



# Letters to Nature Kids

December, 2021 ❁ No. 1



*Dear Nature Kids,*

Yesterday I spent some time at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge with ducks, an egret, coots, an old turtle, and a few wasps. The wasps – those big red and black ones – were checking out a dead tree. One would show up and then another one, not bothering me but just exploring what might be their winter home. If there is space under the bark or inside the hollowed-out trunk, they may chill out inside during the coldest part of the winter. Some of the workers will die, but the queen wakes up in the spring, ready to start another colony.

Lots of people jump or hide if a wasp flies near them, but really the chances of being stung are highest when we are close to a nest that they are defending. Otherwise they just want to be left alone, like the ones I saw yesterday. I do flinch a little if one flies very close, even though I know better.

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At the marsh boardwalk, a big white bird stood on one of the support posts from the old boardwalk. It had a long neck, bent in a sort of “S” shape and a long, sharp yellow bill. Its legs were black. All those things told me that the bird was a great egret. It really is a big bird – when flying, its wingspan is about 4½ feet from wing tip to wing tip. Great egrets wade through the water, slowly and carefully, hunting for fish, frogs, or other animals to eat. When the bird spots a fish, it aims that sharp bill and then suddenly plunges its head into the water, stabbing the fish.



Above: the great egret  
Left: the great egret as if flew away

Want to learn more about great egrets or other birds? Try the All About Birds site, [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/), one of my favorite places to learn about birds.

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A red-eared slider, sunbathing

Nearby, a turtle had pulled up on a piece of wood, stretching his neck out as if he was sunbathing on this cloudy day. But remember, you can actually get a sunburn on a cloudy day, so something is getting through those clouds. The main reason that turtles pull out of the water to balance on sticks and tree limbs (and dive back into the water if we scare them) is to soak up a particular part of sunlight called *ultraviolet* light. They need it to keep their bones and shells strong. So for a turtle, sunbathing is a little like taking vitamins.

If you look closely, this turtle was pretty dark. He had no trace of the famous “red ear” patch of color behind his eye, even though he was a red-eared slider. Older males of this kind of turtle often lose their color until their shells are sort of greenish or yellowish and their heads are dark with a hint of green but no red. They become “*melanistic*,” meaning dark colored. The photos below show one of these old males on the right, and some normal-looking red-eared sliders on the left.

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Normal patterned red-eared sliders



An old melanistic red-eared slider



I also walked through the woods near the marsh boardwalk. It was quiet and peaceful, and only two other people passed me on the trail. I like walks by myself sometimes, although I also enjoy sharing the woods with a couple of friends. But today this walk by myself was great.



Do you know what a hundred tons of leaves smells like, laying on the ground? (I'm not really sure if it was a *hundred* tons, or even a ton, but they covered the ground everywhere I looked.) In my walk, the smell was really strong in a spot between two little hills where the air stays still. Now sometimes when people say that a smell is "really strong," it's a polite way of saying it *stinks*. That's not what I mean. I loved that smell, but I don't have good words to describe it. The leaves fall and they break down and return to the soil. That smell is leaves turning into soil.



It's fun to look at a deep layer of leaves and see how many kinds of trees you see in the different shapes. Even if you don't know the names of the trees, you can look at leaf shape and often figure out that the oval leaf with the ruffled edges is a different kind than the one with lobes that stick out like arms. How many different kinds do you think are shown in the photo above?

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The trail through the woodland



The marsh



That's about all for this letter. I hope you can take a walk in a place like this where there is so much to see and enjoy. May your holidays be wonderful and your New Year be a happy one.

👁 Michael



Looking into a pool of water with oak leaves and reflections of branches

## Places to Go

If you'd like to know more about the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge where I took this walk, check out <http://www.fwnaturecenter.org/>. I have been visiting for many years, and I've walked all 20 miles of trails and seen most of its 3,621 acres. You'll find prairies, oak woodlands, bottomland forest, lake and marsh habitats. The refuge is located in northwestern Tarrant County at 9601 Fossil Ridge Road, Fort Worth, TX 76135. You can reach them at (817) 392-7410.

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