

AFTER DARK

BY JIM MIZE

When the sun goes down and the moon comes up, night sounds cut through the silence, imaginations run wild, and it's prime time for story-telling.

After darkness pulls the shades down, movement begins on the other side, imaginations poke us in the ribs, and some of what we fear begins to walk the earth. Those who venture out after dark know what I mean.

Years ago, my dad and I spent most Saturday nights on the lake with a Coleman lantern hanging over the side of our boat. While it hummed, we would settle into a soft state of listening to night noises and anything over that drone seemed jarring.

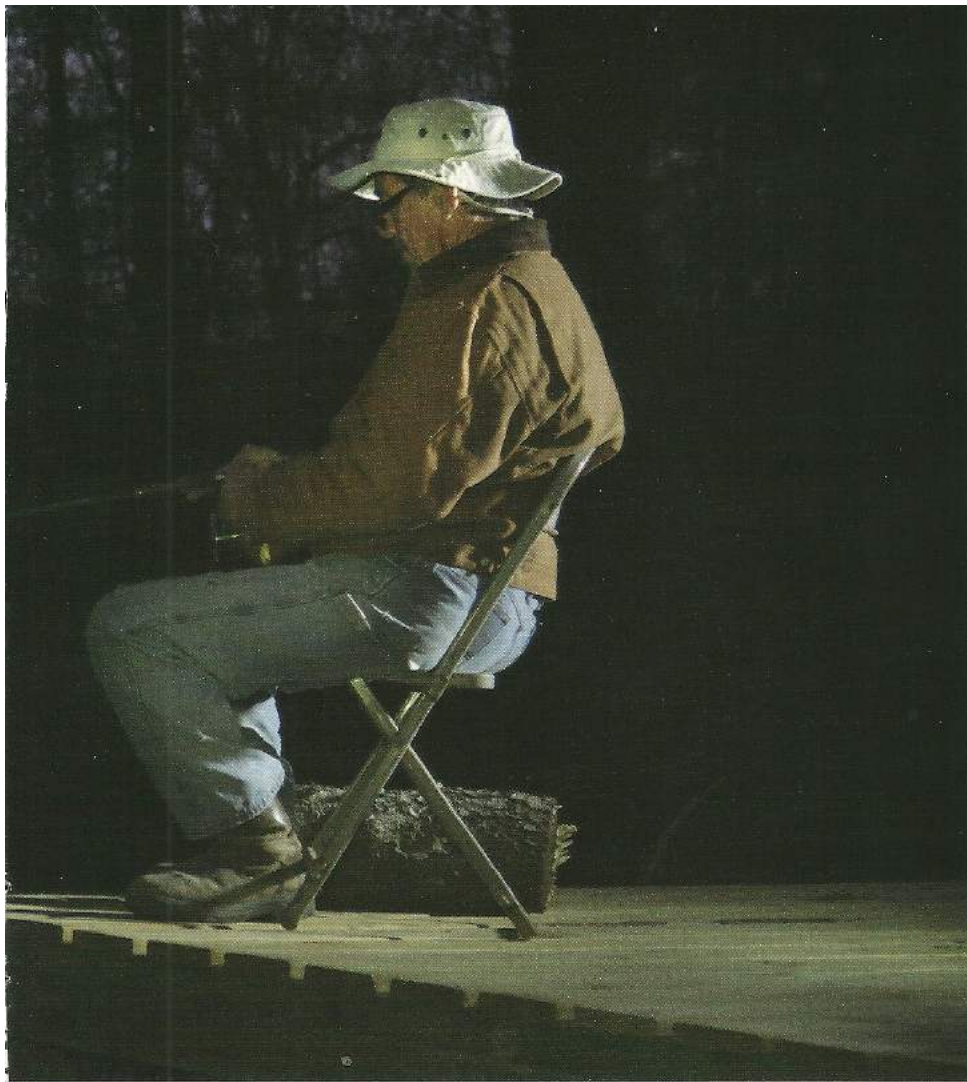
On the occasion of a rod dipping, we'd lean over the side to see the surprise

bounced. He lifted it and started to swing on board a crappie so thin the lantern light shone through. A flared mouth and gills followed it into the light and scared Dad so badly he yanked the crappie right out of a trophy largemouth's grasp. Such is the state of nerves on a quiet night. On another evening, we were backed up to a cliff on the remote end of the lake. The cliff leaned in toward the lake as it went up, sheltering us and reflecting our lantern light. Just after dark, as the world grew quiet, we heard a wildcat scream in the distance. Dad started telling stories.

seen again. Other stories related to farm animals disappearing without a sound and only a track left behind.

Those who fish all night know there is a time when a lull sets in, as if the creatures pause to catch their breath. The sounds soften, the lantern dims, and lines lay slack. On a normal night, it's a signal to pump the lantern and put on fresh bait. Maybe freshen up the coffee.

On this night, just as our eyelids seemed their heaviest, from atop the cliff over our heads as if signaling his mad dive into our boat, the wildcat screamed.



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his clothes in the air on the way up and threading back into them on the way down.

Maybe the cat had followed the light or just claimed the cliff as the edge of his territory. Either way, it didn't matter.

We left.

Sometimes, it's the people you fish with that make the night more interesting. I had a jumpy uncle, named Wally, who liked to fish, but night was not his favorite time to be out. You could see his nervousness as he fidgeted and constantly looked behind him.

We took Wally trout fishing after dark. In the summer, the trout congregated in the deep parts of the lake where they could descend until they found cold water. We'd

anchor where a hundred feet of rope might be exhausted to reach bottom or let the boat drift until the anchor touched and held.

This trip took place back in the sixties, when reports of UFOs dominated the front pages of the tabloids. About an hour into the trip, we had a trout or two in the cooler, the chatter in the boat was upbeat, and it was shaping up to be a fine night. Suddenly, a flash went across the sky like an exploding plane crashing down. It appeared so close that it seemed to fall just over the ridge across the lake. Wally was the first to comment.

"Wh-wh-what's that?"

Obviously, none of us knew, but Dad was never one to miss an opportunity.

"You know, they've been seeing those UFOs all over the place."

"Wh-wh-what?"

"Yeah, those spaceships. People say they've been coming down to check us out. Some say they take people back with them."

"Say wh-wh-what?"

"Sure, I heard one fellow say they killed one of his cows. Only took parts of it and left the rest in the field."

"You th-think they landed over there?"

By now, Wally's knees were bouncing, and he was looking around as if they might be sneaking up behind us. The way our light ended just out of casting range, they could get close before we saw them.

We found out the next day that a giant meteor had hit the ground in Ohio but created such a flare it was visible in ten states. Where we sat, it seemed right next door.

None of this, however, did Wally any good. By now, he was sure he'd seen an alien spaceship. And Dad just kept needling him, obviously having more sport with Wally than with the trout.

"You don't th-think they'd come out here, do you?"

"They could if they wanted to," replied Dad. "I'm sure if they can fly through space they can fly over here."

Wrong answer. Wally slid into a visible state of agitation a boat could hardly contain. His knees were bouncing, and his head rotated like an owl's, watching for aliens on all sides. Finally, he said what he was obviously thinking.

"I want to go home."

We left.

After dark, some boats are just too small for our imaginations.

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 Jim Mize's most recent book is an award-winning collection of humor for fly fishermen titled *A Creek Trickles Through It*. For more information on this and his other books, go to www.acreektricklesthroughit.com.