

Episode 15: The Cobs
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You owe it to cryptids to spend some time looking for them. After all, they spend time looking for you.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist

Walking in a winter wood is a bit like being up past the world's bedtime. All that's green and growing is hidden away, withdrawn into the dark and silent. Today, I'm walking in such a woodland in eastern Pennsylvania, an area I visited just last summer. That fresh memory of a green landscape with mosquitoes humming in my ears and the background music of cicadas and migratory birds, well, that memory makes this winter landscape seem all the more deserted. Quiet and watchful.

There's a fresh inch of snow on the ground today and it gives the woods a clean, sculpted look. Everything is bright, vivid contrasts. It's the sticky kind of snow that clings to the trees and makes the whole forest look like the skeleton of some unimaginable animal.

Now, it may be a more stark and somber place now than it was during my visit in the vibrant, humming summer, but I don't mean to suggest that winter is any less beautiful or less intriguing. Far from it.

In fact, I came here today because these are the perfect conditions to see a cryptid that is practically impossible to spot any other time of the year. They're here and they're active year-round, but good luck spotting one when the leaves are still on the trees and the underbrush is thick and green.

Yes, today, dear listeners, I want to introduce you to Cobs. One of my absolute favorite cryptids and likely the source of a great deal of folklore, though I expect that many of you have never run across the name before.

Cobs are bipedal, arboreal, are quite comfortable with human speech, and are so masterful at natural camouflage that it remains a difficult question to determine if they are truly plant, animal, or mineral.

I couldn't give you a solid estimate of their size beyond a general guess they would stand between four and eight feet tall, if one ever stood up on the ground to be measured. They often appear to be made from wicker, seeming to be more a thing of woven sticks and coiled brambles rather than flesh and blood. Sorta long-limbed and willowy like a stick bug.

As far as I know, nobody has ever seen their faces because they always wear long woven tubes over their heads. So, when meeting a Cob, the general effect is that you're looking at a tangle of sticks amid a tangle of sticks until that strange tube of lashed reeds or twigs swings around and a voice issues from the dark hallow within.

Now, I'm doing them a disservice here making them sound all spooky and mysterious. The truth is they're nice folks. Strange and unknowable, sure, but sweet as pie. They don't exactly have the same manners we do, but we can hardly hold that against them. How on earth could they know our made-up rules and rituals. Heck, we don't even know how they understand human language. But, they can. All languages, as far as we can tell. They even have a habit of addressing speakers in their own accents and colloquialisms.

Now, I don't believe they are purposefully secretive. They're just, well, easily bored and maybe a little uncomfortable being directly noticed. They'll usually chat with you for a few minutes before disappearing into the landscape, but for us CryptoNaturalists, those conversations feel like high-pressure situations, since anything we can learn about the Cobs to enrich our general understanding is a rare and precious jewel in our limited body of knowledge about the species.

Truth be told, most of my attempts to visit a Cob have been failures, which is frustrating in the sense that I truly adore the elusive creatures, but that's all part of the adventure of science. I don't count any excursion to the wild as wasted effort and failures teach as much or more than successes.

Speaking of excursions into the wild, how about a little poetry? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Hidden Lore:

Today's hidden lore segment is two poems from Alice Pow. These two poems are part of a set *from* **The Luna Moth-alogues** poems adapted from interviews conducted with Luna Moths in Quebec City, Canada.

Odette Blanc

Not since digesting my green-with-yellow-stripes, childhood body
in the silk sack I spun myself,
has the road diverging in yellow time before me
appeared so singular, so unstoppable,
and yet so abstract, twisting, flight.
My sister, Alexandra, bright-black-eyed as you are,
fell behind along the way from our deciduous woodland home,
dedicated to a country moth way, but I am liquid again,

cocooned and soon to emerge, my internal city moth external and aflutter.
Miniature stars, hanging in windows and along streets,
disrupt my sense of place, turning city to endless labyrinth,
tiny planet. I navigate by the angle of moonlight against my body.
Alone, adrift, on fire with the life of 500,000 people carrying
little burning suns in their pockets. I studied all the pictures
in magazines and books, but nothing could prepare for
the nebulas of traffic, car brights and stop lights.

Natasha Dartmoth

My ancestral line purports its self-importance
on my great, great, some couple thousand greats grandmother
being the very moth who inspired Robert Frost
to write "To a Moth Seen in Winter." I've never cared
for the man's poetry,
or the honor my mother supposed me to entertain.
Why, there has only ever been one Robert Lee Frost,
and there have been some five-thousand generations in my family alone
since the writing of the poem! And yet,
the Encyclopedia Britannica keeps a longer page about Frost
than about the whole of Luna Moth history.
Is the elegance of my crescent-patterned wings
reputable if Frost did not write of them?
When I flew into the insidious expanse of that spider's web,
eight legs baring on me, only to escape with my life,
did that not matter on its own right?
When Meredith, my love, you landed
that position as a defense attorney,
wasn't that a victory of mothly merit?
When the two of us shared the root
of a sweet-gum tree, that was of worth
unrecorded by poets long dead and pretentious.

Well, now, those are some fine poems and some solid moth journalism. It's good to listen to the stories of luna moths. Their species is much older than ours and it seems wise to listen to their accumulated experience.

Alice Pow allegedly saw Mothman in a Chicago neighborhood during the summer of 2017. She is a writer of prose, poetry, and the upcoming podcast Stone Soup for the Gut. Find her on

twitter @Alicepow and if you like her work, feel free to reach out. She is always in search of the most abundant, yet elusive cryptid: friends.

I met a cob today the way I usually meet one. By accident. I was scraping and sliding through dense, snow coated underbrush when I ducked beneath a skeletal honeysuckle bush and bumped heads with a cob that was reclining in the lower branches.

This feller looked like a bundle of gray maple twigs wound around with the winter-dulled green of English ivy.

“Pardon me,” I managed as soon as I realized that I had stumbled right into the creature’s living room.

“Not at all,” said the cob in a voice like a woodwind instrument.

I took off my hat. Seemed like the polite thing to do. And glanced around at my surroundings. The honeysuckle bush provided a sort of domed roof beneath the lattice of snowy twigs. The noon sun made the whole structure sparkle. The twiggy tube of the cob’s head followed my glance upward and seemed to join me in appreciating the scenery.

“I hate to trouble you,” I said, “but do you mind if I sit and chat a spell? I don’t have your talent for navigating the brush and I could use a rest and some company.”

“Course,” said the cob, “make yourself comfortable.”

“Thanks. Say, if you don’t mind me asking, where’d you learn to speak English so well? I wouldn’t have guessed you get much language practice out there.”

The cob raises twiggy, jointed fingers and made a very human gesture like scratching its chin while it thought about the question.

“Well, now, I don’t speak a lick of English or any other language. I’m borrowing your voice. We’ve got a knack for that sort of thing. Easier that way.”

“Borrowing my voice?” I asked. “How do you mean.”

“Well, reach up and feel your lips while I talk and I think you’ll see what I mean. There you go. Do you understand now?”

I did. That woodwind voice seemed to be coming from the cob’s dark, tubular mask, but as it spoke I felt my own lips moving. Felt my jaw working along with the cob’s words. I gotta admit, it made me a little uneasy feeling my face moving outside of my direct control, but I did my best to shrug off the feeling.

“Alright, well, I guess my other question is this. Are you just borrowing my voice or our you borrowing my meanings as well? Are the thoughts your communicating yours or mine?”

The cob cocked its head a bit and paused before answering.

“Well, friend, it’s a fair question, but if I am borrowing your thoughts along with your voice, I’m not sure how either one of us would know it.”

The cob chuckled using my own chuckle.

“At any rate,” it continued, “I need to be moving on, but it was nice chatting with you.”

With that, the cob shook the branches and a shimmering cascade of snow rained down into the little hollow. I shielded my eyes and when I looked again, the cob was gone.

I’m recording this episode on cobs with a bit of trepidation, listeners. I actually feel like I know less after this meeting than I knew before.

Yes, I learned that cobs don’t mimic human voices, they borrow them. But now I have the larger questions of if the cobs are actually engaging with us or if they are simply holding up a social mirror to whoever they encounter, employing a kind of social camouflage as cunning and subtle as their physical camouflage.

A fascinating question and one that will not be easy to answer.

In any case, I suppose I don’t begrudge them borrowing my voice now and then. Heck, since approximately half of the cells in our bodies aren’t human, we are forever loaning ourselves to other creatures with or without our knowledge.

I’ll leave you with that warm thought on this chilly winter evening.

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

End.

Show Notes: Episode 15: The Cobs: (00:16:15)

Today we visit an elusive cryptid that hides in plain sight and borrows human voices.

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