

Episode 52: Mecha-Shrew
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

You don't need anyone's permission to be amazed. When something fills you with awe, don't go looking around to determine if your awe is correct. Simply lean into the feeling. Your natural instinct for wonder is absolutely trustworthy and does not need measured against any consensus.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

Good morning, listeners. [AMBIENT – DISTANT TRAFFIC/OUTDOOR EVENING]

I'm here on the doorstep of dawn, the eastern edge of night just beginning to soften, beginning to glow with anticipation of the coming sunrise.

And, while I am laying on my belly on cold, gray pavement beneath my RV, I feel the warmth of home all around me.

Why? Well, I'm in a foundational location for my vocation, a place where many-a CryptoNaturalist has gotten their start and heard the call of hidden nature.

If you haven't guessed by now, I am, of course, talking about a Waffle House parking lot.

How I love this place. The circle of yellow light, akin to the inviting halo of a campfire in a dark-wood clearing, a beacon to benighted travelers. The friendly, block-letters, plain and unadorned, proclaiming to all who see them, "this place is as simple and as fundamentally nourishing as the night that surrounds it."

Yes... I suppose Waffle House must still exist under a bright noonday sun... just... ya know... not in the same way.

My Waffle House is a place of dusk and dawn and deepest midnight. That's the place that seems to call to cryptid and road-weary wanderer alike.

And... call it did, catching my eye and drawing me in, coaxing me to park Cassandra at the far edge of the pavement near a shaggy stand of blue spruce.

It's... nearly 5:30AM here. Cassandra just shut down her engine, but I can still feel its heat, still hear it clicking and settling through the steel above my head.

It's drizzly this morning and flirting with freezing, so I'm sheltering here under my kind and capacious vehicle.

I suppose I must look a bit odd under here.

A lot odd for most locations. Only a little odd for a Waffle House.

The pavement smells like engine exhaust and pine tar.

I've angled my body so I can see both the reflection of the Waffle House sign in the mirror of a still puddle and the crumbling edge of the parking lot beneath the skirts of those dark and shifting spruce.

Just before switching on my recorder, I reached into my pocket and retrieved a handful of bait. I made a little pile of it near the edge of the lot and then scooted back into the deeper shadows.

The bait consists of a few pale chunks of quartz. A scribble of copper wire. And three tiny springs recovered from broken click pens. That little heap of treasures glints gold in the glow from the Waffle House.

Some of you listening will have an inkling about what that bait is meant to attract and some of that some will be thinking I'm wasting my time.

There have been several confident reports in the last parcel of years that the humble mecha-shrew had taken its final bow and exited the stage forever, one more noble species concluding the project of its years on Earth, leaving those of us who remain marked with its conspicuous lack.

I received a few notes correcting my assumptions when I reported hearing one of the amazing critters back in episode 35.

Having a hearty respect for my own fallibility, I took the matter as closed.

I started thinking of the mecha-shrew as firmly in the past tense.

And yet, there have been recent mutterings.

Mutterings from newer CryptoNaturalists, not so weighted down with accumulated knowledge and the insidious assumptions that follow in experience's shadow. Folks living those fortunate years as a newcomer, the effortless and open attitude of curiosity walking hand in hand with natural ignorance, a truly fortunate pairing for those of us who value wonder and discovery.

These special community members don't know that the mecha-shrew is supposed to be extinct and several of them have spotted signs in the waffle-scented underbrush that gainsay conventional wisdom on the topic.

That spark of hope kindles a fire in me, and that burning light led me to this spot and this recording.

Also, I keep my ears open while sitting at the bar enjoying my hashbrowns and coffee. I've heard news of hubcaps wandering off. I've heard rumblings of dropped keys seemingly growing legs and scampering off into the leaf litter. I've heard reports of thin, metallic music lapping like placid waves at the edge of the pavement.

So, here I am.

Waiting for a clockwork sound or a flash of metal near my little piled offering.

If you're thinking, "gee, you sure are talking a lot for somebody lying in wait," let me assure you that while the mecha-shrew is wary of large movements, they are drawn to vibration. By all accounts, they seem to enjoy being in the presence of human speech. They were, after all, originally created by a human toymaker.

[SFX – APPROACHING FOOTSTEPS ON PAVEMENT]

Ah, a visitor approaches from my waffle-ward side.

[NOTE: TRACY/CN VOICES MUFFLED, AS IF TURNED AWAY FROM THE MIC?]

Tracy: “Hey, bud. Are you coming inside? Do you want us to start your usual?”

CN: “That’s awfully kind of you, but I’m preoccupied at the moment. I hope to be in eventually.”

Tracy: “Field work, huh? I can bring it out to you, if you like.”

CN: “Well, that offer is hard to resist.”

Tracy: “Hashbrowns, scattered, covered, and chunked. One waffle. Coffee with cream and sugar.”

CN: “Huh. Yeah, that’s me. Ya know, I don’t think I’ve ever been to this particular location. I’m a bit surprised you know that.”

Tracy: “We know you. It’ll be out in a bit.”

[SFX – RETREATING FOOTSTEPS ON PAVEMENT]

Alright then. This place never ceases to surprise me.

Speaking of pleasant surprises, how about a little poetry? It’s time for today’s hidden lore segment. [SFX – UNFOLDING A PIECE OF PAPER]

Today’s hidden lore is a poem by Emily Benson.

On the Question of the Happiness of Clams

Nestled in the seabed
Below curtains of swirling silt,
Mollusks burrow
And hinge,
Yawning suction

Admitting phytoplankton,
Agricultural runoff,
And microplastics
Expelling what they can
Into the turbidity above.
Their shells vibrate
With the subaquatic tremors
From motorboats,
Streaking like silver comets
In their wavering sky.
Otherwise, they are still,
Self-contained, timeless
In their calcareous valves.
On them whole ecosystems
Gorge and feed:
Roseate spoonbills
And families from Little Neck.
But at night,
When the tide sucks back
And the moon glistens
On salt-studded mud flats,
They sing waterspout plumes,
Sand popping squeaks and,
Snapping their ligaments
To castanet,
They thrust their burrowing feet
Down into the oily muck
And dance.

And there you have it. Aren't we all happy as clams, doing as best we can in our imperfect corners of an imperfect world, yet reaching for the power and wisdom to plant our feet in the muck, snap our fingers, and dance.

Emily Benson lives in Western New York with her husband and two sons. Previous publications include *Deep Wild Journal*, *Gastropoda*, *Literary Mama*, *Moist Poetry*

Journal, Paddler Press, and The Dillydoun Review. Her work can be found at www.emilybenisonpoet.com.

I keep catching myself people-watching, looking through the window at customers enjoying their breakfasts or lunches or dinners. A group of college kids that looks to be up late rather than early is in a booth by the nearest window, laughing in such a way I think I can see minerals accreting around the fossil of an enduring memory.

An older gal with a John Deere hat is at the bar, chatting to the cooks' backs with a comfort that speaks of habit.

Wait. I hear something.

There's a clinking, musical note off to my right.

I hope the mic is picking it up.

It sounds like a music box, *Swan Lake*, traveling through the dark beneath the little dunes of spruce needles.

[SFX – SWAN LAKE MUSIC BOX, SHIFTING IN VOLUME – PLAY IN BACKGROUND UNTIL SHREW DEPARTS] – I'LL RECORD THIS

It is honestly difficult to keep talking. I want to hold my breath, but I know that that the vibrations of my voice are a welcoming mystery to a mecha-shrew, if that's what I'm hearing. Perhaps the poetry drew it in. Perhaps the steps of the kindly Waffle House employee.

Too early to tell.

Well, since I need to keep talking, I'll tell you a bit about what I know of the history of the mecha-shrew, a matter of some debate.

The predominant theory places the origin of the species on the workbench of a brilliant toymaker who lived in the woods of western Maine near the start of the 19th century.

She was a recent immigrant to these shores, though ideas differ as to her birthplace. The most popular theory says she came from Mumbai. The thing about being brilliant and adamant about privacy is that she managed to craft an obscuring veil of mystery just as well as she cooked up mechanical marvels. Even her name is lost, leading many in my field to simply call her The Toymaker.

From what little we know of her, I think she would approve of both the title and the anonymity. At least, I hope so.

She seems to have built the first mecha-shrew and, intentionally or not, part of their form and function allows them to build more of their kind, harvesting appropriate materials from the environment and, well, reproducing. They stockpile components in their burrows and, when the time is right, they construct new individuals, expanding their species.

They've also been observed modifying and growing themselves, a trait I think we humans can appreciate. A relatable behavior.

Wait. There. I see a dull copper gleam. And... yes indeed... [SFX – FAINT CLOCKWORK SOUNDS ALONG WITH INTENSIFYING MUSIC BOX MUSIC]

Listeners, I am happy to report that there is at least one mecha-shrew left in the world.

She's approaching my bait.

At a glance, she looks primarily composed of copper or brass. About the size of a red squirrel, minus the fluffy tail. Her eyes look like dark opals, ovular pools of midnight containing fractured shards of a rainbow. I can see gears spinning within her frame, but their movement is too fast and diverse to parse.

She is pawing through the pile with metallic claws, I see points sharp as thumbtacks, translucent like splinters of glass.

Looks like she has selected the quartz and bundled up the copper wire, but seems uninterested in the springs. Huh. I thought those would be a hit. She's stuffing her

check pouches. They bulge, looking a like two half-spheres made from miniature chainmail, shining silver like fish scales in the pale light of a nascent dawn.

[SFX – A SKITTER, GEARS WHIR AND MUSIC BOX MUSIC FADES]

Ope. There she goes. Something startled her.

Off she went, diving into the soil beyond the blacktop as smooth and fast as a frog disappearing into a woodland pond. She must have gone far and fast because I no longer hear her music.

Sigh. How I love being the bearer of good news.

And so, the mecha-shrew lives on. As I would have suspected, if I had just stop to suspect about it. A good lesson to myself to leave a little room for doubt and curiosity on any given subject.

I am dearly glad that the mecha-shrew still shares our world.

Ya know, entropy wears away at many systems, but the will to connect, build, and rebuild is not subject to the physical laws of the universe. The mecha-shrew seems to embody this footnote on the idea of entropy. Life. Will. Love. Hope. All wildcards, scampering about in this big, strange universe, making all this jumble of matter and energy a bit more interesting and unpredictable with their presence here.

[SFX – FOOTSTEPS APPROACHING]

Tracy: “Order up.”

[SFX – SOUND OF EFFORT/PLATE SLIDING ACROSS PAVEMENT/TINKLE OF SILVERWARE]

CN: “Ah, looks wonderful.”

Tracy: “You sure you don’t want me to help you carry this inside?”

CN: “I appreciate it, but my work has gone very well and I think I’d like to drink my coffee out here and watch real dawn settle on these lovely trees. And there’s just something grand about drinking a hot beverage out in the cold.”

Tracy: “Understood. Toss a pebble at the window if you need anything.”

CN: “Will do. I’ll bring my dishes in when I’m finished.”

Tracy: “Cool. Keep an eye on that silverware. Lots of mecha-shrews around here. But I guess you know that.”

CN: “Heh. I do now. Thanks.”

[SFX – FOOTSTEPS RETREATING]

Well, there’s another reminder. Best to take the humble and wise approach and assume you never have the market fully cornered on knowledge or expertise.

A little gratitude. A little humility. They, like biodiversity or creative empathy, make our world a richer place to live.

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

Show Notes: Episode 52: Mecha-Shrew (00:18:10)

Rumor has it the mecha-shrew is extinct, but not all rumors are trustworthy.

Thanks to Emily Benson for this episode’s hidden lore poem, “On the Question of the Happiness of Clams.”

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

For books and poetry collections by Jarod K. Anderson and Leslie J. Anderson, visit CryptoNaturalist.com/books.

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.

This show is produced and edited by Tracy Barnett. You can find them online, anywhere at TheOtherTracy 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:

Supporting the return of the eastern bluebird involved placing and monitoring nest boxes, protecting habitat, and cultivating native plants and trees. You can support mecha-shrews by leaving your garage door slightly ajar, placing a shallow dish of pennies or wingnuts in your landscaping, or tossing a bit of quartz or assorted clockworks into the bushes on your next visit to a Waffle House.