

# Slaying the Vampire

## Solving the *Chupacabra* Mystery

The mysterious vampire beast *el chupacabra* is said to have terrorized people around the world since at least 1995. A five-year skeptical investigation reveals the surprising origin of this monster, finding that there's more to this vampire than meets the eye.

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**B**igfoot, the mysterious creature said to roam the North American wilderness, is named after what it leaves behind: big footprints. Bigfoot's Hispanic cousin, *el chupacabra*, is also known for what it leaves behind: dead animals mysteriously drained of blood. Goats are said to be its favorite prey (*chupacabra* means *goat sucker* in Spanish), and it is the world's third best-known mystery creature (after Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster).

*El chupacabra* first appeared in 1995 after Madelyne Tolentino, an eyewitness in Puerto Rico, provided a detailed description of the bloodsucker. It had a heyday of about five years, during which sightings were widely reported in Mexico, Chile, Nicaragua, Spain, Argentina, and Florida, among other places. By 2002 *el chupacabra* was known worldwide. As one writer noted, "Not since the advent of crop circles has a strange phenomenon been so quickly assimilated into popular culture.... Chupacabras is now equal to the Loch Ness monster or Bigfoot as a cultural icon" ("Chupacabras" 2002).

Though *el chupacabra* is well known, it has been the subject of little serious or skeptical investigation. Researcher Karl Shuker (2009) lamented the "im-

mense confusion and contradiction" surrounding *el chupacabra*, making it "almost impossible to distinguish fact from fiction, and reality from hearsay and local lore" about the creature. Having done many cryptozoological investigations—both alone and with CSI Senior Research Fellow Joe Nickell (himself author of the new book *Tracking the Man-Beasts*)—I took Shuker's statement as a challenge to see if I could be the first to definitively solve the *chupacabra* mystery.

### The Investigation Begins

The first step was finding out what, exactly, people believed *el chupacabra* to be. Tolentino said the beast she saw had dark eyes that went up the temples and spread around the sides; it was a biped

approximately four-feet tall that had thin arms and legs with three fingers or toes at the end of each (Corrales 1997). It had no ears or nose but instead two small airholes and long spikes down its back (see figure 1). When the beast was later reported in other countries, it took on a very different form (see figure 2). A few were found dead (for example, in Nicaragua and Texas), and the carcasses turned out to be small four-legged animals from the *Canidae* family (such as dogs and coyotes).

The next step was identifying and analyzing the central claims about *el chupacabra*: Where did *el chupacabra* originate, and why did it suddenly appear in 1995? Why was the original Puerto Rican *chupacabra* sighting so different from the later canid chupacabras? And what killed the victims of the suspected *chupacabra* attacks?

Over the course of about five years of research I answered most of these questions. For example, the question of what mysteriously drained the blood from livestock was answered decades ago in the context of cattle mutilations (in fact in the pages of SKEPTICAL INQUIRER; see, for example, Stewart 1977). The processes of natural body decay and ordinary predation can mimic mysterious

“vampiric” blood loss and mutilation to the untrained observer’s eye. Furthermore, very few of the “completely bloodless” *chupacabra* victims had actually been examined. I consulted forensic and veterinary resources and interviewed a forensic pathologist who confirmed that

blood loss is impossible to verify without conducting a professional necropsy (Geberth 1996, Cunliffe 2009).

Through researching original sources and accounts it also became clear why the Puerto Rican *chupacabra* was so different from later incarnations: eyewitnesses

saw wildly different things and (confusingly) referred to all of them as *el chupacabra*. Recognizing that the goat-sucker has a strong cultural aspect (for example, it is almost exclusively seen in Spanish-speaking countries and regions), I researched Latin America’s Hispanic and Puerto Rican vampire folklore. This helped me understand the cultural background and social environment from which *el chupacabra* emerged.

By paying close attention to news stories about the monster, I was able to track down each new sighting and report on it immediately after it occurred. In the case of the most famous beast, the “Cuero *chupacabra*,” I flew to San Antonio, Texas, for the television show *MonsterQuest* to examine the beast. I spent about a week interviewing the *chupacabra*’s owner, Phylis Canion, and examining the carcass (see figure 3).

In 2008 I also conducted a field expedition in search of *el chupacabra* in the jungles of Nicaragua, near the San Juan river on the border of Costa Rica (see figure 5). Two colleagues and I searched the remote rainforest for several days and hired an expert tracker to seek any evidence of the beast (for more, see Radford 2010).

### The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

By 2009 I had answered nearly all of the central questions about *el chupacabra*. But one key mystery remained: Why did the goat sucker suddenly appear in 1995? No other animals in the world are claimed to have so recently (and spontaneously) appeared; even Bigfoot and Nessie are claimed to have existed since long ago (though evidence for this is dubious; see Radford and Nickell 2007). Real creatures simply do not appear out of thin air.

The monster’s origin had been an impenetrable mystery for nearly fifteen years; I felt that without answering this question I’d never be able to put forth a complete explanation. I traveled to Puerto Rico and interviewed Madelyne Tolentino, whose description of *el chupacabra* is the most important on record,



Figure 1. In Latin America, *el chupacabra* is thought to be a biped with long spikes down its back.



Figure 2. A second type of *chupacabra* in canid form, reported mostly in Texas since the mid-2000s. This animal was found in Blanco, Texas. Photo by Jerry Ayer.

not only because of its remarkable detail but also because it is the “original” eyewitness description upon which most images of the creature are based. I interviewed her (and her ex-husband) at length, and she showed me where her sighting occurred.

Tolentino claims to have seen the creature near the street outside her house in rural Puerto Rico during the second week of August 1995 (see figure 6). Her account appears in Scott Corrales’s book *Chupacabras and Other Mysteries* (Corrales 1997), and it’s clear that her story is riddled with implausible observations, contradictions, and inconsistencies. This revelation spelled real trouble for *el chupacabra*. If Tolentino’s account, arguably the most important eyewitness account, is not credible, her description—and much of the information that followed it—is irrefutably tainted.

Whether or not *el chupacabra* is entirely a product of culture can be debated, but the monster’s strong pop-culture element is undeniable. I searched for something—*anything*—that might have appeared in Puerto Rico around the time of the first *el chupacabra* sighting that might explain its origin. I discovered that just before Tolentino’s report, a new element was added to the island’s social and cultural mix—something that had not existed there before and could have credibly spawned *el chupacabra* sightings. The creature Tolentino described seeing bears no resemblance to any known animal. It does, however, look almost exactly like a *fictional* creature seen by hundreds of thousands of people in 1995: Sil.

#### What *Species* Is *el Chupacabra*?

Sil is the name of an alien creature played by Natasha Henstridge in the sci-fi horror film *Species*. *Species* was released in Puerto Rico on July 7, 1995—just over a month before Tolentino had her sighting. The creatures look very similar; could the original *el chupacabra* eyewitness have simply described a monster she had seen in a movie? It’s

certainly possible; other monster eyewitnesses have described “real-life” monsters that they actually saw in films (see, for example, Loxton 2009).

I reviewed Tolentino’s description and compared it to the *Species* alien, identifying over a dozen morphological

similarities, including the large, oblong head; large, wraparound eye shape; black or red eyes; small or nonexistent nose; the absence of ears; the bipedal stance; long, thin arms; long, thin legs; thin, clawed fingers; small, lipless mouth; large spikes down the spine; lack of tail;

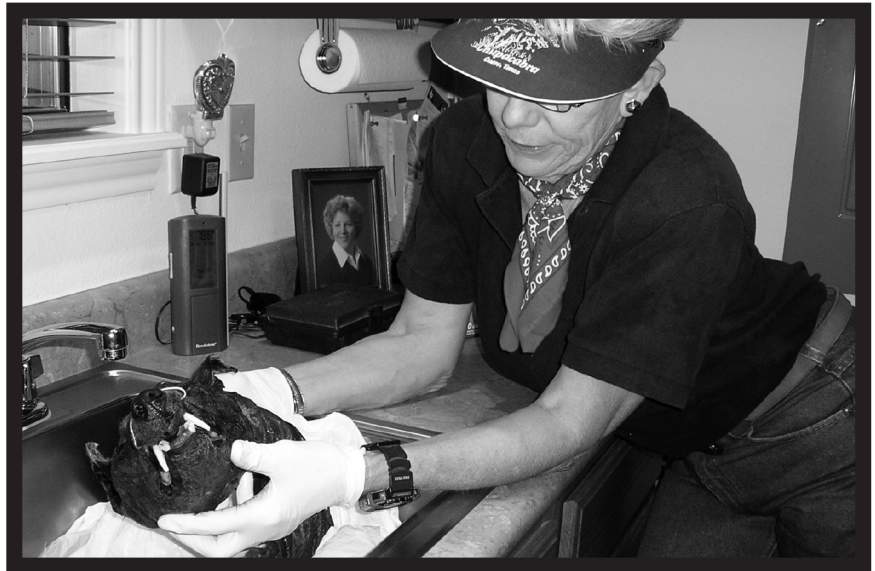


Figure 3. Texas rancher Phylis Canion displays the famous “Cuero Chupacabra” she found near her ranch in 2007. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. The original and best-known *chupacabra* image (left), based on eyewitness Madelyne Tolentino’s 1995 account (drawing by the author from a sketch by Jorge Martin), bears an uncanny resemblance to the monster from the 1995 science-fiction/horror film *Species* (right).

and so on. Indeed, the resemblance of Sil to the Puerto Rican *el chupacabra* is unmistakable (see figure 4). In fact, Tolentino herself said that “the resemblance [of Sil] to the *chupacabra* was really impressive” (Corrales 1997).

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction, and sometimes fiction influences reality. I discovered that the popular image of *el chupacabra*—the one appearing in thousands of books and magazines and on hundreds of websites as a credible

eyewitness description—is in fact based on a science-fiction film. *El chupacabra*'s origin had finally been revealed.

This solves one of the highest-profile “unexplained” mysteries of the past two decades. One thing in my favor was the limited scope of evidence: because the entire mystery was only about fifteen years old, the number of claims, eyewitness reports, and news accounts to consider was manageable.

The next step was completing the research and writing a book on it. (*Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore* was published in April by the University of New Mexico Press.) Of course, just because a mystery is solved doesn't mean that everyone knows about it or that many people won't think the mystery continues. The Bermuda Triangle, for example, was essentially solved decades ago by researcher Larry Kusche, yet it remains in the public's consciousness as mysterious and unexplained. The myth of *el chupacabra* will live on—though for skeptics and the open-minded public, surely this vampire has been slain. *El chupacabra* is dead; long live *el chupacabra*. ■



Figure 5. The author with expert tracker Fernando Casanova searching for evidence of *el chupacabra* in Nicaragua's Indio Maiz Wildlife refuge. Photo by Chris Ayles.



Figure 6. The street in Canovanas, Puerto Rico, where Madelyne Tolentino had the first—and most detailed—*chupacabra* sighting in history. Photo by the author.

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