Snakes in space! Using the Hubble Space Telescope, astronomers have captured an image of a giant space serpent. The image appears to show an elongated galaxy that is much longer and thinner than any other previously observed galaxy. It has been appropriately named the “Cosmic Snake” by researchers.

However, much like evidence for the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot, there is a scientific explanation for this strange shaped galaxy: the cosmic snake is a victim of gravity. This particular part of the sky is also home to the massive galaxy cluster MACSJ1206.2-084747. The cluster has so much mass, about a quadrillion (that’s 1 followed by 15 zeros) times the mass of our sun, that it is able to bend the light coming from a galaxy behind it. The light bends away from its normally straight path and causes the telescope to see multiple distorted images of one object. This phenomenon is called gravitational lensing.

Basically, gravitational lensing works the same way that a magnifying glass can be used by a kid to burn ants. Instead of a piece of glass redirecting the light, a group of massive objects redirects the light.

Astronomers have found that the cosmic snake is made up of “four elongated and stretched images of the southern half of the source galaxy” [1]. These partial images join together to create the giant snake-like structure.

Even though the cosmic snake may be an imposter, it can provide important information about its source galaxy. Analysis of clumps in the cosmic snake led astronomer Antonio Cava and his team to conclude that the source galaxies mass was about 40 billion times as massive as our sun [1]. Space snakes and other similar images will help scientists understand the effects of gravitational lensing and help further develop our understanding of how gravity works (take that lame Earth snakes!).

SOURCES CITED: