



Jabberwocks and Snallygasters: Exploring the Role of *Dungeons & Dragons* in Environmental Education

by Andrew D. Thaler, Erin Z. Anderson, Naomi F. Farabaugh, Andrew Kornblatt, Romaric Moncrieffe, Travis Neilsen, Rae Pendergrass, Heather D. Penney, Leigh J. Thaler, E.C.M. Parsons

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock

Nyles cautiously approaches Soothsore Dam, her comically oversized battleaxe at the ready. The tiny fairy barbarian is poised to strike. There is a rustle in the forest below. Professor Cinnamon McWhiskey Biscuits emerges, dragging a massive, pungent bait ball. The saccharine scent of malted grains wafts through the still air. Plumbeus, wielding a pair of wish-forged daggers, tumbles awkwardly from the undergrowth.

The trees shake. The forest is afraid.

The Jabberwock, with eyes aflame, rises above the canopy, burbling as it approaches the terrified heroes.

Standing atop the dam, Honhk hefts Snicker-Snack, the rude and wholly unhelpful broadsword who has done nothing but mock the adventurers on their journey through these whimsical woods. The Jabberwock casts its gaze upon the hateful sword, the only weapon in all the Warren that can harm it. White-hot fire bursts from its eyes, blazing across the river, striking the sword as Honhk plunges it into the dam's heartstone.

Soothsore Dam crumbles. Water pours forth as the wishstones holding back the swamp shatter. The river surges. From deep in the swamp, the melodious ribbits of cheering Frogfolk are heard. The forest that was once their home will become their home once again. Downstream, a village of Rabbitfolk braces for the oncoming flood.

The Jabberwock turns its uffish gaze towards the soggy heroes...

Thus begins the third and final act of the [*Last Hunt for the Jabberwock: A Feywild Adventure in Ecologic Succession*](#) (Thaler 2024). Throughout this *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) campaign, players explore the ecology of a strange forest, study the impacts of a magical dam, and meet the communities that grow, thrive, toil, and suffer in this altered ecosystem. They discover how the history and ecology of a fire-dominated forest is shaped by the loss of keystone species. They unravel the environmental and social implications of building a dam that brought prosperity to one community while depriving another. As they reach the climactic conclusion, the players must decide how to balance the needs, desires, and fears of many different peoples based on what they have learned about this strange and whimsical forest.

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock is a story about environmental justice, ambiguity, and the hard choices that must be made to heal a damaged land. It is an adventure built for educators and designed to be used within the framework of formal and informal environmental education programs. Included with the adventure are lesson plans, built around Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, which help students understand the context of the adventure through real-world examples of succession in fire-dominated ecosystems as well as the environmental and social consequences of building and removing dams. Those lessons combine in- and out-of-game activities that help inform decision making in this imaginary forest. Throughout the journey, players will encounter creatures from local legends. Some will be friendly, while others are spoiling for a fight.

The Last Hunt for the Jabberwock is part of a growing movement to integrate games, both serious and silly, into educational programs. Successful implementation of games creates immersive, meaningful experiences for students through a learn-by-doing approach to complex topics. Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs)—collaborative, storytelling-driven games in which players assume a character and act out their motives and actions through discussion and dice rolls—have increasingly found a home in both formal and informal educational settings. In addition to knowledge production in diverse subject areas, these games promote positive attitude and behavior changes, social-emotional learning such as social awareness and empathy, and increased communication skills while engaging with multiple learning styles (Tan and Nurul-Asna 2022). TTRPGs encourage creativity, social interaction, and improvisation as the players shape the story's outcome.

Creative Role-Play and Collaborative Storytelling in the Classroom

At their core, *Dungeons & Dragons* and other TTRPGs are tools that allow students to engage in creative role-playing and problem solving in a shared fantasy world in which dice introduce random elements into the adventure. As collaborative storytelling engines, they allow students and

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teachers to explore new and challenging concepts in a safe environment, guided by a game master who sets the tone and pace of the adventure. TTRPGs can serve as dramatic rehearsals where players can view complex and challenging issues from multiple angles and tackle decision making when there is no right answer. In working toward a common goal, players negotiate the competing needs of their party by building and rebuilding consensus (Haarman 2022). TTRPGs are autotelic—it is the experience, rather than the outcome, that is important.

Since 2019, a raggedy band of marine science misfits who call themselves the Cephalosquad, of which the authors of this piece are members, have run a *D&D* "actual-play" podcast, [*Dugongs and Seadragons*](#). "Actual play" is a term for podcasts and live events in which the performers play a TTRPG to an audience. Actual plays involve performance and improvisation in addition to the mechanics of the game. The *Dugongs and Seadragons* podcast has an environmental education twist. Everyone involved in the adventure is an ocean scientist, artist, educator, or student. Through *Dugongs and Seadragons*, the team has explored concepts of overfishing, marine pollution, whaling, ecosystem-based management, Indigenous rights, and environmental justice, all while sharing their love of ocean science and fighting creatures inspired by real marine animals and legendary maritime monsters.

In its eight-year history, *Dugongs and Seadragons* has produced over 370 episodes across the main storyline and several shorter stories, with over 70,000 downloads. The podcast has frequently broken into the top ten most downloaded for both Science and *Dungeons & Dragons* podcasts. The Cephalosquad have performed live shows at both pop culture conventions and scientific conferences. Monsters, especially those based in folklore, can provide shared cultural or place-based touchstones that help players engage in heroic role-play. To bring natural history-inspired monsters into the adventure, Cephalosquad members produced several books integrating marine science into *D&D*, including [*Scientific Secrets of the Salt Marsh*](#), [*Scientific Secrets of Avernus*](#), and [*Scientific Secrets of Icedwind Dale*](#). These modules make it easy for educators to drop specific monsters into existing *D&D* adventures.

One such adventure is *The Curse of the Snallygaster* (see Appendix), a beginner adventure for *Everyday Heroes*. *Everyday Heroes* is a TTRPG based on the 5th edition of *D&D*, which uses the same familiar rulesets of *D&D* but replaces magic and mediaeval mayhem with skills, gadgets, and specialized equipment more appropriate for grounded, realistic storytelling in the modern era. In *Snallygaster*, the players work for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Special Cryptid Unit, where they investigate sightings of strange creatures throughout the country. Namely, players hunt the elusive Snallygaster, a Maryland cryptid described as a winged bird-like reptile with a metallic beak, sharp talons, and, sometimes, tentacles. Some theories hold that the original Snallygaster, first documented as a story of 18th-century German immigrants (Fair 2013), was a heron attempting to swallow an octopus.

Throughout this adventure, which includes lessons plans and is designed to be played over a few classroom sessions, players learn about methods for studying wildlife, including conducting line transects, placing camera traps, and doing eDNA analysis. *The Curse of the Snallygaster* can also be played as an "actual-play" adventure, in which conservation and science professionals run the

game for a live or recorded audience as a novel and entertaining tool for teaching students about careers in wildlife conservation.

Other Examples of Creative Role-Play in Educational Settings

There are myriad opportunities for implementing creative role-play into informal educational programming. In a long-running program through his local library, Thaler explores concepts of censorship and book banning, as well as the value of reading, with mixed student groups from elementary through high school. He has published a complementary expansion to the 2025 *D&D* Starter Set, which adds these themes to a pre-made campaign.

A collaborative short series with the podcast [*Marine Conservation Happy Hour*](#) explores local history and folklore in a duet of adventures set in Colonial Williamsburg just after the Revolutionary War. The players learned about colonial medicine, colonial taverns, historically appropriate food, the history of the College of William and Mary, and piracy (in particular the infamous Blackbeard, whose crew was tried in Colonial Williamsburg). The stories involve local legends and [incorporate St. Nicholas and Krampus into the creation of the American Christmas](#).

There are many systems, like *Everyday Heroes*, which take the ruleset from *D&D* and integrate them into other science and fantasy franchises. [*Doctors and Daleks*](#) is a TTRPG based on 5th Edition *D&D* that places players into the *Doctor Who* universe rather than the Forgotten Realms of *D&D*. This system uses persuasion, logic, and problem solving, rather than violence, to overcome encounters with monsters from science, history, and folklore. Parsons runs *Doctors and Daleks* adventures that include searching for Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest and exploring U.S. Antarctic research stations, with a focus on learning about the National Science Foundation's polar program.

D&D and other TTRPGs can offer tremendous value for environmental educators. Access to the outdoors is not equitable (Parkin et al. 2025) and many students, particularly those in urban and suburban settings, may lack direct access to large parks, forests, and wilderness areas (Thomas et al. 2022). Even in rural areas, automobile dependence renders wild spaces out of reach for many students (Hemby et al. 2023). Social gatherings for young people are increasingly geared toward digital spaces. This phenomenon results in students who rarely interact with wilderness and are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with wild spaces.

Creative role-play, grounded in environmental themes and settings, allows students to explore and interact with unfamiliar places in a comfortable space that creates opportunities for emotional risk-taking without physical risk and can help promote an appreciation for the natural environment in situations where access to wild spaces may be limited. Even wholly virtual experiences that place a focus on natural exploration can inspire more direct engagement with environmental issues (Fletcher 2017). These experiences provide new ways to talk about natural processes, using fantasy as a buffer against the fatalism of environmental change and allowing students to explore solutions in a controlled setting (Niedzwiedz et al. 2025). The structured rules of TTRPGs allow the teacher to guide discussion in productive directions while encouraging exploration. Controversial topics become more approachable when discussed in the abstract, using fantastical worlds and monsters inspired by familiar folklore, rather than real-world scenarios.

Practical Considerations

Whether in the form of extended, semester-long campaigns like *Jabberwock*, or shorter, focused adventures like *Snallygaster*, TTRPGs offer students an opportunity to see how their own emotions are affected by engaging in situations and perspectives that differ from their own (Haarman 2022). These games make space for the instructor to explore new ways of teaching using pre-existing systems, which allow educators to focus on the lesson rather than the mechanics of the game (Burenheide and Allen 2025).

Integrating a *D&D* campaign into formal or informal lessons does not have to be a difficult or time-consuming task. With over half a century of material, much of which is designed around nature-based themes, there is a plethora of adventures to choose from. *D&D* may not be the right choice for every program. *D&D* and its connection to the moral panics of the 1980s can still run afoul of school guidelines and face resistance from parents. Other TTRPG game systems offer similar experiences with varying levels of complexity. All TTRPGs generally follow the same basic gameplay loop: A game master, who oversees the experience, describes a scene. The players decide what they want to do in that scene. The game master then uses the rules of the TTRPG to decide how that decision will be resolved, usually, though not always, through a dice roll. The story then continues, using the outcome of that encounter to determine how the game master describes the next scene. Choosing a TTRPG with which teacher and students are already familiar (which, in most cases, will be *D&D*) eases the task of integrating it into an educational program. The less time you need invest in teaching rules, the more time you can focus on the adventure and the lesson.

D&D, with its massive back catalog, numerous rulebooks, and universe of miniatures, maps, and accessories can seem daunting, but the game itself is resource agnostic. The core rules for the current version of *D&D* have been released free under a creative commons license as the [System Reference Documents 5.1](#) and [5.2](#). While it can be helpful to have the three main rulebooks (the *Player's Handbook*, *Dungeon Master's Guide*, and *Monster Manual*), they are not necessary to play. You can start with nothing more than a set of dice, a character sheet, and the free online rules. The fewer accessories and barriers to play, the greater the opportunities to encourage imagination. Even the rules can be cast aside in favor of imagination. The “Rule of Cool” allows game masters to discard the official rules in favor of rewarding their players for especially novel or creative solutions that may violate the written rules of the TTRPG but better capture the spirit of the adventure.

Note to Teachers

Combat, death, and violence are an inherent part of *D&D* (nearly two-thirds of the 2014 *Players' Handbook* is dedicated to combat and combat-focused magic [Albom 2021]), and excessive violence may not be appropriate for classroom gaming. *D&D*, particularly the 5th Edition, provides numerous alternatives that allow the players to seek nonviolent solutions to challenges facing them. The strict structure of combat in the ruleset can serve to incentivize non-combat approaches, which work within a system that offers infinite variability through the advantage/disadvantage system. However, we also believe that part of the act of heroic role-play (and opportunities for student joy) should include the occasional drawing of swords or casting of fireballs, when appropriate.

The major resource limitation for playing *D&D*, or other TTRPGs, is time. These games lend themselves to two- to four-hour sessions, which can be shortened if necessary, but longer play sessions tend to yield more rewarding experiences. Some adventures, like *Snallygaster*, can be run as a single event, with players completing the story in one session. Others, like *Jabberwock*, are played over several sessions with players completing the campaign over months. This does not always fit into a conventional classroom schedule. To account for time limitations, *Jabberwock* has been designed with smaller bite-sized adventure chunks that can work with either a limited classroom schedule or stretched out over longer sessions of a few hours.

The instructor's time is also a critical consideration to successfully implementing a TTRPG into the classroom. Preparing for a *D&D* session, especially when you are new to running games, can take almost as much time as running the actual game, if not longer. Instructors need to familiarize themselves with the story and the rules and prepare any materials, props, or lessons ahead of time. With practice, this preparation time can be substantially reduced.

Conclusion

Our students are hungry for adventure. *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop role-playing games offer a portal for formal and informal educators to engage their students in complex environmental topics that center decision making on the students. Combining learning with creative, imaginative play, while incorporating real-world scenarios into fantasy settings with monsters drawn from shared stories, can be a powerful tool for challenging students to explore solutions to the problems they face in their own world. This allows them to take an active, rather than a passive, role in addressing seemingly abstract global challenges.

Whether facing the threat of environmental change or staring down the slaving, tentacular jaws of the Snallygaster, through creative role-play students can see themselves as the heroes of their own environmental stories.

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Erin Z. Anderson prepared the artwork, and E.C.M. Parsons created *The Curse of the Snallygaster*, provided in the Appendix, below.

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Appendix: *The Curse of the Snallygaster* (starts on following page to preserve formatting)

A Note to Teachers

Designed for high-school students, *The Curse of the Snallygaster* adventure is built around a local legend about smuggling, rum runners, and a monster. Middle-school educators may adapt this role-playing game by substituting themes as appropriate.



The Curse of the Snallygaster

**A 5e-Compatible Tabletop Role-Playing
Adventure for 1st-Level Characters**

E.C.M. Parsons

CREDITS

Author: E.C.M. Parsons

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First Edition, 2026

Disclaimer: Great Blue Herons are large birds with sharp, bayonet-shaped beaks. They are shy but can be dangerous, possibly more dangerous than the Snallygaster itself. They are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. Snallygasters need no such protection.

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MEET THE SNALLYGASTER

GAME SYSTEM

This adventure is compatible with most 5e-based tabletop role-playing games, including the *Everyday Heroes*™ role-playing game system. The adventure can be easily adapted for many other tabletop role-playing game systems.

ADVENTURE SETTING

St. Michaels, a small town on the Maryland Eastern Shore with a long, rich history

ADVENTURE LENGTH

One 3- to 4-hour session

ADVENTURE BACKGROUND

The Snallygaster is an elusive Maryland cryptid described as a winged birdlike reptile with a metallic beak, sharp talons, and, sometimes, tentacles. Although rooted in the folklore of 18th-century German immigrants, some skeptics believe that the original Snallygaster was a heron attempting to swallow an octopus.

In the 1920s, the backwoods of Maryland were home to bootleggers (people who produce or sell illegal alcohol) who used the legend of the Snallygaster to scare off revenuers (federal agents who sought to

enforce liquor laws during Prohibition). A century later, St. Michaels residents report glowing eyes in the mist, claw marks on barns, and livestock found drained of blood.

Locals whisper that the Snallygaster has returned. The U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team (a special division of U.S. Fish and Wildlife) is sent to investigate.

Unknown to them, a small-time smuggling ring has revived the legend to hide their modern rum-running operation—funneling illicit liquor from the coast to the mountains. The Snallygaster that locals fear is a man in a glider suit, using pyrotechnics and sound devices to frighten off witnesses.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service does not, to the best of our knowledge, actually have a cryptid division, although it is rumored that they maintain a database of Bigfoot sightings.

MISSION BRIEFING

Objective: Investigate and document the reported Snallygaster sightings near St. Michaels, MD.

Secondary Objectives:

- Determine if the threat is biological, paranormal, or human in origin.
- Avoid public panic or media leaks.
- Coordinate with local law enforcement discreetly.

SCENE I: ARRIVAL IN ST. MICHAELS

SETTING: TOWN OF ST. MICHAELS

It is an early Wednesday evening when you arrive in St. Michaels. The town is quiet. The tourists, who usually throng the streets, will not return until the weekend. Members of the U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team come from all over the country and don't necessarily know each other.

Introduce your characters.

After your party gets acquainted, your first stop is the police station, where the friendly but skeptical Chief Beattie Ramsey expects you. The police station is next door to the St. Michaels Library, which has been offered to the team as a base of operations.

Sheriff Beattie "Bea" Ramsey

AC: 11, HP: 16

Skills: Persuasion +3, Insight +2, Investigation +3

Equipment: Radio, flashlight, revolver (1d8+2)

Practical, dry sense of humor. She is skeptical of "monster" talk but happy to let federal agents handle the weirdness. If befriended, she'll cover for them when the press comes snooping.

If asked about anything unusual, Beattie mentions that the jail regular Chunky hasn't been up to his usual low-level shenanigans recently.

ENCOUNTER: MEET THE CHIEF

Interview Chief Beattie Ramsey. She shows blurry phone footage of "the creature" flying over the Crab Claw Restaurant.

This is the most exciting thing to happen to Beattie Ramsay in a long while. Usually, she has to deal with upper-class drunks driving erratically, picking fights on Carpenter St., or skinny dipping in Muskrat Park. She doesn't believe that the Snallygaster exists but enjoys the change to her usual routine.

The party can visit restaurants, coffee shops, bars, or one of the various tourist shops to chat with some of the locals. They get a variety of opinions including:

- "Chunky said he saw it eat a snakehead!"
- "It's probably some kid playing a prank."
- "It'll be good for local tourism."

SKILL CHECKS

- **Persuasion (DC 12):** Gain Sheriff's trust and get access to the evidence locker (scraps of scales that are actually roofing tar).
- **Investigation (DC 10):** Spot inconsistencies in the video — the "tentacles" look like an octopus.

SCENE II: THE FALSE SIGHTING

SETTING: FOXY'S HARBOR GRILLE

This scene sets the tone: part cryptid mystery, part natural history, part bureaucratic misadventure.

Bea sent you to Foxy's Harbor Grille for dinner. Your server, Whit Tilghman, overhears you and reveals that she heard strange noises and saw the shadow of a giant bird near Church Neck Road. She was sitting with her ex-boyfriend, Ed, in his car when it happened. She makes sure the party knows that he is her ex-boyfriend.

As you walk back from the restaurant through Muskrat Park, you see a huge, winged shape flying off with squirming, writhing tentacles emerging from its mouth. A camera flashes and someone shouts:

"Snallygaster!"

ENCOUNTER: THE FALSE SNALLYGASTER

This Snallygaster is a Great Blue Heron that stole an octopus from the dumpster behind Foxy's, the result of an unsuccessful attempt to add calamari to the menu, which spoiled when the shipment was delayed.

Can the team uncover the truth before yet another blurry Snallygaster photo spreads online? This scene should be funny and confusing, not dangerous. The agents may

chase or capture it for cryptid analysis, only to discover that it's just a bird.

False Snallygaster (Great Blue Heron)

AC 12, HP 9

Skills: Perception +3

Peck: +4 to hit, 1d4+2 piercing.

Frightened Flutter (Reaction): If startled, the heron flaps noisily, knocking over unsecured items in a 10-foot radius (DEX Save DC 11 or fall prone).

SKILL CHECKS

- **Perception (DC 12):** Spot the bird's true form.
- **Nature (DC 10):** Identify both the Great Blue Heron and octopus.
- **Athletics (DC 12):** Chase it for fun, possibly leading to someone falling in the water by Muskrat Park.
- **Persuasion (DC 12):** Convince the curious bystander not to post the photo online.

After the false alarm, the agents can return to their B&B for a debrief about the day's activities. The team should spend the next day or two setting camera traps, taking eDNA samples from around town, running transects, and questioning townspeople. The longer this takes, the more tourists arrive looking for the Snallygaster, especially if the photo leaked online.

Clues should slowly lead them to Ballintober Farm.

SCENE III: BALLINTOBER FARM

SETTING: BALLINTOBER FARM

The road to Ballintober Farm is heavily forested and occasionally floods at high tide. Built during the Prohibition Era, the farm most recently was the disreputable residence of a high-ranking government official. It has, in recent years, fallen into disrepair.

The few locals who pass through the area have reported hearing screeches and seeing glowing eyes in the woods.

Investigating the area will reveal an old, abandoned distillery and a rum stash hidden inside.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?

The old docks and boat ramps at Mount Misery Farm are used by recreational ne'er-do-wells to smuggle cheap rum, undermining the excellent distillery in town. They have set up a remote-controlled sound rig and LED drones to deter tourists and nosey neighbors. Their rum stash is hidden in an abandoned distillery at the back of the farm.

SKILL CHECKS

- **Technology (DC 13):** Trace the sound source.
- **Stealth (DC 12):** Approach unseen.

- **Perception (DC 10):** Spot recent tire tracks from a pickup truck.

ENCOUNTER: RIGGED DISTILLERY DEFENSES

A hidden loudspeaker attached to a motion sensor will trigger a Snallygaster scream, forcing a DC 11 WIS Save or become Frightened for 1 round (harmless but startling).

- **Perception (DC 12):** Notice wiring.
- **Technology (DC 13):** Disable loudspeaker.

COMPLICATION: TRIPWIRE FLARE

A hidden tripwire releases a flare and a mechanical screech, causing a temporary panic. You must be actively searching for traps to avoid setting it off.

- **Stealth (DC 13):** To avoid setting off the flare.
- **On failure:** +2 to hit, 1d4 fire damage, and alerts nearby **Smugglers**.

SCENE IV: FACE THE SNALLYGASTER

SETTING: ABANDONED DISTILLERY

"Hidden in the abandoned distillery at the back of Ballintober Farm, you finally meet the Snallygaster. As you approach the building, a tall, winged figure takes to the sky, swooping through the fog, glowing eyes blazing."

BUT IT'S ACTUALLY...

Ed "Chunky" Buchanan, ex-pilot and current rum runner, is wearing a motorized glider rig coated in phosphorescent paint and rigged with sound emitters. Ed uses the glider to appear and vanish dramatically and attempts to frighten the party with loudspeakers and flares.

If reduced below 5 HP, he surrenders, ranting:

"I just wanted to be left alone! It's not my fault the come-heres will believe anything!"

COMBAT/CHASE ENCOUNTER

Ed tries to scare the team off or escape with a truckload of rum while his accomplices (2–3 smugglers) attempt to cover his retreat.

FOES

Smuggler

AC 12, HP 11

Skills: Intimidation +2, Athletics +3

Club or Wrench: +3 to hit, 1d6+1 bludgeoning.

Pistol (if armed): +3 to hit, range 30/90 ft., 1d8+1 piercing.

Flees if bloodied, serve as lookouts or rum-runners at the abandoned distillery.

Ed "Chunky" Buchanan

AC 13, HP 22

Skills: Deception +4, Piloting +4, Perception +2, Technology +2

Revolver: +4 to hit, range 40/120 ft., 1d8+2 piercing.

Glider Dive (Recharge 5–6): Chunky dives up to 40 ft. in a straight line; any target in the path must succeed on a DC 13 DEX save or take 2d6 bludgeoning and be knocked prone.

Flash Bomb (once per encounter): Creates a burst of light and sparks; all within 15 ft. make DC 12 CON saves or be blinded until end of next turn.

CONCLUSION: THE SNALLYGASTER UNMASKED

After capturing or exposing Ed, the team learns that the smugglers revived the Snallygaster legend to keep curious locals, tourists, and law enforcement away from their bootlegging operation. What they didn't expect was that the Snallygaster would attract far more attention than some low-level rum running.

St. Michaels has quite the reputation for high-quality rum, and Chief Ramsey would rather keep it that way. The Snallygaster has been drawing crowds, and news of bootleggers would be bad for the tourist business. She thanks the team for their efforts and offers them a handshake deal:

"Let's just say we bagged ourselves a big bird and keep the mystery alive."

REWARDS

The team receives an **Excellence in Public Discretion** commendation from their agency. As they pack up to leave, their phones start buzzing. There are rumors of another Snallygaster sighting across the state line.

OPTIONAL TWIST: IT WAS A REAL CRYPTID AFTER ALL!

As you check your equipment, you notice that one of your camera traps captured something winged and reptilian flying past the moon.



LESSON PLAN: INVESTIGATING *THE CURSE OF THE SNALLYGASTER*

Life Science lesson using creative role-play.

OVERVIEW

In the adventure *The Curse of the Snallygaster*, students become wildlife investigators working for the fictional U.S. Cryptid Field Research Team. Through collaborative storytelling, scientific investigation, and environmental observation, students learn real biological field methods while exploring how scientists distinguish evidence from misinformation.

TIME REQUIRED

2–3 class periods (45–60 minutes each)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Explain how scientists investigate wildlife sightings.
- Identify basic ecological field methods including camera traps, transects, and eDNA sampling.
- Distinguish between evidence and assumption.
- Analyze animal adaptations and behavior.
- Collaborate to solve a scientific mystery.
- Practice scientific observation and communication skills.

MATERIALS

- *The Curse of the Snallygaster* adventure
- Teacher-prepared “evidence cards” (photos, tracks, witness statements)
- Local maps of parks, towns, or wilderness areas
- Student notebooks or science journals

VOCABULARY

Cryptid: A creature from legend or folklore whose existence has not been confirmed

eDNA: Environmental DNA collected from water, soil, or air

Transect: A line scientists follow to count or observe organisms

Camera Trap: Motion-activated wildlife camera

Adaptation: A trait that helps an organism survive
Observation: Information gathered using senses or tools
Evidence: Data used to support a conclusion

LESSON 1 – THE MYSTERY BEGINS

Warm-Up (10 minutes)

Ask students “If people reported seeing a monster in your town, how would scientists investigate it?”

Write responses on the board.

Discuss:

- Eyewitness reliability
- Animal misidentification
- Scientific skepticism
- Importance of evidence

Introduction to the Snallygaster (10 minutes)

Introduce the Maryland cryptid that a Great Blue Heron may have inspired.

Explain that in the adventure:

- Witnesses believe they saw a monster.
- Investigators collect scientific evidence.
- Many sightings may have natural explanations.

In Game: Wildlife Investigation Teams (25–30 minutes)

Divide students into investigation teams.

Each team receives:

- Witness statements
- Blurry “monster” photos
- Environmental clues
- Wildlife information cards

Students must determine:

1. What evidence is reliable?
2. Which clues are biological?
3. Could the “monster” be a real animal?

Encourage students to think like wildlife biologists.

LESSON 2 – FIELD METHODS

Mini-Lesson: How Wildlife Scientists Study Animals (15 minutes)

Introduce real field techniques used in the adventure.

1. Camera Traps: Researchers use them to photograph elusive animals.
2. Transects: Scientists walk measured paths and record observations.
3. eDNA Sampling: Animals leave DNA traces in water or soil.

Discuss:

- Why these methods are useful
- Strengths and weaknesses of each
- How evidence can be misinterpreted

In Game: Design a Cryptid Investigation (25 minutes)

Student teams design their own investigation plan using assorted local maps.

They must decide:

- Where to place camera traps
- Where to collect eDNA
- What animals might be misidentified
- How to avoid false conclusions

Students create:

- A simple field map
- A hypothesis
- An evidence collection strategy

LESSON 3 – PUTTING EVIDENCE TO THE TEST

Discussion (10 minutes)

Ask:

- Why do monster stories exist and what can they tell us about communities?
- Why do people sometimes misidentify animals?
- How can social media spread misinformation?

In Game: The Final Reveal (25–30 minutes)

Reveal that the in-game Snallygaster was actually:

- A staged hoax
- Based partly on real wildlife behavior
- Amplified by rumors, tourism, and local legends

Students evaluate:

- Which evidence supported the truth?
- Which clues were misleading?
- How did scientific thinking solve the mystery?

Students complete a short reflection:

“What is the difference between believing something and proving it scientifically?”

Assessment

Formative Assessment

- Participation in discussions
- Investigation notebook entries
- Team collaboration

Summative Assessment Options

- Scientific investigation report
- Wildlife evidence presentation
- Reflection essay
- Creature adaptation project

Notes for Instructors

The role-playing elements can be light or extensive depending on classroom comfort. Combat from the original adventure can be removed entirely.

Focus should remain on investigation, ecology, evidence, and scientific reasoning.

This lesson works especially well for:

- reluctant learners
- collaborative classrooms
- STEM enrichment
- library programs
- environmental education clubs

Additional Discussion Questions:

1. Why are eyewitness accounts sometimes unreliable?
2. How can folklore be inspired by real animals?
3. Why is scientific skepticism important and how does it differ from denialism?
4. Are there instances when too much skepticism can cause you to miss something important?
5. What happens when misinformation spreads online?

6. What kinds of cultural value do stories about cryptids have even when they are not scientifically supported?

Next Generation Science Standards

MS-LS2 Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics

MS-LS2-1. Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the effects of resource availability on organisms and populations of organisms in an ecosystem.

MS-LS2-2. Construct an explanation that predicts patterns of interactions among organisms across multiple ecosystems.

MS-LS2-4. Construct an argument supported by empirical evidence that changes to physical or biological components of an ecosystem affect populations.