

Episode 32: Tree Bug
Written by Jarod K. Anderson
www.cryptonaturalist.com

Reptiles rely on sunlight to raise their body temperature. So do we, we just add a lot more steps than they do.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Ghost insects. Walking sticks. Stick bugs. These are the phasmids. Insects that look like bits of twig or leaf. They are gentle herbivores, but some folks still find them unsettling. In many ways, their camouflage is more effective than pure invisibility.

After all, if you bump into an invisible object, you'll seek for an explanation to what you've just felt. You don't notice anything if you encounter a phasmid. The explanation for their presence is baked into the disguise itself. They disappear into the commonplace. They vanish into the mundane. Unless you live in Antarctica, I can all but guarantee that you've stared directly at one of these gentle creatures without ever registering its presence.

I'd say humans could learn a thing or two from these creatures. I've met more than a few people who seem to think raw power and perceived danger are the best paths to safety. Well, I've seen many a menacing and venomous spider plucked up by a sparrow. I don't believe I've ever seen a phasmid snatched up by

a predator. Maybe there's something to be said for gentleness and finding harmony with your landscape, hmm?

Stick bugs might be subtle, but my foreshadowing is not. As you have no doubt guessed, my inestimable Winnebago and I spend the week seeking out that rarest of the stick insect family, the great tree bug. A giant, glorious arthropod that doesn't mimic a twig or a single leaf, but a towering tree. I expect that these creatures are the basis for many old stories about walking forests or trees that stoop to study passing travelers. Certainly, they are deserving of legend.

Rumor among CryptoNaturalists suggest that there is staggering variation among individual tree bugs, that through mechanisms we don't yet understand, young tree bugs grow in shape and size to mimic a specific tree species. So, there are oak tree bugs and elm. Shaggy shagbark hickory bugs. Short, crooked dogwood bugs. Flowering cherry tree bugs and so on and so on.

Now, typically insect size is limited because their respiratory methods cannot support larger forms. Insects don't have lungs and their blood doesn't carry oxygen, instead gas exchange happens through more passive methods.

Atmospheric oxygen reaching tissue via openings throughout the body. Well, tree bugs circumvent this issue by not having solid bodies. Their bodies have a more porous design than their smaller counterparts, like a huge ridged sculptures of

lace. Additionally, they have the help of a symbiotic relationship with a certain small fly that shelters within the tree bug and, through constant wing motion, circulates air throughout the creature's structure. This is both a practical benefit to the tree bug and, from my perspective, beautiful to behold. Tree bugs carry with them their own phantom breeze that is forever rustling their leaves coaxing the smell of loam and leaf litter into the air. It is utterly mesmerizing.

Against all odds and reasonable expectation, I did manage to find a tree bug and spent much of last week watching its subtle movements. This bug, which I nicknamed Cat because of the low, purring sound of all the flies humming around its body, looked precisely like a gray-barked maple tree. The illusion was near perfect, except for thin fissures running vertically up Cat's central trunk. These fissures would open silently into four jointed legs whenever Cat continued their slow waltz around the forest, grazing on the upper canopy of leaves. Cat usually waited until the wind picked up to move, capitalizing on the dance of branch and leaf to mask their movement. When this happened, I would pick up my camp chair and follow slowly behind at a respectful distance. If Cat ever noticed my presence, they didn't show it. High in the branches, I believe I picked out Cat's head at one point. There were two dark eyes that looked incongruously small compared to the body they guided. But, then, I don't suppose sight is a vital

component to survival when you spend your life standing in an unending buffet of your favorite food. What a rich, strange, and beautiful life they must lead.

Speaking of beautiful things, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment. Today's hidden lore segment is a poem by Terry Maggert.

Hidden Lore:

Burroughs and the Congolese Dragon

Samuel's sweaty back is in front of me,

Swaying to the beat of a path that is

Part rumor, part roots, all mud

Wheezing in the sodden heat

Wondering if the stories are true

In my pack, a yellowed volume by Burroughs

Where dinosaurs and men walk together

And the plesiosaur is served medium-rare

"Sammy, think this thing has wings?"

She hesitates, then shakes her head, pulling

Hard at a root, feet sliding

“Nah. I wish. You?”

I take her hand—lean from the field, hard

From work, she pulls me up and over

To the next descent, canopy thicker

As gloom closes in, pushing our offices

And daily lives farther away

It’s full dusk when we hear the first roar

“Don’t say—”

“Primal,” I reply

But Sammy is already running

Wet sounds just ahead

And my boots too caked with reality

To outrun the legend

It is fascinating that folks once believed that dinosaurs lived in the Congo. I

suppose it’s good for both the Congo and the dinosaurs that live there that they

don’t much believe that anymore.

Terry Maggert is an Author. He's left-handed. He likes dragons, coffee, waffles, running, and giraffes. Not necessarily in that order. With 32 novels and a dozen short stories, he's certainly got something to thrill, anger, or leave you wondering why he didn't become a professional baker. He doesn't sleep, but you probably guessed that already. Find his work on Amazon and Audible. Follow him on Twitter @TerryMaggert.

CryptoNaturalism is odd discipline in many ways. I could spend all day enumerating the physical characteristics of Cat the tree bug, which would be a valid scientific approach, but I have a deep and persistent feeling that that would miss the point here. Cat is much more than the sum of their parts.

Once, Cat moved suddenly, a short step the left, then froze again. A cloud of tiny black flies rose up from their branches, swirled through the air like a building thunderhead in miniature, and then disappeared once more into the labyrinthian interior of Cat's body. There was a sweet, rotting leaf smell and for a moment the quiet purr became the growl of an engine.

See, that's not a thing to measure, but it's certainly something I needed to tell you.

I watched a pair of blue birds sit in Cat's branches. Sky on their backs, the earth on their chests. Two little patches of forever springtime. Watching them led my eye to the tattered remnants of an old robin's nest. Just think of that. A bird nesting on an insect. A small and precious oddity reminding us of the larger precious oddity that nature is forever full of surprises, forever beyond the grasp of a wholistic understanding because its more than a collection of things to know, it's a living, breathing work of art that changes every moment of every day. When you go out in nature, you aren't a witness to a place, you're a participant in an event. See, the universe isn't a place, it's an event. You can't sit on the sidelines because there are no sidelines. You are the nature that you love and even your love itself is as much a part of nature as any tall pine on a remote mountain peak. Well, now, there I go again. I've let the tides of poetry carry me out to sea and it's time to row back to shore.

I see we have a new field report. That's just what I need. Let's listen.

Field Report:

This is Jesse Thorn transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

Vampire bats.

You can try to tell me that they're fascinating. That bats are the only mammals that fly and, even more exceptional, vampire bats are the only mammals to

subsist solely on blood. Nature is amazing and full of wonder and blah, blah, blah, blah...

You can try to tell me that vampire bats are not a threat to humans and they only weigh about two ounces.

Well, bad news, friend. I'm not buying it.

Rain is wet. The sun is hot. And a Dracula is a Dracula.

Look, I'm a well-documented lover of animals and a champion admirer of adorable pet photos, but I need to draw the line somewhere.

You can ask me to praise the Peruvian werewolf penguin and you'll get no argument from me.

You can tell me to stroke the flowing bandages of Arkansas's famous mummy toads and I won't hesitate.

Heck, my best friend when I was a kid had a pet Frankenstein, but Draculas are just different.

I can understand that you might be skeptical.

I can hear you saying, "It's just a tiny bat. What's the big deal?"

Well, let's rattle off a few facts.

- Vampire bats are active during the darkest part of the night.
- They fly about a meter off the ground.
- Bats aren't blind, but they have an aggressive propaganda effort to convince you otherwise.
- Vampire bats have both echolocation and the ability to sense heat. Sorta like the monster from The Predator movies, but also with echolocation.
- They're eyes are droplets of elemental darkness summoned from a time before light.

· They are undead abominations that befoul the air with damp, leathery wings and sow nightmares wherever they fly.

Maybe some of you are saying, “but, Jesse, that’s just nature.”

Yeah? Well that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

Jesse Thorn, signing off.

Oh, Jesse, you are certainly not obligated to love every part of nature. That’s part of nature too. I guess I might argue with you about the term “Draculas,” but I don’t think we wanna get lost in semantics. I appreciate your report and your perspective.

Well, friends, after a week of peaceful joy with a fifty-foot insect, I’m back on the road. Recording this in my little bat-lined studio while Cassandra collects miles like a child plucking seashells from the beach.

[Thump]

Oof. Okay, I think that was an intentional pothole. Sorry, Cassandra, I know you’ve asked me to leave you out of my similes. It just slipped my mind.

You know, it’s true of a lot of cryptids, but of tree bugs especially. It’s hard to leave them behind once you’ve found them because, well, it is exceedingly unlikely that I could ever find Cat again. Yet, I have to remind myself that’s as it

should be. There are many wonders I will never see again. There are many wonders I will never see at all. And, what's the alternative? No, bittersweet is an important component to the flavor of life. I can console myself with the thought that you and I will almost certainly meet again.

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

Show Notes: Episode 32: Tree Bug (00:18:10)

Credits

Some of my favorite trees are actually fifty-foot insects.

Special thanks to Jesse Thorn. Jesse Thorn is the host and producer of Bullseye and Jordan, Jesse, Go!, and the co-host and producer of Judge John Hodgman. He's also the founder and proprietor of the Maximum Fun podcast network. I must say, that if it wasn't for the Maximum Fun network, I'm not sure that I ever would have taken an interest in podcasts or started this show. So, thank you, Jesse.

Exclusive stickers, pins, shirts, and access to bonus content and strange expertise on strange topics awaits you at our patreon page. Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist. 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. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod K. Anderson. 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.

Post Script:

Sometimes it's difficult to tell if you've spotted a tree bug. Try this trick. Press your ear to the trunk and listen for the purr of fly wings. If you're still not sure, keep your ear pressed to the tree for a day or so. If the tree moves away from your ear, it's a tree bug.