

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 10: Electric King Snake

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Don't judge a book by its cover. For example, snakes don't have arms, but many of them are dangerously good at hugging.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Howdy listeners.

When you look at nature, it's important to look with new eyes, to realize that the common is not commonplace. That wonders and miracles will often plop themselves down in your front yard and just dare you to notice. Ya gotta intend to notice nature in order to reap the bounty of amazement that's constantly growing there.

In her book "A Passion for this Earth," Valerie Andrews writes:

"As a child, one has that magical capacity to move among the many eras of the earth; to see the land as an animal does; to experience the sky from the perspective of a flower or a bee; to feel the earth quiver and breathe beneath us; to know a hundred different smells of mud and listen unselfconsciously to the sighing of the trees."

Well now, isn't that the truth. Most adults would feel a bit self-conscious stooping to peer under a rock or acquainting themselves with the way the earth smells beneath a juniper bush. And why do you suppose that is?

Is there something childish about taking a real interest in local plant life or the habits of bees? Are those purists less real or complex, less mature, than watching evening sitcoms or sporting events?

I think you can guess where I come down on the subject, but let me offer a word of optimism for those of you who would be too embarrassed to admire an insect or inspect the silhouette of a high-flying bird. The human brain can decide to change itself. The brain is a fickle instrument made of meat and electricity, but it has an uncanny knack for overcoming its own frailty. And so, if you make a habit of choosing not to be embarrassed in your love of the natural world, you might find that the issue eventually solves itself.

Plus, well, love of nature is infectious. Share it with others and watch how it grows and takes on a life of its own.

Following the theme of refusing embarrassment, let me paint you a picture of my last couple weeks.

I spent many lovely afternoons roaming a wind-tossed maple forest bordered by a sandy beach sloping down to lake Michigan. The woods was looking a little ragged, that late-summer disheveled look they gets as true autumn is coming on.

I was getting... what I will charitably call concerned looks from the few joggers huffing and puffing down the nearby bike path.

I guess I can't blame them. See, I wasn't on foot.

I was using a safety precaution of my own diving that looks a lot like a hamster ball made from aluminum reinforced copper mesh. I was also wearing an insulated, rubber suit designed to discourage electrical conduction and, well, I had oven-mitts on over my rubber gloves in case my mesh sphere became too hot. It was hot in my contraption and there was an intense copper smell mixing with the Sulphur smell of the lake.

But, look, I wasn't rolling along in a copper cage down the coastline for no reason. I was out to observe the Electric King Snake and, well, in the voltage department they make electric eels look like regular eels.

The electric king snake is unusually dangerous and dangerously unusual.

Speaking of the dangerous and unusual, how about a little fiction? It's time for today's Hidden Lore segment.

Today's hidden lore is a flash fiction piece titled "84% Compatible"

Hidden Lore Segment:

84% Compatible

The gap between Ted's front teeth opened onto a solar system buzzing with civilizations of light and power. Every once in a while it would glint and draw the eye of Becky Cooley, the shy paralegal with the 84% compatibility rating from the dating website.

Ted found that trying to laugh behind his hand was awkward. Trying to tilt his head down while he spoke was awkward. He'd lost dates to awkwardness and to the bushy mustache he had used to curtain his upper teeth for a few weeks in June.

So, Ted tried to talk with Becky head-on and her inevitable questions followed, questions about the twinkle between his teeth, the sense of life and hope and industry in it. Ted felt his cheeks and ears get hot, but he did his best not to sound embarrassed.

He answered Becky's questions. He even did his best to answer the questions she would think of later.

"It's a solar system. It's been there ever since my adult teeth came in. I don't know if it's just a doorway or if the whole system is actually there in my mouth."

"I don't know if it will live on after I die. I'm not sure if the people there know about me or have ever tried to communicate. Yes, the government knows all about it."

Becky went still and Ted worried that it might have been rude of him to anticipate her future questions. The specter of awkwardness grew like an afternoon shadow.

Becky didn't quite smile as she pushed her long brown hair behind her left ear and tilted her head.

There, above her little gold earring, nestled in the folds of her ear, Ted could just see a bluish glow. And in that glow was somehow the force of gravity held in balance amongst the waltz of stars and planets and the countless souls that spun along with them.

When Ted smiled, he smiled with the light of three hundred billion stars. Becky smiled back.

I like this little story. Which, isn't too terribly surprising, since I wrote it. Which reminds me, if you have a poem or short prose piece you'd like me to consider for a Hidden Lore segment, head on over to the about section of CryptoNaturalist.com for details on submitting your work. If you're not sure if it would be appropriate for the show, send it anyway. I always love reading your work whether it fits in the show or not. Poetry and fiction are worth writing and worth sharing.

Now, where was I. Ah, yes. Beach combing in the most uncomfortable summer wear of all time.

It would be fair to ask if Electric King Snakes are truly snakes. They aren't born from eggs. They don't have scales. They don't shed their skin. And they don't have what you'd call a traditional skeleton.

But, they are snakes. If you met one you'd know. They just have that... snakey vibe. Beautiful. Elegant. Movement that makes limbs seem like a hinderance by comparison.

Unlike most snakes, ok all snakes, the Electric Kingsnake is born thanks to an accident of weather.

Do you know what a fulgurite is? Well, it comes from the Latin word fulgur, which means lighting. It's essentially a tube of glass that forms when a lightning passes through sand. Now, that's rare enough, but if lightning strikes a fulgurite just right, well, that's how you get an electric king snake, a beautiful serpent that looks a bit like a polished glass sculpture of a snake

filled with pulsing blue electricity. They're about four feet long, tend to inhabit woodlands on scrublands not far from where they were born, and are almost painfully beautiful.

That's not the only thing that's painful about them. Their hunting and self-defense strategy is unique among known species. If you're thinking they use electricity, like electric eels, well, you're partially correct.

The difference is they don't generate the electricity within their own bodies. Instead, they rely on their close kinship with lightning to borrow their fangs from the sky, if you will. Like gods of thunder, they call down lightning strikes on prey and would-be attackers alike.

So, now you understand my outfit. A pair of thick gloves and a walking stick doesn't exactly cut in when trying to get a peak at the electric king snake.

I spent 16 days rolling along that beach, stewing in my own sweat and utter ridiculousness, but in the end, it was worth it.

I spotted a flash of summer lightning from out of a clear blue sky and made for it.

I don't know what invited that strike, because when I arrived the snake was coiled serenely on a stone. No prey or predators in sight.

The creature looked like a semi-transparent sapphire containing a visible skeleton of raw, white electricity. I tensed as I approached. Wondering if my makeshift safety precautions could actually withstand a direct lightning strike.

But, the gorgeous creature just turned its head to regard me. Its glass tongue flickered out to taste the afternoon air, and then it turned and calmly threaded its way into the underbrush.

I just stood there. Sweating in my rubber suit and copper cage. Marveling at the snake's beauty and my own ridiculousness.

Like all snakes, the electric king snake had no interest in attacking me. It simply wished to go in peace.

I rolled my way back to Cassandra and sat down to write this episode. Even now, the memory of that creature nearly moves me to weeping. It was like a sliver of the sky had fallen and made a home upon the earth. That lovely snake was both the storm and the clear blue morning, and I feel honored to have seen it.

All that said, it never hurts to err on the side of safety. Let's keep that in mind as we listen to this transmission.

Field Report:

Jed VanDorn reporting out of Tuscaloosa. CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

The squirrel-queen is real and I've met her!

Rumors. Whispers. Chitterings in the branches. Baritone announcements booming from knotholes in old oak trees. We've all heard them! Praise for the squirrel-queen. Songs about her power and beauty. Sure!

But, nobody had ever met her before. Nobody but me! I know, because she told me!

Well, others had met her, but that doesn't count because she didn't let them remember the meetings. A wave of her royal tale and BOOM. She can collect memories like her subjects gather acorns. Store them away in a hallow tree. Savor your lost thoughts over the long winter.

But not me! She let me remember! She told me so!

She called me her "emissary." Emissary! That's a four-syllable title. Do you know what that means?!

It means she trusts me to speak for the squirrels! Me! A guy who hadn't even seen a squirrel until I was 27. She said that was nothing to be embarrassed about. She told me to stop dwelling on it. She said it was just fine, ideal even! Squirrels don't particularly want to be noticed. Did you know that? Well, you do now. So, stop it. Stop noticing the squirrels.

It's an easy royal decree to follow because it's asking you to do less than you were doing before.

If you see something squirrel-shaped move through the branches, just assume it's something else. A toucan. A plastic shopping bag. An orangutan. No need to look. Your imagination is a muscle. Use it or lose it, that's what the squirrel-queen says! I say it too!

The squirrel-queen is not a figurehead. Not a symbolic monarch. She's the real kind. The divine kind. She can see through the eyes of all the squirrels. She'll be disappointed if you notice. And she's so fast. And so quiet. And doesn't understand human emotions.

Food for thought!

Pop quiz! What loves nuts and tree-tops and has a big, bushy tail?

The answer is nothing! That's not a thing that exists, silly-billy.

Did you get it right? I sure hope you did.

She's watching.

Jed VanDorn, signing off for now.

I appreciate that, Jed. Squirrels, eh. That doesn't ring a bell, but if I ever happen to see one, I'll be sure not to see it.

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

End.

Credits

Saker played the voice of Jed VanDorn. Saker is a cohost of It's All Been Done: A Barenaked Ladies podcast. It's two boys talking about almost anything but Barenaked Ladies. You can find it on your favorite podcast catcher. Saker also has a nerd hip-hop group called 2d6, online at 2d6music.com.

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Show Notes

This week we explore safety, a very unusual snake, and receive an important update about squirrels.

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