

Episode 14: Constellation Turtle
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Sometimes, if you shush the silence, you will find that the silence grows even deeper, beyond what you already took to be complete quiet. I invite you to figure out why.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist

Howdy Listeners. Good to have you with us.

Today, Cassandra and I are in the state of Georgia. Not too far from the southern terminus of the Appalachian trail, that venerable old walking path that leads from Georgia all the way up to Maine. A hike of nearly 2,200 miles.

Of course, today we aren't interested in covering distance. Quiet the opposite. We're interested in stillness. Calm waters under cloudless skies.

I drove my excellent and inexplicable Winnebago Cassandra down into a densely wooded valley not far from Springer Mountain just as the setting sun was kindling pink fire above the Western peaks. With the light fading, I climbed down and breathed deep the ancient citrus smell of decaying leaves and forest soil. Just ahead of me, the trees opened on a large pond. The water was so calm I could count the reflected feathers of a passing crow as it headed off to roost with its murmuring kin on a nearby rise.

I retrieved my thin, midnight blue pool float and inflated it as I waited for true dark.

Now, I trusted the old copper and carved granite cryptid detection instruments built into Cassandra's dashboard. Afterall, they were built and installed by the Winnebago company, the gold standard in otherworldly creature detection. But, even so, standing among the oaks, dressed in their ragged, autumn browns, and feeling the absolute stillness of the place seep into me along with the evening chill, I had a hard time picturing anything of the scale I was hoping to see in such a serene setting.

But, now, here's the thing. There's nothing wrong with doubt, so long as it's a doorway and not a roadblock. When doubt whispers, "I'm not so sure about this," I like to respond, "well, let's give it a try and find out." It's okay if your doubt is confirmed, so long as you don't skip the effort to find out.

Doubt is a healthy, natural impulse, but I think it's best when paired with curiosity rather than apathy.

A cloudless night sky appeared overhead. Surely one of the most miraculous and frankly unbelievable sights ever to visit the human eye, an ocean of time and distance that may well be the next shore we visit on our evolutionary track up and out from our species' watery cradle. A limitless field of stars. What an intoxicating idea.

Speaking of intoxicating ideas, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment. Today's hidden lore is a poem by Phoebe Wagner.

Glacial

What a destiny—to move so slowly the hot energy
of excited molecules peels the skin
off your ancient bones, exposing icy innards,
puncturing air pockets to release your collected
wisdom: a frond, a chipped bone, a feather.

First plains-walker, you molded
valley mountains to overlook mankind, an imprint
to long outlast our generational monuments,
yet your neck remains frozen stiff, staring ahead,
unable to see the change sifting between your toes.

With ears dulled by the first crack and splash
of isolation, wind only moans instead of tinkling
between icicles or rim-whistling along canyon scars
cut by too much work in the sun. To understand
legacy, I follow the track of your slog,

where, knee deep in soil, your refuse, metamorphic
and igneous, transcends our geological language,
mapping in strata the singular struggle to carve a path.

This poem reminds me to be fascinated by glaciers. Think of it. They are slow, but fast in geologic terms. They are massive, yet so vulnerable to climate change. In substance, they aren't much different from a single snowflake, yet they carve the landscape and sweep aside stone as if it were no more than piles of fallen leaves. To take the concept of a glacier and couple it with our own very human struggles to find and carve a path, well, now that's the stuff of poetry.

Phoebe Wagner grew up in Pennsylvania, the third generation to live in the Susquehanna River Valley. She currently lives in Reno, Nevada with her tree-climbing husband Andy and their two cats: Mab and Mith. When not writing, you can find Phoebe at the nearest riverbank.

I launched my little pool raft with me upon it, feeling the chill water through my wetsuit and soaking up into my beard. The raft was barely buoyant enough to keep me afloat, but that was just what I wanted, held there in that weightless in-between feeling, my eyeline resting just above the waterline.

As I gently pulled myself away from the shore, I felt as if I were sliding along a black mirror reflecting the starry sky above. Space above. Space below. And me, a lone ship floating along in the star-dusted blackness.

I looked down at the reflective, obsidian surface of the water and wondered what might be swimming beneath me. Water's surface may resemble a mirror, but you know that life swims invisible within that mirror, life that can see and sense your presence in ways that a human body is ill-equipped to comprehend.

There I was, gazing into the water, wondering what might be gazing back with unseen eyes, when I noticed something peculiar. New stars were winking into existence down in the depths. At first, I wasn't sure if the new lights were originating in the reflected sky or in the dark waters below, but soon it became clear.

More and more lights winked into existence deep below me, a new constellation of stars in that chill, liquid sky upon which I floated. The light intensified and soon I could see the outline of the creature I came to see, the rough shape of a turtle as described in a cluster of brilliant points of light. It seemed to be walking on the bottom of the pond, then it began to float upwards.

As it rose, I began to realize both that the pond was deeper than I had guessed and the turtle was much larger than my original estimate. As it grew closer, I edited my size guess from the size of a washing machine to the size of an ambulance and, eventually, the size of a small house.

I paddled backward just so I didn't end up beached on the starry expanse of its shell.

The domed shell broke the water just in front of me and kept rising until the massive reptile was hovering a few feet above the water, as if it were basking on a phantom log. Water showered down and concentric waves propelled me back toward the shore of the pond.

Yet, in the span of a few minutes, everything was still again.

The constellation turtle serenely rested above the water, soaking in the starlight and shining with light of its own. It exuded the same quiet poise of all water turtles at rest. Its jet black skin and shell glistening dully in the twinkle of the thousand stars that glimmered on its shell. It was like looking at a turtle-shaped image of deep space.

I could just make out the tip of its beak and the wet shine of its placid eyes. It glanced at me once, gave a slow blink, and then turned its face upwards, stretching its neck out skyward.

I bobbed there on my little raft and turned my face upward as well. And there I sat, glancing from sky to turtle and back again for over an hour before a veil of thin clouds rolled in from the west and the magnificent creature returned to its watery resting place without so much as a splash.

The night grew truly dark and that's when I realized I was shivering from the cold. I scrambled back on shore, changed into dry clothes, visited Cassandra's specialized coziness chamber and filled a mug from the hot-coco faucet, and came here to the studio to record this episode. And, now you're all caught up.

Well, almost all caught up. I see the transmission light is blinking at me. Let's take a listen.

Field Report

Lauren Dee transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

What is the point of pelicans? We've all asked ourselves this most basic of human questions.

Have you noticed how they insist upon themselves? Daring you to look away? Promising a revelation with their conspicuous presence, a revelation that simply never arrives?

Well, I've been watching them. I recognize when a creature is hiding in plain sight and pelicans exhibit all the signs. Their absurd appearance like feathered ladles. Always sitting high on jutting rocks or pier pylons.

You know I specialize in shorelines and for most of my career I've been looking past pelicans to more obvious seaside cryptonature. Kinetic seals that feed on wave motion. The nearly two-dimensional paper crabs that hide by turning sideways to the viewer. Water-breathing sand moles that specialize in beach tunneling. Until very recently, I never suspected that pelicans held any secrets worth investigating.

I stumbled upon this discovery purely by accident. I was drinking a time-halting smoothie, the one with juniper berries and moonlight extract. It's an after work habit of mine. I like to pause time on a beach at sunset. As I look out on the frozen waters I enjoy imagining that I'm on some distant planet, one with ridge after ridge of small, glassy mountains under a perpetual pink and red sky.

Well, a few weeks ago I sipped my smoothie at just the right moment to pause a pelican mid-yawn and what I saw in its deep throat pouch was a dull, smoky glow. I approached, leaned in, and peered into that bird's mouth. My knees nearly buckled from vertigo.

I was looking down on the distant checkerboard of farmland as viewed from an airplane. It was a pastoral landscape sparkling under a noontime sky. Wisps of cloud in the foreground.

I stood stunned. If I had been thinking clearly, I would have drank more smoothie before the effect ended, but I was too distracted. Time snapped back in place and the pelican, startled by my sudden proximity, fled toward the setting sun.

My colleagues, I have more questions than answers at this point, but rest assured that this mystery has my full attention.

For now, please keep an eye out for pelicans and let me know if you observe anything related to this new puzzle.

Over and out.

(end)

Pelicans, eh? Lauren's right, I should have known they were up to something. I wonder if this is related to the occasional rain of saltwater fish that sometimes plagues French farms. I guess we'll know more when we know more.

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

End.

Show Notes: Episode 14: Constellation Turtle: (00:15:29)

We're all made of star stuff, some of us more literally than others.

Lauren Dee was played by Julia Schifini. Julia is a podcaster, historian, and big fan of professional wrestling. She is the co-host of Spirits Podcast, a boozy tour of mythology, legends, and folklore, as well as a voice actor on several audio dramas. To find out more about her work, visit juliaschifini.com

Lauren Dee was named for Patreon supporter Lauren Dermody. Thanks to Lauren for her support.

Thanks to Phoebe Wagner for contributing the poem "Glacial." Phoebe Wagner grew up in Pennsylvania, the third generation to live in the Susquehanna River Valley. She currently lives in Reno, Nevada with her tree-climbing husband Andy and their two cats: Mab and Mith. When not writing, you can find Phoebe at the nearest riverbank.