

Of Storms and Creatures



WHEN IT'S DARK AND stormy, we drink a dark-and-stormy. That's a tropical cocktail made with ginger beer, rum, Angostura bitters and lime. Goes well with grumbly skies and lightning strikes. You sit back in your favorite chair on the lanai and watch the heavens raining fire, meanwhile savoring your drink and being glad you aren't wearing a T-shirt with a target on it.

There's nothing to do in bad weather except stay out of it. Nonetheless, I have lists of questions that pile up when it rains.

Like, what is a walking stick? I am not referring to the one you put body weight on when you're hiking. I'm talking about the insouciant insect that goes by the following memorable names: witch's horse, prairie alligator, stickbug, devil's darning needle, muskmare. I like the last best.

I was coming through the front door last night with an armload of groceries and a muskmare let me know I wasn't allowed to touch her. She was on the door handle, which I'd thoughtlessly grabbed, and she squirted me with hellfire juice.

Dark brown with two light stripes, this muskmare has six skinny legs and the longest prehensile snout you ever saw, complete with big bug eyes. As I took hold of the doorknob, I heard something go "ssst!" whereupon my right hand felt cool in the 90-degree heat. I smelled it—my hand, not the critter—and it smelled,

well, bad. My dogs didn't like it; they backed away from me.

When I looked up walking sticks on the Internet, I learned that the Australian kind might deliver a toxin that can make you sick. Our Florida species can't do you permanent harm, unless of course they squirt you right in the eye. If this happens, it can cause severe corneal irritation. Most interesting, to me—these bugs can really aim and strike. My vow is to leave them alone when it's dark

**If you like toad choirs,
you'll enjoy listening to the
southern toad on a dark
and stormy night because
its song is so sweet.**

and stormy, because maybe, like us, they're just a wee bit grouchier then.

That said, I ask you, what winged creature sings, "drink your tea" over and over all day long? Once again, it's many-named and fairly widespread. I speak now of the rufous-sided towhee. But, wait! It might also be a Bachman's sparrow. That's another Florida bird that likes to remain invisible and sings a version of "drink your tea" just as well as the towhee. Take your pick. Also your choice of names. Towees are also called chewink, bullfinch, ground robin, and, my favorite, Joree. Bachman's sparrow hasn't another name that I know of, but I do think Bachman & Sparrow would make a nice investment firm.

ANOTHER QUERY FOR A DARK and stormy afternoon: How many little toads live in your back yard?

There are legions of toads—not always frogs—when it rains here in Southwest Florida. The oak toad, the smallest species in the United States, is a summer breeder, an upland scrubber, a dark brown hopper

whose song is like that of a herd of sheep. The spadefoot toad is smooth-skinned; he croaks like a long-winded, down at heels crow. The eastern narrowmouth toad sounds like a screaming machine, but some say the noise is like a herd of sheep with a cold. If you like toad choirs, you'll enjoy listening to the southern toad on a dark and stormy night because its song is so sweet. A lot of burbly little bells spilling into the darkness.

Zora's favorite port in a storm is our Honda. Sitting in the backseat, she looks like an ancient queen being ferried down the Nile.

Our Great Dane, Zora, a Katrina survivor, belches when it thunders. She's a big toad, too, when it comes to dark and stormy nights. As I sit on my favorite Adirondack chair, I often have her back end on my lap and her front end, two legs white as posts, resting on the floor in front of me.

When it's too stormy, Zora hides. She tears closets to pieces. Lately, I found her quivering like a Chihuahua in the shower stall. But her favorite port in a storm is our little Honda Accord. Sitting in the backseat, she looks like an ancient queen being ferried down the Nile. Does she really know that wet rubber tires are safer than lanai tiles?

HERE'S A TICKLISH DARK-and-stormy query for you: When does a black-crowned night heron look like an American bittern?

The answer is: when it's an immature bird. Lacking the imperial, black, white and gray uniform of the parent heron, this youthful brown and white-flecked bird may be seen during the day stalking by a mosquito ditch, or even, unlikely as it seems, hanging

out on the railing of an outdoor fish restaurant. I fed shrimp to one just the other day. Its red-orange eye sees all that's edible, and misses nothing that wiggles. The straight, scissor-like beak opens, the bird's throat pulses—flash! Shrimp's gone. But it never touched my finger, and this young night heron looked so much like a bittern, I thought it was one.

Here's the last of the dark-and-stormy questions: Where is the safest place in a storm?

If you've ever wondered about snakebites, try this dark and stormy question: How many vials of anti-venin would a four-year-old boy need if he were bitten by a water moccasin? We were wondering this the other night after a friend told us that his son had been bitten by a water moccasin right in their yard.

Once rushed to the emergency room, the boy was given eight vials of antivenin at a cost of something like \$85,000 dollars.

And here's the last of the dark-and-stormy questions: Where is the safest place in a storm? A million miles away from it.

Today there is no such place.

YOU KNOW, IT'S DARK AND stormy everywhere these days. I was rinsing dishes a few nights ago when a wild, frizzy, shock of light came crackling into our house. It hopped from the window to the water heater to the fridge, and from the fridge to the sink. When it hit, my hands were high in the air.

I guess I'm the lucky one, being able to tell this story, being able to sit on my lanai and sip a dark-and-stormy.

I know what good health is—it's being able to ask a bunch of questions. †