



# Naturally Twisted: A Wild Look At The Wild

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Front cover photo: Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), trying to be  
the most hidden. Back Cover Photo: Albino American Alligator  
(*Alligator mississippiensis*).

## Table of Contents

Unfenced 10	Cypress strikes 39
Gator's nightmare 11	Sentient Earth 40
Bird bully 12	Bad birds 41
Scary tails 14	Gull sale 41
Darwin's challenge 14	Warbler in the big pen 42
High climbing flyer 15	Problems and solutions 43
Paris in the marsh 15	Fear of humans 45
Persistence prevails 16	Wilderness bow 46
At the egret's ball 17	Hearty weed 47
Grackle sees all 19	Webtropolis 48
Polar gator threat 20	Twenty-twenty undersight 49
Signs of early man 20	Fronde friends 50
Fake flutterer 21	Bee-ing helpful 50
Snake slithering school 22	Never alone 51
Rise and pine 23	My apologies 52
Wetlands monster 23	Playing God 53
Little Big Bang 24	Vulture beauty 54
Understanding love 25	I'm outta here 55
Cypress mentor 26	Ask me if I'm nuts 56
Bird manners 27	Sweet envy 57
Hemingway winner 28	Border-free vision 58
Facebook vultures 28	Lazy thoughts 59
Swamp blood 29	Invisible manatee 60
Indecision 30	Hurried wind 60
Shadow friends 31	Mosquito control 61
Fishy perspective 32	What I see in you 62
Science denier 33	Paradise found 63
Egret storm 33	Wisdom tree 64
Canoeing work-out 34	Part of the whole 65
Gator love 34	Lichen's will to live 66
If up was down 35	Lovely clutter 67
Getting along 36	Little blue poser 68
Rare moments 37	Darwin attraction 69
Beauty bath 38	When we each become all 70

Wilderness wish 71  
Better left alone 71  
Calling it the way it isn't 72  
Twilight sounds 73  
No-no texting 74  
Shark's loss our gain 75  
Unlucky to be superstitious 77  
Good days ahead 78  
Sandy sailor 79  
Flirtatious owl 79  
Real dreams 80  
A vein runs through it 80  
Lovers' gift 81  
Gar by birth 82  
Concentration 83  
Freedom's toes 84  
Love's language 85  
Be yourself 87  
Bury me here 88  
Avoiding the dogcatcher 90  
If looks could kill 90  
Silent connection 92  
The beginning is near 93  
Wild musical notes 95  
Once upon a moment 96  
Theirs not ours 97  
Sense of place 97  
Afterword: The big cheat 98  
Fossil hunt invitation 98  
Other books by author 99

To Gary Larson and Dave Barry.  
Great humans, great humorists.

## FOREWORDS

Mark Renz's gift is helping us to see Florida for the first time, as if it were conceived in the realms of fantasy, intimacy, mysticism and exhilaration. --Billy Cox, reporter, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

"I've known Mark for more than 20 years, have been fossil hunting with him (scuba diving and wading in creeks) and have interviewed him many times. One thing is for sure: He knows his way around the paleo-world as well as any professor in paleontology. With this book, it's obvious that his eye for photography matches his eye for old bones." --Kevin Lollar, Environmental/Science Reporter (retired), Fort Myers News-Press

# NATURALLY TWISTED: A Wild Look At The Wild



*Mark Renz*

## Introduction

I'm a realist who sees things that aren't there. I can't help it. Everywhere I look my world appears larger than life. Simpler too. Funnier, kinder, more compassionate, more forgiving and more gently connected to everyone and everything. Of course, the world I see is the world I want to see, not always the world that is.

Throughout this book I tap into my inner dreamer more than the realist. In doing so, I pretend to become various life forms so I can attempt to see things from their perspective. I am serious but also a joker.

I start my creative process with a camera, where I capture a moment in nature, then take the image home and view it on my computer monitor. There, I adjust the saturation or contrast slightly, perhaps remove an intrusive branch or two, then sharpen the final image. Occasionally I will use an add-on filter to make the image resemble an oil painting. But what I really look forward to is sitting back and spending a minute or two just looking at the final image. What does it do for me? How does it make me feel? What thoughts come to mind?

Sometimes I come up with, “What the...Delete! Delete!” Or no more than “Wow, the lighting was phenomenal that morning on the marsh.” But what I'm really hoping for are the more magical times in which I find myself taking leave of reality and stepping into a make-believe world. Here, I am able to create imaginary stories in which birds talk and dance, humans fly and my atoms move about as if they're part of a universal ballet. Come to think of it, they are.

At that moment, I switch from photographer to writer and allow my fantasies to flow through my keyboard. The results are mixed. Sometimes I come up with a world totally backwards and on its head. Other times, I celebrate the natural world – including us – just the way it is.

As for my writing style, I may start out rhyming and then switch to straight prose, or come up with an odd-ball faux press release, news article or essay. My “story” may consist of one or two words, or a couple of pages. I find that when I am not held prisoner by strict rules of writing and style, I can focus more on what is being said than how I'm saying it. In other words, I can be lazy.

Some people are not too keen on tweaking photographs. Historically, photography has been about recording what is, not transforming it into art – even though photographers of yore often “tweaked” their reality in the darkroom or by using certain lenses and filters. But technology today allows all of us access to our own private e-darkroom where we can play with reality as much as we want.

Don't get me wrong. There is still a place for non-manipulated photography - especially in news journalism or any realm where precise realism matters. But for the artist, tweaking allows the creative juices to pour into a photo. The final image is not for everybody, but it's everything for the artist. So to be clear, some

of my photos are photo art, meaning I have manipulated the image beyond mild saturation or contrast. I am confident it will be obvious to the viewer, but if in doubt, lean on the side of art, not reality.

Rather than try to impress you with a lengthy stellar resume, let me just say that I am the proverbial jack-of-all-trades. Although I'm not a full-time photographer, I've been on the view-finder side of cameras since I was 15, and my freelance photos have been published internationally in magazines and newspapers.

My wife Marisa and I own and operate a Florida guide service called Fossil Expeditions. We started the business 20 years ago, to help the public and schools learn about Florida's ancient mammals, sharks and reptiles. Subject matter comes largely from my near daily dips into the Peace River, between Arcadia and Wauchula – or the Caloosahatchee River near Fort Myers. My photos, prose, poems and general musings are sparsely scattered about in my five fossil-related paperback books and two ebooks.

During my off-time, I have stumbled onto the ancient remains of a 14 ft. tall giant ground sloth, a 12 ft. long dugong (manatee cousin) and a site that – with the help of about 100 volunteers – turned up a dozen mammoths, mastodons, horses, llamas and peccaries. The horse was a new species for Florida but had been found previously in Texas. The more scientifically significant fossils have been turned over to the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH) in Gainesville, FL. FLMNH then permanently loaned representative specimens to the Clewiston Museum for an on-going public exhibit.

I also drive around the state as much as possible, looking for wildlife, landscapes or waterscapes that interest me. I often think of Florida's back country as the Wild, Wild West and I'm an outlaw drifter and camera slinger. Thankfully, my subjects live on – as undisturbed as possible.



What do I hope you and I will gain from this book? A deeper appreciation and understanding of ourselves and the natural world. Perhaps a chuckle here and there. And an increase in knowledge that will inspire us both to be better stewards of the wilderness we love and so desperately need to protect.

## Geek Speak

I understand the need for a light meter and tripod. But the times I've used them, I missed far more decent shots than I got. If my subject matter or lighting would stick around for more than a few seconds it would be worth mounting up. But because my interests are so varied I want to be ready for anything in any direction. So I hand-hold my shots. Yes, I lose a slight bit of clarity. But it's one less thing I have to worry about and I feel that much freer to act quickly when nature calls.

Which cameras and lenses did I use for this book? In hind sight, not the most appropriate ones. But at the time, they were the lenses and cameras of inexperience and financial choice. I shoot with Nikon bodies: An old D40x and D3100. For lenses, I brandish an 18-200mm, 18-300mm and 80-400mm Nikkor. Most of my birding close-ups are with the 80-400. For some of my bug close-ups I've shot with Nikkor's 200mm "micro", but it's been over-kill and difficult to maneuver in the field. Now I mostly use my Tokina 10-17mm. It not only gives me decent close-up shots but a dramatic background because of the wide lens.



One day an old wooden fence  
got tired of being an old wooden fence  
And as a tiny bug flew by  
the old wooden fence got an idea  
Before it could think clearly  
about how impossible the idea was  
the old wooden fence reached out  
and grabbed the little bug  
And at that precise moment  
the old wooden fence  
became a young Gray Catbird  
Then flew off with the little bug  
in its bill

Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*). Audubon Corkscrew  
Swamp Sanctuary, Naples, FL.



Last night I had the strangest of dreams  
in my deepest of deep sleeps  
I found myself in the middle of a large metropolitan city  
Lost of course  
with no sign of brown tannin-stained water  
to swim in or hide  
And no slow moving catfish to sneak up on  
or serrated saw grass to slide through  
And all around me were four-ton steel shells  
belonging to some kind of crazy turtles  
that honked like geese  
and moved in time to red, yellow and green lights  
But thank Darwin I woke up  
realizing it was still dark out  
And I was safe and sound  
at home in the swamp

American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*).  
Big Cypress National Preserve, FL.



Bird Bully – Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) – Arcadia, FL.  
In this four-part series, notice the adult's gentle, but firm way of dealing with a problem. First, the more aggressive chick pecks its sibling in the chest.



Back it tumbles.



The adult quickly intervenes by placing its foot on top of the aggressor.



Then with its bill, it gently picks up the passive chick and uprights it, continuing to keep her foot in front of the bully.  
Lesson learned!



Old Florida Cracker saying: "Never trouble trouble 'till trouble troubles you." Or a rewrite of another one: "Let sleeping logs lie."  
Alligator Farm, St. Augustine, FL.



We all have our challenges in life.  
(My dog Darwin and friend to be.) Arcadia, FL.



I find it inspiring when I see a bird that can no longer fly to great heights, climb there instead. Yellow-crowned night-heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*), in rehab at Florida Aquarium, Tampa, FL.



Paris in the marsh.  
Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, LaBelle, FL.





Persistence (3 photos). Brown Water Snake (*Nerodia taxispilota*)  
and Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*).  
Peace River, Brownville, FL.







Perhaps I was sleep hobbling  
or maybe I was finally awake  
But as I walked along a canal near my home  
I could have sworn I heard Beethoven's 6th Symphony  
reverberating off the water

followed by bright feathered lights bowing and dipping  
then swishing smoothly and gracefully  
Stepping forwards and backwards  
Waving with wings as soft as the air  
while scaled mariners dashed and darted  
away from stabbing daggers of orange and yellow  
Maneuvering around hollow legs as thin as reeds

Aha I thought to myself  
I have somehow stumbled onto a Great Egrets Ball  
held in secret locations away from hurried humans  
who are no longer moved to dance  
I stood there wondering how long it had been  
since I had let loose in the wild  
when suddenly I found myself swaying  
and swooping with them  
As if I had wings  
As if gravity had taken the morning off  
and here I was a lucky uprighter  
A witness to the Great Egrets Ball  
slowing down and for once  
finding myself in time with the natural world

Birds include great egrets, tri-colored herons, little blue herons, white ibis, snowy egrets. Each species was working together and cooperating. Three or four snowys would chase fish to the opposite side where great egrets would pluck them out of the water. Then several tri-colored's would rush forward and scare the fish back to the other side, where they would get picked off by little blues. With a plentiful supply of fish, they all seemed to get along. But when the food source gets more scarce, it's every bird for themselves. Lehigh Acres, FL



If I could see me through the eyes of the grackle  
Perched quietly in the shadows of the wooded lot next door  
    What would I see           Who would I see  
Am I to this bird the best of my kind or the worst  
Is there a curiosity about me or fear or indifference  
    I peer back and think aloud  
    I hope I don't disappoint you  
    I really am trying to be the best I can be  
    In spite of my big-brain bull-headedness  
    and my little-brain short-sightedness  
Then I hear another grackle calling deeper into the woods  
    and my wife in the other room  
    One of us blinks and one of us is gone

Lehigh Acres, FL.



Scientists are alarmed that Global Warming may threaten the remaining 2,000 alligators that congregate on ice packs in the summer Arctic seas. The toothy reptiles depend on tasty penguins and frozen marshmallows from tourists. But as Global Warming politics melt the ice, gators are abandoning their Arctic habitats.

Captive albino American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*).  
Alligator Farm, St. Augustine, FL.

Signs of Early Man. (*Homo silliman*)  
Probably about 7:30 a.m.

Peace River. Brownville, FL.





I would love to know what was going on inside  
the swallowtail's head as it landed on my friend's shoulder  
Looking for friendship or romance  
Or perhaps our canoe resembled a cruise ship  
and the swallowtail was ready for some rest and relaxation  
Maybe it stopped to lay an egg on it's last day alive  
Or left a smelly gift to express it's appreciation  
for being fooled by the wearer of the t-shirt  
Or maybe it was color-blind and never even noticed  
the other flutterers

Peace River, Gardner, FL.



Snake Slithering School  
Ever wonder how snakes do it  
How they learn to slither  
I crashed this rare field class  
where a young rat snake  
(*Pantherophis obsoleta quadrivittata*)  
was taking her master's in double-slither and spook

Peace River boat ramp, Brownville Park, FL.





Rise and pine.  
Big Cypress National Preserve, FL.



Most dangerous wetlands creature.



What a divine morning to rest my ancient cheeks  
on a cow-poo-stained sandy creek bank  
Where looking down I see a mirrored image of another dimension

Then, placing a small pebble between two fumbling fingers  
I wave my hand and release my powers  
My Little Big Bang starts with a splash  
sending ripples across my cosmos creek

I watch for a long minute as life unfolds in front of my eyes  
The ripples rolling further and further away from the epicenter  
Until nothing remains but the reflection of another dimension

I conclude that I have managed to create something out of nothing  
Feeling quite smug about my accomplishment  
until my cell phone rings and a gentle voice says  
Honey, don't forget you promised to mow the yard  
when you get home

Nocatee, FL.





To really understand love it helps to be confused  
and bewildered beyond measure.

Lanceleaf Rose-gentian (*Sabatia difformis*).  
Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, between LaBelle and  
Immokalee, FL.



I want to be like an old bald cypress  
that drops its needles in the cool dryness of winter  
    Appearing weak and vulnerable  
while in reality gathering strength and saving energy  
    for when times are hard  
Then refoliating in the following summer's refreshing rains  
    All the wiser and all the stronger

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, Naples, FL.



It's important that good manners  
are taught at an early age  
But the rate in which we grow  
always seems to be greater  
than the rate in which we mature

Great blue heron family (*Ardea herodias*). Breeds in trees in colonies. Largest of the North American herons. Boardwalk shot. Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



Winner, Ernest Hemmingway Look-alike Contest.  
Arcadia, FL.



Black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*) posting on Facebook.  
Alva, FL.





Swamp blood.  
Florida Everglades.



I am the fox squirrel  
sprinting full speed  
across a busy road  
Only to stop  
on the middle yellow line  
and wonder if the direction  
I came from  
might not be the best way to go  
after all  
So I turn back  
and begin to sprint towards home  
Pausing a quarter of the way  
to wonder again  
if my first decision to leave  
wasn't the wisest after all  
And about that time a  
speeding car chooses my fate  
for me

Sherman's Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger shermani*). Alva, FL.



When I was a little boy in the forest  
I was sometimes afraid  
of shadows and shapes  
and strange natural carvings  
on old broken branches  
Or polished driftwood  
at the edge of winding streams  
Now that I am a much older little boy  
I welcome the shadows and shapes  
and strange pieces of wood  
for they are happy dimensions  
of my imagination  
They are unexpected friends  
I encounter  
in the wilderness

Peace River, Arcadia, FL.



From under water  
what does an unsuspecting fish see  
when it looks up  
Fluffy white clouds blowing in the wind  
or a hungry wading bird  
with an invitation to meet for lunch  
And is the daydreamer fish  
the first to get plucked from dreamland  
Or the industrious finner focussed on earning  
a day's watery wages

Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*).  
J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel, FL.





Keep denying the science and we dinosaurs  
might just get a second chance.

Male Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*). Lehigh Acres, FL.



As I drove home today  
I got caught in an egret storm  
The birds were so thick in front of my truck  
it was like driving in a heavy rain



Canoeing is great exercise. Peace River, Wauchula, FL.



SINGLES AD (Alligator Good Times magazine):  
"Looking for a strong, silent-type. Prefer someone hard-headed with a long blood line who loves to swim and sunbathe in the buff, enjoys dining out at dawn and dusk. Must have great taste in...well, just about everything. No iguanas or monitor lizards need reply." Caloosahatchee River, Alva, FL.



What if the forest  
set over the sky  
and no one bothered  
to wonder why  
If up was down  
and darkness light  
If truths were false  
and wrongs were right  
What if poems  
refused to rhyme  
and orange was lemon  
and chocolate lime  
What if I was you  
and you were I  
And we both craved  
the same piece of pie  
What if the forest  
set over the sky  
and no one bothered  
to wonder why



There's more to getting along  
than just keeping our distance  
from one another  
Getting along means being considerate  
of the habitats and habits  
of all life forms  
with feathers, scales, skin or bark  
Getting along means doing without  
some of life's niceties  
if it means giving others a fair chance  
to get along with us as well

Great Horned Owl owlet (*Bubo virginianus*)  
Alva, FL.



There are rare moments when I have found myself  
completely alone on a Florida river  
No mechanical sounds of boats or cars or ATVs  
or anything human to mar the silence  
Even trash has somehow found another place to lie scattered

During those brief moments I am aware of what I could be  
if I truly lived more harmoniously with the cypress  
and cabbage palm, black willow and winding river  
I am more "of" than "in" the wilderness  
There is no isolation  
No feeling of superiority as the tamer or conqueror  
Just a sense of peace, a sense of quiet  
A sense that I belong

The moments are rare  
But I can imagine what it would be like  
for them to last for hours and days  
years and lifetimes

Peace River, Brownville Park, Arcadia, FL.





You don't get to be  
one of the most beautiful birds  
in North America  
without taking lots of baths.

Male Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*).  
Alva, FL.



Legends claim bald cypress trees  
were once lightening strikes  
that upon hitting the ground  
cooled and took root  
And for awhile sky and earth  
traded places  
Until the cypress grew tall  
and returned to the sky

Fakahatchee Strand Presereve State Park, FL.



Think of Earth as a sentient organism  
and each plant, insect and animal as cells  
Think of how you feel when you're well  
how you feel when you're sick  
and how something as tiny as a flu virus  
can knock you on your keister  
Then think about how Earth's two-legged cells  
have become infected by the virus of greed and ego  
control and short-sightedness  
Think about how Earth feels as a result  
How its breath is labored and its waters poisoned  
its natural cycles disrupted and faltering  
There are doctors who already know this  
and politicians who think they know  
or who purposefully skew the preponderance of evidence  
Meanwhile Earth waits for the medication to kick in  
or the virus to leave and neither happens  
Think of Earth as a sentient organism

CREW Wildlife & Environmental Area. Lee/Collier counties, FL.





Sometimes you'll find birds acting just like us – or perhaps Natural Selection has passed on similar traits as a survival mechanism when resources are scarce. Or, maybe it takes more effort to behave than misbehave so we follow the path of least resistance. Black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*) feeding. Feral hog road carcass was the main course. Arcadia, FL.



Used gull lot.  
Laughing Gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla*). Inverness, FL.



Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*) doing hard time.  
Arcadia, FL.



I can't recall a day I haven't seen an animal  
dead on Hwy. 31, between Fort Myers and Arcadia  
Most days, it's multiple carcasses  
hawks, vultures, egrets, cranes  
otters, deer, raccoons, bobcats, coyotes  
snakes and even alligators

This morning on the same road  
I am fixed as always, on my world  
sort-of listening to NPR  
Caught up in my dreams and my obligations  
with my foot on the gas of my Chevy long-bed  
Pushing 60, occasionally 65  
while nearby a viceroy butterfly, caught up in its own world  
glides gracefully over a field of flowers  
that ends abruptly at a concrete corridor  
Where our two worlds collide windshield to wings  
And upon doing a u-turn in case I was wrong  
I find its lifeless body flattened and wings broken

But rather than dwell on its passing  
I slip back into my cab and soon I'm pushing 65 again  
and listening as the radio guest offers tips  
for a healthier lifestyle

And while thinking about how  
sometimes I'm part of the problem  
sometimes part of the solution  
I see a tiny warbler fly into the path  
of an oncoming 18-wheeler  
then vanish under the rig  
tumbling along the pavement  
before landing on its side  
motionless

Another u-turn...carefully  
then scooping up the tiny bird in my hand  
I feel the warmth of its body  
and see only one eye open  
for just a few seconds  
then watch it slowly close  
as the bird passes

It's hard for me when I so want to protect wildlife  
while at the same time knowing  
I'm a creature that can be its greatest threat  
destructive and indifferent to the nonhuman world

Sometimes I think indifference is a blessing  
and knowledge a curse

Friends tell me to stop worrying  
over every bug and bird  
that slams into someone's windshield  
Get on with life!  
So after burying the bird I slip back into my truck

and back into my dreams  
half listening to NPR and thinking about obligations  
in my world  
wondering if I am part of the solution  
or part of the problem

Hwy. 31, between Fort Myers and Arcadia, FL.



Ever had one of those days when you're swimming along, peacefully minding your own business, when suddenly you feel as if you're being closely watched? Well, that's the kind of day this brown water snake (*Nerodia taxispilota*), had when it slithered right up to my face and almost had a heart attack. Poor snake. I can't understand why it has such a deep fear of humans.

Peace River, Brownville, FL.



I bow to the Wilderness  
freely admitting that I have far more  
to learn from nature than it could possibly  
learn from me  
This is where I come to un-complicate life  
This is where I am accepted and at home  
if I am humble and still  
If I leave my ego back in un-civilization  
I bow to the wilderness  
knowing it is larger than I could ever be  
And in recognizing I am small  
it is easier to be part of the whole  
If I can see the big picture  
yet live peacefully and gently in my small space  
I am allowing the rest of the wild  
the chance to bow as well

Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*).  
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.





I would gladly become as the pickerel weed  
if I thought you might land lovingly on my heart.

Eastern Black Swallowtail (*Papilio polyxenes*).  
Pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*)  
Arcadia, FL.





## Webtropolis

There are cities within forests  
where you'll never hear  
a honking horn  
or squint through smelly smog  
or deal with rampant crime  
needless destitution  
and anxious greed  
There are cities within forests  
where stunning creativity  
cooperative planning  
and recycled structures  
enrich the landscape  
cleanse the air  
and lessen the distance  
between us and the stars

Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, LaBelle, FL.



Like hindsight, undersight can be 20-20. Especially if you're a young Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), and nearly invisible to prey and predators. One of the smallest herons in the world.  
Wakodahatchee Wetlands. Delray Beach, FL.



Why can't we be fronds?  
Saw Palmetto fronds (*Serenoa repens*). Alva, FL.



If we are tuned to the right frequency, there are endless moments in which we can help ease someone else's load. In doing so, make our own much lighter. The specific frequencies created by the honey bee's buzz can also lighten the load of pollen from specific plants. Yes, the bee was rescued! Arcadia, FL.



I may think I'm here alone  
with the motion of the stream  
But the alligator smiles  
and the egret shares my dreams.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*).  
J.N. Ding Darling Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel, FL.



There are times when I am ashamed to be a human. This is one of those times. I so want to apologize to the young Northern Crested Caracara, to tell him that this isn't who we really are, that the world we share with its kind is not as littered and polluted as it looks. But I'd be lying. And to say that I am not part of the problem would also be lying. I'm working on it. But I've got a long ways to go. If you're from the future, please don't give up on Me. On Us. Hopefully, we have evolved into You and the world is a better place for it. Immature Northern Crested Caracara (Caracara cheriway). Arcadia, FL.





We've all been there  
We hear the frog's pitiful squeal  
like forcing air through the narrow slit  
of a full balloon  
And we know death is imminent  
for the little hopper that just a moment ago  
grabbed a moth that made no sound  
as it flapped its wings just before death  
And we know if the snake isn't careful  
the crying frog will alert a hawk  
eager to take advantage of a three-for-one meal  
And we stare in fascination  
feeling fortunate that it isn't us in the jaws of the snake  
or the gullet of the frog  
And yet we feel for both  
until that feeling awakens in us  
a need to protect the weak and vulnerable  
Something we haven't always recognized  
in our character

but now it begs us to intervene  
to play God  
to decide who lives and who dies  
Yet with experience we have learned  
that living and dying is nature's way  
of keeping life moving  
evolving  
And perhaps the toughest part about playing God  
is knowing when to step back  
and when to step forward  
And soon the only sound I hear  
is the screech of a hawk as it stirs in me  
another chance to play God

Southern Black Racer (*Coluber constrictor priapus*) and Southern  
Leopard Frog (*Rana sphenoccephala*). Arcadia, FL.



Winner, Turkey Vulture beauty pageant. (*Cathartes aura*).  
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.





Why do I always have to be going somewhere  
Especially when I am surrounded by plant communities  
that seem content to already be there  
When I have a choice between leaving and arriving  
I am forever leaving  
I am always heading out the door to walk through the woods  
and leave the trails to see and see and see some more  
Yes, I stop to savor moments but then I am off again  
never content to be still long enough  
to allow tiny feeler roots to sneak out between my toes  
and really grab hold of the soil  
Excuse me, but I really must be going now

Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) trees during the dry season.  
Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park near Copeland, FL.



Ask me how much I spend on new clothes  
Ask me whether my diet is nutritious  
Ask me how much water I consume  
Ask me the price of my heating and cooling bill  
Ask me how high my house payment is  
Ask me what happens to my home when I move on or die  
Ask me how much noise I make  
Ask me how much I pollute the oceans, rivers and air  
Ask me whether I enjoy my job and how much money I make  
Ask me how I settle my border disputes  
Ask me about my biggest threat to survival  
Ask me how many squirrels there are in the world  
relative to our carbon paw print  
Ask me which of us is a better steward of Earth  
Ask me whether visitors from another planet  
would be more impressed by my lifestyle or yours  
Ask me which one of us is more nutty

Sherman Fox Squirrel, Alva, FL. According to Wetlands Ecologist James Beever "Shermani ranges south to the north shore of the Caloosahatchee River (farther than some field guides

and scientific papers indicate). The other subspecies *aviccennia*, is found south of the Caloosahatchee River. There is some interbreeding in Hendry and Glades counties along the river interface where it is narrower and squirrels can cross on man-made bridges. It is interesting to postulate whether they were geographically isolated until we built the first bridges. So Lee County is lucky in having both subspecies."



Said the flower to the butterfly  
I envy your wings that you can fly  
anywhere in the world  
Replied the butterfly to the flower  
I envy your scent  
that brings the world to you

Zebra long wing butterfly (*Heliconius charithonia*).  
Brownville, FL.



Some see the world as finite with clear boundaries  
and borders, beginnings and endings  
Others view it as infinite and borderless  
with no alpha or omega  
Still others, like the two of us, see the world as both

We're realists and dreamers  
always testing boundaries and borders  
Wondering what came before beginnings  
and after endings, asking the alpha and omega  
to meet us half way  
Our safety net is a clear sense of reason  
like the safety thread that trails behind a regal jumping spider  
as it tests its own boundaries and borders  
while foraging for food  
and exploring its sense of purpose

Regal Jumping Spider (*Phidippus regius*).  
Arcadia, FL.



It's not that I'm lazy  
but sometimes doing nothing  
allows me to slow down  
long enough to think about  
doing something  
But by the time I'm ready to  
do something  
it's time to do nothing again  
so nothing gets done  
But it sure beats doing something  
and getting nothing out of it

Yellow-bellied Slider (*Trachemys scripta scripta*). Plant is Giant Duck Weed (*Spirodela polyrhiza*), tiny but still the largest of the duck weeds. Native to Florida. Moore Haven, FL.





Disappearing act.  
Florida Manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*).  
Homossassa Springs, FL.



'Cane a'comin'.  
Santa Fe River, High Springs, FL.



Mosquito control.  
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.





What do you see in me asked the turtle to the damsel fly.  
I see someone who isn't afraid to climb to great heights  
and who doesn't always look before leaping  
I see someone who is always home but always gone  
I see someone who can be a little hard-headed  
but is patient and easy-going  
What do you see in me asked the damselfly to the turtle  
I see someone who is always happy even when feeling blue  
You're a bit flighty but you're always here when I need you  
You've got the cutest eyes this side of the river  
and you're lighter than a feather in the wind  
I'm glad we don't allow the world to tell us who we can love  
added the turtle  
Me too replied the damsel fly

Yellow-bellied Slider (*Trachemys scripta scripta*) and damselfly.  
Arcadia, FL.



The other night my wife Marisa and I did some thinking aloud  
and decided we'd get away from it all  
by taking a cruise to one of those far-off tropical places  
Our plan was to sit in the breeze under a swaying palm  
or a moss-draped oak and dip our toes in the water  
Excited we packed a suitcase and Googled "Paradise"  
promising ourselves we would pick the first place that popped up  
"SW Florida" read the entry  
So we unpacked and spent the next 10 minutes driving  
over to the Caloosahatchee River in Alva  
to sit under an old oak and dip our toes in the river  
Ahh...there's nothing like a relaxing vacation I told her  
She agreed and suggested we bring the kayaks next time



If not for the sturdy arms of an old oak  
where would the resurrection fern resurrect  
Where would the bromeliad spread its watery spikes  
And where would the immature Great Horned Owl  
gain its wisdom

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Alva, FL.



I wonder as I watch the whole of the river flow  
What is the role of the individual molecule of water  
Independent yet part of the whole  
Attempting to seek its own level  
while pushed and pulled in every direction  
Then perhaps reaching its salty cousins of the sea  
Or dissipating first and rising skyward  
on the lightest of wings  
Freezing into star-shaped crystals  
then falling 20,000 feet to land who knows where  
and be independent again yet part of the whole

Saw Palmetto reflection.  
Arcadia, FL.



The will to live is as strong in lichens as it is in us  
Growing any darn place they please  
in extreme cold, heat or drought  
Either lichens are content just being lichens  
or they are slowly evolving into something more  
Or could it be something less  
So slow at change that after hundreds of millions of years  
it's too soon for us to notice  
We long to define contentment and purpose in human terms  
Hoping we are somehow different  
perhaps even superior to all other living organisms  
But lichens remind us that simple may be the real superior  
especially when it comes to longevity  
and that maybe, just maybe...there is no purpose  
behind purpose  
Things may be just for the sake of being  
If so, I wonder if we can still find beauty in such knowledge  
Or if we will forever have to create purpose  
so we have an excuse to be

SW Florida cemetery





I love clutter  
It's simple and easy on my eyes  
I admire clutter  
for what it doesn't try to do  
It doesn't try to become  
something it isn't  
such as order or control  
It doesn't try to soothe  
with intentional lines and circles  
Clutter allows me to sit still  
without being tempted to fidget  
or manipulate or conquer  
Clutter allows me to be myself  
while watching the Wilderness  
be itself

Peace River, Arcadia, FL.



Posing Class for Beginners.  
Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*).  
Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.





Scientists world-wide are befuddled over what appears to be an image of Charles Darwin in Everglades algae.

“Primordial!” said one biologist.

“Evolutionary!” exclaimed another.



When all living things become a blur  
and I can't tell flower from tree or bug from bird  
When colors smear and each becomes all  
I begin to see life for what it really is  
A river flowing south and north  
west and east and down and up and outside in  
It's not that our gazillion atoms are each the same  
but that they're just different enough to affect the flow  
Charged with motion they move as individuals  
but bond with neighbors to become molecules and cells  
and living, breathing organisms  
that effect the direction and properties of flow  
I sometimes understand the how but I'm more unsure of why  
Who knows how far our atoms have journeyed  
how often they have changed partners  
and with whom or what or where  
But the blur somehow brings clarity to complexity  
and a smile to my face

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), Bedman Creek, Alva, FL.



While sitting on the banks of a hidden creek  
I wondered what the Wilderness would wish for  
if it had a single wish  
Barely a second had passed when a light breeze  
whispered in my ear  
We wish to be left alone



Sometimes it takes greater forward vision  
to leave things just the way they are.  
Lakeport, FL.



There are times in our lives  
when we say stupid things  
Thinking we are just calling it  
the way it is  
When in reality we're saying it  
the way our prejudices see it  
For those times it might be best  
if we say it -- where nobody but  
the fish will hear us

Blue-winged Teals (*Anas discors*).  
Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



If I listen at Twilight  
I can hear the symphony of frogs and crickets  
croaking and chirping between the shoreline reeds  
While accompanying them a quarter mile away  
in an uprighter's concrete nest  
A two-legged band performs its own concert  
with monster speakers blasting out in a heavy crackling bass  
Between scratchy notes firecrackers pop and fizzle  
People patter patters and a car horn honks  
An ATV screams across a freshly-mowed field  
Unable to filter them out I snap the shutter  
Capturing the sights but not the sounds  
then return home to take a closer look at my photo  
and see if I can imagine that same symphony  
of frogs and crickets  
But my phone rings and my dog barks  
and a neighbor two blocks away  
cranks up his dinosaur-throated Harley  
that roars Look at me  
I am somebody



But I don't know who  
And I sit staring at the photo  
Wondering if I really know  
what it's like to be close to nature

Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



Why dogs should never text and paddle.

Coonie, an Australian Cattle Dog I had before  
my current dog Darwin. Wauchula, FL.





Every tooth tells a story. With every story, comes the opportunity to learn a little something about our planet and ourselves. I plucked this *C. megalodon* tooth out of a SW Florida creek where it had been worn as a pendant by a native Floridian several thousand years ago. This species of shark became extinct a few million years earlier and would have lost the tooth long before humans walked our peninsula.

The shark's kind disappeared about the same time the Isthmus of Panama finally connected North and South America above the ocean's surface some two to four million years ago. This would have blocked the Atlantic and Pacific from freely intermixing.

That means the shark would have had to follow migratory whales 6,000 miles around South America instead of between the Americas – if it expected to survive. It may not have been the only cause of its extinction but was probably a contributing factor.

As for us, *C. megalodon*'s misfortune was our gain. The rising Isthmus created the Gulf Stream, which in turn helped to warm Africa. Our ancestors were forced out of trees as more grasslands dominated the landscape.

Once we were standing firmly on the ground, those bull-headed brains of ours began to grow until eventually we started collecting sharks teeth and posting their photos and stories on social media.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

And just to be clear, I found this tooth before 1990, back when it was legal to pick up isolated artifacts from a state-owned river - although I found it in a private creek bed. I then donated the tooth to the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. It has since been included in their traveling *Megalodon* exhibit.

Removing artifacts from a state-owned river bed today is illegal.



I'm not afraid of the dark and won't think twice  
about stepping on a sidewalk crack  
I'll go under a ladder even when a black cat  
is crossing on the other side  
I'll throw low-glycemic sugar over my shoulder instead of salt  
I'll sail on the morning of a red sky  
and will neither kill a spider indoors  
nor a snake to hang on a fence for rain  
I'll sit too close to the TV without worrying about blindness  
I'll break a mirror and open an umbrella in the house

I won't be concerned if the dog hair I accidentally swallow  
becomes a worm in my belly  
I'll kiss a toad without fear of warts  
(well, maybe just sniff it instead)  
I'll ignore a four-leaf clover if the one  
with three leaves looks lonely  
I'll go outside on a wintery day knowing I won't catch a cold  
I'll accept that there will be days of good luck and bad luck  
whether I wear something old or something new  
Something borrowed or something blue  
I'll breathe freely rather than hold my breath  
while passing a cemetery at night  
Unafraid that ghosts will follow me home  
But there's one thing I won't do...  
and that is to go to bed angry at anyone  
A lover or friend or stranger or enemy  
For that's the worst kind of luck you can have

LaBelle, FL.



It's not that I long for the good ol' days, but rather that I long for a  
new day in which people try harder to find good in each other.  
Ft. Denaud Cracker house, near LaBelle, FL.



I don't know how the first human to design a boat  
got the idea and then used it to sail to new lands  
but I suspect he or she was a beach-comber  
as well as a dreamer.

Sanibel, FL.



When owls flirt.  
Young Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Alva, FL.





While the realist complains there's no water, the dreamer sets sail.  
Alva, FL.



Where the river runs, so do my veins.  
Caloosahatchee River oxbow, Alva, FL.





A gift to lovers everywhere...

Love is not a single word  
with a single meaning  
It's an attempt to describe  
the many chambers of the heart  
Unknown chambers  
that defy the surgeon's blade  
But that can be cut  
with greater precision  
and filled with a special plasma  
that science has yet to quantify  
Love has more meanings  
than there are human languages  
and more languages  
than there are human meanings  
Love is whispered in the dark  
and shouted in the light  
There is no place it can't be found  
and no place it can't be lost

Love is a word for which  
everyone has their own definition  
What other word has such power  
and is so confusing  
yet so sure of itself?  
Love is love - whatever that is.

Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



That I was born a white male in SW Florida, was not my call. I could just as easily not have been born at all, or emerged as another sex, or race, or in another country -- richer or poorer -- or even as a bug, a bird or a gar. For that reason, my aim is to be respectful and kind to everyone and every life form. Do I sometimes fail? Yes. But that is no reason not to try again and again. I owe it to the world to be the best I can be, in spite of my birth form, place or circumstance.

Florida Gar (*Lepisosteus platyrhincus*), Arcadia, FL.



Concentration is in the eyes of the beholder. This bird was stalking fish in a small pond. If the fish moved, they didn't move for long. Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*). Fort Myers, FL.



I am troubled  
by how little time I spend  
looking up or down  
or out or in  
Allowing my human world  
to dictate  
when I can feel  
and when I can be  
more than just a worker ant  
So today I finally broke free  
and looked up  
while walking under  
a giant oak  
Promptly stubbing my toe  
on a root

Arcadia, FL.



I was wandering quietly  
through a scraggly patch  
of saw palmettos  
and cabbage palms  
when I could have sworn  
I heard whispering

Yet it appeared as if  
no one was around  
So I closed my ears  
opened my mind  
and heard it again  
only this time more clearly

Excuse me  
but your bark is to die for  
and your branches

contain the most beautiful fronds  
I've ever had the pleasure  
of brushing against

Then nearby another voice responded  
I have felt the same  
for as long as I can remember  
and I can scarcely wait  
for strong winds and heavy rains  
to prove to the world  
that our bond is inseparable

I look forward to the distant future  
when the two of us  
are growing old together  
firmly rooted in soil  
that only Greenies like us  
can fully appreciate

Not wanting to disrupt  
their sappy embrace  
I moved on  
content to know  
that love  
speaks its own language  
And if you can listen  
as a tree  
or a bird  
or a river  
or even a rock  
It's possible to hear  
the language of love

Peace River, Nocatee, FL.  
(about 1 mile downstream from boatramp – on right)





Don't try to be blue  
if you're really pink  
Don't try to be brown  
if you're really green  
Just be yourself  
Know what I mean

Florida State Yard Ornament - Flamingo. This bird is not a native to Florida. Flamingo comes from Portuguese or Spanish flamenco, "with the colour of flame". There are six species lumped into the genus *Phoenicopterus*.  
Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park, FL.



Forget career, riches and fame  
Give me a lowly position  
as a single soft strand of broom sedge  
growing next to an island of palms  
Where I can spend a lifetime welcoming the sun  
as it rises in the wilderness  
again and again and again

If not a sedge then the next best thing  
a lowly human with the ability to live simply  
And witness the wild with all my human senses  
to hear the silence  
taste the dew  
and feel that vast yellow ball  
as it begins to bathe me  
and welcome me to the morning  
This is the gift of life that I will embrace  
until my final sunset  
And if it's not an imposition to the living  
do you think you could scatter my ashes  
in the broom sedge grasses  
facing an island of cabbage palms  
Where I can continue to know what it's like  
to really live

Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest,  
between La Belle and Immokalee, FL.



Darwin trying to avoid the local dogcatcher.  
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



If I am going to look death in the eye, I would prefer it be through my zoom lens. Eastern coral snake (*Micrurus fulvius*), which has one of the most potent venoms of any North American snake.

I nearly ran over the snake on S.R. 78 in front of Caloosahatchee Regional Park, near Alva. Of course, I immediately pulled over and laid down in front of its path - at a distance of about 10 feet, a position I held just long enough to take this photo.

Okay, you fellow poets, time for a smattering of patter such as the old familiar "Red and yellow, kill a fellow. Red and black, venom lack." or my own, "Nose black, stay back," or my other favorite that covers everything and doesn't rhyme: "Don't kill or harass any snake - treat them as you would want to be treated."

This snake is often confused with the non-venomous Scarlet King Snake which has a red nose, plus the color patterns differ elsewhere on its body.

The bite of a coral snake may soon be more dangerous, in part because bites are so uncommon. Production of coral snake antivenom in the United States ceased because it is not profitable.



What is silence to a deer  
Life or death I suppose  
For the difference between  
    living and dying  
    can be a matter of hearing  
the right sound above the silence  
    to enable a quick escape  
from predators four-legged or two  
    What is silence to me  
    A chance to escape  
human mechanical sounds and stresses  
A chance to hear what the deer hears  
    To be far enough away  
    to listen as a deer listens  
    And perhaps feel  
    a little more connected  
    to my inner self  
And a little more at home  
    with the wilderness

Fred C. Babcock/Cecil M. Webb Wildlife.  
Management Area. Punta Gorda, FL.





Every morning when I close my front door  
and walk past my wife Marisa's blue Mini-Coop  
to get into my truck  
My whole Universe erupts  
into a million tiny droplets of dew

It's the Big Bang I whisper  
The beginning is near I shout  
loud enough to compensate  
for the times I've had to tolerate  
The end is coming!  
by those more divinely connected

And every morning I stop to watch  
as a single tiny droplet  
caught in the same gravitational pull  
that makes my stomach sag after a  
few too many Coronas the night before  
races down the well-waxed slope  
of the Coop  
colliding with another droplet  
and another  
and another

Until it's no longer a tiny individual drop  
It has now joined other tiny drops and  
is a big blue blob gathering speed  
and picking up more passengers  
and more speed

My rapidly expanding Universe  
will splash onto the ground  
about five minutes after I leave the driveway  
adding a bit of fresh water to grass I hate to mow

And then tomorrow morning  
my Universe will explode again  
Unless  
there's no dew  
or my sweet practical wife  
throws the elastic car cover  
over my Universe to protect the paint

Lehigh Acres, FL.



Musical notes growing wild.  
Spanish Moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*), a flowering plant that is  
neither spanish nor a moss. Arcadia, FL.



Once upon a moment  
a tiny bit of time was born  
and 24 hours later  
produced the first single day  
Then along came a year  
and slowly turned the day  
into a decade  
Before long a century emerged  
and grew for a thousand years  
Then suddenly...  
a million millennia later  
the moment was nowhere  
to be found  
Until the next instant  
when a tiny bit of time was born  
and became another moment  
My how time flies  
when you're writing a poem

Fisheating Creek, Lakeport, FL.



What if we lived as if the entire world was theirs, not ours?  
White Ibis (*Eudocimus albus*).  
Harns Marsh, Lehigh Acres, FL.



What they take away from this place today  
will determine what they leave behind tomorrow.  
Six Mile Cypress Slough Preserve, Fort Myers, FL.

## Afterword

With this book I feel like a big cheat. I am surrounded by some of the most beautiful wilderness areas in the world and have a genius of a camera to record it all. It's difficult to think of oneself as an artist with such a combination. And is it any wonder I am moved to write lyrics, poems and prose with such inspirational reality to draw from? Cheating aside, I try to see and record what is there and what is not there. What is obvious and what is perhaps more dreamy. I owe a big debt of gratitude to the Wilderness for allowing me in and for all those geniuses who have perfected that little black box of a camera I rely on and so often take for granted. --Mark Renz

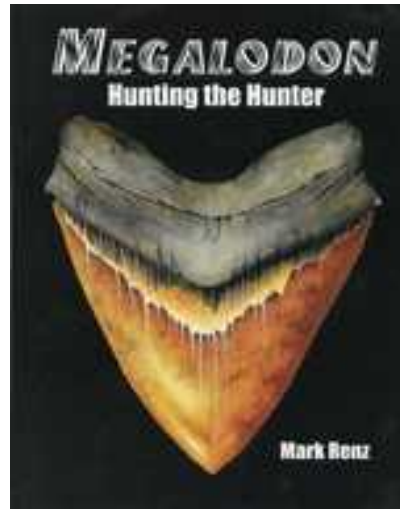
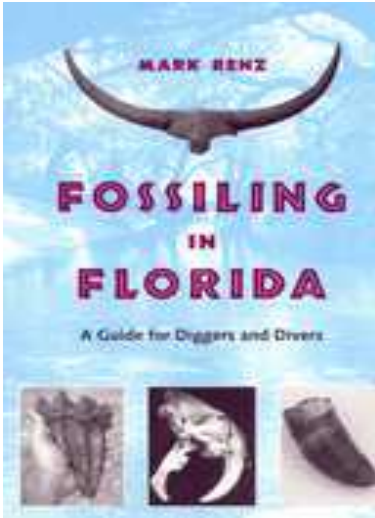


A lot of the photos in this book came about as a direct result of me driving to and from fossil sites, or while looking for fossils in SW Florida's creeks and rivers. I would be remiss if I neglected to invite you and your family, school or scouts to join me for one of my expeditions. Of course, I'm going to charge you but it's fun and educational, plus you get to walk away with pieces of the past (unless it's something worthy of donating to science). For more information, key in "FossilExpeditions.com."

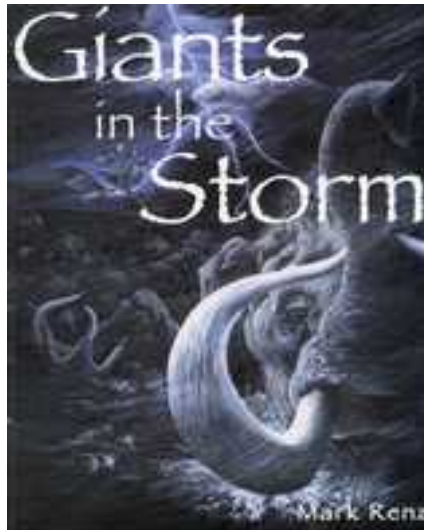
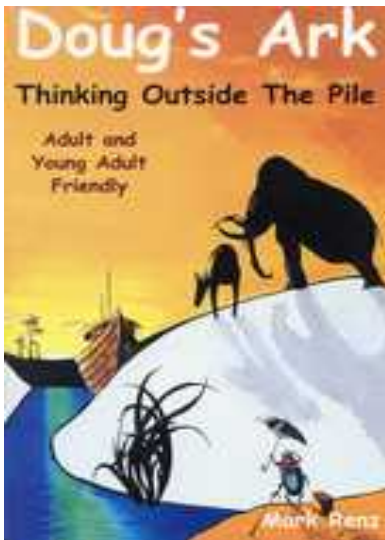
Be ready to get wet and muddy!



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