

Malevolent Maine

Episode 11: Maine River People

Malevolent Maine is a horror podcast, and may contain material not suitable for all audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

INTRO

A scientist performing eldritch experiments in the dead of night. The spirit of a woman lost among the blueberry plains who just wants to find her husband. And a sinister madness transmitted through a simple drawing. These are the stories we'll be bringing you in the coming weeks.

We're enjoying all your interactions with us on social media and our Patreon. You're a great group of fans and we appreciate all the shout outs and reviews. Keep sharing this podcast with your friends, keep liking and commenting on our posts, and keep listening. We've got a lot of great work coming in the next few months. Things we are really excited to share with you. Again thank you for supporting us.

The river babbles lazily beside you. Light ripples off the surface. You're all alone on the river... or are you. You hear the faint sound of something slipping out of the water and suddenly a large pair of red eyes stares at you intently.

This is Malevolent Maine.

Guys, what was that?

I saw it with my own eyes

No, seriously, what was that?

It's just not scientifically possible.

I can't explain it.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

This stuff is wild, man. It's real wild.

But... what was that?

This one is all over the place, MMers. It is one of Maine's most widespread stories, and as near as we can tell, one of its oldest. We're talking about Maine's River People.

The name may conjure up images of hearty men and women living along the banks of Maine's 31,752 miles of river, fishing and logging, living in cabins with gentle curls of smoke rising from the stone chimneys. But for old-timers and lifelong residents of Maine, the term "River People" means something else entirely.

Beginning as far back as the 1700s there have been sightings of creatures that appear vaguely humanoid living in the fresh waterways of Maine. These creatures appear to be, for lack of a better term, fishmen.

During the French and Indian War, in the summer of 1754, British Corporal Eustis H. Gardner was leading a group of soldiers up the Androscoggin River, somewhere outside of modern day Livermore Falls to engage with French troops when he says they encountered a strange creature swimming alongside their boat. It was such a strange sight that Corporal Gardner made note of it in his journal which has survived to this day. Here's Lucas reading a passage pertaining to the creature:

LUCAS: It was the regular size and rough shape of a man though twas cov'r'd in blue-green scales. Its hands and feet were massive, shaped like an oar and tipp'd with razor sharp claws. Its eyes, though beneath the water, burned crimson. It did swim 'longside our boat for five full

minutes before it did swim off. I, nor any of mine own men, have never seen aught like the beast before.

Many considered Corporal Gardner's accounts to be the wild fiction of a man driven to extremes. The trek up the Androscoggin was a difficult one and many assumed the hardships he endured had addled Gardner's wits. Gardner stood by his claim, however, and until his death he was adamant about his encounter with the fish-like creature.

Famed New England explorer, Bernard Pollack, claimed he encountered a similar creature thirty years later, in 1789, while mapping out the Androscoggin. He claimed that while he and his Native American guide, Moxus, were canoeing the river, a fish-man swam up alongside them. It leapt out of the water like a fish, before diving back down, hardly making a splash. The creature was about six feet from the tip of its pointed snout to its webbed feet. Pollack described it as being green, with just a hint of a pinkish hue, like a rainbow trout.

Pollack claimed the fish-man seemed to be leading them down a smaller river that branched off from the Androscoggin. Pollack and Moxus followed the fish-man until he led them to a small village on the shore of the river. There were four or five wigwams or birch houses. These had cone-shaped frames, wrapped in sheets of birch bark. They were close to the banks of the river, closer than Pollack had ever seen in the many indigenous people's villages he had visited. He counted no less than seven of these fish-people, all nearly identical to the one who had led Pollack and Moxus to the settlement.

The explorer stayed in his canoe just off shore for several hours, observing and sketching the fish-men before finally paddling off and resuming his journey. He said several of the fish-men followed him for fifteen minutes or so before swimming back towards their village. Later, when he tried to retrace his route, he found he couldn't quite recall which side stream he had been led to and never discovered the village again.

It should be noted that Pollack was a bit of a braggart, known to exaggerate his own exploits to fill his pockets. Several of his other exploits exploring New England have been called into question, while others proven to be outright lies. Even in his own time, Bernard Pollack was known to stretch the truth to make a good story.

So the question remains, did Pollack see one of the same fish people that Corporal Gardner claimed to have seen? Or did Pollack come across Gardner's diary or hear of his story and incorporate it into his own tales of exploration?

For a time, the story of the River People was confined to just the Androscoggin River, and many people believed the creatures lived solely there. For decades, people emboldened by the tales they had heard about or read in Pollack's *A History of a Maine Exploration*, searched up and down the Androscoggin, trying to find any sign of the village of fish-folk, but to no avail.

By 1870, the story of the Androscoggin River People was well known. Various artifacts claiming to belong to the fish-men began cropping up all over the state. Every few years, new claims of these creatures began circulating. When they reached the ear of one Dr. Phineas Bond, a Harvard educated scientist with a fascination with animal species, his interest was piqued. He and his wife Eliza traveled north and began a fifteen year journey to find and record evidence of the River People.

Dr. Bond began his search along the Androscoggin River. Unlike many of their predecessors, the Bonds used the greatest modern science of the time and began to systematically explore the river. Making their own highly detailed maps, and using a variety of scientific equipment, the scientist and his wife began to piece together the mystery of the River People.

The Bonds were surprised to find plenty of evidence that these creatures not only existed, but had for quite some time. Dr. Bond theorized that the River People had existed long before anyone had settled in the region. He took castings of prints

believed to belong to the fish-men and recorded every story he was told about encounters with them. He gathered quite a collection of bones and fossils he claimed were remains of the River People. He would often present these findings, first in the lecture halls of local colleges, and then as time went on, in local libraries or town meeting halls, showing off his ever growing collection of River People artifacts. In fact it was Dr. Bond who first labeled them the River People.

Phineas and Eliza Bond spent fifteen years researching Maine's extensive waterways, searching for evidence. While many scoffed at their discoveries, Dr. Bond was quite convinced he had discovered a previously unknown species. He published several essays on his theories, including that the River People were, in fact, highly intelligent. He believed they may even be smarter than humans, as they have been able to elude them for so long.

Bond would go on to publish two books on the subject: *The Emergence of the Species, Aquas Sapiens* and the more popular follow up, *The Maine River People*. While the first book, published in 1880, mimicked other zoologies of the time and attempted to explain the creatures scientifically, it was the second book, more of a historical collection of stories published in 1887 that proved more popular. It is still possible to find copies of *The Maine River People* in many local libraries across the state, and copies of *The Emergence of the Species, Aquas Sapiens* can be purchased from online book sellers, though there are not many copies in circulation.

It should be noted that in 1936, almost forty years after its publication, *The Maine River People*, and in fact, all of Phineas Bond's written works, were discovered to have been written by his wife, Eliza. She was educated at Smith College and considered highly intelligent in her own right. Many surmise it was Eliza who was the actual scientific intellectual, but understood that because of her status as a woman in the 1800s, she would not be taken as seriously. For years, it seems, she was content to let her husband claim the credit for her writing. It was her granddaughter, Alice Cousins, who pushed for Eliza's

recognition, and many newer versions of the books, published after the 1930s are attributed to Phineas and Eliza Bond.

In light of that, I've asked our producer, Megan, to read a passage from *The Maine River People*, written by Eliza Bond. It details an encounter the couple had with one of the creatures while exploring the Presumpscot River

MEGAN: It *emerged* as we sat on the banks, eating a dinner of cold sandwiches. Its eyes were large and seemed to shine like two lanterns. There was a crest or fin atop its head and as it rose up out of the water to about chest height, the crest stiffened. Its mouth was full of razor sharp teeth, unlike a shark's, more like a mouth full of needles or nails. It was built like a man with lean, sinewy muscles, but covered in greenish scales. I reached for the rifle that lay nearby, but the creature made no threatening gestures. It floated, perhaps ten feet off shore, staring at us. Perhaps five minutes later, it slipped beneath the surface and was gone with hardly a disturbance.

Both of the books published by the Bonds are full of drawings and diagrams. Many were done by Phineas Bond and show an aptitude for anatomy diagraming. Whatever his lack as a writer, there is no denying his artistic skill. The diagrams are detailed and offer the clearest look at the River People to date.

Bond asserted that one night after one of his lectures in Waterville he was approached by a man who had discovered the dead body of one of these fish-men while out fishing. For twenty dollars, he would let Dr. Bond have one hour with the corpse.

Adjusting for inflation, twenty dollars in 1880 is worth nearly six hundred dollars by today's standards. Still, Dr. Bond jumped at the chance. He met the man in the middle of the night outside a dimly lit barn, paid him the twenty dollars, and stepped inside.

In the middle of the darkened barn was a cart with a heavy canvas tarp covering something. As Bond approached he suddenly grew nervous and wondered if he had made a mistake. In *The Maine*

River People, he, or technically his wife, writes that he suddenly became quite convinced that this whole thing had been a hoax and that the man meant to waylay him. He considered bolting out of the barn and back to the safety of his hotel room. In the end, however, his curiosity got the better of him. He approached the cart and slowly pulled back the tarp.

Bond claimed the body was quite decomposed, but it was still quite obvious that what he was looking at wasn't human. It was the rotting corpse of a River Person. Bond spent his hour taking measurements and studying its various anatomical systems. He drew a quick sketch of the creature, which he printed in the book, alongside a more detailed one he made later.

When his hour was up, Bond offered to buy the corpse off the man for the unfathomable at the time price of five hundred dollars. Bond offered to pay him another twenty dollars for another hour, the man refused. Bond offered fifty, one hundred dollars, but still the man wouldn't take the money. In the end, a frustrated Phineas Bond left with his notes.

When he attempted to return the next day, the man, the cart, and the body were gone. He soon discovered that the barn belonged to an unsuspecting farmer who knew nothing of the midnight deal and thought Dr. Bond and his work were a bunch of, and this is a direct quote, "hooley." The mysterious man and his River Person corpse were never found again.

Combining what we know from Corporal Gardner, Bernard Pollack, and the Bonds, we start to have a clear picture of what these River People look like.

They stand roughly six feet tall and are covered with fish-like scales that range from a light blush color to a mossy green. They stand on two legs, like a human, and their feet are large and webbed. There appear to be sharp claws on the end of their toes, likely used for gripping slippery rocks in riverbeds. Their two arms end in clawed hands. They have two large eyes that multiple reports claim seem to shine red, though whether

this is the actual color of the eye or some sort of luminescence that comes from them is unknown. They have needle-like sharp teeth and gills that run on either side of their neck. Their backs have a series of raised ridges or dorsal fins that run straight to the top of their head. This fin on the head can raise and stiffen, most likely to present a more threatening appearance.

According to the Bonds they found evidence that these creatures appear to be social, in that they live together in small groupings or schools. This would corroborate Pollack's story of the village on the river bank. It is unknown if there are both male and female River People as all descriptions seem to match. It could be possible the females are even more elusive or that they have no defineable differences from their male counterparts

And perhaps, most alarming, the Bonds discovered evidence of the River People's presence in nearly all of Maine's major rivers and their tributaries. Whatever these things are, they are widespread.

Sightings of the River People continued into the modern era. Randy Kramer, a Scout leader, claimed to have encountered one in 1973 while taking a group of boys on an overnight canoeing trip on the Sunday River, a tributary of the Androscoggin. This is from an interview Kramer gave in 1980 to *Scouts Life Magazine* that I've asked our intern Mark to read:

MARK: "I got up in the middle of the night and left my tent to relieve myself. I took maybe ten steps out towards the riverbank when I heard something I thought might have been a snake, but could have just been the tall grass moving. I looked up and I saw a pair of red eyes staring back at me. I froze, and realized I was in real danger. I could tell the thing was about to pounce, but then the clouds drifted away from the moon. In the moonlight I could see what it was - it was...and I know how crazy this sounds, it was a fishman. I knew right what it was. We'd even told a

campfire ghost story about it that night. It was one of the River People. Quick as an eel, it dove back into the river and swam off. I don't think I slept a lick that night."

It seems the River People are still around and seemingly will be for a long time. More disturbing is Kramer's insinuation that the River Person was about to attack. All of the previous reports we've shared describe the River People as inquisitive, but not threatening, and yet, if Kramer is to be believed, it would appear that the River People are becoming more aggressive.

Which brings us to the rather colorful character known as Barry Doldorff. Doldorff has lived in the town of New Sharon his whole life. "From breast to boneyard," is how he put it, implying he was born in the area and will die in the area. New Sharon is a small town of about fourteen hundred people located in Franklin County. It should be noted that the town is bisected by the Sandy River, a tributary of the larger Kennebec River.

Doldorff contacted us with a story that bears a striking resemblance to our previous stories, but with some startling twists.

We sent Lead Investigator Tom up to New Sharon to meet with Doldorff, hear his story directly, and look around the area. Tom had an amazing interview with Doldorff, but the audio equipment had an unfortunate malfunction which left the recording largely unusable despite our best efforts. Instead, I've asked Tom to recount his investigation:

TOM: Okay. I met Barry Doldorff at his home. It was a double wide trailer, a little rundown. He had two of those portable garage tent things, though one was pretty ripped, and what looked like maybe half a dozen dirt bikes and ATVs. There were three vehicles in the driveway, two trucks, only one of which worked I found out later, and an old Honda Civic up on blocks.

Barry met me at the door wearing a Miller High Life t-shirt and a pair of cut off jean shorts. He wasn't smoking yet, but you could smell the cigarettes on him. He was friendly enough though. Shook my hand, offered me a tour of his place. I asked him to tell me his story in as much detail as he could remember.

Okay, so I'm going to try to do my best to imitate the way he talked. I normally wouldn't, but it was so unique, I think you need to hear it to get his story. I'll tell you up front, it's not going to be good, but it's the best I can do. And Barry, if you're listening, sorry. So, yeah, Barry started telling me his story about one day when he was out riding the four-wheeler trails.

"Well I was ridin' pretty quick on em trails up heyah, and I'll tell you what. I was passin' through the normal areas and seein' the streams and the ponds ayuh. But I swear to Jesus, I couldn't freakin' believe what I saw when I whipped 'er around Jackson's Bend. It was a river, and I ain't never seen a river there before. I thought I was havin' one of those....what's that called? A Hall-oo-sin-ation."

I swear, I'm not making this up. This is how he talked. Chris, is there any way we can get the actual audio?

Megan's working on it, but she didn't sound too hopeful.

TOM: Oh man. That's too bad. You really had to hear it to believe it. He was like the stereotypical Maine redneck. I swear I'm not making this up.

Anyways, Barry saw a river that was never there before. It's not on any map, and he's pretty familiar with the area. He's fifty-two and he's lived there his whole life. So he stops the four-wheeler and gets off to take a closer look. He said the river was quiet. It didn't even have the normal river sounds you'd expect, whatever that means. He

couldn't really define it. He said he could hear the water flowing, but somehow it all seemed quiet. He said there was a chill in the air, like one those fall evenings when the sun sets just a little too early. He had the sensation that he was being watched, but he couldn't see anybody or anything anywhere. In the end, he decided to go back into town and get his friend, Donny Smith to come check it out with him. Just to make sure he wasn't going crazy. He said he tied a red bandana he had around a tree so that he'd be able to mark the spot when he got back.

He paused for a minute here, like he was gathering his thoughts. Then he lit a cigarette and started in again:

"'Donny!' I screams at the top of my lungs. 'Donny, get out heyah!' Well, you see Donny has a bit of a drinkin' problem and he was passed out on the couch. Luckily for me, the back door was open I was able to go right inna. I went right inna kitchen and grabbed some cold water fromma faucet. Threw it right on Donny's face. It was 3PM for Pete's sake, and the sonuvagun was drunk as a frickin' skunk! Well, anyways, I got 'im up and got 'im on the back of my wheelah. Donny couldn't ride himself as he was smashed two ways from Wednesday."

Doldorff drove back along the dirt trail and came to the place where he had tied the red bandana. He told Tom that he knew right away something was different. It was the sounds, you see. The animals were back, and somewhere off in the distance he could hear another ATV. And he couldn't hear the river.

The river had completely disappeared. It didn't dry up; not in the hour it took for him to get Donny and get back there. According to Doldorff there was no sign of the riverbed. It was just empty woods as far as the eye could see.

He was sure he was in the right place. His marker was right where he left it, not that he needed it. Doldorff knew these trails like the back of his hand. He was back in the same place,

only this time the river that shouldn't be there, suddenly wasn't there once more.

Here's Tom:

TOM: Barry and Donny go back home. According to Barry, Donny is all mad because Barry dragged him all the way out there for nothing. He thinks it's a prank. Well the two guys go back to Donny's. They start a campfire and have a few beers. The whole time Barry is trying to convince Donny that he really did see a river. Barry says he guesses they were outside until 11, 11:30. Then he got back on his ATV and drove home.

Barry told me that something woke him up at 2:45. He said he remembered looking at the clock next to his bed because his first thought was that he had slept through his alarm. He said - and I wrote this down because I wanted to make sure I got it exact. He said, "I heard something inna kitchen. It was like a slippery slidey sound. By the time I got up and went in and got the light on I couldn't see nothing except for my floor was all wet, like someone just moppedah up real good. Then I got my flashlight and whet out the back door and I was shinin' it on my shed. Now I may have been seeing things again, but I swear I seems like a slimy, man-fish or something. Just the backuh it, runnin off into the trees. Then it turned back and looked right at me with its glowing red eyes. I just about jumped outta my skivvies. Chilled me right to the bone, I tell you what. I went back inna house and locked every lock I got."

Barry told me the thing moved fast. One second it was there, and the next it was just gone. He said he knew it was running, but it was like it just up and vanished. That's how quick it was. Barry said the next morning he went back to the trail on Jackson's Bend, looking for the strange river and the creature he's convinced came from it.

When I showed him one of the drawings from Dr. Bond's book, he got real pale. "Ayuh," he said, and lit another cigarette. "That's it."

Did Barry Doldorff encounter one of Maine's legendary River People? It certainly appears so. But what was it doing inside Doldorff's home? Was it exploring? Or did it have more violent plans in mind?

And then, of course there's the question of the mysterious river that appeared to Doldorff and then just as mysteriously disappeared.

Here's Tom, one last time:

TOM: Barry took me out to the spot where he claimed to have seen that strange river. There was nothing there. Just the forest. He showed me right where the river had been. We even went down and walked along the ground. It was dry and there were no signs of anything resembling a puddle, let alone a river. I asked around with several of the locals and none of them had ever heard of such a river. I even went back and explored all over those trails without him, thinking maybe he had just gotten turned around. Nothing. Whatever Barry Doldorff saw, it's long gone now.

One final note on Barry Doldorff. When we discovered the audio from our interview was unusable, we tried to reach out and arrange for a follow up. We didn't reach him, but left a message. A few days later we heard back from Doldorff's friend, Donny.

He told us that Doldorff had gone missing. It seems that he went out and checked that stretch of trail where he had seen the strange river every day. Donny said that Doldorff became obsessed, often going out two or three times a day just to check if the river had returned. And he was paranoid, too. He started carrying around a gun, and he nailed his windows shut.

Donny got worried when he hadn't heard from Doldorff in a few days, so he went to his house to check on him. When he couldn't find him there, Donny decided to check the trails where they liked to ride.

He found Doldorff's ATV not far from where he had once tied the red bandanna, still hanging there from a drooping tree branch. The ATV was knocked over on its side and its left front tire had been shredded as if it had driven over a handful of jagged blades. Or perhaps a strong set of claws.

There was no sign of Barry Doldorff.

Someone had written in the dirt, perhaps ten feet from where the crashed ATV lay, the word 'whet.' Not wet like water, Donny told us. W-H-E-T. It means to sharpen something by rubbing it with something like a stone. It can also mean to make keen or more acute. As in to whet your appetite, by providing you a small taste of something so that you crave it more.

Did Doldorff write the word in the dust? And if so, what was he trying to say? It's difficult to say. Donny Smith told us one last piece of interesting information.

He said he was distraught when he came across Doldorff's ATV. He looked all over for him, thinking his friend had been in some kind of accident. He couldn't find him, so he eventually went into town to get the local police. He said that even though the woods on either side of the trail was dry, he was shocked to find his boots wet when he got to the police station. And not just damp, he said. His feet were soaked through, as if he had been wading in a river.

The River People have been a presence in Maine for centuries, secret though usually benign. In the past they seemed just as curious of us, as we are of them. They have been known to interact or play with river travelers, and on at least one occasion, actually welcomed humans into their world. And yet, it appears

things have changed in the last fifty years. What could have triggered this more aggressive nature?

One has to wonder about the pollutants being dumped into our waterways, the destruction of the natural world in order to build more and more man-made signs of civilization, and monetization of our aquifers. Have we finally done enough to our rivers that they are now fighting back?

At the time of this podcast Barry Doldorff has not been found. Investigators did discover one boot that closely matches a pair known to be owned by Doldorff. It was buried in the earth up past the ankle in the very spot where he claimed to have seen a mysterious river.

And then there's that word: whet. Could it be that the River People have whet their appetites on the likes of Barry Doldorff? Could they have discovered a liking or even a craving for human flesh? And if they have turned predatory how will we stop them?

If you are out on Maine's rivers, we would remind you to be considerate of our waterways. Don't pollute our rivers and streams with garbage and try not to disturb the environment any more than you must. Be careful, or perhaps some night you will smell a fishy, wet odor or see a pair of glowing red eyes and a mouth full of razor sharp teeth.

Stay safe out there, Maine.

Malevolent Maine is Lucas Knight, Tom Wilson, and myself, Chris Estes.

If you'd like to read more about our investigations check out our website at malevolentmaine.blogspot.com/

While there, don't forget to check our merch store. And, if you're so inclined, support us on Patreon at patreon.com/malevolentmaine

Thank you for listening to Malevolent Maine.
And as always, stay safe out there, Maine.