

The CryptoNaturalist Ep 7: Parking Lot

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Octopuses have a great deal in common with human children, like the ability to solve complex puzzles, an inquisitive spirit, and a razor sharp, concealed beak used for devouring prey and delivering paralytic toxins.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Good to have you with us. Our focus today is a story of adaptation. What beautiful concepts adaptation and evolution are. The idea of changing in the short-term or the long-term in order to be more in tune with our environments. A kind of generational osmosis moving us toward harmony. Changing in order to thrive. If that's not the main theme of the natural world, it's at least one of the bigguns.

Now, you can't hear it here in my studio because the ceiling and walls are dense with acoustic bats that metabolize the energy of sound vibrations into the chemical energy they need to live, but the rain is coming down in buckets outside. Opp, hang on sec.

There you go little fella. Huh, one of the bats must of heard me talking about 'em and crawled over for an ear-scratch. They look a bit like shaggy, gray miniature chihuahuas with wings. Occasionally, I give 'em banana slices as a treat, but not while recording. If they store up too much chemical energy they release the excess by extending their wings straight up and vibrating like a tuning fork in rhythmic pulses. It produces a soft, steady tone unique to the individual. When they do it in groups, it sounds like windchimes and makes me think of sitting on a front porch watching a storm roll in.

Now, you should never touch a wild bat for fear of spreading germs and fungal infections, but I've taken precautions with these little fellers. Let me just put this young lady back up on the ceiling. There we go.

Where was I? Ah, the rain. Yes.

My Winnebago Cassandra is still parked smack dab in the middle of today's subject's home territory, a Kroger Grocery Store parking lot in Laporte, Indiana, about 50 miles outside Chicago. I had to find the right parking lot with the right weather at the right time of day. Story of my life.

What is our subject today? None other than the Urban Salamander, sometimes named Alvarez's Salamander. It was discovered by CryptoNaturalist pioneer Marie Alvarez in the 1920's, but our understanding of the creature is still developing.

Now, I'm going to try keep my composure during this episode, but... I gotta tell ya... I've been trying to see one of these critters for decades and early today was my first ever sighting. Frankly, I'm still buzzin' with excitement. Marie Alvarez was a legend, and seeing an Urban Salamander in the wild gives me the giddy feeling of being connected to the esteemed past of Cryptonaturalism.

Hey, speaking of a connection to the past, how about a few words from a legendary naturalist? It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Today's **hidden lore** is a short excerpt from John Muir's essay "The American Forests," published in 1897 in defense of conservation efforts.

Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed,—chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones.

Few that fell trees plant them; nor would planting avail much towards getting back anything like the noble primeval forests. During a man's life only saplings can be grown, in the place of the old trees—tens of centuries old—that have been destroyed. It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods,—trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra.

Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ's time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools.

Well, now. I suppose I don't need to explain to you, dear listener, why this passage appeals to me. And I hardly think John Muir needs my praise, plus, unfortunately, he doesn't have a website or a podcast for me to plug. But, if you're listening to this and you sense something inherently poetic in nature, do yourself a favor a look up John Muir's writings. I think you'll find that they are still very much relevant to us today. I'll stick a link in the show notes, if you're curious to learn more.

Urban Salamanders are crepuscular creatures, meaning they're active at dawn and dusk. They're fairly large salamanders, about 6" to 12." So, not as large as the hellbenders or arctic crystal salamanders, but certainly above average.

Now, the history of salamanders is an interesting one because we have numerous ancient writings on the subject. I'll give you a taste.

[Isidore of Seville](#) [7th century CE] (*Etymologies*, Book 12, 4:36): The salamander alone of animals puts out fires; it can live in fire without pain and without being burned. Of all the venomous animals its strength is the greatest because it kills many at once. If it crawls into a tree it poisons all of the fruit, and anyone who eats the fruit will die; if it falls in a well it poisons the water so that any who drink it die.

Folks like Augustine and Pliny the Elder predated Isidore, and had similar odd and misinformed opinions on the subject. Augustine wrote that salamanders live in fire, but are not consumed by it. In the first century, Pliny argued that salamanders could put out fire on contact.

What a bunch of far-fetched nonsense. I don't believe any salamander can put out fire on contact, maybe with ice-breath or telekinesis, but not simply from contact. Ancient philosophers and naturalists had some strange ideas.

But, the Urban Salamander does give us a hint as to why salamanders might have been associated with fire. Most salamanders are gentle, moisture-loving amphibians that hunt small invertebrates and want absolutely nothing to do with intense heat.

Now, by contrast, the urban salamander relies on intense heat as its primary adaptation to its new chosen habitat, asphalt.

Did you know that asphalt is technically a super viscous liquid? It's a fact. It's about two million times more sticky than honey and infinitely worse to spread on toast, but it's a liquid. So, if you consider asphalt to be a thin coating of liquid mostly made from decomposed organic material (petroleum) spread across the dirt, why, then most urban landscapes are simply very unorthodox swamps.

You might be asking yourself what this has to do with heat. Well, in order to swim through the asphalt swamp a creature would need to superheat the material around it, and that's just what the Urban Salamander does! Its body can go from the ambient temperature surrounding it to hotter than a blowtorch in a fraction of a second. The asphalt becomes super-heated and the urban salamander slides through it slicker than mud. A perfect adaptation to the growing threat of human expansion.

I arrived at the Kroger just before sunset. There was a steady drizzle coming down from the nickel-colored skies, the perfect weather for finding an urban salamander. See, they're mostly black with a red underbelly, so good luck spotting the little creatures against a backdrop of black asphalt, especially when they can crawl through what might as well be solid rock to you and me. The key is the rain. When it hits a crawling salamander, there's a his and pop of steam like a tiny geyser sprouting from the parking lot.

I climbed to the top of Cassandra to survey the lot, earning me several concerned looks from busy shoppers.

I was nervous, because the light was fading quickly. I'd gotten a tip about this particular parking lot from a Chicago-based cryptoherpetologist I know, but I was starting to have my doubts.

That's when I heard it, pop, sizzle, pop off to my right. I jogged across my Winnebago's slick roof to search out the noise and that's when I spotted it. Three little salamanders walking across the asphalt with plumes of white steam trailing off their backs like pale war banners.

They were twenty feet off, but I was quick with my binoculars and got a good look at them. Majestic. Fiery. Adorable. One of them opened his mouth wide and I saw a white-hot flash from his combustible throat that made me think of fantasy dragons. I'm not gonna lie to ya, I teared up a bit at the sight of something so rare and wonderful.

There was another sizzle and pop and all three of the salamanders sank into the dark pavement, leaving behind little squiggles of black tar on the lighter surface.

I lost the light after that, but I count myself among a lucky few to have seen such a sight.

Oh, wait a moment. Casandra is flashing a message to me here on my console.

Ah, apparently she's identified a Kroger employee with some information to share. Looks like he's busy gathering up wandering shopping carts, but let's see if we can get him in here for a quick chat.

Just a sec.

Witness Interview: (Jarod and Cal)

Jarod: Now, come on in, don't be shy. Here, go on and talk into this microphone.

Cal: Yeah, uh, your... RV said you wanted to talk to m... Wow! That's a lot of bats! Um, are they friendly.

Jarod: No, they are not, but they are pacifists by choice. Come on in and take a knee, son. They won't hurt ya.

Cal: I think I'll stand.

Jarod: Well, suit yourself, but that does put your delicious face closer to the bats. Listen. I don't wanna take up too much of your time, but I got a beard-tickle that tells me you have some salamander evidence there in the sole of your left sneaker.

Cal: What does that mean and how could you know that?

Jarod: Now, don't be bashful, let's see this beauty.

Cal: I don't know. I... (pause) Oh, why not. Here.

Jarod: Let's take a look. Yep. Look right here. Looks like you stepped square on the little fella. A perfect urban salamander in concave relief. Look at that. The indentation is melted into the rubber. I bet the little guy didn't even feel the pressure. Heck, you're lucky you like these big thick fellas and not ballet flats. I'll just hang on to this shoe, if you don't mind.

Cal: Uh, I do mind. I need two shoes. And I gotta get back to work.

Jarod: Not to worry. Hold on now, I have your exact left shoe from before you stepped on the salamander right here in this box. Even washed it for ya. There you are.

Cal: Uh, how do you have this? It even has the insole I bought. Who are you?

Jarod. Heh, full of questions. I applaud your curiosity, but I think you'll find that you're already back outside.

Cal: What? Buddy I think... (voice fades away to silence).

Good talk.

There goes a helpful guy with a lucky foot. Now, I'll just make a mold of this here salamander impression and we'll have us a bit more physical evidence of a rare and fascinating amphibian. This day just keeps getting better.

Ooo. I'm going to work on making a 3D model of the salamander right now.

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

End.

Episode 7: Parking Lot (00:15:18)

Show Notes

On this episode we visit a special amphibian perfectly adapted to life in parking lots.

Special thanks to Cal Cleary for playing the Kroger employee.

John Muir life and times: <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people.htm>

A good sample of John Muir's essays: <https://www.theatlantic.com/author/john-muir/>

New Credits:

The Cryptonaturalist is written and performed by Jarod K. Anderson.

Our theme song is “Banish Misfortune,” played by Andrew Collins. For more information about Andrew’s music, visit andrewcollinstrio.com

For information on how to submit poetry or prose for the Hidden Lore segment, visit the about section of Cryptonaturalist.com.

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Stay curious. Stay wild. Stay weird.