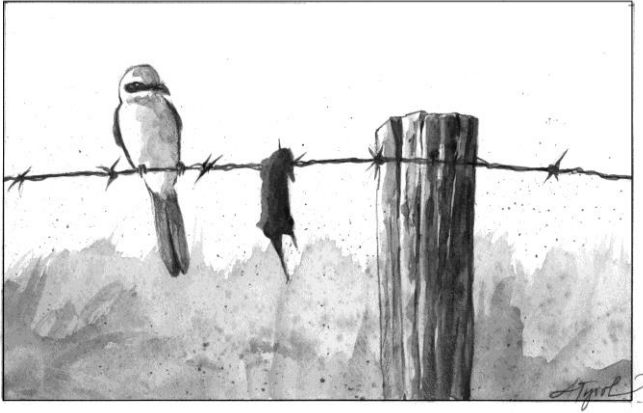


The Outside Story



A Macabre Menagerie

By: Brett Amy Thelen

Last year, I showed up to work on October 31 in one of my old park ranger's uniforms, torn to fake-bloody shreds in an imaginary bear attack. One year earlier, I drank smoothies for breakfast, lunch, and dinner because, ironically, my prosthetic vampire fangs were too fragile to sink into solid food. As a twentysomething undertaking a year of national service, I once asked my supervisor if I couldn't make a few small modifications to my uniform and come to work on the last day of October as an "AmeriCorpse." (He said no.)

In other words, I am a lifelong Halloween enthusiast. Costumes. Ghost stories. Jack o'lanterns. I love it all.

As a biologist, however, I'm no fan of typecasting local wildlife species as mere spooky stereotypes. Owls aren't portenders of doom, but precision predators who'd be delighted to help you with your mouse problem. Bats aren't demons with wings, but devoted mothers and important allies in the

fight against mosquito-borne illness – and, for the most part, tucked snugly away in their winter hibernacula by the time Halloween rolls around in New England. Spiders? Underappreciated fiber artists.

That said, there *are* species whose appearance or actions border on the macabre. In the spirit of the season, I hereby offer this brief introduction to a few who haunt the Northeast:

Ghost Plant. Also called corpse plant, ghost pipe, or Indian pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*), this forest dweller takes on a ghostly pallor as it rises, white and sometimes nearly translucent, out of the leaf litter in summer and early autumn. Its spectral appearance stems from a lack of chlorophyll, the pigment responsible not only for photosynthesis but also for the green hue found in most other plants. True to its name, the ghost plant shirks sunlight and survives by feeding off the energy of the living – in this case by sapping nutrients from mycorrhizal fungi associated with the roots of nearby trees.

Strangleweed. Dodder's (*Cuscuta* spp.) many common names underscore its ghoulish behavior. Known alternately as strangleweed, hellvine, witch's guts, or devil's hair, this wide-ranging parasite grows in dense, tangled strands that resemble orange silly string or, for the gastronomically inclined, angel hair pasta. When a dodder seedling finds its way to a host plant, it twines around the host's stem, penetrates the host's vascular tissue with specialized, nutrient-absorbing structures known as *haustoria* (from the Latin for "thing that draws in"), and uses the vampirized nutrients to fuel rapid growth, attaching

and re-attaching itself to the host until it looks like Cousin Itt's mane. In something straight out of a horror flick, even if the entire external portion of a strangeweed plant has been killed, it can re-sprout completely from the haustoria embedded in its victim's body.

Butcher Birds. Northern shrikes (*Lanius borealis*), whose grisly dining habits have earned them the nickname "butcher birds," breed in the taiga of the far North, wintering in southern Canada and the northern U.S. In the words of Michelle Donahue, who wrote about shrikes for *Audubon* in 2016: "Shrikes are sweet-looking songbirds [who] rip their prey to shreds and festoon their territory with their mutilated corpses." Technically speaking, these collections of mutilated corpses are called "larders," and they may contain up to a dozen vertebrate prey (mice, shrews, voles, other songbirds) at a time, impaled on sharp objects in conspicuous places. Predated birds are generally hung by their neck, head, or shoulders, mammals by their forelimbs. Invertebrate prey, such as grasshoppers, are sometimes speared while still alive.

Dead Man's Fingers. The fruiting bodies of the fungus *Xylaria polymorpha* occasionally appear solo, but more commonly emerge from the base of decaying tree stumps in clusters of two to five finger-shaped growths – looking not unlike, say, the blackened fingers of the undead slowly pushing their way up from the bowels of the earth.

Bleeding Tooth Fungus. For sheer fake gore, the bleeding tooth fungus (*Hydnellum peckii*) is unrivaled. When their fruiting bodies are young, thick red liquid oozes through dozens of pores on

the mushroom caps, leaving the distinct impression that they've just been visited by a coven of ravenous vampires. It's not true blood, of course, but the droplets do contain an anticoagulant. Look for it among the pine needles on coniferous forest floors.

The next time you're in the mood for a good scare, don't turn to owls or bats or spiders for your Halloween fix. Instead, picture yourself stumbling upon a collection of fungal fingers reaching out of the ground like the eerie hands of someone who's been buried alive. Envision yourself as a plant, suffocated and drained by a tangle of hellvine. Think about the fierce songbird who could teach Vlad the Impaler a thing or two. Then, imagine what other supernatural history might be lurking just outside your door.

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