

Episode 43: Prairie Turtle
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I like to think about atoms, to remember that even the most solid seeming objects are full of space and motion. It reminds me that appearances aren't everything. It reminds me that world is full of room for change.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

Something about eating an apple confirms that I'm an animal. That crunch. Less than an arm's length from being sunlight and rain. It's hard to look at an apple and not see the tree that made it. Not to feel the animal mechanics of eating.

I am forever sending my thoughts back to trace the origins of things.

The new green leaf of an ancient oak.
What is that leaf's relationship to its origins?
What does that soft, green thing have to do with the tons of hard wood that summoned it into the world.

What of our ancestors?

2 parents.

4 grandparents.

8 great-grandparents.

You trace that back 12 generations and suddenly you have over 4,000 grandparents in the span of something like four centuries.

Just think of all the love and kindness that had to fall precisely into place to build the puzzle of circumstance that brought you here to this moment.

All those years and lives and choices collapsed into one distillation of all those happenstances.

You.

The green leaf on the branch tip of an ancient oak. The gleaming edge of a great forest of years.

Ah, there I go again.

These sorts of mental digressions are exactly how I started having a snack this morning and then found myself a half mile into a hike I didn't mean to take. I tell ya, I keep catching the smell of spring in the air and it leads me to walking the wilds and thinking about the nature of life, as sure as walking from a dark room into bright sunlight makes me sneeze. Fully out of my control.

An old friend of mine must know this fact about me well, because at the terminus of this morning's walk, I found a note on swan-white paper written in beetroot ink. It was hanging from a thread just at my eye level. Flashing white, waltzing in the breeze, my name printed large on the envelope.

I plucked it from the air and read it. It was from my old friend and mentor Valentina Blackwood.

The note read:

Dear Jarod,

The prairie turtle has reappeared.
It is swimming near the Faroe Islands (fey-row islands).
Coordinates below.
You'll find my next note there, if you make it in the next 24 hours.

-Valentina

A note about retrieving another note. Heh. Yep, that's my old teacher. Apropos of nothing, I shall point out here that no matter how strange you may be, there is always someone stranger.

Speaking of felicitous strangeness, how about a little poetry?

It's time for today's hidden lore segment. Today's hidden lore is a poem by

Naomi Blackwood... (no relation to Valentina, as far as I know).

They say people don't change
but I've seen the great sequoias
and know they were once
not even saplings, but seeds
buried within the imagination
of the earth

So much change happens below
the surface and what we can't see
relies so heavily
on dormancy
what we can't control
are the perfect conditions that cause
that radical first shoot to grow

I look at my own limbs now
in the middle of what I hope
to be my lifetime
and I can't say exactly how my roots
have intertwined with others
but I know in moments of hunger
I've been fed
and what was once
barely shadow has become
a shelter

Ah, the mysteries of becoming. Of growing. Of finding our own unique ways to be whole within an ever-changing body in an ever-changing world. Recognizing what we can control and learning to accept what we can't. And, hopefully, finding the beauty in the journey.

Naomi lives in Canada. She spends her spare time thinking about how humans can live in equilibrium with nature and each other. She is currently working on a small

publication about nature and other redemptive mysteries. She also has two small children. Her poems can be found on Instagram @nome_poem

I follow her account on Instagram and, if you enjoy poetry, you should too.

Well, needless to say, it did not take Cassandra anywhere near 24 hours to make it to the Faroe islands. She had already plotted a route by the time I got back from my walk. She's always doing things like that and I seldom understand how. Although, this time, I suspect she may have spoken to Valentina directly. I asked, but she was in one of her extra-mysterious moods.

I can certainly sympathize with that.

If you've never been to the Faroe islands, you should consider a visit. Short of that, maybe lookup some pictures. Something about seeing fresh water and salt water separated only by a sheer cliff is like reading a profound poem about the Earth written in startlingly few syllables, all contained in a glance.

We found the Prairie Turtle less than ten miles east of the islands.

Cassandra cut through the water and I saw the dome of the shell rising on the horizon. As we approached, I could see the green-tinted tan of the prairie and the one, giant oak that stands in the exact center of the shell. It's a singular tree. Its leaves a dusty blue-green like old sea glass. I've never seen its like elsewhere.

The turtle wasn't traveling terribly fast, it's head a vast shadow just beneath the surface.

I climbed up to Cassandra's roof and managed to sort of pole-vault myself onto the turtle in a motion that was more or less on purpose.

Being on the prairie turtle is... transportive. Literally and figuratively. It's a place. It's a creature. It's a banquet of sounds. The sizzle of wind in the sun-baked grasses. The omnidirectional rumble of the sea like the breath of a sleeping colossus. The sound of a shady-looking warbler singing with the crackle of old radio static.

And, all the while, real or imagined, there's the feel of deep, old life beneath my boots... a kind of warming electricity flowing up into my body.

I would have loved to linger there on the shell shore, but I was on an errand, after all.

I climbed toward the oak and found something I hadn't seen before. An old rope swing with a plain plank seat was lashed to one of the boughs. It swayed in the sea breeze and the white envelope pinned to the seat flashed in the sunlight.

The note read:

Happy birthday.

Your present is the next ten minutes,
during which you will sit in this swing.

You will look and listen and taste the breeze.

Afterwards, you will feel different.

In a good way.

Again, happy birthday. I'm glad you're on this planet.

-Valentina

PS: There are no warblers here. If you meet one, don't trust it.

Well, leave it to my old teacher to deliver important lessons right when I need them. Not the thing about warblers. I didn't trust that warbler the moment I saw it. No, I mean the lesson about lingering. Errands or not, just sitting for a spell and really opening up our senses to the moment is nourishing and instructional in ways too numerous to articulate.

Thank you, Valentina.

I had a lovely day and now I'm back aboard Cassandra feeling different indeed. In a good way.

It's nowhere near my birthday today, but that seems like a minor detail.

Well, now. Good fortune strikes again, I see.

It looks like we have a new field report! Let's take a listen.

This is Elena Fernández Collins transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

Hummingbirds. So named for the hum of their wings. 4,000 beats per minute. A blur of motion surrounding a hovering jewel of a bird, a creature that defies gravity with a casual grace that proclaims diplomatic immunity from the laws of physics.

And yet, what should we call the hummingbirds of the Leopard Spot Isles? Their wings don't hum.

As you may know, the Leopard Spots are the colloquial name given to the series of hidden volcanic atolls dotting the Bermuda Triangle. Idyllic rings of sand and jungle that appear to hover in the liminal blueness between sea and sky. There are many singular examples of cryptonature to be found there, but my focus has been the Cobalt Arias, the pony-sized vivid blue hummingbirds that feed from the hibiscus trees.

The wings of these birds thunder across the landscape. They make a deep, whoomp whoomp noise that reverberates in your chest. Part dance beat. Part helicopter rotors.

Studying these creatures means a constant need for ear protection, but at least they aren't difficult to locate. When they approach my feeding station, made from cherry red oil drums filled with artificial nectar, my whole observation blind pulses like a subwoofer.

I wish I could show you one. They are so blue it almost hurts to look at them. Electric blue ghost-images dance in your vision even after you look away. Yet, like so many cryptids, they do not film well.

Sometimes, one of them will hover close to the sand and send grit leaping into the air. It leaves an impression a bit like a snow angel, yet infinitely more

complex. Every bird leaves a different impression in the sand. I think of it as their signatures.

The Cobalt Arias are so different from most hummingbirds and, yet, the differences are more a function of amplification of characteristics rather than any real divergence.

No, humming aside, I think we should still call them hummingbirds.

I hope you'll come and see them. If you do, you'll feel them singing in your bones for the rest of your days.

Elena Fernández Collins, signing off.

Well now. I wasn't entirely sure what to do with myself when I finished recording today. But, now it seems a new destination is calling.

Until next time, remember. We're all strange animals. So, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 43: Prairie Turtle (00:17:30)

Credits

Special thanks to Sarah Rhea Werner for reprising her role as Valentina Blackwood. Sarah has so many wonderful projects, including The Write Now Podcast and Girl in Space. Sarah has all sorts of ways to entertain, educate, and inspire you and you should really learn more about her at sarahwerner.com.

And double-special thanks to Elena Fernández Collins for voicing Ave María's field report. Elena Fernández Collins is a genderfluid podcast critic and reporter and a forensic sociolinguist living in Portland, OR. She curates a biweekly newsletter about audio fiction, Audio Dramatic, where she reviews episodes and provides essays and news for the community. She also covers the audio fiction podcast

beat for The Bello Collective, an indie online publication about podcasting, and is a contributor to The AV Club's Podmass, among others.

Check out Field Guide to the Haunted Forest by Jarod K. Anderson wherever books are sold. If you'd like a signed bookplate for your copy, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to:

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Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist. You'll find information about submitting your poetry or prose for our hidden lore segments in the about section of our website at CryptoNaturalist.com. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson. Thanks to Adam Hurt for the use of his song Garfield's Blackberry Blossom from his album Insight. For more information on Adam's music, performances, and teaching, visit adamhurt.com.

Post Script:

It's easy to differentiate the untrustworthy warblers. There the ones wearing little black sunglasses.