

Episode 59: Moon Shadow
Written by Jarod K. Anderson

We don't own wonders of nature, but we do become a part of them simply by contributing our joy and gratitude.

Welcome to The CryptoNaturalist.

[MUSIC – MAIN THEME]

Recently, I had the good fortune to experience the total solar eclipse on April 8th. I was in a little patch of woodland near Mansfield, Ohio.

I'd spent much of the morning and afternoon pacing about and cataloging all the spring ephemerals that were blooming in the area. The spotty-leaves of trout lily. The snow-white petals of bloodroot. Bluebells. Trillium. And spring beauties.

Ya know, it may have been my imagination, but it felt like I wasn't the only creature beneath the trees anticipating the coming eclipse.

On one hand, an eclipse is just the moon's shadow. On the other hand, night is just the Earth's shadow and nobody doubts night's role in the cycles of life on our planet.

How many characteristics of our universe are echoed in the myriad patterns and behaviors of life?

The seasons. The tides. The Earth's magnetic field. Solar weather.

Heck, just think of the frost moths of Alaska and the way their entire vibrant lifecycles are dictated by the aurora borealis. Or the magma trout that can only breed in actively flowing lava.

There are endless examples of life mirroring the physicality of their environment. And, what could be more natural?

Sometimes, I think we fall into the trap of looking at a distant mountain or a shooting star and thinking of such things as just the setting upon which the story of life is unfolding. Background scenery to the main action, as it were.

Yet, it isn't background scenery. It's both the playwright and our fellow cast members. The physical nature of the universe is not just where life happens. It's the reason life happens. It is in conversation with life. After all, what are we but a sort of waking dream built from iron and water and sunlight.

When I look around at the Earth, sometimes it hits me that I don't just "happen to be here." I am an expression of here, like ocean currents or snowfall or the very specific character of our planet's gravity, a feeling we know too intimately to easily describe.

Point being, it occurred to me that while a total solar eclipse is a rare enough occurrence, it would be foolish of me not to keep my senses attuned to eclipse-dependent behavior. Whatever that might be.

And... the fact that I'm mentioning this at all... gives you a pretty solid hint about where this episode is headed.

[SFX – pneumatic tube sound]

Ah, but first thing's first.

[SFX – unfolding paper]

Cassandra has just sent me a delivery and... yes... I believe this is today's hidden lore segment.

Water Beetles

A change occurs when you immerse yourself in a cold freshwater lake. Your breath quickens. Your blood vessels constrict. Your heartbeat struggles to keep up.

The initial leap into cold water can be distressing but—as every avid swimmer knows—this distress passes quickly. In mere seconds it recedes, giving way to a soothing, blissful sensation.

You may think this acclimation comes from within, from signals sent by your skin to your hypothalamus.

Not so.

Look around. Do you see the insects, swimming in playful circles across the water's surface? Each one like a single grain of wild rice, given life by the nutrient-rich alluvium. Each one a fragment of the darkness that circles the planets, the sun, the stars. Each one a distant relative to the flecks of nonbeing that drift through the mucus membranes of your eyes.

All water beetles possess a small amount of clairvoyance. They are capable of seeing, knowing, and most importantly, transferring. When you enter their habitat, you form a connection with them. Your thoughts dance and mingle, spiraling through the water. Their love of the cold and the wet becomes yours.

It is a comfortable symbiosis. A welcome amalgamation. The beetles are happy to receive your thoughts; they find you soothing as well.

When you return to the land—be it by clambering onto the sandy shore, the water-logged planks of an old wooden dock, or back into your small, rusted boat—the exchange is over. Your thoughts are once again your own. A lonely feeling, isn't it?

It doesn't have to be this way. If you'll allow it, the water beetles' consciousness can find a permanent residence inside you. Next time you find yourself enveloped in the welcoming embrace of a freshwater lake; invite them to stay.

The cold and the wet will no longer distress you. Instead, they will feel like coming home.

Ah, a lovely piece and solid advice. I often invite aspects of nature to stay. And, somehow, I seem to grow alongside those invitations so that the woodlands and meadows of my heart never feel too crowded.

As afternoon arrived and the eclipse neared, I took an old camp chair to the edge of the woods, where the land sloped down into a lake called clear fork reservoir.

I plopped down in my chair, donned my eclipse glasses and settled in to watch the waning of the sun.

I lost track of how long the process took as the moon moved in front of our beloved star. Watching, it seemed like I stepped outside time, like I was watching the moon cycle through its phases at a pace that was both slow and bizarrely fast.

It was a month passing by in minutes, the wonder magnified by the eclipse glasses through which only the shrinking disk of the sun was visible, breath by breath, shifting from circle to crescent.

When the totality arrived... well... I've been around a while now and sometimes I am caught off guard by the sheer magnitude of amazement this world can drop in my lap.

The sun was now just a rim of light, the sun's outer atmosphere, the corona clearly visible.

I recalled that the word "corona" comes from the Latin for "crown," and, at that moment, the word seemed more appropriate than ever.

It felt like the temperature dipped about eight degrees.

The birdsong changed, robins calling out their dusk melodies.

Across the water I heard the trilling call of an eastern screech owl.

It wasn't dawn. It wasn't dusk. It wasn't night. There was something entirely unique to the quality of the light.

There was a tinkling sound like tiny, silver bells at my feet. I looked down to find a single flower, shining like polished chrome in the unearthly light. It shivered and chimed again as I knelt down.

In that moment, I desperately wanted to be two people.

I wanted to keep staring at the totality, the corona, drinking in the weightless feeling of a rare wonder.

I also wanted to keep studying the sudden flower, chronicling a singular mystery, giving all my senses over to the unknown.

It was an impossible choice to make, so I did my best to look back and forth, beset above and below by gifts of beauty and majesty.

High in the sky, I felt the tension of time being pulled taught, the inevitability of a wonder that cannot last.

Down in the leaf litter, I felt something similar.

The corona blazed like nothing on Earth, the sun's power held at bay, for a moment, by the moon, a profound orb of stone in endless freefall around our planet, an object that has no business being the exact correct size to create a perfect solar eclipse... but is anyway.

The eclipse flower shivered and chimed. It rotated at a nearly imperceptible pace that seemed somehow tethered to cosmic clockwork beyond guessing.

Above, in the span of a heartbeat, a slender column of sunlight poured around the rim of the moon and I had to look away. A different sort of dawn cresting a far-off lunar horizon.

The tiny, metallic flower, so out-of-place on the forest floor, quivered and then shed its five shining petals. The remaining stem vanished in a shower of white sparks that disappeared in the air like a magician's flash paper.

Those chrome petals sat still for only a moment, then each creased and divided into forewings and hindwings. They fluttered experimentally before, in unison, they shot skyward. Not a flutter. A shot. The air sizzled like rain on pavement from the speed of their passage.

I certainly couldn't follow their progress, but I judged their trajectory as roughly moonward.

The moon has always loved her moths. Perhaps, a few, she calls home to her own rocky lands.

Having consulted the cryptonaturalist literature in the days that followed, I have found no mention of such a flower.

Yet, strangely, I don't feel comfortable giving it a name.

That tiny flower feels... well, it's hard to articulate, but... it feels too big for me to give it a name.

Perhaps others will feel differently and I'll leave the naming to them.

What more is there to say about the flower? About the eclipse?

It's funny to think that the eclipse is a simple matter of perspective, more a function of the position of the observer than any fundamental change in the sun or the moon.

There's a lesson in that.

Our perspective, whether in the context of lending our wonder to a flowering patch of clover or hope for an uncertain future, can seem like a mere illusion, yet it absolutely carries the weight of planets.

We have some choice in matters of perspective.

There's power in that realization.

May we each discover and cultivate a perspective that leads us to love and wonder. May we each find amazement among the rare and commonplace alike.

A total eclipse is a rare event, but no more unique and unlikely than you and me.

And... on that note...

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

Show Notes: Episode 59: Moon Shadow (00:18:45)

Night is Earth's shadow and many creatures call it home. The moon's shadow

Thanks to Nicolette Nuytten for today's hidden lore, "Water Bettles." Nicolette works at the library and spends her free time walking in the woods or reading everything she can get her grubby little hands on. She lives in Manitoba with her wife and a little grey chinchilla. You can find her at www.nicolettenuytten.com or on Twitter @LibraryNii

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

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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.

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Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

Post Script:

The moon has been circling us for a very long time. There are those who believe she is preparing to attack. Personally, I like to think we're locked in a friendly, eons-long dance contest.