

Episode 21: Highway Islands
Jarod K. Anderson
www.cryptonaturalist.com

The forest is awake and curious. It's just seldom curious about us.

Welcome, to The CryptoNaturalist.

Hello listeners. Let's chat a bit about highways. My thoughtful and fuel-efficient friend Cassandra and I certainly spend ample time wandering these ribbons of shaped rock, but let's set aside the roads themselves and think about the strange islands of land they create. The shark-fin shaped swath of green space nestled in the crook of that on-ramp. The narrow rectangles of wildflowers and wind-whipped grasses that punctuate the borderlands between northbound lane and southbound lane. The puzzle pieces of meadowland and woodland that stand out as verdant islands amid the gray and yellow rivers of asphalt and concrete.

These liminal spaces, these geometric sanctuaries of life... well, it's easy to dismiss them as "not really a part of nature." To think of them as a landscaping afterthought.

My friends, leave such assumptions aside and meet nature where you find it.

These highway islands of green are true islands, isolated footholds of land-dwelling wildlife. Crossing between them is quite treacherous, so communities of animals become isolated.

And there's just something about islands that tends to engender incredible biodiversity.

Charles Darwin, remarking on the breathtaking diversity of the Galapagos, said this:

"I never dreamed that islands, about fifty or sixty miles apart, and most of them in sight of each other, formed of precisely the same rocks, placed under a quite similar climate, rising to a nearly equal height, would have been differently tenanted."

And, so it is with the tiny human-made archipelagoes that dot our massive system of roadways crisscrossing this planet.

Just take a moment to consider the landmass of the combined roadways of the world. One notable CryptoNaturalist currently recording this podcast guesses that the collective areas of all the highway islands in North America alone equals a space larger than the state of Rhode Island.

That, coupled with the inherent biodiversity of islands, makes highway islands a habitat worth our attention.

Speaking of intriguing areas worthy of exploration, how about a little fiction? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Hidden Lore:

Today's hidden lore segment is a flash fiction piece from Olivia Williams.

The Geologist and the Oceanographer

If I'd known that marrying you would have been this cruel, I never would have done it. You're tied to the land, now: tethered to me like the sea-women in the stories, their seal skins held captive by their fisherman husbands. You can't survive here any more than I could step out of the rough-plowed fields of my home to join you on the waves.

Today you visited me at the lab, eyes combing over our shelves of samples like we had combed the beach for shells before I brought you back with me. I had looked out over the grey waves, and you told me they were just ripples compared to the currents underneath—the slow pulse of our planet and its deep, cold hunger, threatening to drag me out with the undertow. You splashed in the shallows and I watched. Some ancient instinct kept me back on the safety of the land.

I tried not to look up from the crystal I was dusting—I thought you might startle, I suppose. You don't know, but I saw you pick up a jar of dust, examine it, read the label, and set it back down.

Your frown told me you had mistaken it for beach sand.

You brought me lunch. Tuna salad. Too many ingredients, a testament to your restlessness on the days you spend at home. I've seen you sitting at the computer for hours, blank documents in front of you—or worse, papers on the cutting edge of your field, papers you should be writing. But there are no currents for you to measure in the fields around us, and sinking a thermometer into the rolling green hills will tell you nothing.

When it was time for you to leave, you kissed me on the cheek and retreated like the tide. I folded my crystal into your hand before you left, but you barely looked at it. I think you'll see it later—maybe as you drop it in the cup holder of the car, or maybe weeks from now when you find it in the glove compartment—and if you look closely enough, you'll see what I saw: clear blue water, shot through with veins of green and purple. A little ocean frozen in time.

It's not enough, and it won't be enough, and I know one day you'll sink away from me and keep pulling back all the way to the shore, dragging me with you to my own death, but for now it's something: a first raindrop landing on my earthen exterior, threatening to weather it down to nothing.

(End)

What a beautiful piece, capturing an elemental tension between earth and water, between human love and love for the natural world, career and companionship.

Olivia Williams is a student of geoscience and literature. She writes short fiction, poetry, science articles, funding applications, and D&D sessions, but when she's not doing any of that you can find her in the woods looking for cool fungus. Her writing and opinions about rocks live on Twitter @OliviaOnCampus.

The highway island I chose to study this week was a pie-slice slope of mixed greenery next to an overpass in Western Pennsylvania. The little wedge of land vibrated with the roar of passing traffic, but it was shaded by a nearby cluster of dogwoods nestled along the roadway such that a shade-loving variety of woodland plants had found a home. I saw spring violets and, surprisingly, mayapples.

If you're not familiar with mayapples, they look a bit like foot-high, glossy green umbrellas that pop up in shady woods in early spring. This little island was dotted with dozens of them.

With Cassandra pulled over on the shoulder, her hazard lights blinking, I laid down on my belly with my nose to the ground, peering into the patchwork of grass and violets, clover and mayapples. Passersby might have thought I was working on my vehicle, except that I was facing the wrong direction.

Now, I had no prediction of what I might see on this particular outing, and I find that that's often a healthy attitude for venturing into the field. I knew, of course, that species ranging from calligrapher ants to micro-finches had been observed in such places, but I set that knowledge aside and opened my senses to the meadow-in-miniature just under my nose.

Now, this is an exciting one folks because the creature I documented is, as far as I know, completely undescribed to cryptoscience. I say that with the caveat that there's always more research to do and I am never shy about being corrected.

Now then, the first I saw of this fascinating animal was a golden jewel that seemed suspended in the air beneath one of the mayapples. At first, I took it to be a bumble bee, but upon closer inspection I noticed a graceful fantail and two pectoral fins. It was no bee, rather it looked like a koi fish just about twice the length of your thumbnail.

My eyes widened and I noticed three more of the creatures swimming through the empty air just a few inches off the ground. One was a vivid black and red. Another was the pale green of young leaves. Another, pumpkin orange.

All of them moved with a languid grace that seemed to transform the grassy patch of land into an undersea grotto. The sound of traffic faded as I watched them and I found myself completely engrossed by their gentle movements, weightless shapes moving in slow figure-eights among the mayapples.

One of the creatures passed just in front of me and I was able to confirm that, while they certainly resembled koi, their segmented eyes betrayed a kinship with insects. Their eyes reminded me of butterflies or perhaps dragonflies, yet the rest of their structure was decidedly fish-like.

For the present, I've decided to call these tiny wonders koi-flies, though between you and me I believe they deserve a more graceful moniker. Perhaps, in time, something more appropriate will come me.

[The Transmission Announces a new Field Report]

Ah, a new field report! A lovely end to a lovely day. Let's take a listen.

Field Report:

(Lucy Valentine) Willow Armstrong

Willow Armstrong transmitting on Cryptonaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

I'm recording this from Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska. If you're unfamiliar with the area, it's part of the largest temperate rain forest in the world and... well, I've been roaming this forest for some number of decades now. I don't know how many. I've never been much of a believer in linear time.

I'm transmitting to report on a new species of frog that I discovered high in the canopy here. In terms of morphology, it is very similar to the poison dart frog, however its toxicity is more energy-based than chemical-based. I'm calling them Neon Peepers for now. I'll explain.

The frogs are smaller than your thumb and most are a vivid shade ranging from cobalt to violet. They glow with an intensity that leaves an afterimage haunting your eye if you look directly at one for more than a second or two.

Moreover, their defense mechanism involves an intense burst of UV light that results in a painful localized sunburn.

As I record this, my forearms are dotted with frog-silhouette burns. Some fresh. Some fading to dark shadows resembling sun-faded tattoos. The problem is that the frogs are gentle and curious, but easily startled.

If you decide to join me in studying these creatures, I recommend packing sunscreen. Welding goggles are also useful.

You'll find more details in my forthcoming article in the journal of crypto-herpetology.

Willow signing off.

(End)

My word. It's been too long since I've been to Alaska. Maybe I'll head up North in the near future and see if Willow will give me a tour. I would love to see a neon peeper... through sunglasses of course.

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

Credits

Special thanks to Lucille Valentine for being the voice of Willow Armstrong. Lucille is a voice actor, poet, visual artist, and LGBTQ+ community advocate. Find her on twitter [@severelytrans](https://twitter.com/severelytrans).

You can support the production of this show and find bonus content and exclusive episodes by becoming a patron at Patreon.com/CryptoNaturalist OR by visiting the Merch and Support sections on CryptoNaturalist.com for t-shirts, stickers, and more. You'll find information about submitting your poetry or prose for our hidden lore segments in the about section of our website. The CryptoNaturalist is written and read by Jarod Anderson. Our theme song is Banish Misfortune, played by Andrew Collins. Stay Curious. Stay Wild. Stay Weird.

Show Notes: Episode 21: Highway Islands (00:15:15)

The patchwork islands of greenery nestled on the edges of roadways hold secrets worth our attention.

Hidden Lore fiction by Olivia Williams. Olivia is a student of geoscience and literature. She writes short fiction, poetry, science articles, funding applications, and D&D sessions, but when she's not doing any of that you can find her in the woods looking for cool fungus. Her writing and opinions about rocks live on Twitter [@OliviaOnCampus](https://twitter.com/OliviaOnCampus).

Willow Armstrong was played by Lucille Valentine. Lucille Valentine is a desert rat masquerading as a voice actor, poet, visual artist, and LGBTQ+ community advocate whose works often include themes of poverty, womanhood, queer and trans experience, along with whatever her current existential crisis is. You can hear her in the podcasts The Six Disappearances of Ella McCray, the upcoming second season of Unplaced, among a number of other upcoming shows, or by pressing your ear up against a cactus skeleton on a windy night. You can find her disappointing every grammar elitist over on twitter [@severelytrans](https://twitter.com/severelytrans).