

Delia Broom and the Frog-People of Quicksand Pond

Thursday, October 1

From: *The Swampton Weekly Gazette*:

IT'S NO FAIRY TALE, PHOTOS REVEAL HALF-HUMAN FROGS

Amazing photographs taken last week of a previously unknown species of frog living in South County's Quicksand Pond have sent ripples through nearby communities.

The frogs appear to have developed some human physical characteristics, including necks and arms. Whether the mutant strain has been there all along, hidden within the primordial bog that surrounds this pond, or evolved recently is among the questions already under investigation by a team of prominent scientists and biologists.

The photos were taken by a twelve-year-old camera buff who was looking for her lost cat when she stumbled on the amazing creatures.

She had not stumbled, of course. Newspapers always get things wrong. Delia Broom was not a stumbler. She walked precisely, attentively, with a sharp eye for detail—exactly the way she took her photographs.

And she had certainly not been looking for her cat. That was ridiculous. You don't go around looking for a cat that has been lost for almost a year. You might think about him, yes. You might go around remembering his thick, velvety fur and enormous paws. Six-toed paws, Roderick had. He left tracks the size of a wolf's. But he was beautiful: the way he moved, like a dancer, and the honey-gold color of his eyes.

Sometimes in the late afternoon, Delia Broom went out in the field behind her house where this cat was last seen. She'd gaze across the darkening surface of the pond and think of calling: "Roderick!" As she used to. "Roderick, come for supper!"

But she didn't call. Not anymore. Instead she'd walk slowly to the edge of the pond, sit on the bank and *click*, take a picture of the late afternoon sun shining on the water. (Not a bad shot.)

The bank might still be wet from a rainstorm last night but so what? Dampness, mud, they weren't things Delia Broom noticed. She wasn't one of those photographers who are afraid of getting their feet wet. Though the weather was getting colder now. Autumn was well under way in this fresh water pond near the sea. The reeds were beginning to turn from green to honey-gold, the same honey-gold shade as....

Click. Nice colors there. Hope that one comes out.

Three seagulls flew over (*click, click*) giving out the plaintive mew that seagulls make when they are speaking among themselves of seagull matters. Of migrating shoals of fish, or beds of juicy mussels nestled along the shore. Of food in many forms – what most wild creatures think about at this time of year, not only birds but muskrats, mink, rabbits, deer...coyotes. Everyone is looking for a good meal. The chilly nights give warning: Last call to fatten up before winter's frigid fast. Even cats get this message.

Roderick liked to hunt in the field. In the fall, he'd be out in it all day. He was an expert mouser and enjoyed tracking moles, rabbits and chipmunks. He'd always come home for supper, though, and spend the night indoors. There was a good reason.

Some nights, in the cold, black hours before dawn, Delia Broom would wake to hear a high, yelping wail outside her window. Coyotes. Their howls made the hair rise on the back of her neck. They kept a den somewhere west of the pond

and had the run of the area because they were protected by law. Newly arrived, an endangered species from the north, they could not be hunted.

Everyone knew the Quicksand Pond coyotes liked to hunt at night. Roderick knew. He'd seen them: gaunt, yellow-gray, wolfish-looking animals, always hungry but especially hungry in the fall. So hungry they'd come out before dark sometimes, while the sun was still setting and shadows striped the land. They'd pad out of the woods, lope silently toward the pond and spring into a field before a cat had gone indoors.

Then the cat would have to run for its life.

He'd have to sprint and leap and zig and zag and use every trick he knew to get home before...before...

Let us not say before what.

Late one afternoon, Delia Broom was sitting on the wet pond bank as usual, her camera around her neck. (She never traveled without it.) She was looking across the darkening water, remembering her lost cat, Roderick, trying not to think of what might have happened to him, when there was a rustle in the grass to the right.

She jumped a little, twisted around and saw something move. She got up warily and went over to investigate. That was when she saw them for the first time: a cluster of little creatures surging busily here and there, gathering red berries from a bush at the pond's edge.

Delia thought they were a large type of hummingbird at first. They were green all over, flying off the ground, or bouncing, maybe, because their wings were folded. Then she looked closer and realized that they didn't have wings. Those were arms. The creatures had half-bent, froglike legs, and green hands and feet that were webbed at the end, no fingers or toes.

Perhaps she gave a little gasp as she crouched down and focused her camera for a shot (*click, click*). Or maybe her shadow fell over them because just then, quicker than lightning, they looked up and saw her, and were gone. Like that! In one second, Delia Broom saw the flash of their big, frightened eyes looking up out of their flat, froggish faces (*click*), and the next second--empty space.

She lowered the camera, glanced about, but there was no sign of anything, except down by the bank a few water ripples fanned out into the pond, growing wider and wider.

Naturally, in the next moment, Delia wondered if she'd seen what she thought she'd seen. She couldn't wait to get home to develop the photos. There's nothing like a photo for showing the truth. It was time to go home, anyway. Past time. The sun had dropped behind the horizon. The evening was rapidly turning dark and cold.

Delia started to walk home fast, a bit nervous about running into a coyote cruising the field. Or worse, a pack of coyotes. It was unfair, she thought, that these coyotes got to roam around carefree and un hunted, preying on cats or whatever they wanted. They should have predators, too. They should have to feel afraid, the way they made others feel, including at this very moment Delia Broom, who now began to race at top speed across the field toward home.

From *The Swampton Weekly Gazette*; Thursday, October 8:

EXPERTS WARY OF LEAPING TO CONCLUSIONS ON RARE FROGS

A team of top biologists confirmed yesterday that an unknown species of frog photographed recently in South County township's Quicksand Pond area does seem to display characteristics that strongly resemble the human body.

The frogs, which were photographed by a young photographer at dusk on September 28, show well-developed necks, shoulders and arms. Heads, however, retain frog shape and features, including jowls and wide-spaced bulging eyes.

The creatures, which are about the size of a large hummingbird, appear in the photos to be foraging for food on the pond bank, according to Dr. Edward Biltmore of Lovelace University's Biological Labs, Inc., a nonprofit research group.

Dr. Biltmore said scientists remain skeptical but are intrigued by the photos, which were tested for authenticity and found reliable.

"We have set up fine-mesh fencing and positioned watch teams around the pond in hopes of further glimpses of these rare creatures, and perhaps even of capturing one," Dr. Biltmore said.

Meanwhile, Delia Broom, the twelve-year-old photographer who apparently snapped the photos, warned researchers about coyotes in the area that may threaten the frogs. Interviewed by reporters at her home yesterday, she told of witnessing an attack on one frog colony by coyotes who encircled their victims and then...

"It was horrible to watch."

(This was the story Delia told the reporters.)

"I was sitting on the pond bank when it happened. What time? Oh, about 4 P.M. I guess. After school, anyway, like the first time. I'd been keeping my eyes open all week for any other strange appearances. So I noticed when the sound started up.

"It was a humming noise, sort of, from a place farther down on the pond's edge. I tiptoed over, ready to photograph more evidence. I knew what might be there. And that's exactly what it was: the frog-people again.

"They were crouched in a ring having some kind of ceremony. The noises came from their throats, like purring. I was just raising my camera to take a picture when these high, wailing barks broke out and four huge coyotes sprang

through the tall grass. They pounced on the frogs. I was so shocked! I stood there with my mouth open. I meant to scream but never did. I never took the photo either. That's why there isn't one.

"What happened then? Well, just what you'd expect. The coyotes began to eat up the little frog-people with terrible chomps and gulps. They swallowed most of them in a matter of seconds. A few frogs escaped into the pond. I saw ripples of water fan out from the bank. The coyotes barked angrily after them and scratched up mud. Coyotes don't like anything to get away.

"That's why I decided to warn Dr. Biltmore and the scientists who were investigating the frogs," Delia told the reporters, who were sitting around her living room taking notes as she spoke. "Rare and beautiful creatures are in danger. Some have already been lost. Not only frogs, but cats."

CATS! The reporters chuckled. Cats were hardly in the same category as a rare species of frog, were they?

"Oh yes they are!" Delia Broom found herself bellowing. "Cats are very important animals!"

When the reporters chuckled again, Delia ended the interview by marching furiously out of the room.

From *THE SWAMPTON WEEKLY GAZETTE*, Thursday, October 15:

SCIENTISTS ACT TO PROTECT ONE ENDANGERED SPECIES FROM ANOTHER

A group of biological scientists led by Dr. Edward Biltmore today petitioned the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service for permission to "hunt out and destroy" a pack of Eastern Mountain coyotes that has taken up residence west of South County's Quicksand Pond.

The action was taken after the animals, which are on the endangered species list themselves, attacked an even rarer and more endangered species of frog that is believed to be living around the pond area.

The frogs appear in recent photos to display characteristics of the human torso, a surprising but not impossible evolutionary phenomenon, according to Dr. Biltmore, who is leading the research group.

“Frogs’ internal organs and circulatory systems have many similarities to those of human beings,” he said. “This is why frogs are often dissected in schools. The frog interior provides students with an excellent model of how the human body functions. It does not seem improbable, therefore, that some frogs may finally be evolving external human characteristics as well. We’re excited by recent photos showing...”

It’s amazing how much attention a person can get from a few little stories in the newspaper!

One minute Delia Broom was a shy, quiet loner who spent half her time outside photographing animals and nature, and the other half in a darkroom developing her film.

The next minute she was being interviewed by radio and television reporters, telling the rather ordinary story of her life. She was born. She learned to talk. Her dad, Walker Broom, was the famous wildlife photographer who disappeared two years ago on assignment in Africa. He’d taught her everything she knew about photography, darkrooms, etc. Sure, she missed him, what a dumb question. He might still come home someday. Who knows? He might.

After getting through with her life, Delia answered more questions about her two meetings with the extraordinary frog-people. No she hadn’t seen them again, not since the coyote attack. Wasn’t twice enough?

Delia was getting so much better at interviews! She didn’t lose control of her temper now, and agreed to allow more reporters to interview her (though her

mom was beginning to get kind of worried about all this) because she wanted to make her point about coyotes more forcefully.

These animals were a clear and present threat to much-loved species of all kinds! They wreaked havoc and left shattered lives in their wake. No, Delia wasn't out to get them, she just...believed that biological diversity was important. Endangered species must be protected!

When one sharp-nosed reporter asked if it wasn't true that coyotes killed a cat belonging to her, Delia Broom, last year, Delia shrugged.

"This has nothing to do with cats," she replied in a chilly voice.

Meanwhile, the result of Dr. Biltmore's petition to the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service appeared in the field below the Broom house one afternoon toward the middle of October. It was a squad of men with guns. They were wearing bright orange hunting vests and caps. Delia walked down with her camera to see what was going on. One of the hunters came forward to meet her. He asked, "Can you show us where the coyotes attacked the endangered frogs?"

"Yes, of course. Right over here. Near the pond's bank there's a little clearing. Here it is."

"And you were standing where?"

"Oh, back over there. I tried to take a photo, but it happened too fast."

"But you saw the coyotes? How many were there?"

"Four, maybe more. They came so quickly."

"The reason I ask," the orange-vested lead hunter said, "is it's peculiar. This type of coyote doesn't normally hunt in packs."

"Oh. Well, there were at least three. Or maybe two. Do they ever hunt in pairs?"

"They do. It's more likely."

"Well, now that I think about it, two does seem more like the right number."

“There’s one other thing,” the orange-vested hunter went on. “Coyotes are usually not much interested in frogs. Too small, you know? They like larger, juicier animals – rabbits, ground hogs. Cats, for that matter.”

“I know.” Delia gazed briefly across the pond, then brought her eyes back. “But that’s the thing about these frogs.”

“What’s the thing?”

“They have more to them...than ordinary frogs, I mean. They’re kind of like small human beings. Maybe they smell different than frogs. And taste better.”

“Hmmm,” said the lead hunter, giving Delia a skeptical glance. “So far, we’ve found the tracks of only one animal. He’s a big fellow. Leaves enormous tracks. Walks with a limp. Probably been around here awhile.”

“Enormous tracks?” Delia echoed.

“Yup. Big for coyote tracks. About the size of a wolf’s.”

When this conversation ended, Delia walked thoughtfully around the pond to where the scientists’ mesh fencing was set up. After a week of staking out the pond, no one had reported seeing any of the half-human frogs.

“I hope they didn’t all get eaten by the coyotes,” Dr. Biltmore worried to Delia when she found him.

She sat down near him on the bank and took a few photos (*click, click*) of him peering through his binoculars. He looked a little like a grasshopper – flat eyes, long nose, silver-rimmed spectacles whose wire stems looped up over his large ears like antennae. Delia leaned back and stared at him. For a minute, she seemed about to ask him something. Then she shook her head, as if dismissing a worried thought. Car horns blew loudly in the distance. There was a rumble of wheels.

“Now who can that be?” Dr. Biltmore inquired.

From THE SWAMPTON WEEKLY GAZETTE, Thursday, October 22:

QUICKSAND POND FROG-PEOPLE DRAW SURGING CROWDS

Reports of frogs that resemble small human beings and live in South County's Quicksand Pond attracted crowds of sightseers to the area this past weekend.

Local homeowners complained of noisy traffic jams that blocked their driveways and trampled gardens as hoards of people converged on the pond with binoculars and cameras.

Township police were called in to keep control. Fire department volunteers arrived with rescue vehicles when one woman fainted at the pond's edge.

"I saw one! I saw one!" screamed Marianne Childs, of Rocky Point, moments before she fainted and collapsed on the bank. She was taken to South County Hospital, where she was treated for minor bruises and released. Childs said later that she had seen one of the frog-people, but others standing near her could not confirm this.

Meanwhile, scientists from Lovelace University's Biologic Labs, Inc. said sightings of the frog-people, as the mysterious frogs are being called, have been reported in growing numbers.

The creatures, which are said to have human torsos and make vibrating noises that sound like a cat's purr, have been seen on the west, east, and northern edges of the pond, and paddling south across the water on pieces of wood resembling miniature dugout canoes.

Dr. Edward Biltmore, of the University, said he and his staff are attempting to validate all sightings.

"We have, as yet, no concrete evidence of the existence of these frog-people, but we remain hopeful," Dr. Biltmore said. He added that he has asked police to seal off the area so that important scientific evidence is not trampled.

In related activity, a group of Fish and Wildlife Service sharpshooters have located an abandoned coyote den in a shrub thicket west of the pond. The sharpshooters were called in after one frog colony was reportedly devoured by a pack of coyotes.

“The coyotes that occupied this den moved on some time ago,” said John Rinaldi, chief of Wildlife Management in the South County area. “We are currently tracking another large animal who leaves six-toed paw prints. The animal walks with a distinctive limp. Its tracks, which resemble a wolf’s, center around a deserted cabin in a heavily forested section of South County Reservation about three miles south of Quicksand Pond. Hikers are urged not to use trails in this area until...

SIX-TOED PAW PRINTS!

It was Thursday afternoon. Delia, just home from school, was reading this news article when, coming upon the words *six-toed paw prints*, she dropped the newspaper and let out a terrified shriek.

A second later, she was racing into her darkroom. She grabbed the frog photos she’d taken three weeks ago, hurtled out the door and sprinted down into the field to find Dr. Edward Biltmore, before it was too late!

There he was, thank heavens, hopping with his grasshopper-ish leap over the fine-mesh fencing, just disappearing around a curve in the pond.

“Wait!” Delia screamed. “I need to tell you something! Dr. Biltmore, please wait!”

He turned, wearing a friendly smile and waited for her to catch up.

“I lied!” Delia panted without introduction when she got to him.

“What?” His smile faded.

“I made up the frog-people. There aren’t any.”

“But, but...” He shook his head. “What about the photos? They tested out. They’re authentic,” he sputtered. “Our specialists said so.”

“They aren’t authentic. I made them look that way,” Delia yelled. “I took photos of some plastic toy aliens I had when I was a kid. I faked the photos, I swear it! I know how to do it.”

“Why, you little snake!” Dr. Biltmore looked furious.

“So you can call off the sharpshooters. That was a lie, too,” Delia said.

“What was?”

“Coyotes never attacked the frogs. I made that up to get in the newspaper.”

“This is outrageous! Wait until I tell your mother! What kind of mother do you have, anyway, to let you get away with something like this?”

Delia hung her head. “A really great one, actually. It’s not her fault. Since my dad got lost, she has to work all the time to get us through. She misses him a lot and doesn’t always notice what I do.”

Dr. Biltmore’s face softened. He patted Delia’s arm, deciding that she was a confused child still suffering from her father’s tragic disappearance in the wilds of Africa. He let her off the hook. Dr. Biltmore was a kind man with a big heart who just happened to look like a grasshopper. He couldn’t help it.

“I knew your dad,” he remembered suddenly.

“You did?”

“Long ago. He was a fine photographer. Any chance he’ll be found?”

“I don’t know,” Delia said. “It’s been two years.” She let out a deep sigh.

Within hours of Delia’s amazing confession, Dr. Biltmore had packed up his scientific gear, rallied his scientists, and told everyone to go home. He also called the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service and ordered the sharpshooters pulled from the area. There was no need to hunt the coyotes now.

“It was all a misunderstanding,” he informed the Feds, the university, the scientists, and *The Swampton Weekly Gazette* in an exclusive interview. “Although, if you ask me, those photos are authentic,” he added quietly. “The negatives tested out. They’re as real as they come.”

No one was in a mood to ask him anything, however. Many people were angry. They felt tricked and used. Others thought it was funny. They said they never believed in any frog-people anyway, so what was the difference?

And with that, the story of how Delia Broom, expert camera buff, invented the frog-people of Quicksand Pond to take revenge on the terrible coyotes who killed Roderick, her golden-eyed, velvet-maned, six-toed cat, came to an end.

Except for one thing.

Toward evening on the same day she confessed to Dr. Biltmore, Delia took a walk around Quicksand Pond, heading toward the South County Reservation. She walked uphill, then downhill, following an old hiking path into a densely wooded area. In all, she went about three miles.

The deserted cabin was exactly where the Fish and Wildlife Service hunters had said it would be, beside a stream in the woods.

It was very quiet there. Very lost, very lonely. The lowering sun shone with a honey-gold brilliance through the trees surrounding the cabin. Delia sat down and *click*, took a picture. (That was a nice one.)

Click. Click. Evening approached slowly and, except for a few chirping birds, silently.

After a while, Delia caught sight of movement in some underbrush near the cabin. She held her breath. A moment later, a large animal came out of the bushes carrying in its mouth a dead mole.

The animal was limping. Something had mangled his right front leg and made him lame. Such accidents happen in the wild. You often can't know with certainty whether a simple fall, an attack by a ferocious animal, a hunter's trap, a speeding car, or any of a dozen other mishaps have caused injury to the stricken animal, have perhaps confused his brain so that he forgets where he is and becomes lost, and is separated from his home.

"Roderick!"

Delia called him in the softest voice, not wanting to scare him after all this time.

“Roderick, come for supper.”

The big cat with the thick, velvety mane turned his head and looked at her. He dropped the mole and stared. Then, without taking his eyes off her, he began to run toward her on his enormous paws. Like a dancer, he moved, except for his limp, like a dancer who has suddenly remembered everything, everyone, and *click, click*, Delia took his picture that way, running for her arms, coming home.