

Episode 58: Ghost Flies
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

Recalling that your own imagination is also a part of nature, is one way to reconnect with the gorgeous wellspring of magic that our universe hides in plain sight.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

[SFX – breeze and wind chimes, subtle creek of old boards]

Good evening listeners.

The sun set a few minutes ago. I'm sitting on hay bail in a weathered barn the dusty gray of an aged elephant. The boards seem to have shrunk since they were first nailed in place, so that I can still see the rising moon through the cracks. The wind is up and its searching fingers are finding all those gaps, reaching the wind chimes dangling from the loft. It smells like dust and hay and the memory of horses.

I'm here because of ghosts.

The old fella who owns this barn and I have a mutual friend who passed on news of a haunting.

I consulted my library of CryptoNaturalist writings and found that here in eastern Nebraska the time and weather was right for ghost flies.

See, ghost flies are a bit like cicadas, living most of their lives underground before surfacing for a brief time. Different broods follow different timetables, some notable populations rising at the end of October. But, not this spring group here in the cornhusker state. Of course, unlike cicadas, ghost flies are about the size of a pinhead and when they gather in mating swarms they bioluminescence a pale blue or green.

Yet, it's the shape of those glowing swarms that earned them their name.

The ghost flies seem to cling to the shape of, well, lives that have passed on from the world. At least that's the predominant theory. Whether they are revealing the presence of an actual specter or following the currents of some form of place-bound memory is unclear. I'd say it's unclear that such a distinction even matters.

What does matter is that they are a rare and spectacular sight.

So, here I sit. Right where I'm told light and movement has been seen the last few evening. Clutching my recorder to my chest and talking to you good folks.

[SFX – hand radio chirp]

Ah, hold on a sec. My radio is peepin' at me.

I'm guessing that's Cassandra with today's hidden lore segment.

Hi Cassandra. I'm here. Go ahead.

[SFX – hand radio chirp and click]

Chrysalis

One day the caterpillar
forms a chrysalis,
waits a while,
becomes a butterfly.
They told us this much, told us to wait
for chitin to split, for the emergence
of dazzling colors and pumping wings.
But they never talked about
what really happened inside:
how the caterpillar's whole body
dissolves,
how for a time
there is nothing but soupy liquid,

butterfly goo, formless but for the
rigid purse holding it in midair.
And no one told us, either,
that when the caterpillar was born,
while it grew and crawled along,
a few cells called imaginal
already held instructions for what to build
when it came time for another body.
Here, the shining eye, the scaled wings.
Let me remind you of the power
of sticking around.
If you feel shapeless and scared,
imagine yourself in that tiny,
thin-walled shell, whistling in the dark,
some part of you already knowing the way.

[SFX – hand radio chirp and click]

Roger that. Thanks Cassandra.

What a lovely poem. It's hard to overstate the importance of sticking around. Nature contains myriad change and potential, but she does indeed need time to work. It's worth remembering that. It's sometimes impossible to know which hardships in our lives are part of building our own chrysalises. Or what we're on the way to becoming. Eh?

[SFX – fretting, rusted hinges as the barn door blows open and thuds against the wall – outdoor sounds intensify with the door open/wind and spring peepers]

Ah, hang on a sec. The wind just blew open the door. Lemme see if I can get it latched again.

[SFX – footsteps in the straw. Closing/latching the barn door. Outdoor sounds fade.]

Alright, I got it.

[SFX – return to the hay bail / taking a seat]

Ah, maybe more than just the wind came in when the door blew open. There's a glimmer in the air by that old horse stall.

Yes... a shape... it's the ghost flies alright.

The glow is the color of sea glass, a pale green, fine as dust. It's condensing into a figure...

It looks like a man in a wide-brimmed hat. He's standing at the shattered door of that broken down stall and... he's raising his hand to stroke the face of a horse I cannot see.

His jaw seems to be moving, like he's talking to the invisible animal.

It seems like he's saying something... gentle.

The tiny flies are bright enough that each broken board and discarded old farming implement is throwing off shadows in the ghost-light.

Ah, the swarm, the figure, is turning away and moving toward the door.

I know he can't see me, but I couldn't help nodding at him. It just seems polite.

[SFX – door blows open again and CN shuts and latches it]

There goes the door again!

Okay, got it.

Back in darkness. The swarm is gone. The ghost is gone.

I think I'll sit here for a spell and catch back up with you back in the RV. I want to gather my thoughts.

[SFX – recording clicks off and then resumes in Cassandra’s studio. Ambient sounds are gone.]

Hi again, listeners. I’m back in my regular studio.

I’ve been pondering the ghost flies. They are, of course, fascinating and worthy creatures all on their own. But, they also reflect some aspect of the world back to those who observe them.

They are a mirror held up to reality.

Sometimes, like tonight, that mirror shows us something soft and, perhaps, a bit bittersweet. A scene from a bygone time.

Other times... well... I’ve seen the ghost flies on many occasions. I seem to have a knack for encountering them.

Yes, I’ve seen them take on human shape before. But, I’ve also seen them in the shape of Thylacine. Passenger pigeons. Caspian tigers. And Sicilian wolves. All species that were driven to extinction in the past 100 years.

If ghost fly swarms are a kind of mirror, it is fair to say that the reflection is not always a pleasant sight. Yet, when that’s the case, the mirror is hardly to blame.

Still, some sights and memories are all the more vital because they are difficult. May they haunt us constructively and teach us to do better.

Well, I see a field report light flashing here on my console.

Let’s take a listen.

[SFX – Field Report Click]

This is Travis Jaynes broadcasting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1. Once, when I was a kid, I emerged onto a roadside after a day of creek-walking and nearly bumped into an old man sitting on the berm.

There I was, soaked jeans and muddy everything, carrying an old pickle jar full of tea-colored water and a crawdad doomed to be my pet for the next few weeks. The old fella looked me up and down and asked one question.

“You know who owns this property, son?”

I answered with the confidence of a ten-year-old.

“Nobody owns it. It’s the woods.”

He grinned.

“Well, the law says different. Says I own it. Now, the woods would say they own themselves. And, if we’re being honest, the woods was here before the law.”

I didn’t have an answer for that. I was running the kid-math on whether or not I was in trouble and if it was worth making a run for it.

I guess he read the thought behind my expression.

“Look, young man,” he said. “I’m not concerned about it.”

I was relieved, but then he said something that kicked over a bucket of ice water in my guts.

“Just don’t go north of here. There’s a big, old stump up stream where the creek splits. Stay away from it. That stump’s been there all my life and it’s never been quite right. You get me?”

I didn’t.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

He asked for “my word” and I gave it, not thinking much about it but recognizing a way to end the conversation.

He swiped a fingertip through the roadside dust and touched it to my forehead.

I flinched.

“You have yourself a good day,” he said and I turned homeward, going as fast as I could without spilling my new pet.

Then, something very unusual happened.

I listened to him. I took his advice. I kept my word. I didn’t mean to, but something about those words put a splinter between my eyes and it threatened to sink deeper anytime I even looked toward the place he’d warned me against. The years got on and the memory dulled like a sun-faded can down among the ditch-lilies.

I grew up and I began to see things in the woods that other people didn’t. I know many of you listening to this can relate.

My interests led me to become a cryptonaturalist and my passions and profession put me on friendly terms with many an odd and unsettling sight beneath the trees.

Ignorance leads to fear, but curiosity adds new variables to that equation. The unknown is fearful, but it's often up to us if that fear is a wall or a gateway.

So, decades after my talk with that old man, I went back to those woods that nobody owns. I went back armed with new knowledge and experience.

I scabbled down the hillside to the creek, smiling at the crawdad holes, little chimneys built of mud cobbles.

I didn't walk in the water, the way I once had. I traced along the bank, moving quiet, hoping to glimpse a mink or a muskrat, the fabled phantoms of my childhood wanderings.

I felt that splinter again. It was like a shard of crystalline nostalgia digging into my mind. I tried to drown the sensation with a deluge of my stubborn curiosity and had a bit of luck. The ache eased.

Somehow, I knew the exact moment when I had gone further north along that creek than I ever had before. I pressed on.

It wasn't far.

There was the stump. Big as a toolshed. Alive with cascading moss and toadstools pale as a rat snake's belly.

I stopped.

I didn't mean to stop. I just did.

Movement drew my eye up and there, sitting cross-legged on top of all that rotting wood, was the old man I'd met twenty years earlier.

He looked much the same, except he was naked but for a mantle of curling autumn leaves draped over his shoulders. A crown, toothy with honey locust thorns, hovered six inches above his lank, gray hair.

I looked at him and felt the creek of my own thoughts swelling with frigid snowmelt, escaping its banks. I smelled loam and mildew, soil and leaf-rot.

He inclined his head, then made a "turn around" gesture, stirring the air with one knob-knuckled finger.

I gave an awkward little bow, then obeyed. I desperately wanted to look back. I didn't.

Maybe nobody owns the woods. Maybe the woods own themselves. But it's worth remembering that each stretch of trees is at least as diverse as people and... well... their opinions on ownership will vary.

Travis Jaynes, signing off.

[SFX – Field Report Click]

Ah... ownership is indeed a topic of some debate.

Personally, I think ownership should come with a responsibility to understand and enrich. It seems to me that any real connection with place should start there. The trees, like so many residents of woodland communities, are great teachers of living in a way that makes their world better with their presence.

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

Show Notes: Episode 58: Ghost Flies (00:19:45)

What counts as a ghost is, perhaps, open to interpretation.

Thanks to Steve Shell for voicing today's field report. Steve is a co-creator, writer, and voice of the narrator on the Old Gods of Appalachia podcast. Old Gods is entering the homestretch of their fourth season and will be heading out on tour again this summer.

Thanks to Emilie Lygren for today's hidden lore poem, "Chrysalis." Emilie Lygren is a poet and educator who has published poems in several literary journals and anthologies and developed dozens of publications focused on outdoor science education. Her first collection of poems, *What We Were Born For*, was selected by the Young People's Poet Laureate as the Poetry Foundation's monthly book pick for February 2022. Emilie lives in San Rafael, California, where she wonders about oaks and teaches poetry in local classrooms. Find her online at: emilielygren.com

Thanks to Leslie Anderson for reading today's hidden lore. You know Leslie as the voice of Cassandra and the voice of the credits. You may not know that Leslie has a new horror novel coming this August from Quirk Books. The book is titled *The Unmothers* and it's a folk horror-mystery about a journalist going to a small town to investigate a rumor about a horse giving birth to a healthy, human baby.

"*The Unmothers* is exquisite and haunting in equal measure. . . . Nauseatingly tense and crushingly insightful. This book represents an absolutely vital entry into the horror canon." —Sarah Gailey, nationally best-selling author of *The Echo Wife* and *Just Like Home*

For preorder information, visit LeslieJAnderson.com

Preorders for Jarod K. Anderson's new memoir about loving nature and struggling with depression are now open. Visit JarodKAnderson.com for more information. To find bonus content and a variety of strange rewards, support our show by visiting 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.

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:

If you see a ghost, treat it with the same gentle care with which we should approach all natural wonders of our world.