

# The Kelpie



The **kelpie** is a supernatural shape-shifting water horse from Celtic folklore that is believed to haunt the rivers and lochs of Scotland and Ireland. It generally has grayish black fur, and will appear to be a lost pony, but can be identified by its constantly dripping mane. its skin is like that of a seal but is deathly cold to the touch. In Orkney a similar creature was called the *Nuggle*, and in Shetland a similar creature was called the *Shoopiltee*, the *Njogel*, or the *Tangi* .

It also appears in Scandinavian folklore where in Sweden it is known by the name **Bäckhästen**, the *brook horse*. In Norway it is called *nøkken*, where the horse shape is often used, but is not its true form.

In Scottish folklore, a kelpie would lure people onto its back and then dive into a deep lake to drown its unfortunate rider. A kelpie if bridled by a human might be forced to do the bidding of the rider but if the bridle should slip then the unfortunate soul would find them in a watery grave.

The kelpie sometimes appeared as a rough hairy man who would grip and crush travelers, but it most commonly took the form of a beautiful tame horse standing by a stream or river. If anyone mounted it, it would charge into the deepest part of the water, submerging and taking the rider with it. They would sometimes interbreed with humans' horses, and the foals were said to be fine fleet footed horses. The kelpie was also said to warn of forthcoming storms by wailing and howling. Rarely, kelpies could be benign.

According to the Swedish naturalist and author Bengt Sjögren (1980), the present day belief in lake monsters in for example Loch Ness, is associated with the old legends of kelpies. Sjögren claims that the accounts of lake-monsters have changed during history. Older reports often talk about horse-like appearances, but more modern reports often have more reptile and dinosaur-like appearances, and Bengt Sjögren concludes that the legends of kelpies evolved into the present day legends of lake-monsters where the monsters "changed the appearance" to a more "realistic" and "modern" version since the discovery of dinosaurs and giant aquatic reptiles from the horse-like water-kelpie to a dinosaur-like reptile, often a plesiosaur.

The following tale is a good illustration of the brook horse:

“ A long time ago, there was a girl who was not only pretty but also big and strong. She worked as a maid on a farm by Lake Hjertasjön in southern Nerike. She was plowing with the farm's horse on one of the fields by the lake. It was springtime and beautiful weather. The birds chirped and the wagtails flitted in the tracks of the girl and the horse in order to pick worms. All of a sudden, a horse appeared out of the lake. It was big and beautiful, bright in color and with large spots on the sides. The horse had a beautiful mane which fluttered in the wind and a tail that trailed on the ground. The horse pranced for the girl to show her how beautiful he was. The ”

girl, however, knew that it was the brook horse and ignored it. Then the brook horse came closer and closer and finally he was so close that he could bite the farm horse in the mane. The girl hit the brook horse with the bridle and cried: "Disappear you scoundrel, or you'll have to plough so you'll never forget it." As soon as she had said this, the brook horse had changed places with the farm horse, and the brook horse started plowing the field with such speed that soil and stones whirled in its wake, and the girl hung like a mitten from the plough. Faster than the cock crows seven times, the plowing was finished and the brook horse headed for the lake, dragging both the plough and the girl. But the girl had a piece of steel in her pocket, and she made the sign of the cross. Immediately she fell down on the ground, and she saw the brook horse disappear into the lake with the plough. She heard a frustrated neighing when the brook horse understood that his trick had failed. Until this day, a deep track can be seen in the field.

— (Hellström 1985:16)