

Episode 50: Willow Man
Written by Jarod K. Anderson
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Superstitions can seem a bit frivolous. Then again, when we observe superstitious behavior spanning populations all across the globe, all across our history, perhaps we should allow that they may serve a function.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

It's almost morning here.

Before climbing inside my RV Cassandra, I looked out across the fallow fields in which she spent the night. It's a lonely place, prickly with the remnants of last year's corn crop. Surrounded on all sides by the Elm and oakwood where I passed the last few hours walking in the dark beneath the trees.

In the far distance, in the hour before dawn, I could hear a highway clearing its throat, preparing for the growl of real rush hour traffic.

There, on a distant hilltop, a tower with a purpose I do not know blinked its slow, red light. On and off. On and off.

Perhaps a warning to low flying aircraft.

Stay away. Stay. Away.

Perhaps something I cannot guess.

It's a simple truth that the most haunted house is still less frightening than the least haunted cornfield. This place stands testament to the fact that even a former cornfield can muster up a fair amount of creepiness, if it puts its mind to it. A ghost of a cornfield.

Then again, maybe the mood of the place is being influenced by the nature of my errand here.

I don't think it's a secret that trees speak to one another. Of course they do. How do you think oaks all coordinate on what years there will be a bumper crop of acorns?

Chemical messages on the wind. Wordless voices flowing through fungal networks like sap rising in late winter. I don't doubt that trees have at least as many ways to communicate as we do.

At least as many.

The woods in these parts are old, but islands of new farmland have been carved into the hillsides in the last few decades. Graded and flattened. Fertilized and irrigated. And the fields, including the one I'm currently parked in, still feel a bit alien here. A bit too tidy against the backdrop of wilderness, the tangle of underbrush and the wild, untouched places that are not set into rows aimed at efficiency and productivity.

Yes, trees speak, but I'm here investigating what else they do.

Folklore has its ideas on the subject.

Take this old Sommerset rhyme I found in KM Brigg's book *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*.

*Ellum he do grieve,
Oak he do hate,
Willow do walk
If you travels late.*

That last line sounds a bit like a threat. Then again, when I read that passage I had two immediate thoughts. First, I love traveling late. And second, threat or not, I would dearly love to see a walking willow.

Briggs adds some further context to the old rhyme, “The belief behind this is that if one elm tree is cut down the one next to it will die of grief: but if oaks were cut they will revenge themselves if they can.”

She goes on, writing that, “Willow is the worst of all, for he walks behind benighted travelers, muttering.” (Briggs, Pg. 83)

And, so, here I am in an area where trees might have call to be suspicious of humans.

Certainly many have been cleared.

And I feel confident that if a tree has a mind to walk abroad after dark, it is not likely to be frightened of even the ghostiest corn field.

Speaking of things with minds and ways all their own, how about a little poetry?

It’s time for today’s hidden lore segment.

Today’s hidden lore is a poem by Jarod K. Anderson.

That’s me.

Sorta.

Forsythia

As forsythia grows tall,
its branches bend beneath their own weight,
bowing to the ground in arches of yellow flowers.

Wherever they touch the earth,
the branches root again and send up new shoots,
stitching gold across the landscape.

Some new kinds of knowledge shift our center of gravity,
staggering us,
bending us low beneath the burden.

If you think of your worldview as a stone tower,
this shift is a cataclysm of splintered rock.

If your worldview is forsythia,
then every startling truth that bends you low becomes a new connection to the
earth,
a new way to stand,
an invitation to grow.

We live in a time of strong wind and sudden pressure.
It is not an age for towers.

It's an age for stubborn flowers.

Resiliency certainly feels like the watchword for these times and nature has many
accomplished teachers of such virtues.

This poem is from my second collection of poetry, *Love Notes from the Hollow Tree*. You can find more information on both of my poetry collections at cryptonaturalist.com/books. My first poetry collection, *Field Guide to the Haunted Forest*, now has over 1,000 5-star reviews on Amazon, and I'm happy to say that *Love Notes from the Hollow Tree* seems to be receiving a similarly warm welcome from readers. Both collections are now available as audiobooks from Tantor Media.

It turns out that the folklore, in this instance, was correct.

Ya know, I won't quite pretend that the steadiness I feel now sitting in my studio,
with morning twittering in the branches outside, is characteristic of what I felt
walking the woods last night.

But I suspect if you are hearing my voice right now you will believe easily enough
that I was not afraid of anything walking in the forest night.

How could I be?

Walking in the dark beneath the trees, my senses alive and on the hunt for wonders, why... it is one of my favorite things in this wide, wonderous world. Anything else that walks there, in gatherings or alone, dappled in shadow and starlight, how could I view such things as anything but family, cousins in the simple joy of wandering the somber, sacred night.

No, I was not afraid.

We'll call me... curious bordering on the neighborhood of concern when I realized that I was being followed.

I was skirting one of the newly cleared fields and there was a breath of wind that wasn't wind on the back of my neck.

That hard to measure, but quite real, sense of being watched.

I bent all my thoughts toward that feeling, hoping to focus on the imperceptible cues that were pulling my gaze over my shoulder when the willow that was walking twenty steps behind me decided to shrug off subtlety completely.

Friends, it did indeed mutter.

Although, muttering suggests unclear communication.

That's not quite right.

The willow's communication felt very clear to me.

Clear and threatening.

Clear and angry.

Clear and perhaps hungry for explanations that I could not readily give.

So many trees killed and taken away. So many kindred lives gone and for what? What was this tattered field to the willow? This scar on the woods. This place of mud and ghosts.

No.

I could not explain.

And, while I very much wanted to about face and meet the willow being to being, my years of experience told me that I would not be offered a companionable greeting if I approached the following tree.

But, of course, as a CryptoNaturalist, I couldn't just flee and I couldn't leave as a perceived enemy.

I wasn't sure if the willow could understand human speech, but I had brought an apology along with me that I felt would bridge the gap of our understanding.

A retrieved a damp bundle from inside my jacket. Nine seedlings.

Nine little lives.

Oak. Maple. Walnut. Locust.

Native species.

Tender little twigs.

All potential energy and an old, old instinct to grow.

The ground would be warm enough and the cool weather coaxes roots to grow.

The willow followed and muttered.

I found spots that felt correct to me.

Spots where trees seemed purposelessly felled. Near the cleared farmland but still beneath the sheltering eaves of the forest, places where shafts of sunlight fell on bare earth.

One by one I planted the seedlings.

The willow followed and spoke.

Sometimes the speech felt like anger and disdain. Sometimes it was like a kind of nostalgia for an unbroken canopy and gossip handed root tip to root tip.

I planted and reached for understanding as best I could.

Friends, I, of course, did not believe my tiny effort of reforestation did anything to absolve the crimes the willow wordlessly named.

It was more that if I was going to come to such a place to witness such a creature, I felt that the least I could do was commit myself to the business of the forest while I loitered here.

And, so I did, and benighted traveler though I was, shadowed by an old willow man, I reached the morning and my RV in safety.

Safety is such a strange concept isn't it?

Because sometimes I suspect that when people say "safe," they mean unchanged.

If that's the meaning, then I certainly did not return safe from these woods.

Not safe at all.

Well. Anyone with open senses and an honest heart can see what we owe to trees.

I don't think I need to tell you that we can do better by them.

But... we can do better.

I know that thought can feel daunting.

Just remember, when we seek to do better, don't look to the horizon. Look to your own hands. To your words. To the small, intimate reality of you and your place and time.

No, you may not be a thing that can move a mountain or build a forest.

But I suspect that you could very well be a thing that can plant a seed.

I digress.

Sometimes it takes a strange encounter to remind me of commonplace wonder, like the way a chance glimpse of a shooting star can draw the eye upward where such glorious sights of moon and stars intoxicate, sights that were waiting there even before that sudden streak of brilliance graced the night.

Sudden light indeed.

My transmission light is blinking. Looks like we have a new field report.

Let's take a listen.

This is Ellen Weatherford broadcasting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

Narceus americanus. The American giant millipede. Sometimes whimsically known as the iron worm. These lovely, gentle detritivores can grow to a respectable four inches. A cylindrical knight in polished armor marching through the moonlit leaf litter on 400 sturdy legs.

It is, I think, worthy of its own field report.

However, I am broadcasting on a CryptoNaturalist frequency for a reason.

I have discovered that the American giant millipede has a larger cousin. Much larger. A creature I am tentatively calling the American colossal millipede, though that name may not be fitting for a creature that seems to be as light as air and as fleeting as morning dew.

At the time of this broadcast, I've observed the colossal millipede nearly a dozen times near the dwarf cypress forest of Tate's Hell in Franklin County, Florida.

The first time I spotted it, I thought it was a trick of my imagination. I suspect that many of the CryptoNaturalists currently hearing this will be familiar with that feeling.

The millipede appears in the early morning, when the water is a black mirror cracked here and there with tree shadows. When conditions are right, a mist hangs over the water, ghostly white tendrils drifting among the cypress knees and cow lilies.

That mist is the colossal millipede's home.

They look very much like the smaller iron worms, except that they are nearly ten feet long and similar in diameter to a telephone pole.

Also... they aren't quite there...
At least, not in a way I can easily explain.

In color, they are lighter than the water and darker than the mist, like an overcast sky that hints of rain. They walk on the water's surface with neither splash nor ripple, tracing graceful s-curves between the trees.

Twice I've seen one stray from the mist, only to quickly course correct and return. It reminded me of a breaching whale arching above a gray sea before disappearing again beneath the water. Something so large and alive hidden by the interplay of sunlight and water.

I'm not sure how the creature walks on the water. I don't know where it goes when the mists are banished as the sun climbs above the horizon.

I'm broadcasting today in part so you can share in the excitement of not knowing. And, of course, I'm eager to hear your theories.

For now, I am simply grateful to have one more reason to watch the sun rise above the swamplands and know of one more wonder that share's our world.

Ellen Weatherford signing off.

[End Transmission]

Well now, that sounds like a reason for me to head south.

“They aren’t quite there.”

How many natural wonders fall into that category, hmm?

Everything from love to moonlight to minnows flashing in the sunlight, then vanishing into dark water.

Few things capture the imagination like a fleeting wonder. Just one more reason to be grateful of the limitations of our own senses.

As for me, my limited senses and I are bound for breakfast. I believe I spotted a Waffle House on my drive here.

Until next time, we’re all strange animals. So, act like it.

Show Notes: Episode 50: Willow Man (00:21:30)

Credits

All trees talk. Some trees walk.

Special thanks to Ellen Weatherford for voicing today’s field report! Ellen is a co-host on the Just the Zoo of Us podcast, a family-friendly show that researches, rates, and reviews wildlife, along with hosting a wonderful variety of expert guests.

Check out Field Guide to the Haunted Forest by Jarod K. Anderson wherever books are sold.

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at cryptonaturalist.com.

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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:

Ya know, I probably should have tried singing to old man willow, but I didn't think of that until after I was sitting warm and comfortable. Isn't that always the way with tense conversations. It's easy to think of what you should have done hours or even years later.