

The CryptoNaturalist Ep 9: The Old Barn

Jarod K. Anderson

www.cryptonaturalist.com

Every house has mice in the walls. Some mice are sneakier than others. Some are a nuisance. And some are so ancient and powerful that it's really more accurate to say that you live in their walls.

Welcome to the CryptoNaturalist.

Life is always changing. It's often a slow process, so sometimes it seems like it's standing still, but rest assured listeners, nature is on the move. Adapting. Changing. Reacting. Learning and creating.

Think about it. Even as little as 10,000 years ago, you would face a vastly different planet. Seemingly alien mega-fauna and not a parking lot in sight. And what is 10,000 years to the earth? The blink of an eye.

The same, of course, is true of cryptonature. The parts of the natural world that aren't as obvious and open as the woolly mammoth or the common sasquatch.

Change comes to the hidden as surely as it comes to the common. It's a law of living things as surely as gravity or the conservation of energy is a law of the physical world.

The changing nature of our world has also led us humans to be obsessed with learning the origins of things. Our brains love to categorize, so we look at the great, chaotic flux of our world, the rise and fall of countless species and ecosystems, and we work to painstakingly draw connections and classifications.

What CryptoNaturalists know, however, is that logical connections don't always carry a lot of weight out in the field.

Let's take owls for example.

Owls hatch from eggs, right?

That's true. Sometimes. But, there's more than one way an owl can be born.

Imagine an autumn evening at twilight, if you will. Jacket weather. The street lights just humming to life.

Somebody's having a campfire somewhere. You smell it in the air.

There's that dry, scraping noise of dead leaves blowing across asphalt and your shoulders tense before you can process the origin of the sound.

You flinch at leaf shadows tumbling across your driveway and the shadows notice you flinching. The thought gets under their skin, starts them asking questions to your back as you walk away.

"Are we something to fear?" the shadows ask.

Two nights later, the shadows pile up into three dimensions, hop twice, and fly off on soundless wings. And Bob's your uncle, there's one more owl in the world.

I've seen it happen.

Some of y'all are saying that doesn't make any sense. Well, what of it? It might not make sense, but neither does a bird that travels to Brazil visiting the same pond in Ohio annually like clockwork. Neither does bacteria living in volcanic heat or bioluminescent fish swimming at a depth where the water pressure would crush a car.

Making sense and finding truth are often different things.

That feeling that something doesn't make sense, doesn't square with your worldview, now... that's an important feeling, friends. That feeling means it's time to make a choice. On the one hand, you can shut down. Label something as impossible and dismiss it from your mind. On the other hand, you give yourself over to curiosity and open-up your senses to new possibilities.

Guess which one I prefer?

Well, now, that's enough philosophical jawin' from me. Let's dig in to today's field work.

All of my talk about change and origins and embracing the unlikely... well, it's because I do believe I've discovered something entirely new. But, friends, this one's a little strange... even for me.

Of course, some cryptids have become adept at hiding in plain sight. From the tribes of bipedal rodents that live in highway medians to the electric neon-sign-gecko, plenty of cryptids have rolled with the punches of human expansion. Hidden wonders in a human landscape. That, friends, is the topic of today's episode.

However, our story doesn't take place in an urban population center, but in rural countryside in South West Pennsylvania. A place with vast seas of corn, patchwork woods and little towns set amongst some beautiful wilderness.

Alright. Enough beating around the bush. I'm just gonna come right out and say it. Some barns are not barns.

Sigh. CryptoNaturalists are a curious bunch, but I don't blame you if this one stretches your incredulity. I felt the same way, but stick with me. I'm not just tellin' tales here. Before you send me a transmission on the CryptoNaturalist Frequency, just hear out my field report and, hopefully, you'll join my research and round out our understanding of this new creature.

After all, everything is weird the first time you encounter it.

Hey, speaking of weird, maybe we should start my report with a little poetry just to get us in the right frame of mind. It's time for today's hidden lore segment.

Hidden Lore Segment:

Today's Hidden Lore is a poem titled "Be Mine," by Amber Bulinski.

Be Mine

There's a woman in the mountain
I see her come out sometimes
Emerging from the jagged canyons
Sitting on the cracked boulders
Looking out to the horizon
Watching the storm clouds creep closer.

There's a woman in the mountain
Some say she's a vampire
But I see her in broad day light
Soaking up the warm sun on a cold winter's day
Arms outstretched, twirling around to music no one else can hear.

There's a woman in the mountain
Some call her a ghost
But I see her at the gas station late at night
Buying moonpies and milkyways
Biting into one as she leaves the store.

There's a woman in the mountain
It took some time and one day
I gathered the courage to hike the mountain side
When I reached her
The skies were shades of pink, purple and blue
Her arm stretched out
Offering a helping hand for that one last step

She smiled softly and asked:
“Does this mean that you will be mine?”

I like this poem. I like the idea of building an unusual life on a mountainside. I like people who are hard to define. And I love it when the weird becomes familiar, becomes love, becomes home.

Amber Bulinski is an artist and writer trying survive the thralls of the Sonoran Desert by respectfully fearing the heat from indoors. Find her on twitter @ResinQuotes

Cassandra and I pulled off a little two lane highway in corn country and drove off-road into a pasture that was more clover than grass. The land sloped down to a old, age-faded barn. The middle of the roof sagged a bit and its weathered boards were the dark gray of tobacco ash.

There was nothing unusual looking about the field or the barn, except that I had been on that same stretch of backroad frequently six months earlier investigating a Cashmere Possum sighting far north of their usual range. There had been no field and no barn then. I was certain of it. There was also no sign of recent construction, tree-clearing, or any other indication that 100 year old barn had recently been reconstructed.

It was inexplicable.

The obvious answer was that I was simply misremembering... only... that felt a little too easy.

I had a little time in my schedule before I was due in China to teach a seminar on the care and feeding of thunder-bees, so, I set up my equipment and settled in to observe.

I was expecting something mundane. One of the usual suspects, like illusion frogs or psychic moss or a simple late-summer increase in clairvoyance pollen. But, it turned out to be something much more unexpected.

The first creatures I observed on the scene, appropriately enough, were barn owls and barn swallows. Now, that got me thinking.

Barns, certainly aren't what you'd call a new technology, but they're a heck of a lot newer than owls and swallows. Amazing that these ancient creatures had such an intimate, almost symbiotic relationship with a relatively new kind of structure. How seamlessly they have integrated a technology that didn't exist in North America in its current form even 1,000 years ago into their behavior.

Strange, isn't it?

Moreover, these particular owls and swallows were doing things I had never observed before.

For example, I watched a barn owl carry roadkill into a hayloft window. They aren't carrion feeders. Unusual, but maybe not impossible. But I also saw it fly into the barn with an ear of corn and shiny red apple in its talons. The swallows exhibited similarly odd behavior. I swear I saw one swallow swoop up under the barn's eaves carrying an unopened bag of M&Ms. When I finally decided to investigate inside the barn, well I picked exactly the right or wrong time depending on your point of view.

I had the sense to throw on a safety harness and attach myself to Cassandra's remote wench system before I went exploring, and it's a good thing I did.

As I approached the barn, I noticed a sharp, sweet scent, so powerful it stung my eyes. The entire structure seemed to be crawling with flies, ants, and bees, all trying to find the source of that smell.

I reached the door and didn't see any sign of a lock, so I reached out and took hold of the metal handle. It wasn't metal. It felt sort of moist and spongy like rotting wood. It left a residue on my skin that tingled a bit.

The door was slightly ajar, so I reached into the gap and pulled. The door didn't swing open. It just sort of flexed outward with a sensation like pulling a thick, rubber flap.

That cloying scent intensified and a wave of humid air hit me. I flicked on my head lamp and ducked inside.

I guess, in a purely visual way, it could have been the inside of a barn. It seemed to have a dirt floor scattered with straw. The interior looked like dusty wood dimly lit by thin, tilted sunbeams sneaking in between loose boards...

But, listeners, everything else was all wrong.

The air was thick and wet, with an acrid quality that stung my eyes and nose. Everywhere there was a jumble of food items in various states of decay. Half rotten fruit. Plant matter. Various small animals.

Upon closer inspection, I could see that many of the surfaces of the barn looked like fly paper. Trapped insects buzzing and straining to get free.

It was a grim sight that made me uneasy, which I gotta say, doesn't happen often these days.

I was made more uneasy when I realized that the sunbeams were shrinking down to razor thin blades of light and then vanishing into darkness.

I looked up just in time to see a gap in the wood contract shut.

I turned back toward the door and saw that my safety harness cable was no longer resting in a three inch gap. Now it seemed to be protruding from solid wood.

“Ah,” I said to myself. And I hit the wench remote to pull myself clear of the barn.

The barn resisted my escape, but, eventually I popped through the wall with a squelching thwack sound like pulling a boot out of mud.

I sat on the clover a bit too stunned to think, my skin stinging, my eyes dazzled by the sudden brightness of being back outside.

I did notice that high up beneath the eaves of the barn, I could see the bone-white faces of barn owls, sitting untroubled in little alcoves that seemed made just for them. I could also hear the happy twitter of swallows somewhere.

Whatever was happening, wasn't troubling them.

I hurried to Cassandra to wash up, decontaminate, and grab more equipment.

The barn stayed sealed, but as evening came I made a few discoveries.

First, the barn stayed warmer than the ambient temperature around it. Second, the structure was expelling various gasses indicative of digestion. And the stuff I scraped off of my boots resembled nothing so much as stomach acid.

I don't know what we call this cryptid. “Barn” doesn't quite seem to do it justice.

More tests are needed, but my theory is that it's survival strategy is similar to some carnivorous plants, the pitcher or the sundew. Unlike those species, the barn appears to have a symbiotic relationship with the owls and swallows, perhaps providing warmth and shelter. Maybe even protection from other predators.

That said, boy howdy, there's a whole host of things I just don't know yet. How does it move. Does it have to look like a barn? What did it look like before barns were around? Is it a new species?

Friends, I don't have the answers yet, and isn't that part of the beauty of what we do. CryptoNaturalists, like any good scientific discipline, is a community of knowledge-seekers. I've found a piece of the puzzle. I can't wait to see what else my colleagues unearth.

On that note, I'd like to share a new transmission I received today. Nature truly is an all-you-can-eat buffet of mysteries. Take a listen:

Transmission: Field Report

Valentina Blackwood transmitting on CryptoNaturalist frequency 11-58-1.

Moths eat wool.

Is that news? I don't think that's news.

Do you ever notice how hard it is to keep track of what's unusual and what isn't after any length of time in the field? Frankly, it was hard even before I spent all that time trapped in amber, now... it's impossible.

Anyway, if I have my facts straight, we thought it was just clothes-moth and carpet beetle larvae that ate woolen fibers, but apparently not.

Also, they weren't digesting it. I know, because I'm looking at it.

I'm in Wyoming. Near a place called Hell's Half Acre.

The moths are here too. All of them. I mean, I didn't count... but it's all of them.

Everything from hand-sized luna moths like shards of pale seaglass to the offensively adorable rosy maple moth.

The wool is here too. It would be unscientific of me to say that it was all the wool moths have ever consumed... so I won't. I won't say that.

This landscape looks like a giant spilled his kitchen-drawer full of stone cutlery.

They've started weaving the wool between the sharp, standing stones. It looks shaggy and gray. It's hard to see what they're making with all the fluttering wings in the air, but it reminds me of an angry stormfront in miniature suspended from the rocks. I see fibrous thunderheads building between the rainbow chaos of moth-wings.

I think this may represent the spontaneous, unpremeditated creation of some sort of new, global moth religion. Or it could be just for fun.

Did you know that if you get enough moths together it smells like the first time the furnace kicks on in the winter? Sort of like burnt dust.

I'll report back with my final assessment if I remember.

Valentina over and out.

(End)

Well, there you have it. If you get the chance to join Valentina, I'd take it. Go introduce yourself. Strike up a conversation. Thanks to a botanical mishap, she has six or seven centuries on most of us, so she's a great mentor of young CryptoNaturalists.

I'm going to stick around this barn for a few more days, but I'm going to have to move on before I have all the answers. And isn't that just the bittersweet crux of living on Earth.

Stay safe and stay curious.

Oh, and while you're at it,

We're all strange animals, so act like it.

End.

Credits

Episode 9: The Old Barn (00:21:15)

Show Notes

If you stop to check, it turns out that not all barns are barns.

The voice of Valentina Blackwood was played by Sarah Rhea Werner. Sarah Rhea Werner is a professional writer and podcaster who loves to help creators find confidence and success. She is a contributor to Forbes, and creator of the Girl In Space and Write Now podcasts. She currently lives in the Midwest with one husband, two rescue cats, and a ceiling full of spiders. Learn more at sarahwerner.com.

Hidden Lore Segment poetry contributed by Amber Bulinski. Amber is an artist and writer trying survive the thralls of the Sonoran Desert by respectfully fearing the heat from indoors. Find her on twitter [@ResinQuotes](https://twitter.com/ResinQuotes)