

The CryptoNaturalist Ep 1: The Blue Spruce
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Drink deep of the gathering gloom, fellow wanderers. And know that at each and every moment, two places on earth are held in that uneasy, weightless twilight space between night and day. *At least* two... that is...

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Jarod, here. I am your host, as you are mine. You have invited me into your ears and minds. You have not turned your nose up at my mud-caked boots, my burr-haunted beard, my green eyes so distant and shadowed from gazing too long into the rich loam, the secretive treetops, the jealous mountain valleys, the frankly catty streams and rivers. So, here we are together. Mutual hosts. Mutual seekers. Mutual thirsty vagabonds wandering in a scorching information-desert, our only water... the secrets of the wilderness.

Let us begin today exactly where I began the day, digging like a badger beneath a blue spruce in the parking lot landscaping of the Waffle House. Not far from the intersection of Ohio 71 and State Route 37. Blue spruces, as I expect most listeners to this program would already know, are renowned for sheltering unique, singular creatures of all sorts. They, of course, share that renowned with Waffle House landscaping in general. Yes, the venerable old biome of the Waffle House parking lot, not unlike the great coral reefs of mother Gaia, have seen the sunrise of new life and the sunset of extinction for many rare and fleeting species of flora and fauna. Most famously, the terrestrial sea horse and the mecha-shrew. So, listeners, you can imagine that the confluence of blue spruce and Waffle House was just too tempting a treat for this mossy old secret-hound to pass by.

Allow me to paint you a picture. 6:20AM on a morning in late April. Cold, but with the promise of a spring-fattened sun rising in a cobalt sky. The doppler whoosh and roar of the highway like the breath of a colossus stretched out on the couch of countryside. The sweet, smoky smell of shredded wood rising from the dark blanket of freshly spread mulch beneath my knees. The sweeter, smokier smell of the Waffle House an invisible companion to all my efforts. There could be little doubt that the stage was set for discovery.

There I was. Crawling on my belly like the humble mecha-shrew, pressing myself beneath the fragrant boughs of spruce, peering at that damp, sun-dappled landscape mere feet from asphalt, and yet lightyears away from human civilization.

As my eyes adjusted to the shadows, the first thing I noticed were the pink, rounded tips of my own fingers worming their way up from beneath the earth on the far side of the trunk. Now, I know I have some budding young naturalists that listen to this program, so here's an important lesson for you new folks. If you see your own fingers sprouting from the ground like mushrooms, your first urge will be to reach down and clasp those familiar-looking digits in your

own and haul yourself up from beneath the earth the way you'd haul a drowning librarian out of a cistern and back onto dry land.

Friends, resist that urge.

Seasoned naturalists will tell you, grabbing those tickle-sticks buys you nothing but a one-way trip to a dark mirror version of your life. It's a cold, lightless existence in which eons seem to pass while wet, eyeless facsimiles of your loved ones attempt to gaslight you into thinking that there was never any such thing as sunlight. Never any such thing as dry, warm comfort sitting in your home. Never any such things as homes or comfort.

You'll spend vast, unmeasurable lifetimes in that other place until driven by some instinct far-removed from any part of your half-forgotten past in the daylight world, you'll stoop, drive your fingers into the haunted, fungal surface beneath your feet, and touch the other you's fingers and swap places again, continuing the cycle and desperately fighting to believe that your time in the dark under-places was nothing but a twisted, half-remembered dream.

So, don't touch the fingers. A quick pro-naturalist tip from me to you.

I just chuckled at those fingers and shouted into the soil, "it's still your turn, you forsaken creature! You'll never have a name again!"

That did the trick. The fingers seemed to wilt and recede at a pace I can only describe as "hopeless." It's always satisfying when years of experience out in the field payoff. One feels a kind of harmony with the natural world, a fluency in the language of the wild.

Speaking of the "language of the wild," that brings us to today's Hidden Lore segment.

-music cue-

Today's hidden lore is a poem entitled "The Changeling Answer," by Jarod Anderson

Stir up chains in a big pot.
Stick it on the stovetop at high heat.
Pepper in some silver dust and witch-hazel.

When the metal half glows
And your forearms burn from stirring
Dump it all into a sack with the thing.

Let the hot metal slither in like a snake
Down onto the limbs of your not-daughter
Your used-to-be son.

You can't get back what it's taken,
You can't even kill it. Not really.
But that's not the point.

You can remind them,
Those little men of dusk and leaf litter,
That we don't always come unhinged in our grief

That there is anger in us more strong and biting
Than the raw wet thrashings of tooth and claw.

Well, that poem gives us all something to think about. Changelings are a nasty business. In fact, I have a niece who's a changeling. Of course, I'd rather not say which niece because I like to let nature take its course in such cases, but my cold iron filling buzzes like a housefly whenever she's around. Quite a nuisance.

-music cue-

I stayed prone and motionless beneath the spruce for some time, letting myself acclimate to my surroundings, becoming part of the landscape.

Like Ralph Waldo Emerson's transparent eye, I became a collection of senses and nothing more. Completely open to the world around me.

The chatter of Waffle House patrons, filtering in through the spruce like tinny transmissions from an alien world.

"Mommy, what's that man doing?"

"Sush. Don't look at him. Keep walking."

I watched as sow bugs, those insect-like crustaceans that travel the leaf litter like mobile fortresses of jointed-steel, seeking back and forth like armored weaving shuttles.

I saw a black and yellow orb-weaver spider cross the back of my hand on her way to find the perfect gallery for her next silken masterpiece.

And, as the sun rose in the sky and my body became a half-remembered thing in the wake of my intense focus on the ground in front of me, I saw what I had been waiting for... Something new.

They were small, gray, furry creatures. Besides their fur and eerily human faces, they looked a lot like hermit crabs. Though, instead of shells the rear portions of their bodies were concealed

by various bits of Waffle House detritus. Single use creamers. Splenda packets. Crude cylinders woven from coffee stir sticks.

They appeared all at once, arriving in a single file line from behind the trunk of the spruce. There was no indication as to whether they had been patiently concealing themselves on the reverse of the trunk or if they had mastery of some fourth dimension not easily accessed without more equipment from my kitchen junk drawer.

Around a dozen in total, they stood before me and looked up at me with wide, questioning eyes. One of them, who had an impressive handlebar mustache seemed to take note of my attempt to remain motionless and spoke to the others in a voice that sounded a bit like the crackle of a fresh bowl of rice krispies.

After that, they did their very best to take no notice of me, milling about and attempting to make me feel concealed. I could tell they were doing their best, but a number of them kept sealing glances at me. One, in particular, tried to mask her staring by hiding her eyes behind the sweep of her bangs. It was a good effort, but I felt increasingly awkward and out of place.

I sighed, and made peace with the fact that I had discovered a new species of cryptid, even if I wasn't able to observe anything like truly "natural" behavior. It was still an achievement and a pretty good Friday morning, even by Waffle House standards.

I muttered a polite excuse about getting home to feed my dogs and shimmied out from beneath the tree. I tried not to take it personally when I heard the creatures' speech become more natural upon my departure.

I call this new species Woolly Waffle Crabs and I, for one, hope they are a permanent fixture on this great planet's menu of biodiversity, not simply a limited time promotion. I hope their quantities are not limited and that all potential habitats are participating locations.

I brushed myself off and spared a fond kick for the tires of Cassandra, my custom 1985 Winnebago LeSharo, the venerable old vehicle that serves as my home, mobile laboratory, public lending library, and all-purpose sanctuary. She's one of kind, a gift from the fine folks at Winnebago after I helped them with a potentially embarrassing situation involving arctic vortex beetles and a prototype air conditioning system. Suffice it to say, engineers should stick to engineering and let cryptonaturalists do the cryptonaturalizing.

I followed the rumble of my stomach toward the friendly yellow glow of the Waffle House. Discovery is hungry work and its wages are enduring wonder and sometimes... fresh waffles, and a large order of hashbrowns: skattered, covered, and chunked.

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

End.