

AIto Update, December 2011: All Creatures Great and Small

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small

All things wise and wonderful, the lord God made them all

Most of the people who live in Tompotika are Muslim, with smaller minorities of Christians and Hindus. The above words come from a Christian hymn, but they express rather well a notion common to all three faiths: the natural world around us was not made by humans and is not ours to misuse. Rather, the great Creation of which we are but a part is a wonder that we humans must treasure with gratitude and tend with care.

To care for *all creatures great and small* is an obligation and privilege--whether those creatures conform



Amorphophallus paeoniifolius Photo: Kevin Schafer

to our norms and expectations or not. Yet by whatever name--or no name--you may call the Creator, Tompotika is clearly a showcase of Creation Humor, for the plants and animals there revealed cannot fail to surprise, delight, and perhaps stretch you. Take, for example, the so-called Elephant Yam, *Amorphophallus paeoniifolius*. One of the world's largest inflorescences, the *Amorphophallus* flower can reach over a meter wide and two meters tall, and you'll find them growing wild in woods and roadsides in Tompotika. A huge root or corm accompanies the flower underground, as well as a single, large, multi-part leaf. But if at the thought of *flower* your mind springs to graceful petals and delicate umbels, think again. The *Amorphophallus* flower is purplish-brown, leathery, and, well, like nothing else so much as what its Latin name suggests!

Still, a meter-wide flower, you are thinking, that thing must put out fragrance like a perfume factory!

Well, yes--but no sweet aroma of rose or lavender wafts from this posy. No, *eau de*

Amorphophallus is definitely not something you'd want to put behind your ears or on your pulse points: it smells just like rotting flesh! All for the sake of becoming irresistible, it turns out, to pollinators in the form of carrion flies and beetles.

Carrion flies and beetles? With flowers? Well, why not? Why should the happy life-giving pollinator role fall just to cheerful buzzy bees and slender-billed birdies? Why should carrion flies and beetles not spice up their lives with a little change from their everyday chore of disposing of the world's dead things? It is, one might say, another joke of the Creator, perfectly evolved for both function and frivolity: the insects are lured to *Amorphophallus* in the expectation of finding a scrumptious corpse, and instead their search ends in pollen, through which, unwittingly, they bring new life. Who is to say? Perhaps they are disappointed at finding no carrion--but maybe too, after spending all their time around death and decay, these little critters welcome their shining moment to hang out with a flower--and one the largest and most dramatic in the world, at that! In Tompotika, Creation defies all our expectations, breaks through the ordinary, and redefines what is possible.

So, next time you think of *All things wise and wonderful, all creatures great and small*, go ahead and think of the elephant and the sparrow. Think of the humpback whale and the pygmy sea horse. But don't forget the *Amorphophallus* and the carrion beetle, too. Perhaps they, and the myriad other beings of Creation that populate the Tompotika area--and the whole earth, for that matter--are *wise and wonderful* in ways that are particularly precious, particularly essential--especially in the challenging times we live in.

During this holiday season, we are reminded that wonders can arise from unexpected places, that the humble and the exalted may be one and the same. Here at the Alliance for Tompotika Conservation (AITo), we aim to appreciate, and preserve, all of the *wise and wonderful*, the *great and small* of Creation that we possibly can. Thanks for being part of the AITo alliance, and happy holidays to all!

Salam, peace,

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