

# LEARNING ARKANSAS

BY JENNIFER CASE

**THIS PAST AUGUST**, my family and I moved from upstate New York to central Arkansas, a three-day trip that took us south through Pennsylvania and Virginia, then west through Tennessee. I had never lived in the South before. I had never, really, even been in the South before. With each mile, the terrain became more unfamiliar, and when we finally crossed the bluish, steel bridge over the Mississippi—a bridge that reminded me, but only vaguely, of my childhood along the same river in Minnesota—I knew that living in Arkansas would disorient me.

And it has: from the heat of late summer to the long tepid fall, to the single day of snow in January, and the very early spring. When my 3-year-old daughter and I go on evening walks, I am caught off guard by the budding and leafing of trees, activities I expect at the end of April rather than early March. Already, the lawns stir with robins—not just one or two, hiding in hedges, but dozens of robins. Their sudden presence seems vaguely off-kilter so early in the year. We clomp through parks dusted with tiny clover flowers, and when it storms, the instantaneous puddles stain my daughter's boots with an odd orange mud.

I am displaced. Out of my comfort zone. Even when it comes to activities such as gardening that I think I know well. “It won't be anything like you are used to,” the leader of a local community garden says, telling me about the insects and the mold I'll now experience in the South. He emails me links to neem oil and other organic pest solutions. He warns me about caterpillars in August the size of my fist and says I should kill any cutworms and white grubs I see while tilling the soil.

In New York, what I called cutworms were small and thin, taking up no more space than a nickel when curled. I could mince their dark, segmented bodies in half with just my thumbnail and finger.

The larvae I discover when preparing the soil in Arkansas, on the other hand, have substance. Curled in fat, tight balls, their white, translucent bodies and striking red heads are as thick as my thumb. Even more, it takes force to squish them. When I rest a bloated body against the shovel and smash it with my fist, my fist bounces off. I try again. I push harder. The watery innards splat with a strong, terrible scent. I begin to cringe whenever I unearth a new white grub.

Where have I come?

I have turned into a 3-year-old myself, gazing at robins for the first time, clomping through fields of clover, stomping through orange puddles, cocking my head at the strange chirping and clawing and smells. Newness is everywhere. Even the everyday ravines and damp fields re-

verberate in spring with a cacophony I can't quite place. Something between a cricket and a cicada, though I know it is too early for those. Something not unlike the electric transformer buzzing behind our house, but louder and more insistent. The sound hits me when I open the doors, when I drive past ditches, when I round the bend near an undeveloped parcel of land by our home.

Finally, I decide I've had enough unknowing and determine to identify the noise. I input “early spring sounds in Arkansas” into Google, then specify insects and frogs. I spend an evening scrolling through *FrogWatch*, with its data points and nationwide network of trained frog spotters. I make a list of possible species, then listen to audio clips at [arkansasfrogsandtods.org](http://arkansasfrogsandtods.org). “Is this most like the sounds that fill the fields?” I ask with each one. “This?” My daughter and I move from wood frogs to bull frogs to spring peepers and Southern leopard frogs until pausing at the Cajun Chorus frog, which someone on *FrogWatch* has recently heard in the nearby Ozarks, and which the website describes as “a thumbnail rubbing across a plastic comb.” Yes. The sound matches. This is it.

The Cajun Chorus frog. Not a name I'd ever expect in Minnesota or New York. Clearly a name for here, this new place we've come to, this rectangular range covering only Arkansas, Louisiana, and eastern Texas and Oklahoma. It dawns on me anew that these are species I have never seen or heard before. That they are utterly unique to my ears.

Maybe next year, the seasons will transition with familiarity. I will

hear the Cajun Chorus frogs, recognize them, and in doing so become an inhabitant myself of this place. Maybe, five or even 10 years from now, their clicking spring call will fade into the background—merely a heartbeat, a living pulse. The frogs and the cutworms and the giant caterpillars will become nothing beyond expected, seasonal signals. But until then, they are astonishments—strange names to roll on my tongue, strange bodies to press between my fingers—and I can't help but believe I am lucky in this way.

Lucky that Arkansas, for now, mystifies me. That each sound and species brings with it a bit of wonder. An opportunity to hold it in my hand, to tune in to its sound, and, in the midst of the day, ask, “What is this here?”



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