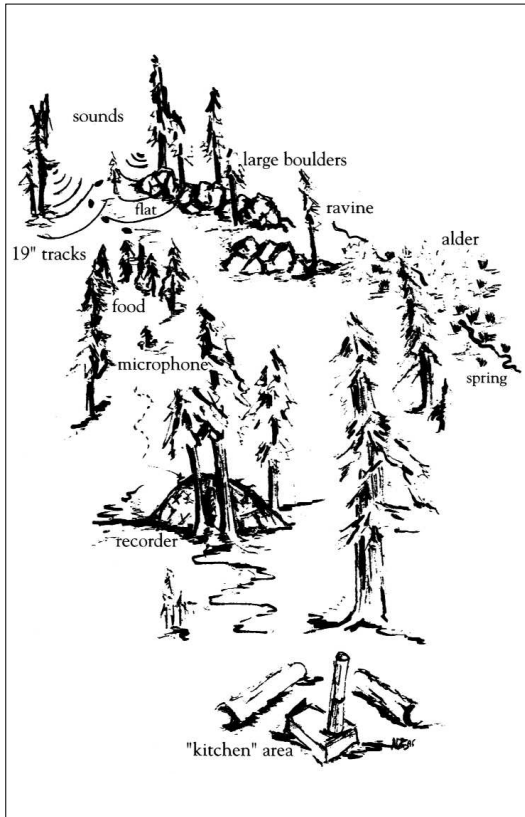


The Sierra Sounds



The Sierra camp set-up and location of the vocalizations. © 1975 Bigfoot Records, 1996 Sierra Sounds

Many sounds have been attributed to the sasquatch. In rare instances, people have spoken of hearing whistle calls, mumbling and monkey-like chatter or gibberish just beyond their view in the trees around their camps after dark. More commonly, however, people hear rocks clicked together or an inexplicable rhythmic, sometimes loud, rapping of wood on wood. There are also voluminous high-pitched yells and mournful howls that can raise you from your sleeping bag in the dead of night. These are not owls or yipping coyotes; these are powerful calls that reverberate through mountain canyons and forests for long minutes and can be heard for miles.

Occasionally such calls and sounds have been tape-recorded. By far the most unusual of all recordings reported to date are from a remote deer camp on the crest of the High Sierras in California, that were recorded between 1971 and 1974. Basque shepherds left their names carved in aspen near this camp in the early 1900s. It has been used and maintained since the 1950s by a small family-oriented group of hunters headed by Warren Johnson, who was then manager of an egg ranch in Ripon, a small agricultural community in the Central Valley. Warren and his younger brother, Louis, a carbonation technician at a sugar refinery in Fresno; Bill McDowell, a housing construction contractor in Merced; and Ron Morehead, a restaurateur, were all principal witnesses familiar with the camp and area.

Warren and Louis first experienced a disturbance and heard vocalizations at the camp in late summer 1971 when they hiked in to scout the deer population in advance of hunting season. There were repeat encounters through the hunting season, and again the following summer and fall, that all the men experienced, finally including Alan Berry, a news reporter who had been working for the *Redding Record-Searchlight* in northern California. Berry brought in recording equipment that was more sophisticated than what the men had been using, and as a journalist threw his weight into a full investigation of their story. What happened at the camp in his presence and the aftermath, as he searched for the truth behind the unusual primate-like sounds he had captured on tape, appears below, in his own words for *Know the Sasquatch*.



Al Berry (left) and Warren Johnson in front of the Sierra camp shelter. The activity was on a flat about 200 feet (61 m) uphill, behind the shelter. Trees prevented any possible visual sightings.

THE SIERRA SOUNDS STORY

by Al Berry

[In 1972, at a remote deer camp in the High Sierras where I was investigating an unusual story lead for a newspaper, I tape-recorded what are purported to be Bigfoot vocalizations. These recordings have been widely publicized over the years and remain a focus of controversy today. This is a summary of the story and my investigation.]

The hunters' camp was accessible only by horse or foot, and was miles from any beaten trail. I knew we might hear unusual sounds and was naturally suspicious and looking for any signs of a hoax, but what I witnessed and recorded was not so easily dismissed. In support of the recordings' authenticity, a year-long statistics-based university study would provide evidence showing that the voices were spontaneous at the time of my recording, and are humanlike in some respects, but clearly not in others.

The creatures had announced their presence at dusk, breaking branches and thumping wood as if to deliberately signal their approach off the ridge behind camp. We had moved from the camp cook area—where we had been enjoying the warmth of a fire—to inside the shelter, to give the appearance that we had retired for the night. This had been the hunters' practice in past close encounters. Inside we rested on our sleeping bags and heard nothing for a long while, but finally there were whistles, and soon afterward some close, very aggressive-sounding snarls and snorts, and a spate of strange chatter and gibberish. There were two vocalists, one higher pitched than the other, and both sounded highly excited and edgy. I had begun recording, and I scrambled to get up through a hole we had made in the roof, where I could view the surroundings and possibly see what was going on. I had good earshot, but could not see anything animate in the dark, so had to content myself in the end with the recordings I captured that night and the next before we packed out.

Inspection of the camp area during daylight revealed that the creatures had left 13 and 18-inch



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(Left to right), Bill McDowell, Warren, and Louis Johnson at the stove on the first night before any bigfoot activity started.



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Bill McDowell and Louis Johnson getting into ribs at the camp stove. This shot was taken on the day after the first night of bigfoot activities.



© 1975 Bigfoot Records, 1996 Sierra Sounds

Al Berry (left) and Ron Morehead at the shelter.



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Bill McDowell casting a 13-inch (33-cm) footprints. A casted print is seen in the foreground.



© 1975 Bigfoot Records, 1996 Sierra Sounds
An 18-inch (46-cm) footprint in a thin patch of snow.

(33-cm and 48-cm) footprints in thin patches of snow and ice, and also in the moist pine mat beneath the trees—including where we had chased after them on the second night, after moonrise, hoping to flush them into the open. I photographed several prints, and we made casts of the best impressions.

How would I deal with evidence that had seemed compelling and credible at the time, yet had no physical point of reference other than footprints? It bothered me that I had not seen what had made the sounds. They were gnarly, emotionally charged, and thoroughly mysterious vocalizations, and they had seemed spontaneous and real enough. We even had whistling and vocal exchanges between “them” and us, but who would believe any of this without photographs or a description of our aggressive-sounding visitors?

I had promised the hunters an investigation. I approached Syntonic, Inc., a New York audio-acoustics research lab, one of two hired by the U.S. Senate Watergate Committee to investigate President Nixon’s tapes. I spoke with the company’s president, and remarkably he offered to run some basic tests on the sounds. The work was not extensive, but it established, importantly, that there was no 60-cycle “hum” in the recordings that would point towards indoor pre-recording and a hoax.

I would not publicly release the story for a year and a half. Dr. Jarvis Bastion, a University of California, Davis, physical anthropologist, meanwhile, had provided me soundgrams of segments of the vocalizations that illustrated the harmonics in the voices, including a melodic whistle-call. Dr. Bastion was unequivocal about the sounds. “They were primate,” he said. The question was what primate?

The *San Francisco Chronicle* would feature the story, and the *Los Angeles Times* posted a jocular editorial “toasting” me as an “ex-reporter.” Television and radio interviews followed along with appearances in *In Search Of Myths and Monsters*, and later a feature-length Schick-Sun Classic film, *The Mysterious Monsters*. In 1976 I co-authored a Bantam book entitled *Bigfoot*, and I continued to look for expert help.

Finally, in 1977, a semi-quantitative statistical study was undertaken comparing the vocalizations with those of humans. The study

was sponsored by the University of Wyoming's Department of Electrical Engineering as part of a thesis program for a Norwegian graduate student, Lasse Hertel, under the direction of Dr. R. Lynn Kirlin, a professor of electrical engineering. The resulting paper, "Estimates of Pitch and Vocal Tract Length from Recorded Vocalizations of Purported Bigfoot," was presented at a conference, "Anthropology of the Unknown," convened in May 1978 by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. The paper subsequently was published in an anthology entitled, *Manlike Monsters on Trial*, UBC Press, 1980.

Kirlin and Hertel concluded that the formant frequencies and the vocal tract estimates indicated there could be as many as three speakers, with the data for one clearly falling beyond the human norm, yielding proportional height estimates ranging between 7'4" and 8'2". [The complete conclusions are presented in the sidebar.]

The deer hunters had recorded the creatures off and on, beginning in August of 1971. The recordings were made with inexpensive recorders and are poor in quality, but the voices from those of June of 1972, five months before mine, are unmistakably those of the creatures I recorded that October. The audibly evident patterning of the articulations suggests there is memory and similar emotion connected to the vocal expressions—at least over this span of five months.

Kirlin and Hertel had explored re-recording, variable speeds, and playing the recordings backward, but had found no evidence of such chicanery. "The possibilities for pre-recording are many," Kirlin wrote, "but there is no clear reason to believe it is likely. If Bigfoot is actually proven to exist, the vocalizations on these tapes may well be of great anthropological value, being a unique observation of Bigfoot in his natural environment."

Jonathan Frakes of *Star Trek Voyager* and *The Next Generation* fame narrates the story and sound presentation in "The Bigfoot Recordings," a professionally mastered CD, written and directed by myself and produced by Ron Morehead. Ron produced a second CD that presents sounds he and Bill McDowell recorded in 1974, which are compared with those from 1972. The 1974 vocalizations seem more humanlike than those of 1971 and 1972 and may represent an unrelated or different group of creatures moving through the area. They began making noise, rapping on trees and rocks and chattering, almost as soon as Ron and Bill arrived in camp at dusk and were unpacking their horses. Ron interacted with them and mimicked their whoops and yells.

CONCLUSION REACHED BY DR. KIRLIN AND LASSE HERTEL ON THE SIERRA SOUNDS

The results indicate more than one speaker, one or more of which is of larger physical size than an average human adult male.

The formant frequencies found were clearly lower than for human data, and their distribution does not indicate that they were a product of human vocalizations and tape speed alteration. Although a time-varying speed could possibly produce such formant distributions, an objective hearing and the articulation rate do not support that hypothesis.

Statistical analysis was applied to groups of vocal tract estimates from different vocalizations and a significant difference was found between the groups. When compared with human data the results indicated that there could possibly be three speakers, one of which is non-human. The average vocal tract length was found to be 20.2 cm. This is significantly longer than for a normal human male. Extrapolation of average estimators, using human proportions, gives height estimates of between 7'4" and 8'2".

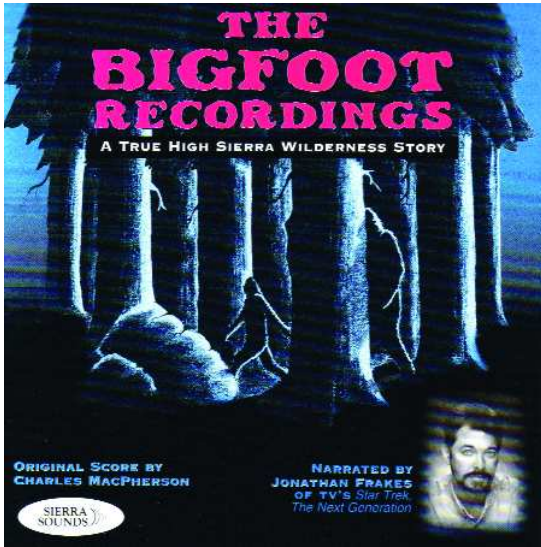
Analysis of the rapid articulations in the beginning of the recording (gob-gob) resulted in human-like vocal tract lengths. Also, the sound /g/ in "gob" suggests a human-like vocal tract (two vocal cavities).

The pitch periods found cover the broad range of pitch periods for both normal human male and low-pitched human male. However, they are mainly distributed around the data for the low-pitched human male.

Pitch and length estimates vary considerably but they are all found to be within the 95 per cent confidence interval for human speech with varying tape speed; however, assuming that there is only one vocalizer, then time-varying tape speed is necessary to produce data over such a wide range.

Both typical human whistles and some abnormal types of whistles were found. By using the formants from the abnormal whistles, very short vocal tract lengths were estimated. These whistles could either have been produced with some kind of a musical instrument or by the creature using only a part of its vocal tract.

It is hoped that the remaining uncertainties will not be considered reason for dismissing the recordings. The possibilities for prerecording are many, but there is no clear reason to believe it is likely. If Bigfoot is actually proven to exist, the vocalizations on these tapes may well be of great anthropological value, being a unique observation of Bigfoot in his natural environment.



The original Sierra recording made by Al Berry is considered the most convincing evidence with regard to sasquatch vocalizations.

He and Bill have maintained that they could see the creatures in silhouette as they darted between the trees below camp, crossing the slope in the vicinity of the camp latrine. The latrine consisted of a hinged toilet seat affixed to logs over a trench. At one point—the sounds are distinct—they banged the lid of the toilet seat several times and chortled and yelled in obvious amusement. Any listener familiar with outdoor camping will find that these are very provocative and endearing vocalizations, whatever made them! Both CDs and Ron's 40-year chronicle, *Vocies in the Wilderness*, are available online: <<http://www.bigfootsounds.com>> or <<http://www.ronmorehead.com>>.

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August 2005

UPDATE: In 2008 Scott Nelson, a highly experienced Crypto-Linguist who was trained by the United States Navy to transcribe languages, was vetted through the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC)—he is a two-time graduate of that school. Mr. Nelson interviewed Al Berry and Ron Morehead and subsequently studied the original recorded vocalizations. His conclusion was that whatever made the sounds has a very complex language—by the human definition of language.



Ron Morehead (left) and Al Berry (1941-2012). Ron Morehead is still active in sasquatch research and continues to present the Sierra encounters at sasquatch conferences and symposiums.