his grip as the entity rose straight into the air and made its escape. Elsewhere in the city residents complained of eerie screams and howls, apparently produced by a flying “something” invisible in the night sky.



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In mid-May police looked into a report by an elderly sugarcane cutter who had suffered a heart attack after a gigantic “bird” attacked him while he was working. On April 23 Reynaldo Ortega of Naranjito sighted a huge creature on his roof. Three to four feet tall, with black feathers and thick neck, it had a wolflike nose instead of a beak.

### Emergence of the chupacabras

It was against this background that reports of a specific kind of creature began to emerge. No one can point to a “first” sighting, but by August sightings of the entity or entities that would be called “chupacabras” were impossible to ignore.

A more or less typical one occurred in Canóvanas, where a prominent citizen, educated and devout, named Daniel Pérez told investigator Jorge Martín of an encounter that he said he’d had just before seven o’clock one morning. Pérez first became aware of something out of the ordinary when he heard a moaning sound that brought him to his window. Seeing nothing, he started to close the window, then stopped when a buzzing suddenly filled his ears. Moments later he observed something coming out of the sky and landing on a big rock only twenty feet from him.

The duly startled Pérez got a good look at the bizarre creature. It stood five feet high on long, powerful-looking hind legs. It had a large head, with big, slanted eyes and six-inch fins or spikes running all the way down its back. It had tiny forearms with small hands. As the thing prepared to ascend, the fins pointed upward and vibrated, making the buzzing sound Pérez had heard just minutes before.

He saw the same creature, or one exactly like it, around the same time the next morning. He kept both sightings to himself for a time before confiding the details to his wife, who repeated them to a neighbor. In due course Martín, a writer and broadcaster on paranormal subjects, learned about Pérez’s claims and interviewed him on his radio show.

That same month two other residents of Canóvanas claimed to have seen the creature at even closer range. At 4 p.m. Madelyne Tolentino was helping her mother, who lived on the first floor of the house owned by Tolentino and her husband José Miguel Agosto, when she glanced through the front window to see a car with a frightened-looking driver inside. The cause of his alarm soon became apparent as a bipedal creature stepped from the side of Tolentino’s house into view from the other side of the picture window.

She described the creature much as Pérez had, except that she insisted its arms were “very long.” She said “it appeared to have been burned by something. It had some round things on its body, and the region seemed ashen, as if something had burned it right there.”

When her mother saw it, she ran outside to try to catch it. It escaped into nearby woods, hopping like a kangaroo. A young man who worked for Agosto joined the chase. He caught up with it and held it briefly, long enough, he claimed, to pry its mouth open and determine that it had large fangs and teeth. It escaped down a street and disappeared from view.

Opposite Page:  
This illustration  
of the  
Chupacabras is  
based on  
eyewitness  
descriptions.

(Illustration by John  
Sibbick, courtesy Fortean  
Times/Fortean Picture  
Library.)

From reports by Canóvanas residents and others, Martín compiled this composite description:

*It appears to have strong coarse hair all over its body; and whilst most observers claimed that the hair is black, it has the remarkable ability to change colors at will, almost like a chameleon.*

*In the dark, it will change to black or a deep brown color – in a sunlit area surrounded by vegetation, it changes to green, green-gray, light brown or beige. The creature has two small arms with a three-fingered clawed hand and two strong hind legs, again with three claws. This appears to enable it to run quickly and leap . . . over 20 feet in a single bound. According to many observations, the creature's legs look almost reptilian or goatlike. It has quill-like appendages running down from its back, with what seem to be fleshy membranes that change color from blue to green, red to purple, etc.*

In some reports, however, the chupacabras was described as having wings or large ears, and at least one report had the facial features as "simian." In a few instances the creature allegedly left a slimy substance in its wake.

Though no one could prove a connection, the chupacabras got its name because of a widespread belief that it was killing animals, goats prominently among them, and draining them of their blood. Autopsies, however, showed that the bodies indeed contained blood, and authorities attributed the deaths mostly to feral dogs, apparently because any other explanation seemed inconceivable. But a University of Puerto Rico professor, Juan A. Rivero, proposed another: that rhesus monkeys brought to offshore islands for research purposes might be responsible.

Search parties led by Canóvanas' flamboyant mayor José "Chemo" Soto, a former police detective, plunged deep into the mountain foliage trying to bag a chupacabras. Rumors circulated that on two successive days early in November, Puerto Rican and U.S. federal authorities captured chupacabras, "one of them," according to Martín's quite specific account, "in the town of San Lorenzo, in the center-east of Puerto Rico; the other in the National Caribbean Rain Forest in El Yunque, to the east. Both were alive and allegedly taken to the United States by special personnel." There is no reason to believe any such thing really happened, but it is the sort of folkloric embellishment one could easily anticipate in a decade dominated by stories of recovered extraterrestrial spacecraft and bodies.

Another popular rumor held that the chupacabras was a grotesque mutilation, the product of genetic engineering crafted by scientists in a secret U.S. government laboratory. A caller to Martín's radio show, allegedly a former serviceman, claimed not only to have seen chupacabras while serving in Vietnam but to have observed them in cages at a classified facility in the American Southwest. "These creatures looked at you pleadingly with their sad eyes," he averred. "They appear to be lost on an unknown world."

In this vein Fernando Toledo, president of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Association, asserted that "we must be dealing with an extraterrestrial," though

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there was no demonstrable connection – aside from their shared weirdness – between chupacabras and more conventional unidentified flying objects.

The killings of livestock continued even as reports of chupacabras sightings declined on the island in the early months of 1996. An extremely rare report of a chupacabra in the act of killing animals came out of Toa Baja, a small city in the northeast, on the evening of June 27. Debra Hernández had stepped into her backyard and seen a black creature “with pointed ears and enormous fangs.” It was ripping open a chicken coop and had one chicken in its claws, but when it saw Hernández, it dropped the bird and escaped through a hole. Five weeks earlier, the witness told the press, she and her husband had lost a goose, two guineas, and six hens to an unseen something she assumed to be a chupacabras. “The chickens were left bloodless,” she said, “but their wounds appear to indicate that their intestines were removed. I know this could not have been done by dogs because there are no feathers anywhere – only chickens’ bodies.”

### Rumors of chupacabras

By January 1996 the chupacabras scare was attracting international attention. On the twenty-sixth the *New York Times* took notice, and soon afterwards chupacabras became a popular craze, mostly in Latin America, where they were sung of in *corridos* (folk ballads), displayed on t-shirts, and featured on television shows (including the popular *X-Files* television series).

Coincidentally or predictably, chupacabras sightings were no longer Puerto Rico’s alone to claim. On March 10 a Sweetwater, Florida, woman spotted an “inhuman shape” crossing her property. Later that month, another Sweetwater woman lost twenty-seven chickens and two goats to an unknown attacker. That same night her son and daughter-in-law, who lived with her, had glimpsed a shadow “like that of a tall man” pass by their bedroom window. Speculations about chupacabras swept through the area, populated in large part by people of Latin American background.

According to José Espinoza of Tucson, something with “red eyes, a pointy nose, pointy ears, and a wrinkled face” hopped into his house in the early morning hours of May 1. It sat on his seven-year-old son’s chest before hopping out the bedroom window and disappearing into the night. Espinoza said that it had “mumbled something.”

Though the description of the alleged creature, brief as it is, does not make it sound much like a chupacabras, it was so identified in press and other accounts. Unexplained animal killings in Arizona, Texas, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and even Spain were linked to chupacabras even in the absence of sightings. There were, however, some reports of unidentified, oversized birds.

In Mexico animal slayings sparked investigation and controversy. Authorities blamed the deaths on conventional predators, while popular opinion pointed to chupacabras. Some witnesses actually reported seeing large dogs killing livestock, but even this failed to stem the growing hysteria. In the state of Nayarit, a

spate of chicken killings led to the forming of posses. At least one posse member allegedly encountered the creature thought responsible, an entity with most though not quite all of the chupacabras' features. In the words of Silva Avila:

*I saw it in profile at a distance of some 33 feet, and it stood motionless. I picked up a stone and threw it at the creature, but I missed. The animal turned toward me and moved away with hurried jumps, vaulting over a six-foot wall. It measures some 30 inches and has a small head, with short, pointed ears, like those of a bat. Its eyes were brilliant red.*

Its legs folded at the knees, and it had two small arms extending from its torso. It was covered, the witness said, with black fur.

### The end?

The chupacabras scare ended in mid-1996, and practically nothing has been reported of this creature – or these creatures – since. If the chupacabras is remembered at all, it will probably be as the star of a particularly outlandish episode in popular hysteria.

Certainly the chupacabras is outlandish, and it certainly generated hysteria. Beyond that it is hard to say much. As one reads the accounts written during or just after the scare, the attentive reader does not learn much, except that some apparently sincere people believe they encountered an unearthly beast, that many animals were killed under sometimes murky circumstances, and that they were not drained of blood as the legend would have us believe.

Chupacabras was entirely a Latin American phenomenon. There are no known reports outside Latin American nations or neighborhoods. This fact inevitably leads to theories that the source of the scare is in Hispanic supernatural traditions, a not unreasonable conclusion, except that such theories do not explain the more dramatic first-person accounts – assuming, of course, that these are not hoaxes. They may be, certainly, but they need not be, either. After all, as this book amply demonstrates, the world is full of weird experiences that happen to perfectly sincere people.

Reading the literature on this subject, one is frustrated. Those most actively involved in running down cases often seem credulous, and those who dismiss them as nonsense seem willing to brush aside all sorts of interesting unanswered questions. The chupacabras seems destined to remain in the shadows – either the shadows of this world, where witnesses so often encounter it, or, more likely, the shadows of our imaginations.

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## Cosmic Jokers and Saucer Critters

When we think of encounters with the otherworldly, certain words tend to attach themselves automatically to our response: fear, astonishment, incredulity. But sometimes another word, one that ordinarily does not come to mind, best describes what the witnesses experienced (or claim to have experienced): comic.

By "comic" we do not mean the preposterous tales of the shameless hoaxer, such as the contactee who sells moon potatoes to the especially credulous or to the schlock magazine publisher who peddles tales of Midwestern towns leveled by marauding flying saucers. Sometimes persons who, from all available evidence, have their sanity intact and their sincerity manifest recount experiences that make it sound as if they were the unwitting victims of jokers from the cosmos.

Take, for instance, the tale of a couple we will call Frank and Kathy, whose bizarre experience Mark Hunker, a sober investigator for the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), investigated not long after it allegedly occurred. It happened on a Saturday night in early April 1974 in rural Hancock County, Ohio.

Driving along a country road early in the evening, the couple observed a light low on the northern horizon. At first they thought it was from a fire, and they decided to drive toward it to see if they could help. Then the "fire" shot up into the air and grew in size. "That ain't no barn fire," Frank, stating the obvious, remarked to Kathy. He later told Hunker that it "looked like the whole northeast section of