

The Cryptonaturalist Ep 5: Elephant Spider

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Turtles are just rocks that mastered the power of positive thinking. So, just imagine what you could become if you just believe hard enough.

Welcome to the Cryptonaturalist.

Well, friends. My right foot is barking like an over-caffeinated chihuahua at a squirrel convention. Mmm. Maybe not the warmest welcome I've ever broadcast on my show, but truer words were never spoken, and truth is the foundation of my business.

Your intrepid narrator sustained a bit of an injury this week. But, as Shakespeare said us he was being carried away from the stage by an army of angry badgers, "The Show Must Go On."

Alright. I got my injured foot elevated here on my lichen-covered studio table and I'm keeping the swelling in check with a wriggling tube sock full of icy arctic vortex beetles. Don't worry, they like confined spaces and I'll return them to their polar stompin grounds before they even get a chance to be homesick.

Enough about me. Let's get down to business.

Walt Whitman once wrote of a Patience, Noiseless Spider. Today, we focus on a loud, impatient spider, The Elephant Spider of the liminal desert. A rare jewel of an arachnid and an outright insult to physics and physiology in general.

Now, I see lots of buzz on the CryptoNaturalist forums about the difficulties some folks have reaching the liminal desert. Well, here's some advice. Don't expect it to be easy! The liminal desert is an in-between place. You quite literally can't get there from here, and yet, if you just travel long enough you find yourself there anyway.

How long is long enough? How many lonesome miles? Well, friend. That's not for you to decide. Determining when you arrive is the desert's prerogative. I can understand your frustrations, but comfort yourself with this. The best moments *and places* in our lives often come to us uninvited and unexpected. Plus, few places worth visiting are accessible through a shortcut.

I guess that's enough preaching. The point is, I can't give you directions. Just an account of my journey.

I arrived in the liminal desert at about 4 in the morning while on a disturbingly narrow road overlooking some dark sheep pasture and sprawling olive groves just north of Florence, Italy. I

was just starting to nod off, the gentle purr of Casandra's auto-pilot indicating that she no longer trusted me to drive, then BAM. Blinding white light assaulted my tired eyes and I was stompin' the break in an arid scrubland with a scalloped line of crimson dunes marching along to my west. A few ochre rock formations stood tall ahead of me and the dark silhouette of stunted trees in the distance stitched the hazy blue sky to the land.

I was wide awake in a heartbeat and utterly disoriented from departing the Italian countryside in a splintered instant.

Speaking of utter disorientation, how about a little fiction?

It's time for our **Hidden Lore segment!**

Today's hidden lore comes to us from Jamie Lackey. A flash fiction piece called "Joining the Flock."

I dashed into the woods. The trees swayed overhead--thin leaves and sturdy branches and Spanish moss moving as one. I couldn't see the birds--couldn't hear them, either. But I knew better than hope that I'd escaped them.

I stumbled and fell into thick loam. The scent of rich dirt and rot filled the air. I scrambled back to my feet and kept moving, deeper into the forest--away from the open sky. There was a cave ahead--surely they wouldn't follow me there.

Danny and I had explored the cave years ago, holding hands and urging each other around each dark turn.

I couldn't think about Danny. He was one of them, now.

A harsh caw broke the silence. I urged my exhausted body forward, my breath as rough as the bird's cry. I spotted the cave, a black smudge in the green and brown.

The sound of wingbeats came from everywhere. Gusts buffeted at me. I threw myself forward, scrambled along the ground on all fours--maybe if I stayed low--maybe I could still escape.

My fingers brushed damp rock.

But it was too late.

My body contracted, and feathers sprouted from my skin. I opened my mouth to scream, but a caw emerged from my beak.

We flew away together, weaving through the trees to explode up through the canopy as one.

We spread out to look for the next member of our flock.

Ya know, there's a native American legend about crows. It says that their feathers are black and their voices are harsh because when the land was cold, a crow flew to heaven to bring back fire for the earth. But... I don't think the crows in this story are the generous, selfless sort. This piece does a good job of capturing that breathless feeling of pursuit, of fleeing dangers known and unknown. It also has something to say about the mob, and the fear of being changed without our consent. Whether we're thinking of aging or injury or a myriad of other variables, I think

losing who we are is one of the most basic human fears. Change is constant... but it's not always our friend.

Jamie Lackey lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and their cat. She has had over 130 short stories published in places like *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Apex Magazine*, and *Escape Pod*. Her debut novel, *Left-Hand Gods*, is available from Hadley Rill Books, and she has two short story collections available from Air and Nothingness Press. In addition to writing, she spends her time reading, playing tabletop RPGs, baking, and hiking. You can find her online at www.jamielackey.com.

I like to go barefoot in deserts, which is totally unadvisable for a thousand reasons, but I do it anyway. We all have our vices and one of mine is a foolhardy love of feeling hot sand beneath my feet. I swear I can feel the very pulse of the land while walking barefoot over arid earth, and the risk of venomous snakes or scorpions or sharp vegetation is just plain worth it to me.

I activated Casandra's pneumatic parasol to keep her out of the sun and headed for the rock formation, an angular jumble of sandstone about the size of a baseball field. As I approached the stone, I noticed a handful of craters that resembled small meteor impacts. The craters seemed relatively fresh, no real signs of weathering or erosion. A good sign that an elephant spider was near at hand.

The elephant spider is a jumping spider in the family Salticidae. An active hunter, rather than a web-weaver. It's typically a cornflower blue color with tan accents. About the size of your thumbnail, they aren't terribly striking at first glance.

So, what's so special about today's subject? I'll give you a hint. The elephant spider is also sometimes called the Osmium Spider or even the Neutron Star Spider. Give up? Both references to the animal's uncanny density.

The elephant spider can weigh hundreds of pounds. Some CryptoNaturalists suspect that weights can even fluctuate toward a ton or more. That's a tiny spider that weighs as much as a car. Moreover, evidence suggests that spider can change its weight, a fun fact and a ridiculous abuse of the laws governing matter. A colleague of mine once got the same Elephant Spider to crawl across a digital scale a dozen times. Over the course of an hour, the spiders weight more than doubled.

There was a crack like thunder from the far side of the rocks and I ran to investigate. I found a cloud of dust and circle of shattered rock fragments surrounding a fresh crater. An elephant spider had just made a new burrow by tossing itself high into the air and landing with incredible force concentrated behind a tiny body.

At the bottom of the crater was a black circle like a bullet hole, with a tiny, blue spider face peering up at me through the dust. I defy you to show me a cuter physics-breaking invertebrate.

I assumed that the spider was laying an ambush for potential prey, capitalizing on the funnel shape of the crater to direct potential meals to the waiting fangs below.

I learned that the crater was actually a prelude to mating when the second spider I hadn't spotted crawled over my foot. The tiny bones in my foot made a noise similar to popcorn and I howled like a horned-wolf.

Needless to say, I cut my observations a bit short so I could limp my way back to Cassandra. I can tell you that two elephant spiders in love sound a bit like the rattle and crack of a boulder rolling down a mountainside.

Sometimes, you just have to let the situation dictate the plan.

That remind me, just before I started recording, I received a transition over the crypto-band radio. I swear, the new kind of radio wave we discovered through the Mothman treaties is truly remarkable. The transmissions reach me even in the liminal desert. Let's take a listen.

Field Report:

This is Cat Stone transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

I'm preparing to depart the tropical island of West Dakota. Those of you who dabble in seismography probably already know that the island's migratory forests are on the move again, marching down the coast with synchronized root motions that vibrate the bedrock.

Obviously, that's not news. But what *IS* news is why the forest is moving outside its usual migration season.

We do have record of the forest moving to avoid a sentient lava flow in the 80's and unscrupulous lumber poachers in 2011, but the phenomenon I'm witnessing here is, as far as I know, entirely new.

A dense, localized, patch of ruby-throated hummingbirds seems to be targeting the trees. It resembles a thick, green-gold cloudbank and it is actively working to block sunlight from the forest. It's dark as night beneath the hummingbird swarm. Every time the trees move in pursuit of clear skies, the birds follow. I can't imagine what is motivating this attack.

If a mercenary crow hadn't sabotaged my bi-plane, I would investigate further, but I'm currently grounded. Be advised: any CryptoNaturalists in the area, this is a unique research opportunity and an opportunity to aid one of earth's few old-growth migratory forests.

Over and out.

Huh. Well, if I wasn't currently sitting in a transitory desert, half-out of phase with physical reality, I'd go take a gander myself. As it, I highly recommend to anybody listening to this that has the means, go take a look. Cat is a friend and colleague, not to mention a solid source and an expert CryptoNaturalist. If she says a situation merits investigation, it does. If I were you, I'd get on that mystery like a duck on a June bug.

Well friends, it looks like my arctic beetles have chewed through their tube sock prison and encased my foot in ice. I guess I should do something about that. Though... it actually feels pretty good.

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

End.