

Episode 51: Shadow Fly
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

If you understand that any single maple, hands outstretched, kindling to Autumn color, is a vital stitch in the tapestry of nature, then you can understand that you yourself arrived here through the same natural artistry and are just as vital to the character of our living world.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[Theme Music]

Welcome friends.

I hit a temporal pothole a ways back, but I seem to be firmly back on my old timeline.

The air smells like December.

Plus, if you're anything like me, then every December an inexplicable covered bridge follows you wherever you go.

You don't see it move.

It's just always there, about a hundred yards off, its dark mouth open in silent summoning to venture through, to cross over to... somewhere unknown.

Yes, if you're like me, you'll chat with folks about that bridge and, as far as they recall, the bridge will have always been there.

It doesn't matter how unlikely the location. [MUSIC - JAUNTY BANJO]

Inside a grocery store. On the football field of a local high school.

"It's always been there," they'll say.

I ask about the lantern that lights the way.

I ask about the tuneless music it makes.

When the wind blows,
that old lantern sways on its hook,
answering the crickets with the whine of fretting metal.

That's when all the shadows bend and reach,
haunting that old, covered bridge.
Peeled paint breathing like a reef.

Somehow, I'm certain there's nothing on the other side.
Just thickets and thorn-wounds.

A dirt road too hard and dead for weeds.

That lantern and the way it illuminates the path is a paradox,
somehow making us all less safe with its light,

with its lie of knowability.

Yesterday, I met a toll booth worker who wondered aloud, "who keeps that old lantern lit?"

I asked her, "who'd dare to put it out?"

Well... anyway... this episode isn't about that December bridge and the way it marks the year's departure. It's just a pleasant part of the waning autumn landscape, akin to an overripe jack o lantern, leaves in the wind, and the gentle knocking of falling walnuts on my RV's roof.

Today's episode is about another late autumn phenomenon you've likely noticed.

On crisp, Fall afternoons, when the sun hangs at the horizon like an apple ripe for plucking, have you taken note of your shadow? The way it seems somehow thinner than it did on Summer afternoons? Less... substantial?

That's the handywork of the seldom glimpsed Shadow Fly, a cousin to the mosquito that dines on something a bit more abstract than blood.

More abstract, but no less fundamental.

Speaking of things that may be abstract, but are certainly fundamental, how about a little poetry?

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

Hekate Cleans House

Tonight, a witch will appear and give you a galaxy.

You will not know what to do with it -

The shape is awkward, and the style

Doesn't go with your decor.

The witch will consider the problem - have you

Considered the bookshelf, she will say. Or,

It might work as a mobile in the corner, there.

Of course you've thought about the bookshelf.

And a galaxy is not like a houseplant, content

To sit in one place and grow peacefully -

You'll have to dust off the interstellar radiation,

Keep an eye on its expansion, watch out

For its tendency to drift. This one looks like trouble, too.

Its black hole roils, and the spiraling arms

Hook out to catch whatever passes.

You already have a cat. That's enough chaos.

You'd wave it away, but she wrapped it nicely,

And witches are notoriously touchy

About this kind of thing. So you smile,

Hold it in your hands, lift it to the light, and

Watch it sparkle under your own strange sun.

Ya know, I'm not sure what I would do with a galaxy. I feel quite enough responsibility in the care and shelter of my many books. Books aren't quite galaxies, but they are certainly windows peeping out onto other realities, which is almost the same thing.

Hannah Ringler is a poet, parent, and gardener from North Carolina. She is the coordinator for the North Carolina Poetry Society's *Poetry in Plain Sight* program, which is a community outreach program across North Carolina to bring North Carolina poets and readers together.

October, November, and December are all showplaces for shadows, at least they are here in the Northern hemisphere where I currently reside. The days are so short they feel like placeholders for night. If night were the sea, December would be speckled with tidepools, little islands of night keeping the creatures of the dark safe and sound until the tide returns.

Shadow is home to many things.

The one I encounter most frequently here in Ohio is The Shadow Fly.

Like some folks are particularly delicious to mosquitoes, I seem to be particularly delicious to shadow flies.

Yet, I realized I haven't encountered much about the creatures in CryptoNaturalist literature and discourse, so I thought I'd make some observations here.

That's the funny thing about familiarity. It's like breathing. Or gravity. Or a warm drink and a dry place to sit. Familiarity can make wonderful, magical things seem mundane. Sometimes, it's down to an act of willful noticing to realize that we are living an unguessed self's fantasy.

So, this afternoon as the sun was settling down into the treetops, I stepped out of my RV to make some fresh, firsthand observations of a Shadow Fly.

I... had very little doubt that I would find one. Well, that one would find me, I suppose.

Cassandra was parked near an old cemetery, a leaf-littered hillside toothy with headstones. A big, Osage-orange tree stood nearby, the tree the mourns the mammoth with its knobby green fruit meant for larger mouths than gray squirrels and bobwhites, although many generations of the tree have arrived since the mammoth departed, telling us something about the resilience of nature.

The tree cast a shadow onto the hillside as the sun sank behind us in the West. I stood next to it, casting my own shadow onto the hill.

Shadow flies are attracted to movement, so I did a little dance of greeting for any ghosts that happened to be watching.

A cold wind came down from the north, numbing my ears, and the tree danced along beside me.

I suppose the wait wasn't long, but it felt long. I may be out of shape for extended cemetery dances.

The shadow fly broke away from the big tree's shadow and hung in the air considering me. Or, well, considering my shadow.

Picture the dark silhouette of a mosquito, about the size of a Dutch oven.

I felt rather than heard its whining buzz, a localized sensation like static electricity on my right shoulder, just beneath where the creature hovered.

I swallowed. *Take one for the team*, I thought, preparing to turn all my senses toward the coming experience.

The shadow fly landed on my shoulder and I watched it tilt itself forward to drink.

How do describe the feeling?

It doesn't hurt. It feels... well, I wanna say "spooky," but I worry that term is too subjective. It feels a bit like that moment when you awaken on the second day of a trip and there's a small period of reality readjusting as you remember where you are. It feels like your life is becoming, by the slightest degree, a bit less real.

As the shadow fly drinks, my shadow began to fade, becoming noticeably less dark, especially when viewed next to the tree's shadow.

Meanwhile, I held my hand up to the fading light and noted that my body was just a little less opaque than when I had stepped up to the hillside.

It's an uneasy sort of feeling.

I looked around the cemetery and found that as I faded, I could see things that weren't there before. Shapes drifting here and there among the stones.

I'm not here to speculate what those shapes might be, only that whatever the shadow fly had taken from me had partially inhibited some form of perception.

It's not exactly a state I wanted to savor, which is exactly why I waited until dusk for this little errand. A shadow fly's bite isn't like a mosquito's bite. It doesn't linger on, itching for days. No, the effects of a shadow fly bite end promptly when true night falls.

When shadow gives way to night, when the Earth's mighty shadow overtook my own, I felt myself return to normal.

I mean... ya know... normal for me.

I climbed back aboard Cassandra, drank a warm apple cider, and considered my invite list for this year's Fire Feast. By the time I finished, I felt right as rain and ready to record.

Little pro tip. If you do encounter a shadow fly and want to avoid a bite, simply locate your shadow and then step it inside a larger shadow. No shadow, no target for a bite. It's just that simple. It's also part of the reason I prefer to work in the woods rather than open fields as the year gets old.

My friends, thank you for being here and thank you for listening.

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

Show Notes: Episode 51: Shadow Fly (00:14:08)

Credits

The Shadow Fly drinks from your shadow, which, in turn, drinks from you.

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The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson.

This show is produced and edited by Tracy Barnett. You can find them online, anywhere at [TheOtherTracy](https://TheOtherTracy.com) or TheOtherTracy.com.

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.

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

Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

Post Script:

In the unfortunate event that you encounter a shadow fly in your home, you can either banish every shadow from the place with light or darkness, or try to cultivate a friendship with an admirably unconventional pet.