



NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

# TALES <sup>of the</sup> weird

unbelievable  
**TRUE  
STORIES**



**ZOMBIE ANTS  
ATTACK**



**MOON LANDING  
HOAX: BUSTED!**



**THE SEARCH  
FOR BIGFOOT**

**EDITED BY DAVID BRAUN**  
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NATIONAL  
GEOGRAPHIC

**TALES** of the  
**unbelievable**

**weird**  
**TRUE STORIES**

Edited by  
**David Braun**



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Census Scopes Out Strange New Sea Species  
405-Year-Old Clam Called Longest-Lived Animal

Illustrations Credits



(Photo Credit col.1)

## INTRODUCTION

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### You Can't Make This Stuff Up!

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**And to think it all began with a two-headed snake.** A Spanish farmer captured one in 2002, and scientists were eager to study it. National Geographic Daily News published a story about the strange reptile on our website, and our readers went wild. More than a million people clicked on that weird tale, and then they came back for more and more stories.

Ten years and 8,000 stories later, more than 200 million individuals have clicked on our stories about strange and wonderful things. The two-headed snake was the first of many of the astounding National Geographic stories that lit up the Internet during the last decade. Our fans just can't get enough of tales about albino Cyclops sharks, fish with hands, zombie ants with mind-controlling fungi, top-secret photographs of Area 51, and the truth behind the Maya "Doomsday" calendar.

As the founding editor of National Geographic News, I have watched our community of fans grow from hundreds to millions to hundreds of millions. It's been a delight to publish stories that are as much fun to produce as they are to read. There isn't a day that goes by when the editors of National Geographic News do not find stories about new species, amazing animal secrets, the wonders of deep space—all weird discoveries that change our thinking about who we are and where we came from, the great enigmas of the universe.

Did comets make life on Earth possible? Will superhuman hearing soon be possible? Can stars "eat" other stars? Where was the world's oldest mattress found? These are only some of the hundreds of questions explored in our stories. The answers can be profound (and even disturbing), and they almost always lead to new questions.

*National Geographic Tales of the Weird* is our first reader filled with all kinds of these unbelievable true stories. National Geographic Books editor Amy Briggs and I have selected some of the highlights of the first ten years of National Geographic News—the stories that were most popular with the National Geographic global audience as well as some of our personal favorites. From "Creepy Crawlies" to "Human History," each chapter is stuffed full of our strangest, oddest, and most truly fascinating stories.

As I picked each tale, I had to constantly remind myself that you can't make this stuff up. We are living in the real age of discovery, and I have observed that the world is more marvelous and mysterious than anything we can imagine. All we're doing is sharing this with millions of readers. It's got to be one of the best jobs in the world.

—David Braun

**Editor in Chief, National Geographic Daily News**  
*[news.nationalgeographic.com](http://news.nationalgeographic.com)*

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**The stories you're about to read** were crafted by the talented journalists at National Geographic Daily News, a top-notch crew devoted to ferreting out the weird and wonderful facts about our world.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Ancient Rites and Sacred Places



(Photo Credit 1.1)

**For centuries**, human civilizations have been grappling with some very big spiritual issues: What happens when we die? How will the world end? Will I need my chariot in the afterlife? Strange and wonderful archaeological discoveries—from the puppy mummies of ancient Egypt to the entrance to the Maya underworld in Mexico—are revealing the many fascinating ways that cultures all over the world developed sacred rituals and practices.



## Maya “Doomsday”

### *Calendar Explained*

---

**It’s remotely possible the world will end in December 2012. But don’t credit the ancient Maya calendar for predicting it, say experts on the Mesoamerican culture.**



(Photo Credit 1.2)

**It’s true that the so-called long-count calendar—which spans roughly 5,125 years starting in 3114 B.C.—reaches the end of a cycle on December 21, 2012. That day brings to a close the 13th Bak’tun, an almost 400-year period in the Maya long-count calendar.**

But rather than moving to the next Bak’tun, the calendar will reset at the end of the 13th cycle, akin to the way a 1960s automobile would click over at mile 99,999.9 and reset to zero.

#### ***FAILED PROPHECIES***

**70:** Ancient Romans believe the end is near with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

**1666:** The Great Fire of London, along with the biblical denouncement of the number 666, contributes to Londoners’

belief that this is their final year.

**1910:** The appearance of Halley's comet stirs up apocalyptic fears among Europeans and Americans, who believe gases in the comet's tail will end life on Earth.

**1914:** Since its founding in the 1870s, Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the end of the world in 1914. When it didn't come, the religion's followers began predicting that the end is coming "shortly."

**March 1997:** Heaven's Gate members commit suicide when comet Hale-Bopp is closest to Earth because they believe a UFO riding the comet will save them from the Apocalypse.

**January 1, 2000:** A 1984 trade publication predicts that computers will be crippled by a "Y2K" bug and cause mass chaos.

**May 5, 2000:** Richard Noone predicts that the planetary alignment of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn with the sun and the moon will cause another ice age to occur.

**September 2009:** Critics of the Large Hadron Collider, the world's largest atom smasher, believe that it will create a black hole that destroys Earth.

"We, of course, know that really means a hundred thousand [miles] and not zero," said William Saturno, an expert on Maya archaeology at Boston University and National Geographic explorer.

"Two women in the last two weeks said they were contemplating killing their children and themselves so they wouldn't have to suffer through the end of the world."

**David Morrison**

*senior scientist*

*NASA Astrobiology Institute*

“So, is [the end of Bak’tun 13] a large period ending? Yes. Did the Maya like period endings? Yes,” Saturno said.

“Would this have been a period ending they thought was wicked cool? You bet. The biggest period endings they experience are Bak’tun endings.”

But “was it predicted to be the end of the world? No. That’s just us.”

Instead, for the Maya, the end of the long count represents the end of an old cycle and the beginning of a new one, according to Emiliano Gallaga Murrieta, the Chiapas state division director of Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History.

“It is like for the Chinese, this is the Year of the [Rabbit], and the next year is going to be the Year of the Dragon, and the next is going to be another animal in the calendar,” Murrieta said.

## Bak’tun the 13th

Written references to the end of Bak’tun 13 are few. In fact, most Maya scholars cite only one: a stone tablet on Monument 6 at the Tortuguero archaeological site in Mexico’s Tabasco state.

What exactly the tablet says, though, is a mystery, because the glyphs in question are partially damaged. Nevertheless, scholars have taken several stabs at translations, the most prominent in 1996 by Brown University’s Stephen Houston and the University of Texas at Austin’s David Stuart.



*Maya pyramid of Kukulcan, Chichén Itzá, Mexico* (Photo Credit 1.3)

Houston and Stuart’s initial interpretation indicated that a god will descend at the end of Bak’tun 13. What would happen next is uncertain, although the scholars suggested this might have been a prophecy of some sort.

This 1996 analysis was picked up “on many New Age websites, associated

forum discussions, and even a few book chapters” as evidence that the Maya calendar had predicted the end of the world, according to Stuart.

## Commemorating the Future

Houston and Stuart, however, recently revisited the glyphs independently and concluded that the inscription may actually contain no prophetic statements about 2012 at all.

**TRUTH:**

**THE MAYA LIVED IN THE JUNGLES OF THE AMERICAS  
FOR 3,000 YEARS.**

Rather, the mention of the end of Bak’tun 13 is likely a forward-looking statement that refers back to the main subject of the inscription, which is the dedication of Monument 6.

In a blog post about his conclusions, Stuart makes an analogy to a scribe wanting to immortalize the New York Yankees’ 1950 sweep of the Philadelphia Phillies in that year’s World Series.

If this writer were to use the Maya rhetorical device thought to be in Monument 6’s inscription, the text might read as follows:

On October 7, 1950, the New York Yankees defeated the Philadelphia Phillies to win the World Series. It happened 29 years after the first Yankees victory in the World Series in 1921. And so 50 years before the year 2000 will occur, the Yankees won the World Series.

Written this way, Stuart notes, the text mentions a future time of historical importance—the 50-year anniversary of the victory—but it does so in reference to the event at hand, i.e., the 1950 game.

“This is precisely how many ancient Maya texts are structured, including Tortuguero’s Monument 6,” Stuart writes.

“Our ancestors said that when the last days draw closer,  
many people will die and bad things will happen.”

**Mary Coba Cupul**  
*Maya descendant*