

# Path of the Skinwalker

THE STRANGEST PLACE ON EARTH?

## PART 1

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by **GEORGE KNAPP**

I'm sitting on a white plastic chair in what seems like total darkness. Strapped to my chest and shoulders is an array of electronic gear--microphones, a video camera, a box that detects magnetic changes and a Geiger counter. Somewhere in the mix is a flashlight, the only device whose function I understand, and thus, the only device I cannot find.

In front of me, I can almost make out the sinister shapes of some truly spooky trees. Malevolent bugs are buzzing in and out of my eyes and ears, and it occurs to me that there must be a tavern open somewhere nearby, even in this remote corner of Utah. One hundred or more yards away, beyond a barbed-wire fence and a little creek, are my fellow paranormal rangers, equipped with their own video cameras, night-vision glasses and assorted scientific gear. They are supposed to be watching me to see if anything happens.

On this night, I am the bait. Bait for what, I wonder? The unspoken hope is my own inherent weirdness quotient might give me some sort of connection to the undeniably odd energy, or entity, that seems to have concentrated itself on this remote rural community, and, in particular, on this small ranch where I now sit, waiting for something to announce its presence.

Some very strange things have happened at the precise spot where I'm sitting. It is here that a visitor was accosted by a roaring but nearly invisible creature, something akin to the Predator of movie fame. It is here that a Ph.D. physicist reported that his mind was invaded, literally taken over, by some sort of hostile intelligence that warned him that he was not welcome. It is here that an entire team of researchers watched in awe as a bright door or portal opened up in the darkness and a large humanoid creature crawled out before quickly vanishing. And it is here that several animals--cattle and dogs--were mutilated, obliterated or simply disappeared.

For as long as anyone can remember, this part of northeastern Utah has been the site of simply unbelievable paranormal activity. UFOs, Sasquatch, cattle mutilations, psychic manifestations, creatures that aren't found in any zoos or textbooks, poltergeist events. You name it, residents here have seen it.

Retired schoolteacher Junior Hicks is the area's unofficial historian for all things weird. He's catalogued 400 or so incidents, most of them involving UFO sightings, but says there have been thousands of other cases. Hicks estimates at least half of the 50,000 residents of this basin have seen weird things in the sky--flying saucers, cigar-shaped craft, zigzagging balls of light, so many different objects that local police and the Highway Patrol long ago stopped taking reports. (Many of the lawmen have been witnesses themselves.) Hicks and members of his family have witnessed their own UFO events over the years.

"The UFO activity really started getting intense in the early '50s," Hicks says. "There were cases where the whole school and all the teachers saw these things hovering over the town in broad daylight. In the '60s and '70s, we probably had more UFO sightings than any place in the world."

But run-of-the-mill UFO events don't begin to describe the rich array of unusual phenomena in this area. The Ute Indian tribe has been here far longer than white settlers. Tribal leaders are reluctant to speak to outsiders, but their oral history is replete with examples of strange creatures and sightings. Indian lore refers to some of these beings as Skinwalkers. Other cultures call them shape-shifters, werewolves or Bigfoot.

"The Utes take this very seriously," Hicks says. "They think the Skinwalkers are powerful spirits that are here because of a curse that was put on them generations ago by the Navajos. And the center of the whole legend is this ranch. The Utes say the ranch is 'the path of the Skinwalker.' Tribe members are strictly forbidden from setting foot on the property. It's been that way for a long time."

The ranch in question is a 480-acre spread of rich, well-watered pasture and a few thick patches of tall cottonwoods. It's divided into three sections, each section being a former homestead. Thick brush and a small river

are on one side. A rocky, picturesque ridge is on the other side. Skinwalker Ridge is what the Utes call it, according to Hicks. A long dirt road is the only way in or out of the ranch.

When rancher Tom Gorman (not his real name) bought the place in 1994, it had been vacant for seven or eight years. Gorman, his wife and two kids were curious about the impressive array of bolts that covered the doors and windows of the main house. There were deadbolts on both sides of the doors. Even the kitchen cabinets had bolts on them. And at both ends of the house, iron stakes and heavy chains had been installed. Gorman guessed the previous tenants had positioned large guard dogs in the front and back of the home, but he had no idea why.

### **The bulletproof wolf**

On the day the Gormans moved their furnishings onto the property, they had their first foreshadowing of the events that would follow. They spotted an extremely large wolf out in the pasture. The wolf cautiously made its way across the field, and, to the surprise of everyone, sidled up to the family, acting like it was a familiar pet. It had rained that day, and the family remembers the wolf smelled like a wet dog as they were petting it.

After a few minutes, the wolf strolled over to the corral and grabbed a calf by its snout, attempting to pull it through the corral bars. Gorman and his father began beating on the wolf's back with sticks but it wouldn't release the calf. Gorman grabbed a .357 Magnum from his truck and shot the wolf at point-blank range. The slug had no noticeable effect.

Gorman pumped another bullet into the wolf, which then let go of the calf but stood looking at the family as if nothing had happened. Gorman shot it two more times with the powerful handgun. The big animal backed off a bit, but showed no signs of distress, not even any blood.

The mystified rancher retrieved a hunting rifle and shot the wolf again, once more at close range. Gorman is not only an experienced marksman but a big-game hunter of considerable repute. Five slugs should have been enough to bring down an elk, let alone a wolf. The fifth shot caused a chunk of hair and flesh to fly off the wolf, but it still didn't seem fazed. After a sixth shot, the wolf casually trotted across the field into a muddy thicket. Gorman and his father tracked the beast for about a mile, following its pawprints through the mud, but the tracks suddenly ended, as if the wolf had simply vanished into thin air.

Returning to the corral area, Gorman examined the chunk of wolf flesh and says it looked and smelled like rotten meat. He made inquiries among his neighbors, but no one seemed to know anything about any tame, over-sized wolves in the area. A few weeks later, Mrs. Gorman encountered a wolf that was so large, its back was parallel with the top of her window as it stood beside her car. The wolf was accompanied by a dog-like animal that she couldn't identify.

Over the next two years, a menagerie of weird animals was reported by family members and neighbors. While driving into the ranch on a bright afternoon, Gorman and his wife saw something attacking one of their horses. They described it as "low to the ground, heavily muscled, weighing perhaps 200 pounds, with curly red hair and a bushy tail." It somewhat resembled a muscular hyena and seemed to be clawing at their horse, almost playing with it. Gorman got within 40 feet of the animal but says it literally vanished before his eyes. Poof. Gone. They checked the horse and found numerous claw marks on its legs. (A few months later, the wife of a deputy sheriff reported seeing a similar muscular, reddish beast running across the property.)

Another visitor to the ranch had a more ominous encounter in the middle homestead, the same place where I was set out as bait. The visitor, along with Gorman and his son, say they saw a large blurry "something" moving through the trees. The visitor has been meditating when this thing showed up. It swiftly moved from the trees, across the pasture, covering 100 yards in seconds, and when it reached the man, it let out a ferocious roar, something akin to a large bear, a roar loud enough to be heard hundreds of yards away. But this was no bear. It was, according to the Gormans, nearly invisible, resembling the camouflaged being in the movie Predator. The visitor was so scared, he grabbed on to Gorman and wouldn't let go. He left the ranch and has never returned.

Other creatures and beings were also seen, including exotic, multicolored birds that were certainly not native to the region and could not be identified. There were numerous close encounters with dark, nine-foot-tall beasts that resembled a Bigfoot or Sasquatch. (More on those incidents will follow.)

As if those visual experiences weren't enough, the family claims its other senses were also challenged by assorted weird events. They often were overwhelmed by strong musk odors. The pastures would unexplainably light up at night like a football stadium. They claim to have seen shafts of light that seemingly emanated from the ground. They (and others) say they heard what sounded like heavy machinery operating under the earth. And they heard voices. Tom, his son and his nephew remember hearing a loud, disembodied conversation in some unintelligible

language. The disembodied male voices spoke in what the witnesses say was a mocking tone and sounded like they were emanating from 20 or more feet above their heads, but they saw nothing. The dogs accompanying the three witnesses growled and barked at the voices, then took off in a panic.

There were physical manifestations that aren't easily explained. While checking on his herd in the third homestead, Gorman noticed that someone had dug up his pasture. Hundreds of pounds of soil had been scooped out of the ground. The edges of the hole resembled perfect, concentric circles, as if someone had dropped a gigantic cookie cutter on the pasture. Several smaller scoop marks were also found.

The Gormans also report phenomena similar to crop circles. One formation found in their pasture consisted of three circles of flattened grass. Each circle was approximately eight feet in diameter, and they were arranged in a triangular pattern, with each circle about 30 feet from the others. Keep in mind, there is only one road leading into the ranch. Anyone coming in or going out would almost certainly be noticed by the Gormans or their neighbors.

### **UFOs and other aerial oddities**

In the spring of 1995, the Gormans started seeing strange things in the sky. While out checking on their cattle, Gorman and his nephew spotted what they thought was a recreational vehicle parked on the property. They approached it, figuring the driver might be having mechanical trouble. As they got closer, the RV moved silently away from them. They moved closer, it moved further away. They climbed a fence to get a better look at it, and that's when they knew this was no Winnebago. The craft rose above the treetops and slowly flew away, making no sound as it departed. It certainly wasn't a helicopter. The witnesses had a clear view and say the object was shaped like a refrigerator, with a single light on its front and a red light on the back.

Before long, everyone in the family was seeing weird aerial objects. Mrs. Gorman says something that resembled a stealth fighter, but ringed with blinking disco lights, silently hovered about 20 feet above her vehicle before zipping off. Each family member had repeated sightings of a cloud that usually hovered just outside the property. The cloud was characterized as having "blinking Christmas tree lights" or "silent, mini-explosions" inside. Among the other aerial craft seen by the Gormans, their neighbors and other witnesses were classic flying-saucer objects, flying sombreros, shafts of light similar to fluorescent light bulbs and a cigar-shaped craft several football fields long.

By far the most common objects they witnessed were floating spheres of different sizes and colors. In 1995 and 1996, the Gormans and others reported 12 separate incidents of seeing large orange circles flying over the trees of the center homestead. Tom Gorman claims that holes occasionally opened up in the orange spheres and other smaller spheres would fly out. (A neighboring rancher told this reporter of his own encounters with what he called a flying orange basketball.)

By early 1996, the sightings of blue spheres at the ranch became almost commonplace. These orbs were said to be about the size of a softball, made of glass and filled with bubbling blue liquids that seemed to rotate inside. Mr. and Mrs. Gorman say that in April 1996, they watched one of the blue orbs repeatedly circle the head of one of their horses. The horse was illuminated by an intense blue light, and there was a sound like static electricity in the air, but this wasn't ball lightning. The orb seemed to be intelligently controlled. When Gorman approached the horse with a flashlight, the orb darted off, maneuvering through tree branches with speed and dexterity.

The Gormans say the blue spheres seemed to generate severe psychological effects on the family. Family members felt waves of fear roll over them, far in excess of what might be normal, whenever the blue orbs appeared. It was the appearance of one blue orb in particular that finally convinced the Gormans to sell the ranch.

One evening in May 1996, Gorman was outside with three of his dogs when he noticed a blue orb darting around in the field near the ranch house. Gorman urged his dogs to go after the ball. The dogs chased and snapped at the orb, but it dodged and maneuvered enough to stay just beyond the reach of their snapping jaws. The ball led the dogs out across the pasture and into the thick brush that borders the field. Gorman says he heard the dogs make three terrible yelps, then they were silent. He called for them, but they didn't respond.

The next morning, Gorman went to look for the dogs. What he found were three round spots of dried and brittle vegetation. In the middle of each circle was a black, greasy lump. Gorman surmised that his dogs had been incinerated by something. One thing for sure, the dogs were never seen again. The disappearance of their dogs prompted the Gormans to think about getting out.

### **Mutilations and other animal mysteries**

Tom Gorman wasn't some country-bumpkin farmer trying to get by. He had college degrees and advanced training in animal husbandry, was considered an expert in artificial insemination and had plans for raising hybrid, high-end

stock at the picturesque ranch. His herd, which ranged from 60-80 head, consisted of expensive, top-of-the-line heifers and four 2,000-pound show-class bulls.

From the day he moved his herd onto the ranch, though, his hopes--and his animals--seemed to be under assault. The balls of light that were seen so often on the property seemed to take special interest in the cattle and were often seen buzzing around the heads of the animals. Sometimes, the cattle would react violently, the herd splitting suddenly as if some invisible force was plowing through their middle. It soon got worse.

Although the Gormans kept close watch on their stock, something began exacting a terrible toll. One cow was found dead in a field. A strange, crisp hole had been cut in one of its eyes. There were no tracks or blood, and Gorman wondered what could do such a thing. He noticed a strong musk odor around the carcass, a smell he would come to know all too well.

Other cattle were carved up, as if with pinking shears.

Cattle mutilations have been reported throughout North America for several decades. In typical cases, the ears, eyes, udders and sex organs are removed with surgical precision. Gorman's animals were subjected to all of the above.

As an experienced hunter and rancher, Gorman was more than familiar with the capabilities of natural predators. This wasn't being done by coyotes or mountain lions. The butchery was simply too clean. And no blood was ever left at the scene of the attacks. His other animals also suffered. His favorite horse had its legs slashed, as if by sharp instruments or claws. (The musk odor was still in the air when he discovered the damaged horse.) His dogs seemed to develop paranoia. They stayed inside their doghouses for days at a time, too fearful to emerge for food. Six of the family's cats vanished in one night.

Soon, cattle started disappearing altogether. One of the animals vanished from a snow-covered field. Gorman saw the hoofprints lead into the field, but the tracks simply stopped, as if the animal had been plucked from the sky. A 1,200-pound cow leaves tracks in snow, Gorman told himself, so what happened to this one?

In all, 14 of Gorman's prized animals were either sliced up or vanished. In one instance, a cow was found mutilated just five minutes after Gorman's son had checked on it. Something cut a hole, six inches wide and 18 inches deep, in the animal's rectum. The cored-out section extended into the cow's body cavity, yet there was no blood on the cow or on the snow-covered ground.

The loss of 14 expensive animals from an 80-head herd is extreme by any standards. (There were other losses as well, but from explainable causes.) It meant that Gorman was close to financial collapse. One April afternoon, Gorman and his wife took a quick drive to town for supplies. As they passed the corral that contained their four bulls, they commented to each other that they would really be in trouble if something should happen to one of the bulls.

When they returned to the ranch less than an hour later, all four of the bulls were gone. The Gormans began a frantic search for the missing behemoths but couldn't find a trace. As a last resort, Gorman decided to peek into a metal trailer that is situated inside the corral. He thought it highly unlikely that the bulls would be inside because, from the corral, there is only one door into the trailer and it was secured with thick metal wire, wire that clearly was still in place.

Gorman was shocked to see that all four of his bulls were inside the trailer, squeezed like so many oversized sardines into the tiny enclosure, crammed in against the sides of the trailer and against each other. When he yelled to his wife that he had found them, the bulls seemingly woke up, as if from a dream state, and started kicking the hell out of the trailer and each other.

"There is simply no way that anyone could coax those four bulls into that trailer," says Colm Kelleher, a microbiologist who would come to know the Gormans well. "It would be tough enough to get one of them into the trailer, but all four? Virtually impossible. The only door leading from the corral into the trailer was still securely fastened with wire. And there were cobwebs on the inside of the door, proving that it had not been opened. It's almost as if someone overheard the ranchers' worries about their bulls, then decided to mess with them."

NIDS to the rescue

Kelleher didn't realize it back in 1996, but the Gorman ranch was to soon become his home away from home. Kelleher is the deputy administrator of NIDS, the National Institute for Discovery Science, a Las Vegas-based research organization founded by local businessman Robert Bigelow. Bigelow's long-standing interest in paranormal topics, including UFOs, animal mutilations and human consciousness, prompted him to assemble an

impressive team of physicists, engineers, psychologists and other doctorate-level professionals for the purpose of investigating subjects that are largely shunned by mainstream science.

By the middle of 1996, the Gormans were ready to cash in their chips. Those who know Tom Gorman say he blamed himself for the weird string of events that had ruined his ranching operation. He didn't want to give up but felt cursed, and was ready to bail for the sake of his family. In an uncharacteristic moment, he told parts of his story to a news reporter. A respected journalist from Salt Lake City heard about it, came to the ranch and talked to the family. Pictures were taken, and a wire service picked up the story. That's how Bob Bigelow first learned about the ranch.

Bigelow and his team flew to Utah and introduced themselves to the Gormans. NIDS staffers checked out the story, interviewed neighbors and evaluated the Gorman's seemingly incredible tales. Bigelow offered to buy the ranch outright with the idea of transforming it into an interactive paranormal laboratory, an ongoing experiment that might shed some light on questions that have been viewed with scientific skepticism. Amazingly, he talked the Gormans into staying at the ranch as caretakers.

By that point, the family was a wreck. The UFOs, balls of light, cattle mutilations, animal disappearances, Bigfoot sightings and Skinwalker legends were bad enough, but there had also been an ongoing series of more personal events. Things had occurred within their home that had made a normal life impossible. They saw apparitions in the house, blinding lights, dark creatures peering in the windows. Furnishings, tools and everyday items moved around, disappeared or turned up in unusual places.

No one could sleep. When they did manage to grab a few hours, they were plagued by violent nightmares, often discovering later that different family members had experienced identical dreams. The two kids, honor students before arriving at the ranch, saw their grades plummet. Mrs. Gorman lost her job at a local bank because of her repeated absences and disturbing water-cooler tales. Hoping for safety in numbers, the Gormans slept each night on the floor of their front room.

The folks from NIDS offered moral, emotional and financial support to the Gormans. What's more, they had a plan. The ranch presented what appeared to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to legitimately study a full menu of paranormal activities. They endeavored to seal off the ranch, pack it with high-tech monitoring equipment, staff it round-the-clock with trained observers, and see what happens.

Some residents sarcastically wondered what the hucksters from Las Vegas really had in mind. A scam of some sort was one oft-mentioned possibility. UFO buffs whined that Bob Bigelow was a "shadowy" guy who may or may not have CIA connections and that he was out to somehow corner the market on E.T. They demanded that whatever happened at the ranch should be made immediately available for their evaluation. And paranormal debunkers predicted the NIDS team would come up empty-handed because unexplained events inevitably wither under careful scrutiny.

As it turned out, all three groups were wrong. NIDS did seal off the ranch from outside observers but not for any monetary gain. Neither the CIA nor any other government agency had any input or access to the things that have occurred under the NIDS watch. And the phenomena itself did not wither or evaporate.

For the past six years, events at the ranch have been under constant scrutiny. Witnesses, including highly accomplished scientists and law enforcement personnel, have documented a mind-boggling array of unusual activity. But there has been a near-total blackout on the release of any information about the site.

By agreement with Bigelow, this reporter was granted the first outside access to the ranch and to the scientists and ex-lawmen who've been studying it. Interviews were conducted with ranch personnel, as well as with community members who had reported unusual events. And several nights were spent out on the ranch itself, watching for odd lights or other manifestations.

No one who has studied this can say with any certainty what's going on here. The NIDS researchers are not making any claims about E.T.s or ghosts or Skinwalkers. They are merely collecting data and trying to make some sense of it. That is small comfort to me as I sit in the darkness on my little plastic chair, waiting for something to happen. The mind certainly can play tricks in such an environment, but could so many witnesses be completely wrong?

Next week: We'll examine a long litany of bizarre activity that occurred while the NIDS team was stationed at the ranch, including the shooting and tracking of an unknown creature, the destruction of electronic equipment by something unseen, the unexplained creation of "ice circles" and the opening of what some say is a portal to another dimension.

### **Warning to paranormal enthusiasts**

Do not travel to the ranch. You are not welcome there.

It is private property and the people who live on or near it don't want to be hassled by curiosity seekers or the media. What's more, the level of unexplained phenomena has taken a steady nosedive over the past several months, so chances are you wouldn't see anything even if you could get on the property.

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