

## Chapter 2: Darwin's Voyage

Darwin's voyage? But wait! What happened to his road trip to the Carolina mountains?

Bolt not my impatient reader. You can't follow where we are going without knowing where we've been. And because I am not sure myself, I need to regurgitate my earlier adventures with Darwin and connect them here.



In March of 2009, I embarked on a three hour journey circumnavigating the upper reaches of the Peace River in DeSoto County, Florida. The task assigned me by my exquisitely beautiful wife, Queen Marisa, was to map the muddy banks during low tide and look for alternate trade routes to the mall should the river ever completely dry up.

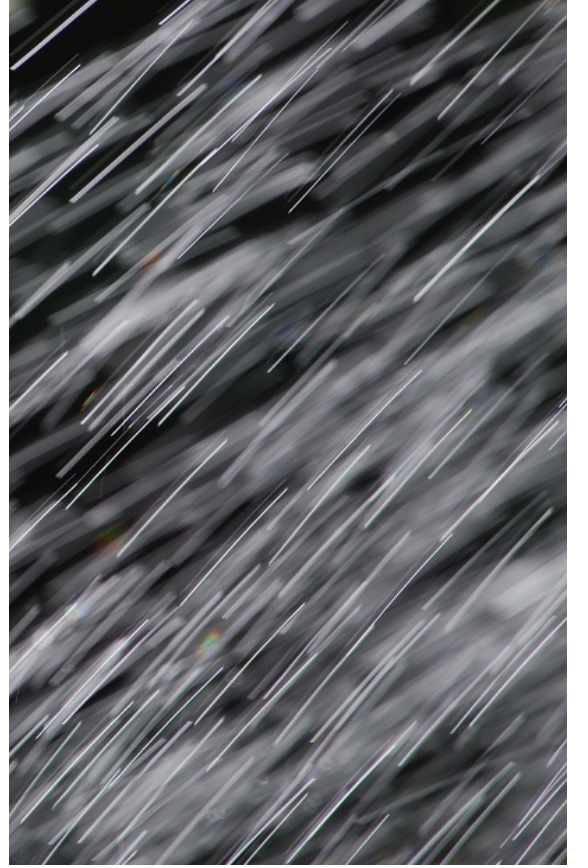
In my company, was a young cattle dog and biologist who was a recent graduate of the Academy of Old Bones. Darwin Renz would be my "gentleman passenger" for the trip, selected because of his superb intellect on evolutionary matters and because I happen to be rather fond of talking dogs. As long as I can get a word in edgewise.



I considered inviting our cat Lima, but figured she would be clinging by her claws to the overhead and I might develop severe neck strain trying to communicate and maintain eye contact with her. Besides, what does "meow, meow" mean anyway?

Darwin's self-assigned mission was to collect bugs and fossils, and to roll in any fresh cow dung he might discover along the banks.

No sooner had we set off, than the pounding rain turned to marble-sized hail and the wind blew strong from the northwest, turning the light river ripples into large violent swells that threatened to capsize our tiny craft.





Darwin immediately felt ill and was unable to maintain his "sea legs", so he retired to his cabin.





All during the first hour, he lay there moaning, wondering if this is how Gilligan must have felt on his three hour tour. Even the thought of a tasty soup bone upset his little tummy.



But once the storm calmed, Darwin managed to gather the strength to look out over the bow.

"Land ho!" I yelled, pointing at an island in the distance.

"Land ho yourself," he barely mustered, wobbling slightly while struggling to stand.

"Why don't you step ashore and look for bugs or bones," I suggested.

"I'd rather eat some grass right about now, thank you." Darwin replied.



"Darwin, perhaps we've reached the Galapagos Islands in the storm!"

"I don't know," he countered, "it looks a lot more like Galopolis, as in Ohio!"

"Don't be such a fuddy-duddy. Get out there and explore! Make a great discovery! Leave your legacy!"



"Okay, okay, soon as I find a tree!" mumbled Darwin to himself. "But wait, what's this? My first bug!! I will name it..."

"Whoa Darwin! Not so fast. The little critter might already have a name."

"You're right, Mr. Mark. According to my *Bugs for Dogs* book, it's called a short-winged grasshopper."



"And look above you Darwin, a fishing spider!"

"But where's his pole?"



"And slider turtles looking like house boats..."

While a gopher tortoise is a motor home on land! Cool!!!"





"Here's a paw print...looks like a raccoon stopped by in the past hour..."

"Yep, my nose confirms it!"





"And check out the fox squirrel checking me out in an oak tree, Mr. Mark!"



"Or Old Man River checking me out Darwin!"

"Here's one I didn't expect to see this far up a fresh-water river, Mr. Mark. Is it a crab?"



"It's a blue crab Darwin. But you'll probably want to call it a blue-nose pincher?"

"Why's that?"





"...A green heron. I can see other colors too!"

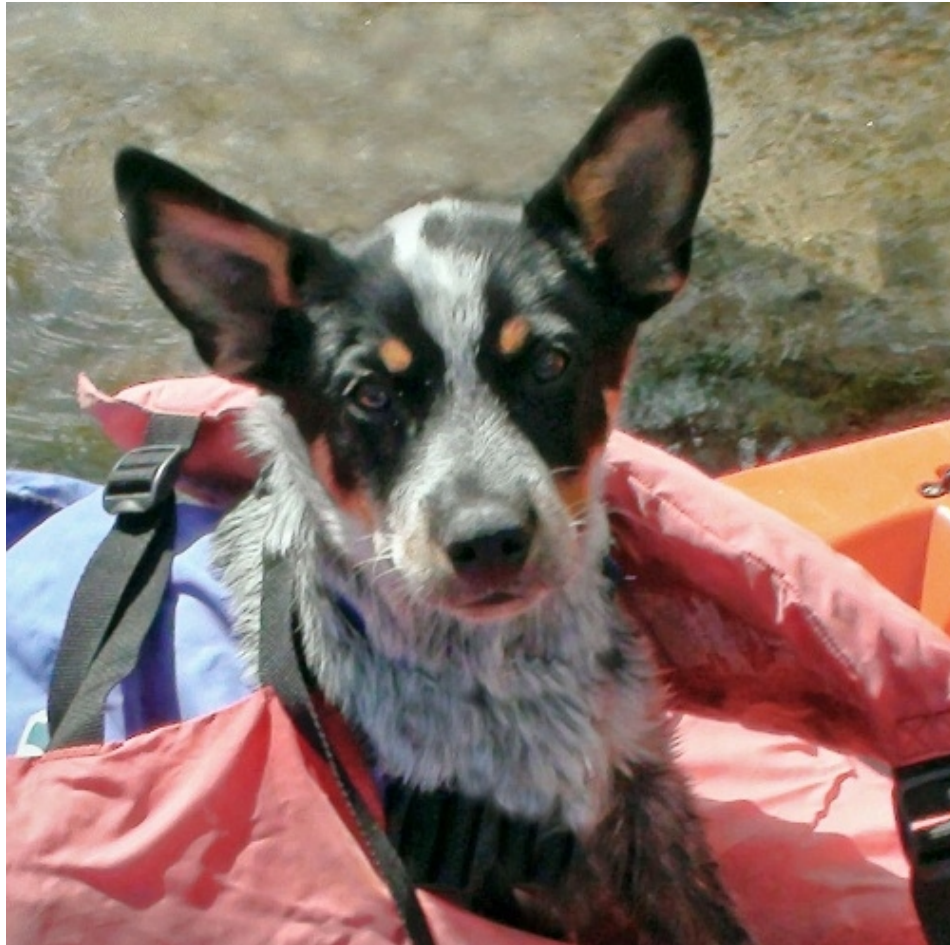
"This one has piano keys for feathers, Mr. Mark!"

"It's an aninga Darwin. It has no oil ducts in its wings so it can dive underwater. But now it's time to dry out!"





"Osceola turkeys! That 'ol Tom must be trying to keep all the hens in a straight line and get them across that field fast!"



"Well Darwin, we had better start home now. Queen Marisa will be worried if we stay out too late!"

"Great...At least this time the water is more calm! I can continue my research from the deck of the kayak."



"What in the world is that?" asked Darwin as we paddled out into the main channel.

"It's a manatee, also known as a sea cow because it grazes on sea grass."

"Why the popcorn on it's back?"

"Ha! Those are barnacles, or a type of animal known as a crustacean. They feed on plankton as water passes over the manatee. Some people describe them as nothing more than a little shrimp-like animal, standing on its head in a limestone house and kicking food into its mouth."

"Um, why is that skinny manatee smiling at me?"

"I was hoping we would see one of these critters from the safety of our kayak, Darwin. Meet "thunder lizard", alias an American alligator. This beastly boy is a large reptile capable of popping you down its throat like I might down a sugar-free glazed doughnut!"

"I get your message, Mr. Mark. We both have to be careful."



"I think I know what these are...Native American arrowheads!"

"Close, my dear dog. They're a little too large to have been used as an arrow. But you're right that they were weapons or tools. Some may have been fitted onto the end of a long stick and used as a spear, while others were made into knives. They were very useful by some of the first human residents of Florida."





"Let me guess," said Darwin. "This is concrete proof that the Romans vacationed in Florida?"

"Leave the jokes to me lad."



"What in the world? You never said anything about sharks in a fresh-water river!" Mr. Mark. "And look at the size of that tooth. The shark that lost it must have been as long as a school bus!"

"Fret not Darwin. The *Carcharocles megalodon* shark that owned this tooth may have been 50-60 feet long, but he or she has been extinct and fossilized for several million years. When it was circling whales, this area was an ocean, not a river. "

"I recognize those alligator teeth. It's neat how the minerals in the river have preserved them and turned them brown."

"You've done your homework well Darwin! They're fossil alligator teeth!"



"And is this a fossil flute, Mr. Mark?"

"It does resemble a musical instrument. No, those holes along the length of the bone suggests this was part of a prehistoric dolphin jaw."

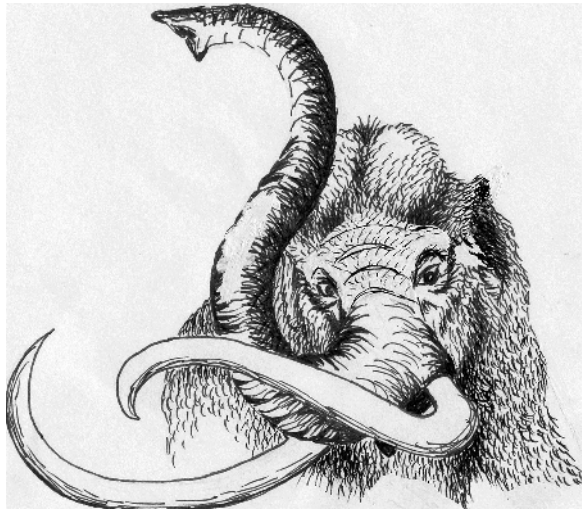


"Wait, don't tell me...that's a horse tooth!"

"You're right Darwin! And?"

"And horses began evolving in North America 57 million years ago. There were big ones, small ones and all kinds of in-between ones! Those funny-looking lines are part of the horse's chewing surface."

"That's my boy!"



*Illustration Marisa Renz*

"Ms. Marisa's illustration gave me a clue on these two...that's a mammoth tooth on the upper left and a mastodon tooth on the right!"

"Right again Darwin...and why do their teeth look different if they're both primitive elephants?"

"Because they had different diets, Mr. Mark! If mammoths were alive today, they would be next to cows grazing on grasses. Mastodons would be in the woods munching on tree leaves and shrubs."

"This has been a great trip, Mr. Mark. You sure know you're way around in the wild. I would never be able to find my way home from here!"

"I have a little more experience than you, that's all Darwin. It's just a matter of knowing which signs to look for..."



Face it,  
you're lost