

Episode 30: Basic Facts About Owls
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And when you looked back the way you had come, there were no footprints in the sand, because the invisible mirage-scorpion of the dunes erases the tracks of its intended prey.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

[Background: Ambient Wind/Cricket Noises]

Howdy Listeners, today we're talking about owls. I'm sitting here in the treetops of Vermont's White Mountain National Forest. The sun set an hour ago and I'm looking forward to a night of fragrant forest air and quiet observation. Well, not too quiet. I do have a episode to record while I'm up here.

Back in episode 9, I told you a bit about the origin of some owls. If I may be allowed to paraphrase myself:

[Clears Throat]

"You flinch at leaf shadows
Tumbling across your path
And they notice you flinching.

The thought gets under their skin,
Starts them asking questions to your back
As you walk on.

"Are we something to fear?"

Two nights later,

The shadows pile into three dimensions,
Hop twice, and fly off on soundless wings.

[Clears Throat Again]

Now, that bit of owl knowledge is noncontroversial. In fact, I expect that's a fun bit of owl trivia that even most non-CryptoNaturalists know. On the other hand, owls are a particularly controversial creature, epistemologically speaking. What we know and don't know and don't know we don't know about owls is a favorite topic of many lovers of nocturnal and crepuscular wildlife. So, I thought I might use this episode to establish a bit of a baseline in our ongoing conversation about owls.

If you don't mind, let's start with a tidy little list of the most noncontroversial owl facts.

Fact One: Owls own all eyes. Even if you have an eye or two snugly nestled into your face, the truth is you're just borrowing them from owls and deep down you know this.

Fact Two: If you see an owl, its because the owl wanted you to see it. Speculating on why the owl wished to be seen is a great way to get a nosebleed and attract lightning strikes.

Fact Three: Owls are birds in name only. They are actually more closely related to that creaking noise you sometimes hear whenever you sleep in an unfamiliar location.

Fact Four: Owls are the only land animals that weigh less than their shadows.

Fact Five: The Owl Queen Sits on darkling throne of twisted branch and splintered bone and when she calls out to the dark it comes and smothers every spark.

When next you hear her asking “who?,” make no mistake, the answer’s you.

Fact Six: A group of owls is called a parliament.

Fact Seven: If you take the time to learn facts about owls, they will take the time to learn facts about you. Fair warning.

Fact Eight: Owls breathe, but not oxygen.

Fact Nine: Possums and owls tend to be friends. The owls really wish people would be nicer to possums.

Fact Ten: Every living owl corresponds to an unwritten poem. If that poem is ever actually written, the corresponding owl will vanish.

Now, those are, of course, the fairly well known and well understood owl facts.

So, let’s move on to the more controversial material. ‘Course, I’m not about to list *every* controversial owl theory or I’ll be yammering on well past morning.

The heart of a lot of the stranger ideas about owls comes from folks' general feeling that owls are somehow alien, that, in one sense or another, they come from outside our natural world. Take that unusual belief and set it next to what we know about these creatures. One of the things we know is that owls have been around a lot longer than us humans. So, if they're aliens, then what does that make us? Anyway, I've never had the feeling that owls are overly strange. Heck, what can we call strange in the context of nature? We don't think trees are strange, even though they eat sunlight, are regularly over one hundred feet tall, and can live for thousands of years. The truth is, I've been doing this long enough that I can hardly keep track of what is and what isn't considered a cryptid. It's simply unfamiliarity that breeds the mystique of magic and legend. I've never seen a baby crow, but does that mean I think crows are worthy of awe? Well... yes, yes I do believe that. And I would argue that awe is a very reasonable response to much of what nature has to teach us.

[Buzzing]

Oh. My hat's vibrating. That tingles. I guess that mean's we have a remote transmission from Cassandra. Let's take a listen.

[Static Sounds]

Hank Green Transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

The anglerfish. A 100-million-year-old species named for a 16th century idiom for fishing with a hook and line. A young name for an ancient creature.

And does the deep sea anglerfish really “fish?”

Picture it.

A flicker. A will-o-the wisp. A solitary star hanging in a sky that will never know a dawn. A lone light down in the crushing, timeless dark miles beneath the gulls and the sparkling foam. The weight of the ocean pressing down and one small glow defining the blackness through contrast. Ushering in the concept of dark simply by offering an alternative. The deep sea anglerfish.

No, I think that’s a little more than just fishing.

Really take a moment to think about her. Let her swim into your mind as you lay down to sleep tonight. She’s down there right now you know. As you sit filling your lungs with air, she’s down there in those obsidian waters just as she was a million years ago. Her parasitic mate, closer than close, just as real and semi-alive as you and me.

Consider. Without any protection, you could conceivably survive longer in the vacuum of space than in the home waters of the deep sea anglerfish, yet she’s been down there carrying her bioluminescent torch since before the first primates walked the Earth.

My fellow CryptoNaturalists, I know that these field reports are usually reserved for new discoveries of strange and hidden nature, but I’m transmitting today to remind us that amazing organisms don’t stop being amazing just because we’ve named them and observed the basics of their behavior.

If a fire-breathing dragon walked through the front door of the American Museum of Natural History and presented herself for study, how long before we would all agree that the deep sea anglerfish is several orders of magnitude more odd? Six months?

Seven tops.

So, I guess my point is that wonders have a knack for hiding in plain sight. Sometimes the magic of nature has more to do with noticing than with novelty.

Hank Green signing off.

[End]

Huh, that was thematically appropriate to what we were just discussing. Funny how that happens.

The wind is kicking up a bit, listener, so I should probably end our chat and focus on holding on to these branches.

[Owl Hooting]

Ah, speak of the devil. I believe that's the call of a great horned owl. I remember the first time I heard an owl call in the forest at night. It filled me with a dizzying sense of wonder, a curiosity as nourishing as mountain air. It still does.

[Owl Hooting Continues]

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

Show Notes: Episode 30: Basic Facts About Owls (00:15:05)

Credits

Special thanks to Hank Green. Hank Green is the CEO of Complexly, a production company that creates educational content, including Crash Course and SciShow, prompting The Washington Post to name him "one of America's most popular science teachers." Hank co-hosts Dear Hank and John, an advice podcast, and Delete This, a review of his Twitter feed. Find out more about Hank's many delightful projects at HankGreen.com.

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