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A Bargain Monster From the Sea’s Basement

The aquarium wanted a creature that was both unusual and economical to catch. So a search was launched in the weird world of 200 fathoms down for the giant sea roach

**Thomas Lee Mills**, skipper of the shrimp trawler *Norma Yvonne*, flicked on the fathometer. “We’re at 70 fathoms now,” he said. “By three or four in the morning, we’ll have a good 200 fathoms of water under us.”

We were eight hours out in the Gulf of Mexico, due south of Mobile, Ala., on an expedition to bring back living deep-water specimens for the New York Aquarium.

“But the way these seas have been building I ain’t so sure we’re gonna be able to work when we get there,” he added.

“A big boat like this ought to be able to take it,” I said hopefully.

Mills laughed sardonically. “Oh hell, yes, the boat can take it. But you ain’t gonna stand up to it. When she hits those 25-foot seas, she’ll beat your guts out. And it don’t take but a second for a man to get washed overboard. Damned if I’m gonna get drowned trying to drag up a mess of nasty looking sea roaches.”

Thomas Lee didn’t think much of our expedition. Fishing out there was brutal on equipment. Enormous sharks attacked the nets, and violent squalls struck. Even the big, deep-water royal red shrimp were no incentive to most skippers. We had persuaded Thomas Lee to take us out deep only because the shrimping inshore was no good.

As we headed farther out, we
studied a computer printout of when and where Bathynomus giganteus, commonly called the giant sea roach by fishermen, had been captured over the past 25 years. Nixon Griffis, a trustee of the New York Zoological Society, sat quietly in the galley, puffing his cigarette. A few months earlier he had asked me, “Jack, where can we catch a monster? We need something unusual for the New York Aquarium.”

“Well,” I said, “we could go drag Loch Ness.”

“No,” Nick said. “British government wouldn’t allow it. Besides, it would take a fortune. We need a bargain monster.”

The only economical monster I could think of was Bathynomus giganteus, which lives at the edge of the continental shelf in the Gulf of Mexico. With a length of up to 14 inches, it is the world’s largest isopod, a flat-bodied crustacean with seven pairs of sharp-hooked legs and a segmented body. The “pill bugs,” or woodlice, that hide under rocks in a garden are isopods. Imagine a pill bug about a foot long, with a jointed body, hooked claws, triangular eyes and a mouth filled with cutting mandibles, and you’ve got a real monster. Common 60 million years ago, Bathynomus giganteus survives today only in scattered locations.

As the evening wore on, the seas began building and the 90-foot steel-
hulled trawler pitched and rolled. I went below and lay in my bunk listening to the engines fighting the waves. I dozed off. At three in the morning, a deck hand was shaking me. "Captain wants to talk to you."

The skipper’s mood was somber. "In two hours we’ll be over 200 fathoms," he said. "The way these seas have been building I ain't so sure I'm going to put the rigs overboard. But it’s possible that they’ll lay down at daybreak."

At dawn we assembled on the deck, yawning gloomily. The seas were steel gray, frothed with whitecaps, beset with huge rolling waves.

"All right, we’re setting out at 190 fathoms," Thomas Lee shouted above the wind. "We’ll be dragging on out to 200 fathoms."

He started the winch turning, the nets were thrown overboard and the trawls splashed into the sea. The green webbing sank down behind them on the long journey to the bottom.

The giant drums spun wildly, spewing out fathom after fathom of steel cable. The Norma Yvonne churned forward. When he was sure there was enough cable out, Thomas Lee slowed down, and the crew locked the winches.

Now it was our turn to get busy. As I gushed seawater from the deck hose into Styrofoam containers, marine biologist Joe Haluský brought up bags of crushed to chill the seawater to the sea bottom temperature of 45 degrees. We checked the air pumps that would aerate the water in which we would put our specimens. If any creatures came up alive, we were going to do our best to keep them that way.

Three hours dragged on. Finally, Thomas Lee started reeling in the nets. It took more than 30 minutes. The 50-foot-long starboard net came up first. With creaking groans, the rope hoisted the green webbed bag until it dangled from the boom above the deck, showering out water, gorged with life.

The skipper snatched the release ropes. A few fish started spilling on the deck, then an avalanche of little orange shrimp, along with seemingly every other imaginable creature.

I surveyed the pile with amazement. There were long eels with wicked-looking teeth and huge, horned, plated goose barnacles in 12-inch-long clusters. The deck bounced with big, leathery-skinned white sea anemones, and scattered everywhere were moon snails.

We were dragging at the edge of the continental shelf where the bottom begins its sharp plunge to the abyssal plains. The animals on this frontier are more related to the bizarre forms of life on the sea floor three miles down than to shallow-water species. Nearly all the fish were dead on deck. These casualties had swim bladders—gas-filled sacs to regulate buoyancy. At 200 fathoms they existed under a pressure of 550 pounds per square inch. As the net rapidly ascended, the pressure decreased and the gases expanded, popping their eyes out and tearing
the fish apart. Some creatures that lacked swim bladders were still alive but in shock from the abrupt temperature change.

We peered over the near-lifeless pile, looking for Bathynomus giganteus. But the sea roach was nowhere to be found. Suddenly my wife Anne, also a marine biologist, cried out, "Hey! Look! It's a chimera."

Nick jumped up with excitement. "I've only seen pictures of them before," he said. "That will make the expedition right there."

In Greek mythology, a chimera was a monster. The name fits. This one had a bulbous nose; its skin was soft, almost mushy. A wicked spine protruded from its black tapered back. Its huge, bright-green luminous eyes were like two crystal balls.

When Anne gently eased her specimen into the box of water, it began to swim, its fan-shaped pectoral fins spread out like an angelfish's. Suddenly it became beautiful.

When the second net was opened, there were more chimeras. There were also tiny (nine-inch) chain dogfish sharks, tan with black markings and slanted green eyes. They were alive and healthy.

We all worked like madmen, desperately raking through the catch to get the animals into water before they died. The crew members were happy, too. In just 30 minutes they had four baskets heaped high with fluffy, bright royal red shrimp.

"Jack," Nick called. "Come look at the chimeras. They're dying."

"The fish were belly up. I blasted pure oxygen into the water, but it was hopeless. Their delicate bodies had undergone too much shock.

"Skipper, we need to make another tow," I said. "We didn't get our sea roach and we lost our other little monsters."

"The seas ain't picking up any worse," said Thomas Lee, rubbing his unshaven chin. The shrimping fever was possessing him.

We started dragging again in 280 fathoms. Three hours passed. Finally the net rose up and fairly whipped out of the sea, it was so light. "Damn!" the skipper snorted. "We made a water haul! We weren't even on the bottom."

He was embarrassed. He had underestimated the amount of cable to
put out. “All right,” he said. “We’ll make one more tow. This time she’ll damn sure be on the bottom.”

The sun was beginning to set, a cold orange ball sinking into the horizon. When the nets came up again, there was a heavy, solid look about them.

“Sharks!” yelled a deck hand. “They’re eating the nets up!” The sea was boiling with sharks. The dead fish we culled overboard hours ago had attracted them.

Thomas Lee shoved the throttle down and tried to outrun them, but there was no way to buck those 15-foot waves. As the two swollen bags were pulled to the surface, the sharks lunged in. When the first bag was lifted clear of the water, fish began flopping out into the sea and the sharks greedily thrashed in and gorged them down. A moment later the second net was lifted clear and dumped heavily on the deck, riddled with gaping holes. Shrimp and fish began spilling out from the bottom.

Then suddenly we were staring at an enormous sea roach! It was as if the Norma Yvonne had dropped her nets back to the Eocene and brought up a creature from that era.

I rushed over to grab the sea roach, but the skipper bellowed, “Jack! Stay clear of them nets.”

In a flash our precious Bathynomus disappeared beneath the avalanche. But then as my eyes took in all the diverse forms, the confused flapping, the dead creatures, two more sea roaches slid across the deck.

Anne grabbed one. “Ya-hoo! We got them, we got them!”

To our delight, when we dropped them into the boxes of water they began to swim. I dug out another Bathynomus from the pile. By this time the other net had been opened and we found three more.

We finished pulling under the glare of the deck lights and a star-studded sky. Then the grueling voyage back to port began. The 25-foot seas slammed over the bow, foamed around the wheelhouse and flooded the aft decks. Fifteen hours passed, then 20, and still no sight of land. It had taken only ten hours to get out.

It was late in the afternoon before we inched into Mobile Bay. Frantically we repacked the specimens, loading them on a truck to meet the evening flight to New York.

At six o’clock the next morning we finished unpacking at the New York Aquarium in Coney Island. Hours later, before the blazing lights of television cameras, goose barnacles extended their feathery scarlet cirri. Tan-and-black-striped chain dogfish sharks glided along the bottom of the tank, and one laid an egg. Best of all, six giant sea roaches peered out from behind the glass walls of their new home, looking like something from outer space.

Crowds flocked to the Aquarium, even in the dead of winter. Admissions soared. The sea roaches, our bargain monsters, had proved to be a monster bargain.