

Episode 56: A Walk in the Woods

Written by Jarod K. Anderson

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Come to the woods with the mindset of a newcomer and find yourself overwhelmed by wonders.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

[SFX footsteps through leaf litter – walking in the woods – birdsong in the branches – eastern USA woodland sounds]

[SFX distant fiddle playing – cheerful, but with a haunting quality]

Welcome listeners. Thanks for joining me on a little walk.

Today we're walking a disused little trail on the edge of The Catskill mountains.

The sun is... oh... about one and a half hand's widths away from the horizon, meaning I have about 90 minutes of daylight left. Plenty of time for a nourishing wander before heading home to Cassandra.

I suppose you can hear that distant fiddle. Yup. I'm a bit curious about that myself. Seems like I'm getting closer to that music with each step. Perhaps we'll find the source. Then again, perhaps we won't.

Ya know, I think I became I cryptonaturalist because of this, right here. The feeling of looming discovery that walks beside me anytime I take a stroll somewhere wild.

I'm not talking about that distant music. I'm talking about the character of the woods, the way anywhere I set my eyes demands ten lifetimes of study, anything from an isopod crawling through the leaf-litter to the diverse microorganisms in a boot-shaped puddle beside the path.

And, yes, my specialty is cryptonature, the places and organisms that dwell on the edge of what is real. And yet... if I studied field mice or moss or red oaks, you could hardly argue that my chosen path of study was any less strange and wonderful, any less heavy with a harvest of miraculous secrets.

A walk through the woods, any woods, is an act of wading into mystery.

[SFX mourning dove calls]

Ah, there's a pair of mourning doves up in that sugar maple, calling as if in answer to that fiddle. Their song does indeed sound mournful, doesn't it? It also sounds like a poem, like a deep well of meaning cloaked within simplicity.

Ya know, I used to think their name referred to the dawn rather than the remorse in their voices. They were the bird I'd here first in the morning when I slept next to an open window. So, I was surprised when I finally saw the correct spelling of their name.

I'd wager these woods knew that sound long before those morning and mourning homophones existed, before it knew people or fiddles. How many species have heard that haunting, avian melody? How many ineffable feelings has it evoked in how many non-human minds?

Once upon a time, long before I had heard the word "cryptonaturalist," I had an encounter with a creature I could not explain. That encounter happened not too terribly far from this spot, here in the Catskills.

I was generously referred to an expert. That expert was Valentina Blackwood.

I told her my story and I referred to the creature I encountered as, "a monster."

Those of you who know Valentina can probably guess the look I received for that particular word choice. Then and there, I received my first formal lesson on cryptonature, starting with an explanation of why we don't use words like "monster."

Cryptids are not monsters, no more than a black bear or a water bear is a monster. "Monster" is a word we use when we let another creature be defined by

our own subjective fear of the unknown. It's both arrogant and a way to slam the door shut on curiosity.

It's also deeply human and, so, we have to pay attention to that old impulse to label and dismiss.

Think of that old phrase used by cartographers to describe uncharted waters.

"Here there be monsters."

Well, step into a wild place and be perfectly honest with yourself about what you are sensing all around you. How many of these waters are uncharted? The secret lives of trees. The life-rich soil beneath my boots. The character and intimate lives of ants. So many uncharted waters.

Here there be monsters? No. Here there be family. Here there be a rich tapestry of living expressions of our shared universe and endless causes for gratitude.

Heh, a bit wordy I guess, but worth writing on the edges of our uncharted waters.

There's something moving in the shadowed hollow of this big, old cottonwood tree. I think it's probably today's hidden lore segment. I'm going to move my recorder into that hollow and see what I can capture.

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[SFX recorder jostling into knothole – hidden lore has hollow/echo sound of emanating deep within the tree]

The Bone Mother's Daughter

I am her only child. Why does she dress me like this? A dragonfly flits past. I hold my tongue. There's no magic in this. There's no magic at all. No magic anywhere. I know that. But they don't. The tribe. What I do isn't magic. What I do is how I live. The hounds obey me because I talk to them. I can predict the weather just by looking. It's my knowledge that heals people, my understanding of what is found in algae, mud, muck, sludge, rot, sediment, and all that makes up the living marrow of the Earth. Those same people believe I am a shaman because I'm the Bone Mother's daughter. So does she. I know the things they can't be bothered to know. Or her. That's all. No sorcery. No nonsense. No magical robes. No peering

up into the skies reaching hands up towards the clouds in worship. As always, I'll wait 'till she's asleep, slip out of this costume she's covered me in, then go naked into the swamp, wading out through the waterlilies, sedges, reeds and rushes, then pull this thick fetid wet blackness over my head, and by imitating the actions of frogs – propel my body down – and further and further down, down, down into the soft all-enveloping silt at the swamp's base where I settle on my back and sink still further, and further and further until my gills begin to form.

[SFX jostling of recorder being pulled from the hollow tree]

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[SFX – footsteps through the woods resume/continue]

Magic is a matter of perspective, isn't it. We gain a little understanding and start to discount the relevance of the idea of magic. Ya know, I'm a lover of science, but I'd suggest we shouldn't be so quick to overlook the value in a word like "magic."

There's a clearing up ahead and I think we'll find our musician playing there.

Gotta say, I get it. If I had a way to serenade this place, like the fiddler, like the mourning doves, I'd feel called to do it too.

Long before I ever saw anything that people would call a cryptid, my mother took me for daily walks in the woods out behind our house. I think of those walks often, especially around this time of year. Spring was always particularly special. That's when she'd point out the bumble bees bouncing around beneath the may apples. The jack-n-the-pulpit. The trillium and the bloodroot. The cream-white dogwood blooms with the little rust spots on each petal.

I remember the first time we encountered an eastern box turtle, black and orange, part Halloween, part leaf-litter. Eyes as red as holly berries. I lifted it up and looked into those eyes, long claws digging into my small hands. The turtle pulled back into its shell and the front underside tilted up, closing with a soft, hushing sound, completely hiding the beaked snout.

All these many decades later, I can still feel the electricity in the air from that encounter. Kids know what adults so often forget.

It's all magic.

A housefly on an apartment windowsill. A little brown bat swooping beneath a streetlight. A single, curling hawthorn leaf tumbling down a busy sidewalk with crumpled receipts and paper straw wrappers. Magic.

I dare you to tell me a turtle that can shut its front door is any less strange than a sasquatch or an electric king snake. Look around, friends. It's all impossibly wonderful.

[SFX fiddle volume increases]

Nah, cryptids aren't less magical than the nature everyone can observe in their daily lives. Remembering that is especially important for folks in my field. Mostly, because it's simply true and all naturalists should revel in the paradoxical absurdity in what seems "simply true" about our world.

If you notice that fiddle getting a bit louder, that's because I've entered the clearing.

I have indeed found the source of the music. It's a grove fiddler.

I suppose folks from other parts of the world might need a little more explanation. I'll give it a shot.

What's a grove fiddler?

Well, picture an old man. Now, imagine that man as a thinner version of a 1950s style sci-fi robot. Good, not replace all those boxy, metal shapes with lovingly carved and polished wood.

Hmm. Let me try another angle.

Okay, imagine somebody's grandpa, except he's also a traditional Black Forest Cuckoo Clock. Minus the clock. And... with eyes that are baseball-sized peepholes into midnight with a single, golden candle flame hovering within each, dark circle.

Got it?

That's a grove fiddler.

This one's head seems to be hollow at the crown, like an ornate wooden bucket. Well, not a bucket so much as a planter.

A particularly hearty looking ostrich fern is cascading over the rim of his head.

Handsome fellow.

Those of you familiar with grove fiddlers are probably bracing yourselves, but don't worry. He gave me the nod as I entered the clearing, so I won't have to do the whole riddle business.

I think he and I both understand it's a little too lovely out here to break the spell of breeze and song.

Hmm. I'm noticing something striking on the old stump that's serving as the fiddler's stage.

Think I'll slowly... respectfully... take a closer look.

The old fiddler is watching my approach, but seems perfectly happy to share the clearing with me.

[SFX – fiddle volume increases a bit more]

[SFX – footsteps slow, then sound of kneeling in the leaves]

Wow. On the side of the stump is a truly massive cluster of dryad's saddle polypore fungus, like a stack of dinnerplates stuck into the old wood.

It's really amazing. I don't know that I've ever seen a collection of dryad's saddle quite this impressive.

The fiddler is watching me with those flickering golden eyes.

I'm nodding to the fungus and touching my heart, trying to convey my admiration.

Heh. Yeah. He understands.

A toothy, wooden smile and another nod.

Gotta admit, I didn't know grove fiddlers had mouths. There's always more to learn, isn't there?

Well, this here recorder is starting to feel out of place in my hands, so I'm going to shut it down and drink in this beautiful scene and sounds while the light lasts.

Thank you for coming along on my walk.

And, just in case you need reminded, there's a worthy world full of lovely sights waiting for you out there. Don't forget to go and notice.

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

### **Show Notes: Episode 56: A Walk in the Woods (00:19:45)**

**There's something playing music just down the path, but that isn't the only worthy mystery beneath the trees.**

Today's hidden lore was "The Bone Mother's Daughter" by Tim Goldstone. Tim Goldstone is based on a true event. He has roamed widely and currently writes in remote rural Wales. Published internationally in numerous print and online journals and anthologies, including *The Speculative Book*, *Altered States*, *Veil: Journal of Darker Musings*, *Selcouth Station*, *I Become The Beast*, *DarkWinter*, *Medusa's Kitchen*, *Pyre*, *Toil & Trouble*, *Coven Poetry*, *Dark Fire Fiction*, *Red Wolf Periodical*, and forthcoming in *Flash - The International Short-Short Story magazine*, among other venues. His prose sequence was read on stage at The Hay Festival, and his poetry presented on *Digging for Wales*. Scriptwriting credits for TV, radio, theatre. Loiters in twitter @muddygold

Thanks to Amanda Milstein for voicing this episode's hidden lore. Amanda Milstein is a personal friend of the podcast, amateur voice actor and full-time nerd. You can also hear her as Vendetta Violent on the *Violent Life Podcast*.

To find bonus content and a variety of strange rewards, support our show by visiting [Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist](https://Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist). You can also help by rating, reviewing, and telling a friend.

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](http://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](http://CryptoNaturalist.com).

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

Reminder: Transcripts of this and every episode are available at [cryptonaturalist.com](http://cryptonaturalist.com).

Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

**Post Script:**

Intrigue, like love, like awe, is subjective. When you encounter a lovely mystery of the natural world, you don't need to hold it up against the full body of human knowledge in order to justify your amazement. Just lean into your instinct for magic, lean into that instinctual pull to fall in love with your world.