



11. Animals and Plants

There are numerous miscellaneous superstitions regarding animals and plants, which do not fall conveniently into any of the classes hitherto discussed. For example, there is the notion that roosters always crow at midnight, and again about 5 A.M., but that on Christmas morning they all sound off exactly at three o'clock. In some sections, farmers insist that snake doctors (*Odonata*) are never seen over the fields before 10 A.M. or after 4 P.M. The harvest fly or summer locust, a big yellow cicada, is supposed to begin its song precisely at high noon; I have seen a farmer stop work in the field and set his watch by the harvest fly's note.

Many backwoods folk are convinced that there is a mutual understanding between squirrels and mosquitoes, so that the latter protect the former from hunters. In early June, when the squirrels are feeding on mulberries, mosquitoes sometimes appear in such numbers that a hunter cannot remain quiet long enough to stalk a squirrel.

My ridge-runner friends nearly all insist that the big Ozark fox squirrels castrate the smaller gray squirrels; the male fox squirrels and the male gray squirrels do fight savagely sometimes, and it is true that many male grays in this region are without visible testes.

A great many hillmen believe that the male opossum ejects his sperm into the nose of the female, which then blows the spermatic fluid into the vagina—a belief wholly without foundation, which doubtless had its origin in the peculiar bifurcate form of the opossum's penis, and to the female's habit of nosing the vulva.

Very few Ozark hunters accept the ordinary opinion that deer shed their horns annually. Each year, the hillfolk say, the horns soften and velvet shows on them; evidently they itch, too, as the animals are often seen rubbing them against bushes. This rubbing causes the soft ends of the horn to split open, and sometimes to bleed. Then the horns grow a bit, and turn hard again; as the ends are split, there are two points where one grew before. Sometimes one tip splits into three parts instead of two, so that the right and left antlers differ in the number of points. If deer really shed their horns every year, as the government game wardens say, how is it that we don't find them lying about on the ground?

It is very generally believed that the appearance of an albino deer is a bad sign; some hillfolk think it has something to do with witches' work, others that it is an indication of disease among the deer, and that venison will be unwholesome for seven years. In 1939 a white deer was seen in Taney county, Missouri, and many natives were pretty much upset about it. Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, wrote to a local newspaper: "I cannot overcome a subtle uneasy feeling that this may be a *token*. In other words an omen, or warning, but old-timers use the old words."

The old folks at Thomasville, in Oregon county, Missouri, say that the early settlers often saw a white buck in the woods, but nobody would shoot it for fear of some bad luck. It was seen at intervals for about fifteen years, and when it finally disappeared people said that it must have died of old age.

Many old-time hunters believe it is a mistake to kill deer on Sunday. Not only sinful, but also unlucky; some say a man who bags a deer on the Sabbath will not get another for seven weeks, even if he goes hunting every day. A well-known hunter in Missouri saw a small doe almost in his front yard one Sunday and refrained from shooting it, although he was badly in need of meat. Early next morning he looked out to see two fine bucks in the same place and killed them both. This man was firmly

convinced that the two big deer were somehow *sent* to him on Monday, because he had resisted the temptation to shoot the little deer on Sunday.

Woodsmen say that the fox sometimes "charms" squirrels out of the trees, simply by rolling about on the ground until the squirrel becomes "dizzy like" and gradually descends to see what is going on. Finally, when the distance is short enough, the fox suddenly recovers, makes a great spring and catches its prey. Three old hunters, sober and ordinarily trustworthy men, assure me that they have witnessed this performance. A great many others have heard of it, and seem to believe that foxes really do charm squirrels and even wild turkeys in this manner. Dr. J. H. Young, of Galena, Missouri, told me that he once saw a red fox rolling wildly about beneath a tree in which two squirrels sat watching the fox's antics. Dr. Young waited a long time, but the squirrels did not come down.

When a female fox is pregnant, or is nursing her young, many hillmen believe that something changes about the odor of her body, so that even the best hounds can't follow her trail. Frank Payne, of Stone county, Missouri, in the midst of an argument about religion, once mentioned this as evidence that there is a God who takes care of foxes at such times, in order that they shall not be exterminated.

In many parts of the Ozark country one hears of enormous wildcats; there are men who swear they have killed cats four feet high, weighing 150 pounds! A bobcat shot by Del Taylor, near Galena, Missouri, in January, 1945, was the biggest I ever saw in the Ozarks. But it was very thin and probably weighed less than forty pounds.

Marvel Cave, near Notch, Missouri, was regarded with superstitious awe by many of the old-timers, who used to warn tourists away from the place. A schoolteacher in Walnut Grove, Missouri, declared that one subterranean room was literally full of the bones of panthers and bobcats. All of these animals for miles around, according to the old story, made their way

into the cavern before they died, to leave their bodies with those of their ancestors in the "cat room." It is true that the bones of panthers and wildcats, along with those of deer, elk, bears, and other animals, have been found in Marvel Cave. But the "cat room" story is obviously a myth.

Many of the old settlers believe that panthers or "painters" have a great appetite for human infants and will go to almost any length to obtain one. It is said that they locate babies by smelling the mother's milk as the babe is fed. Wayman Hogue tells several stories of panthers devouring babies. At Hogue's own home, in Van Buren county, Arkansas, a painter fought their dog to a standstill and came down the chimney after a five-day-old infant. The beast was driven off by Hogue's mother, who tore open a straw mattress and threw the straw on the fire, producing a great blaze through which the painter could not descend.¹

Farm boys always tell the city feller that a skunk cannot discharge his stinking liquid without raising his tail, and that one has only to hold the tail down to render a polecat harmless. They say also that if a skunk or civet is suspended by the tail, so that its feet do not touch any solid object, the animal is unable to throw a single drop of perfume.

Groundhogs are hunted by boys with dogs, and young groundhogs are very good eating. But some of the old-timers frown on the modern practice of shooting groundhogs. They don't mind if city sportsmen do it but often forbid their own children to shoot groundhogs, because it is supposed to bring bad luck.

There are persistent tales of a fine-haired, golden-yellow, red-eyed groundhog, much larger than the ordinary kind. Harold Wales refers to this as the "yellow-bellied marmot."² I have met old hunters in Arkansas who claim to have shot these "big goldy groundhogs" but have never seen such an animal myself.

The old folks are all agreed that it is bad luck for a hunter

¹ *Back Yonder*, 1932, pp. 170-181.

² *Arkansas Gazette*, July 3, 1938.

to return home with an empty gun—this entirely apart from the immediate advantages of personal protection and the like. I have been told of cases in which whole families have gone supperless because of a hillman's reluctance to use his last cartridge.

There is a very general notion in southwest Missouri that there were no rats in the Ozarks in the early days, until they were brought in by settlers from the east. One John Cooper, who lived in Springfield, Missouri, in the early 1900's, always contended that there were no rats until the Frisco railroad came in. The rats arrived in boxcars, he said, and later took to the woods and became common everywhere as they are today.

It is bad luck for a rabbit to cross your path from left to right; you can take the curse off, however, by tearing some article of clothing just a little. If the same rabbit crosses your path *twice*, it means that you are needed at home immediately.

One often hears that it is a bad sign for a flying squirrel to get into an automobile, and people who have closed cars are careful to run up the glass at night. There is a good practical reason for this, however, since flying squirrels have been known to gnaw big holes in the upholstery.

Some hillmen claim they can prevent wolves from howling, or hounds from baying, simply by muttering some gibberish. I have seen this tried, but with no great success. Some men can make an owl cease hooting, it is said, merely by pulling their trousers pockets inside out, and others pretend to stop the noises of crickets, katydids, tree toads and even bullfrogs by the same procedure.

I was once tramping through the woods at dusk, hunting the cows with a farm boy. We stopped at intervals and strained our ears for the distant bells but could hear nothing save the clamor of tree frogs and katydids. Finally we rested under a big tree which seemed to be full of these noisy creatures. "Watch me make 'em shut up," said the boy, and slapped the trunk lightly with his hand. Instantly all was silence. I have since tried

this trick myself, and it seems to work under certain conditions. But I don't think there's any magic about it.

The Ozarker does not like to hear a screech owl near his cabin, since it is always an unfavorable sign and may indicate sickness or approaching death. But above all he cautions his children never to *imitate* the call of such a bird under these conditions. If an owl hears its cry answered from within the cabin, it will return again and again and sooner or later descend the chimney and scatter the fire out on the floor, so as to burn the whole place down.

One often hears children say that whoever hears the first dove coo in the spring will soon take a trip in the direction from which the sound came. Some older hillfolk really seem to believe that whatever a man is doing when he hears the first dove of the season, that's what he'll have to do all summer. In Taney county, Missouri, they tell me that the ruling bird is the whip-poorwill rather than the turtle dove, but the idea is the same.

Various sorts of birds are believed to carry warnings. A woman in my neighborhood whipped her grown daughters unmercifully, until one day "the redbirds come an' ha'ted her" by tapping on the windowpane, which gave the woman a terrible fright and caused her to mend her ways. Another of my mountaineer friends was greatly disturbed when a "rooster redbird" hovered about his door; he said that it was a warning of death, and sure enough, one of his daughters died within a few weeks.

If a bird defecates on a girl's hat or bonnet, it is regarded as positive evidence that her parents are stingy; some say it's a sign that the parents do not approve of the girl's suitor.

Buzzards are supposed to seek out and vomit upon persons guilty of incest. It is said that a certain man near Siloam Springs, Arkansas, never ventures out into the open if a buzzard is anywhere in sight. There are persons who have a pathological horror of buzzards, just as some otherwise normal individuals hate and fear cats.

I have met men who contend that when the buzzards dis-

appear in the fall they do not fly south but hibernate in caves like bears, bats, and groundhogs. Lennis L. Broadfoot quotes Ed Lehman, Carter county, Missouri, as follows: "I go in some caves where there's great flocks of buzzards. There's lots of people that don't know where the buzzard goes for the winter, but they live in the caves here in the Ozarks all winter long."³

There is an old story that when a crow fails in his duty as a sentry—I believe it is true that some crows watch while others feed—all the crows in the neighborhood meet to "try" the offender. If the culprit is found guilty the rest attack him and kill him at once. An old man in Southwest City, Missouri, told me that he had twice "heard the crows a-caucassin'" in the tall trees near his home and had on both occasions seen the guilty bird pecked to death by his fellows. The noise made by crows at a trial, he said in all seriousness, is very different from that which they make when they are tormenting a hawk or an owl.

It is said to be very bad luck to count the birds in a flock. Nevertheless, Ozark children have a little jingle to sing when they see crows flying:

One's unlucky,
Two's lucky,
Three's health,
Four's wealth,
Five's sickness,
Six is death.

I have heard this used in Newton county, Arkansas, as a counting-out rhyme, in connection with some childish game.

To find a dead crow in the road is always lucky, but a dead "carr'n crow" is a sign of superlative good fortune. Just what "carrion crow" means in the Ozarks is not clear to me, as I have never examined one of these birds. Some old hunters say that the carrion crow is just a little larger than an ordinary crow, dead black rather than glossy, and that it croaks or

³ *Pioneers of the Ozarks*, p. 146.

squalls rather than caws. But other Ozark woodsmen tell me that the real carrion crow is as big as a buzzard, but a bit darker in color, and its head is feathered while the buzzard's head is bare. It is said also that the tips of the carrion crow's wings are whitish and much more rounded than the buzzard's wing tips. These birds are said to fly with buzzards, and nearly all of the old folks believe that they mate with buzzards. Several river guides have pointed out flocks containing both buzzards and carrion crows on the shores of Lake Taneycomo, but they all looked pretty much alike to me, and I could never get close enough to see the difference in heads and wing tips.

There is a good deal of confusion in the Ozarks about the whippoorwill, a crepuscular or nocturnal bird which is often heard but seldom seen. A great many hillfolk believe that the whippoorwill is identical with the night hawk or bullbat, often seen flying about in the late afternoon. Some Ozarkers apparently believe that the bullbat somehow changes into a whippoorwill, or vice versa. Charles Cummins, a veteran newspaperman of Springfield, Missouri, defends this belief in the *Springfield Leader & Press*, Sept. 25, 1933:

Coincident with the appearance of the Harvest Moon, Ozark bullbats are turning to whippoorwills. You are leary of that? Skeptical, also, that tadpoles turn to frogs, wiggletails to mosquitoes? The bullbat, which came off the nest early and has awkwardly, like the young martin, clung fast to a tree limb all Summer, soon will be seeking a barrage in low growth trees, where at evening tide it will begin that familiar and lonesome call.

The truth is, of course, that the bullbat and the whippoorwill are two distinct species, which differ widely in appearance and habits. Neither bullbats nor whippoorwills "come off the nest," because they do not build nests but deposit their eggs on bare rocks or on the ground. I have seen both birds incubating, and found bullbats' eggs on a gravel roof in Joplin, Missouri.

There are people at Thayer, Missouri, and at Mammoth Springs, Arkansas, who claim that the bullbat, the whippoor-

will, and the rain crow are one and the same bird—which presumably gives the rain crow “holler” at midday, the bullbat cry in the afternoon, and the whippoorwill call at night. The rain crow of the Ozarks is the yellow-billed cuckoo, which has nothing much in common with either the bullbat or the whippoorwill. Some Ozark natives have told me that the rain crow is merely a variant of the turtle dove, hatched by the same parents, so that the rain crow and the turtle dove are comparable to the red and gray phases of the screech owl. This confusion of rain crow and turtle dove is understandable, since the two are somewhat similar in appearance at a little distance. According to W. S. White, of Bolivar, Missouri, most of his neighbors believe that the rain crow lays its eggs in other birds’ nests as the cowbird does; this belief seems very odd, since any sharp-eyed country boy can find the rain crow sitting on its nest, and the large pale-green eggs are common in Ozark collections.

It is said that all hawks are blind in dog days, which is obviously not true. Many farmers think that hawks call chickens to their doom by imitating the cry of a young chick in distress, and this may be a fact for all I know.

Blue jays are supposed to be very rare on weekends, and children are told that these birds go to hell every Friday to help the Devil gather kindling. Another story is that the blue jay spends Friday breaking off twigs to be burned by wicked people here on earth. There is an old song with the chorus:

Don't you hear that jaybird call?
 Don't you hear them dead sticks fall?
 He's a-throwin' down firewood for we-all,
 All on a Friday mornin'.

The great pileated woodpecker, rare in most sections of the country, is still fairly common in the Ozarks. Most Ozarkers call it a woodhen, but it is also known as “God Almighty” or “Lord God Peckerwood,” doubtless because of its large size; it

looks as big as a teal duck, or a crow. This bird is supposed to have some supernatural powers, and I am told that various portions of its body are highly prized by witches and goomer doctors.

It appears that many old settlers have a peculiar feeling about the wren; some of them really believe it is different from all other birds, and that there is something supernaturally evil in its habits. The bite of a wren is supposed to be deadly poison, perhaps because wrens eat so many spiders. I have known country boys who were accustomed to rob every birds' nest they could find, but had never even seen a wren's egg, much less touched one, although wrens were nesting all over the place. Several of these fellows told me that it is very bad luck to kill wrens, the best course being to let them severely alone.

I have heard experienced woodsmen insist that young crows, before they leave the nest, are white. Why they say this I have no idea, since one has only to look into a crow's nest in the spring to see that it isn't true.

There are numerous old sayings and proverbs about the dates when certain birds first deposit their eggs. One often hears it said that guinea hens never lay until the first week of "buckberry swell." The buckberry swell is the season when the buds on buckbrush begin to enlarge, usually about the middle of March, I think.

Many turkey hunters claim that loud thunder really does kill young birds in the egg, especially birds that nest on the ground such as turkey, quail, ducks, geese, and the like. They insist that it is the thunder that does the damage, not the lightning or the rain. One veteran hunter says that hen turkeys usually desert their nests about twelve hours after a severe thunderstorm; he thinks they can tell somehow that the eggs are dead and realize that it's no use to fool with 'em any longer. Some of these Ozark bird hunters tell a story about the time the powder works blew up, over in Jasper county, Missouri, and no quail were hatched that year for seven or eight miles around.

Old fishermen have told me that the redhorse and white suckers will not spawn until they see dogwood blossoms on the banks of White River. It is true that these fish shoal about the same time that the dogwood blooms, but it is doubtless a matter of temperature; certainly there is no evidence that any fish can see flowers on the shore, or distinguish between dogwood bloom and other flowers.

Harold Wales, of Mammoth Springs, Arkansas, mentions the hillman's belief that the eel is a *male catfish*.⁴ Many hillfolk believe there is something supernatural about the reproduction of eels. This is doubtless because no little eels are seen in the streams, and eels are never found to contain spawn. The Ozarker does not for one moment accept the scientists' tale that eels reproduce only in salt water.

Another odd notion is that if you leave a fried eel alone, the flesh will be "blood raw" in a few hours, just as if it had never been cooked at all. This is not true, as anybody with a piece of fried eel can demonstrate. But I have heard the story all over the Ozark country, and have met a score of men and women who declared that they fried eels at night and saw the same fish dripping with blood next morning.

Many Ozark people believe that eels are inordinately fond of human flesh, and there are stories of vast numbers of eels taken by fishermen callous enough to use this sort of bait. On the lower White River, according to one account, some fishermen murdered a Negro girl and soaked thousands of dough balls in her blood; with this gruesome bait they caught a whole truckload of eels in two nights' fishing. This story was widely circulated at one time, but the peace officers who investigated the matter found no evidence of a killing, nor any trace of the truckload of eels.

There are some Ozark folk who will not touch eels at all, but most of the old-timers eat blue eels freely enough, while contending that the larger yellow species is poisonous. I have seen yel-

⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, July 8, 1938.

low eels weighing five or six pounds thrown away by giggers at Noel, Missouri, on the Cowskin River. And Mr. R. W. Church, of Pittsburg, Kansas, tells me that people near Stuttgart, Arkansas, think that yellow catfish are not fit to eat; he says that the boys down there used to eat the blue catfish and throw the "yaller bellies" to the hogs.

I know many rivermen who believe that spoonbill catfish, which grow quite large in some of the Ozark rivers, are not wholesome food for human beings. These fellows cut the heads off spoonbills and sell the flesh to the tourists as ordinary catfish, but they don't eat such stuff themselves. Other fishermen tell me that the injurious substance occurs mainly in the brain and spinal cord; if a man *must* eat spoonbill cats, he should split 'em open as soon as caught and remove not only the head but the entire backbone as well. In many places one hears experienced fishermen say that a spoonbill catfish can't swim downstream, though nobody seems to have any particular reason for this belief.

Catfish and men, it is said, are the only living creatures known to eat pawpaws; dogs and even swine turn from them in disgust. However, though it is almost proverbial that catfish are "plumb gluttons for pawpaws," I have never seen a hillman use them as bait. "Fish that's a-feedin' on them things," an old man told me, "aint fit to eat nohow." It seems very odd that these fellows eat pawpaws themselves with every sign of relish but regard fish that have fed upon pawpaws as unwholesome. Personally, I do not believe that catfish have any particular fondness for pawpaws, although they doubtless eat 'em on occasion, as they will sometimes devour any sort of garbage that falls into the water. But the catfish-pawpaw legend is heard the length and breadth of the Ozark country, and is repeated even by second-growth hillbillies in the cities.

Guides on the Ozark streams are always telling the tourists that gars are deadly poison, but I have seen people eating them on the lower White River. There is a very ancient idea

that mussels, the shells of which are collected and sold to the button factories, are poisonous. This despite the fact that shell diggers are known to eat them, when times are hard, without any fatal results. In fact, I don't mind admitting that I have eaten mussels myself. They aren't very good, but they're certainly not poisonous.

Ozark fishermen are careful never to step over a fish pole, or over a fishing line on the ground; if a man does inadvertently take such a step, it means that he will catch no more fish that day.

Country boys often leave one fish of a large catch hanging in a tree near the fishing hole. "Oh—just for the birds," a boy answered rather sheepishly when I asked him why this was done. The old-timers say that it is supposed to bring good luck next time. A woman at Calico Rock, Arkansas, told me that it was a trick learned from the Cherokees, who always left several of their best fish lying on the bank. The old Cherokees whom I interviewed, however, said they never heard of any such foolishness.

The old-timers believe that an east wind is the worst possible omen for a fisherman, but I have seen large catches of bass made in Lake Taneycomo when an east wind was blowing; I recall at least one fine jacksalmon which was taken in White River, when a regular gale was blowing from the east. There is a very general belief that all fish bite best during the dark of the moon, and also that fish exposed to moonlight are likely to spoil in a few hours. Another old story is that bass won't bite during an electrical display, but I have caught both big-mouth and black bass in a thunderstorm, with flashes of lightning illuminating the whole countryside. Many old rivermen insist that fish won't bite when the sign is in the heart or stomach, but it seems to me that there is no truth in this, either.

If dragonflies or snake feeders alight on a still-fisherman's bobber it is a sign of bad luck; but if the little black beetles

called lucky-bugs gather around his cork, he may expect to catch a fine string of pan fish.

Many rivermen say that fish may be kept fresh for several days, even in the hottest weather, simply by wrapping them in green walnut leaves. Others claim that the same result is obtained by smearing the dressed fish, inside and out, with black pepper.

Any hillman will tell you that an ordinary mud turtle contains seven kinds of meat—pork, beef, mutton, venison, chicken, duck, and fish. Despite this belief, the Ozarkers as a class seldom eat turtles. The hillfolk who do eat them choose the soft shell kind, not snappers or hard-shells, although I have eaten all three and find little difference. Some of the Indians in eastern Oklahoma eat land turtles or box tortoises, and a dog which will point these creatures always brings a good price in the Osage Nation. Bird hunters will not believe this, but it is a fact that some pointers and setters will disregard quail in order to retrieve land turtles.

Miss Margaret Lillie, of Rockaway Beach, Missouri, who boasts some Cherokee blood, told me that she had eaten land turtles and that they were very good. Later on I tried one myself, as cooked by some Indians from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, and found it palatable enough. But I have never known a non-Indian hillbilly who could be induced to taste a land turtle, and the majority of them will not eat any sort of reptile.

There is an old saying that once a turtle bites a man, it never lets go until a clap of thunder is heard, but I don't think anybody really believes such an obvious falsehood. Akin to this is the idea that a snake can't possibly die until the sun goes down, no matter how badly it is injured. No snake can cross a horsehair rope, according to the old-timers, many of whom have never even seen a horsehair rope.

If a single horsehair is placed in water, in the summer time, it is believed to turn into a snake. This notion probably arose

from the fact that long hairlike worms, said to mature in the intestines of grasshoppers, are sometimes seen in watering troughs and roadside pools. I found one of these creatures once, in my springhouse at Pineville, Missouri. It was about a foot long, white, and rather thicker than a horsehair. One end was tapered, the other blunt—the tapered end seemed to be the head. I kept the thing in an aquarium for several days. It was always moving, the tapered end being most active in exploring every crack and cranny as if seeking a way out. Later on some boys showed me another horsehair snake they had found in a creek. This one was about five inches long, dark brown in color, and very active. It really looked pretty much like a piece of horsehair, and the boys who found it had no doubt that it *was* a horsehair which, in the natural course of events, had “turned into a snake.”

The old story of the hoop snake which puts its tail in its mouth and rolls downhill is believed by many; in most cases this creature pursues some poor hillman, misses him, and strikes the horn on its tail into a growing tree; the hoop snake’s horn is deadly poison, and the tree always dies within a few days—sometimes the green leaves wither and fall within an hour. Otto Ernest Rayburn repeats the story of a woman who was attacked by a hoop snake, but the sting in the snake’s tail barely touched her dress. She washed the dress next day, and the poison “turned three tubs of wash water plumb green!”⁵ I have met reliable and honest farmers who say that they have *seen* hoop snakes rolling through the tall grass, and there is no doubt in my mind that they are telling what they believe to be the truth. But the scientific herpetologists are all agreed that the hoop snake is a myth.

A variety of blacksnake called the “blue racer” is popularly supposed to chase people, particularly little boys playing truant from school. Many people believe that the coachwhip snake, a big blacksnake with a red tail, has been known to catch a

⁵ *Ozark Country*, p. 267.

child by the lips, take one turn round his neck, and whip him very severely; sometimes two coachwhips are said to work together, one holding the victim while the other lashes him.

Poisonous snakes, when in the water, are said to lie on the surface with the entire body afloat, while nonpoisonous serpents swim with only the head exposed; many hillmen really believe that this is a reliable way to distinguish between the venomous cottonmouth moccasin and several species of harmless water snakes. Some noodlers or rock fishermen, accustomed to catch big fish with their bare hands, say that moccasins never bite a man under water. Others believe that the snakes may bite, but are unable to inject poison into the wound while their heads are submerged.

Many persons believe that female snakes, particularly water moccasins, swallow their young at the approach of danger. One of my neighbors says that he suddenly came upon a large "bitch cottonmouth" with a number of young snakes playing about her; the moment the old moccasin saw him she opened her mouth wide, and the little ones instantly ran down her throat. A few moments later he killed the big snake, cut her open, and found fourteen little moccasins inside.

A number of sober backwoods farmers have told me seriously that before a copperhead takes a drink of water, it discharges its venom carefully out upon a flat stone; a moment later, having drunk, the creature sucks the poison into its fangs again.

There is an almost universal belief that the king snake, which has no poison fangs, can kill any copperhead or rattler. And there are people who say that the king snake is not affected by the venom of a rattlesnake, because it eats rattlesnake weed as an antidote. The story goes that every time a rattler bites the king snake, the latter hurries over to a snakeweed nearby and nibbles off a leaf or two, before returning to the fight. I have never found anybody who claims to have witnessed this performance, and the whole thing doubtless began as a tall

tale, but there are people in Missouri and Arkansas today who accept it as a fact.

Many people in northwestern Taney county, Missouri, tell me that they have killed big timber rattlers with hair on 'em. "Like coarse bristles, black, about three inches long," the story runs. "Mostly there's a scatterin' of bristles just back of the snake's head, and maybe a few more shorter ones about eight or ten inches from the tip of his tail." So many people in this region tell the story that I am almost persuaded that they have seen rattlesnakes with something like bristles on them. It occurred to me that the "hairs" might be some kind of parasite, but the experts at the American Museum of Natural History tell me that nothing remotely resembling bristles has ever been found on snakes anywhere; Dr. Charles M. Bogert, of the department of herpetology, suggests that the "hairs" might be cactus spines, but this does not impress me since the only cactus in this region is the prickly pear, which has short thorns not at all like the three-inch bristles which my neighbors insist they have seen on these Taney county rattlesnakes.

All snakes are supposed to go blind and change their skins during the dog days in late summer and become more belligerent than at any other time. Uncle Israel Bonebreak, an ordinarily reliable old gentleman who lives near Pineville, Missouri, tells me that he has often seen blacksnakes, chicken snakes, milk snakes, and other harmless serpents deliberately attack human beings during the dog-day period. There is an old saying that "all snakes go blind when huckleberries are ripe," and it appears that some hillfolk accept it as a literal truth.

A great many Ozarkers fear the common blow snake or puff adder quite as much as the venomous copperhead. Visitors from the city have fallen into this error too, and even Marge Lyon says that "the spreading adder, called spread head, is very poisonous."⁶ The truth is, of course, that the vicious-looking adder is completely harmless.

⁶ *And Green Grass Grows All Around*, p. 294.

The innoxious little green tree snake is believed to carry a deadly poison. It is called the snake doctor, and is supposed to cure all other kinds of snakes when they are sick or injured. I once found a large timber rattler which had been badly wounded, apparently by deer or goats. An old hunter who was present said "Look out for the doctor!" and began to search the bushes nearby. Sure enough, in a few minutes he found one of these little green snakes in a blackberry bush.

The old folks say that wherever you find a scorpion—the Ozarker's name for a harmless little blue-tailed lizard—there is always a snake only a few feet away.

There are several old tales about an odd relationship between snakes and babies. According to one story, well known in many parts of the Ozark country, a small child is seen to carry his cup of bread and milk out into the shrubbery near the cabin. The mother hears the baby prattling but supposes that he is talking to himself. Finally she approaches the child and is horrified to see him playing with a large serpent—usually a rattlesnake or copperhead. The baby takes a little food but gives most of his bread and milk to the big reptile. The mother's first impulse is to kill the snake, of course, but the old-timers say that this would be a mistake. They believe that the snake's life is somehow linked with that of the child, and if the reptile is killed the baby will pine away and die a few weeks later. I have heard old men and women declare that they had such cases in their own families and knew that the baby *did* die shortly after the snake's death.

A spotted serpent called the milk snake is said to live by milking cows in the pasture. I know several persons who swear they have seen these snakes sucking milk cows, and they say that a cow which has been milked by a snake is always reluctant to allow a human being to touch her thereafter.

Some of the Holy Roller preachers are accustomed to bring poisonous snakes into the pulpit, declaring that God will protect His servants from all harm, and quoting various Biblical

references to such matters, usually the statement in Luke 10: 19, where the saints are given power to tread on serpents and scorpions and assured that nothing shall hurt them, or the passage about taking up serpents in Mark 16: 18. I have not seen this performance myself, but I once called on one of these "snake-wavin' preachers" and was shown two large copper-heads in a cage. The man of God refused to handle them in my presence, although I offered to make a substantial contribution to his church. He said that he claimed nothing for himself, but that a temporary immunity to snake venom was sometimes given him by God Almighty for the purpose of impressing His poor sinful children. "I don't believe in temptin' Providence," he added, "an' I don't never touch no sarpints only when I feel the Power a-comin' on."

It is very generally believed that there is something about the odor of gourds or gourd vines which repels snakes; many people plant gourds near their cabins for this reason, although they will seldom admit it to an outsider.

Some families have secret spells or "charms" which are supposed to protect them against snake bite, but the nature of these has not been revealed to me. I do know, however, that some hillfolk are very careful to avoid the use of the word "snake." Instead of warning their children to beware of snakes in the path, they say "look out for *our friends* down that way," or "there's a lot of *them old things* between here and the river." If despite all precautions a hillman is bitten by a reptile which he regards as poisonous, he still has recourse to some astounding remedies—but I have dealt with the treatment of snake bite elsewhere in this book.

There are many odd notions concerning insects and arachnids. Big centipedes are common in the hill country, no matter what the Chamber of Commerce people may see fit to tell the tourists about it. Some old-timers say that a centipede tries to count the teeth of every child who approaches him; if the creature makes a correct count, the child will die in a few weeks. I have seen children close their lips firmly and even cover their

mouths with their hands when a centipede appears in an Ozark cabin. Many hillfolk repeat the tale that the bite of a centipede makes the flesh fall off the bones, but I don't think there's any truth in it.

People near Natural Dam, Arkansas, told me that the Devil's horse, or praying mantis, is deadly poison, and that a boy near that place died as a result of its bite. Local physicians laughed at this story; one doctor said that he didn't know whether or not the Devil's horse was poisonous, but he knew damned well that it had never killed anybody in his neighborhood. Children in the Ozarks are often told, however, that it is bad luck to "pester" a Devil's horse, as the creature is likely to spit tobacco juice in one's eye and perhaps cause blindness.

The sting of the big Ozark hornet is a painful matter, but I never heard of hornets killing anybody. Mr. Elbert Short, however, who lives near Crane, Missouri, reports the old idea that if seven hornets sting a man at once, the poor chap dies instantly, as if he had a bullet through his heart.

Very few of the mountain people would intentionally kill a spider, since such an act is supposed to bring misfortune in its wake. It is bad luck to kill a cricket, too, though I have not heard of any definite penalty for this. My neighbors were disgusted to see me using little black crickets as fish bait. One man who looked at a fine string of perch that I had taken with crickets observed that he would not eat one of these fish or allow his children to do so. "I'd have to git mighty hungry," said he, "before I'd ever put one of them crickets onto a fish hook."

There are several peculiar superstitions relating to the larva of the ant lion, which lives in little cone-shaped pits in the dirt under rock ledges. Every boy is told that if he finds one of these nests and cries:

Oh Johnny Doodlebug,
Come up an' I'll give you a bushel of corn!

the insect will climb out and show itself immediately.

Mr. Lewis Kelley, of Cyclone, Missouri, tells me that practically all of the old settlers believed that spiders hatch from eggs laid by "dirt dobbers" or mud wasps. "Just open up a dirt dobber's nest," he said, "and see if you don't find it full of live spiders." The truth is, of course, that the spiders are stung by the adult wasps into a state of paralysis and placed in the mud nests to serve as food for the young dirt dobbers. The old-timers have heard of this theory, but they don't believe it.

The white foam which appears on the stems of certain weeds, produced doubtless by the activities of some small insect, is always called frog spit; this is merely an imaginative name, however, since the hillfolk don't really believe that frogs are responsible for it. Many of them are convinced, however, that horse flies somehow hatch out of frog spit. I have met old men who told me seriously that fleas are hatched from eggs, under ordinary conditions, but are sometimes produced spontaneously from dog hair.

Charles J. Finger, of Fayetteville, Arkansas, told me of his neighbors who believe that the drops of resin found on pine boards often turn into bedbugs. I have never encountered this idea but have known many hillfolk who think that bedbugs are somehow generated from bats. Some old-timers say that the daddy longlegs or harvestmen deposit their eggs on bats, and that these eggs hatch into bedbugs. "If you mash a daddy longlegs," said an old fellow in Polk county, Arkansas, "it smells just exactly like bedbugs"—this being regarded as evidence of parental relationship, apparently.

There is an old saying to the effect that dog fennel breeds chiggers and kills ticks; the hillfolk claim that chiggers swarm on the yellow flowers, and this may be true, for all I know. The old notion that fennel kills ticks seems to have no foundation in fact. The common milkweed with orange-colored blooms (*Asclepias*) is also called chigger weed and is said to be headquarters for chiggers.

The hills around Bonniebrook, the old O'Neill home near Day, Missouri, are crawling with chiggers and wood ticks all summer. There is only one place in the whole neighborhood where it is safe for campers to sit on the ground, and that is a certain hillside where pennyroyal grows. Pennyroyal is a kind of mint, and it really seems to discourage both ticks and chiggers.

Many Ozark people insist that cedar trees are poison to the tiny seed ticks which are so abundant in July and August. One often sees farmer boys take off their overalls and brush their bare legs with a cedar bough. I have tried this myself, but without any benefit whatever. And the cedar thickets or "brakes" in Taney county, Missouri, are swarming with seed ticks every summer.

There are strange theories about certain trees, and I have touched upon some of these items in connection with witchcraft elsewhere in this book. Many old people believe that there is something supernatural about the propagation of the ironwood tree, which is supposed to be planted by the Devil's agents. And there are woodsmen in Missouri who say that sassafras trees do not grow from seeds, but somehow sprout from grub worms.

One often hears that mistletoe, known as witches' broom, is used in casting magic spells and the like. Some farmers hang a bunch of mistletoe in the smokehouse, "to keep witches off'n the meat." About Christmas time the country boys make a little money by gathering mistletoe and sending it to the city markets. These fellows all say that mistletoe doesn't come from seeds but grows spontaneously out of bird manure.

The pawpaw tree is well known to be connected with witchcraft and devil worship, and even a gray-and-black butterfly (*Papilio ajax*) is looked upon as "strange" because it is so often seen fluttering about pawpaw trees. People near Goodman, Missouri, tell me that there is some direct connection between pawpaw trees and malaria, but just what this relation is I don't know. Pawpaws are becoming rare in many sections

where they were formerly abundant; this is regarded by the old-timers as a bad omen, perhaps a sign that the end of the world is at hand.

Several tales about the dogwood tree are linked up with religious legends. One story, said to be very old although I never heard it until about 1935, is that the cross on which Jesus died was made of dogwood, and that He cursed the tree and doomed it to be stunted and twisted, unfit for any kind of lumber. In the center of the dogwood flower is something said to resemble a crown of thorns, while a brown mark—like the stain of a rusty nail—shows at the tip of each white sepal. A fanciful and romanticized version of this legend was written up by C. E. Barnes of Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, in the 1930's and was published by many Arkansas newspapers.⁷

In Washington county, Arkansas, a wood chopper told me that it was the willow, not the dogwood, which was cursed by Jesus. "An' since that day," said the old man, "the willer tree aint been worth a good God damn for nothin'." This man assured me that the tale of Jesus cursing the willow is in the Book—by which he meant the Bible. "I caint read myself," said he, "but it's in the Book all right, an' any o' these here spindle-assed preachers can tell you all 'bout it." A related legend of the willow tree is the "Jesus and Joses" story recorded by Professor H. M. Belden who got it in 1914 from a man at Rolla, Missouri.⁸

The wild hawthorn or redhaw (*Crataegus*) is another accursed tree, though just how this came about is unknown to me. In March, 1923, the legislature named the hawthorn bloom as the state flower of Missouri, but there are many people in the southern end of the state who avoid touching it and regard even an accidental contact with the blooming tree as a very bad omen. Both redhaw and blackhaw bushes are common in the

⁷ See also a reference to the dogwood-cross story in Guy Howard's *Walkin' Preacher of the Ozarks* (New York, Harper, 1944), p. 141.

⁸ *Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society*, Columbia, Univ. of Missouri, 1940, p. 102.

Ozarks, and both are connected in the hillman's mind with sexual misadventures—rapes and unfortunate pregnancies and disastrous abortions and the like. Other plants which may be mentioned in this connection are the lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium*) and the stinkhorn fungus (*Phallus impudicus*).

The Oklahoma legislature, in 1937, passed a bill making the redbud Oklahoma's official state tree. This roused a great storm of criticism, because many people believe that the redbud is the unluckiest tree in the world, since Judas hanged himself on a tree of this kind. Some hillfolk who have no interest in religious matters still feel that the redbud or Judas tree is bewitched, at least in the spring, and it is well to keep away from blooming redbuds after dark. Mrs. Roberta Lawson, of Tulsa, vice-president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, led a large number of Oklahoma clubwomen who held public meetings, telegraphed protests to Governor Marland, and so on. Some important citizens of northeastern Oklahoma were still grumbling about the matter, I am told, as recently as 1942.

Some observers have thought they found a suggestion of tree worship, or something of the sort, in the Ozarker's use of masculine pronouns as applied to trees. One of my neighbors near Pineville, Missouri, said of a certain bee tree: "*He's* holler as a gourd! I bet there's five hunderd pound o' honey in *him!*" A gentleman at Fayetteville, Arkansas, remarked that he had enjoyed the shade of a certain maple on his lawn for forty years and added: "I aim to be buried under *him* when I die." I have many other examples of this sort of thing. It does not seem particularly significant to me but has impressed several eminent scholars who have visited the hill country, and I set it down here for what it may be worth.

