

Naturally Twisted: A Wild Look At The Wild

Words and photography by Mark Renz
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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*).

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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

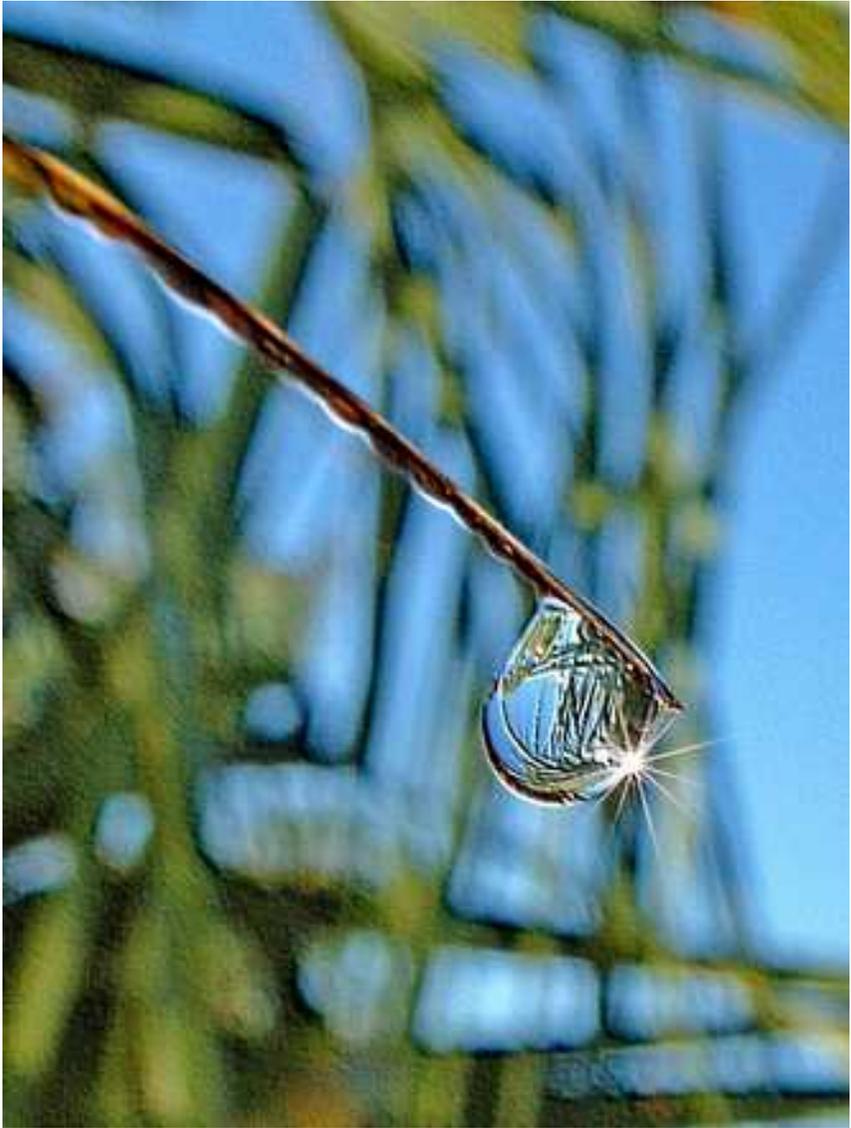
Great blue heron family (*Ardea herodias*). Breeds in trees in colonies. Largest of the North American herons. Boardwalk shot. Wakodahatchee Wetlands, Delray Beach, FL.



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 *avicennia*, 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*).
Horns 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

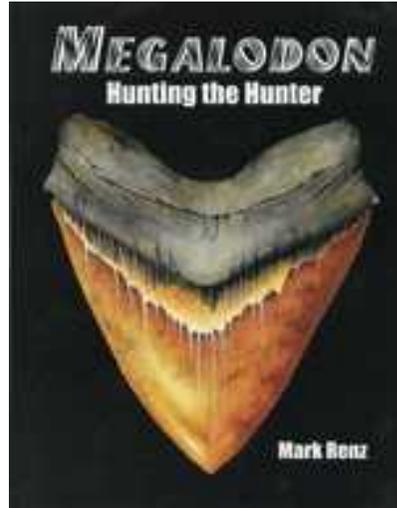
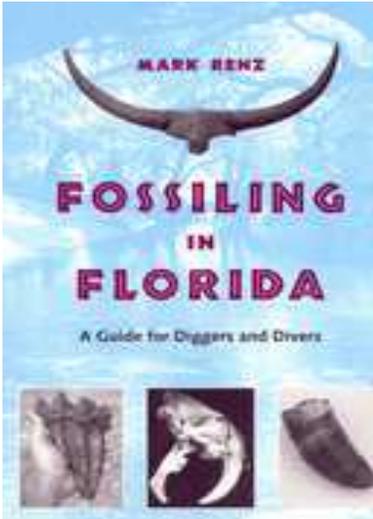
With this book I feel like a big cheat. I am surrounded by some of the most beautiful wilderness areas in the world and have a genius of a camera to record it all. It's difficult to think of oneself as an artist with such a combination. And is it any wonder I am moved to write lyrics, poems and prose 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



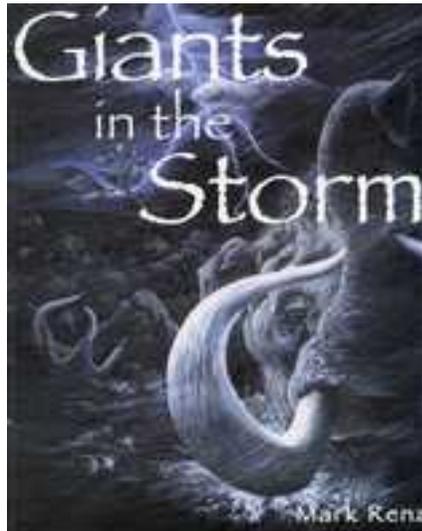
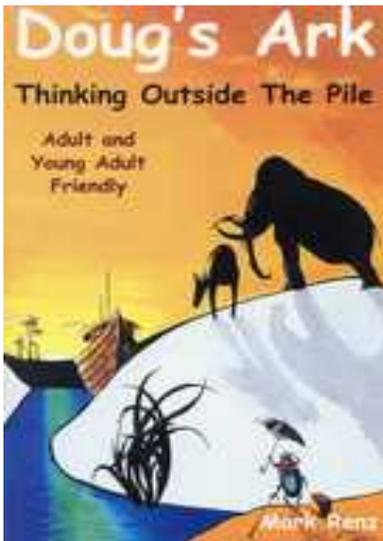
A lot of the photos in this book came about as a direct result of me driving to and from fossil sites, or while looking for fossils in SW Florida's creeks and rivers. I would be remiss if I neglected to invite you and your family, school or scouts to join me for one of my expeditions. Of course, I'm 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."

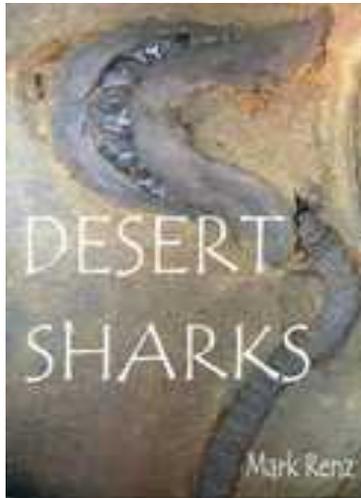
Be ready to get wet and muddy!

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