Many of us at the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County were perplexed last November when director of animal protective services Ilka Daniel brought in an odd-looking creature. She and animal control officer Bruce Dangerfield received a call to rescue the animal from a nearby dumpster. The problem was that nobody could explain what kind of animal they’d been called out to help.

When staff looked over Ilka’s furless find, they weren’t sure how to record the animal on intake. What should they put for “species”? Programs like Chameleon and PetPoint don’t offer “alien” as an option.

Some people joked that Ilka had captured a “chupacabra.” From the Spanish chupar (to suck) and cabra meaning “goat,” mythological goat-suckers hail from the same netherworld as Big Foot, Yeti, and the Loch Ness Monster. If your shelter has been hoping to encourage indoor pets and responsible livestock care, chupacabra lore may help—the creatures supposedly prey upon cats, dogs, and farm animals, drink their blood, then leave them for dead. Legend has it that when they’re really hungry, people aren’t safe, either. Sightings of the goat-sucking ghouls have been reported from Puerto Rico up to Maine and along the Texas-Mexico border.

As word of Ilka’s “chupacabra” spread through the shelter, staff and volunteers ran outside to investigate and offer up (un)educated guesses. Freakish feline? Odd opossum? Armored armadillo? Volunteer Sherry Shively thought he might even be some kind of prehistoric beast. He seemed more fearful than fearsome and didn’t have any spikes, but his eyes were quite big. Ilka was pretty sure he was far less nefarious than a chupacabra. “Look at his anatomy,” she suggested. Keeping us all in suspense, the only other clue she provided was that he’s an animal “we see every day.”

It turned out that Ilka’s mystery critter wasn’t very mysterious at all. She hadn’t captured a monster, alien, or prehistoric beast. Not even a chupacabra, as we all had secretly hoped.

He was just a hairless raccoon.

No one is certain how he lost his fur. Theories include genetic mutation, disease, malnutrition, or perhaps an autoimmune disorder. When staff searched the Internet using the keywords “hairless raccoon,” photos of similar-looking animals popped up. We transported him to a wildlife sanctuary where they agreed with Ilka’s judgment of Procyon lotor: raccoon.

Few people can imagine how a raccoon might look in the buff, yet each of us (eventually) had an “Aha!” moment. Assistant animal care director Robyn Krajewski said his front paws gave him away. Adoption supervisor Alisha Zaleuke recalled the shape of his tail. For me, it was how he moved.

Once our story hit the news, Ilka made it a point to explain that just because we don’t understand something doesn’t make it paranormal. “People may jump to conclusions when they see animals like this raccoon, and may even be frightened,” she remarked, adding that careful observation of an animal’s body and behavior can usually provide a logical, less amazing explanation.

It certainly solved the riddle of our shelter’s “chupacabra.”

— Janet Winikoff
Director of education, the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County
Vero Beach, Fla.

Send us a great picture of an animal who came into your care, and tell us: What made them particularly special? Was it the perfect adoption—or a tricky one? Did they come from a harrowing cruelty case? Was it something funny about their behavior, or were they just so unusual-looking you’ll never forget them?

We’ll contact you for details, and we’ll feature your photo and story in Animal Sheltering. Photos must be at least 300 dpi at 5-by-7 inches and at least 1MB and no more than 5MB. Go to animalsheltering.org/unforgettable to submit.