



Letters to Nature Kids

December, 2021 ❁ No. 2



A cricket frog seen on December 27th

Dear Nature Kids,

It is now winter, but today I saw some turtles and about a dozen cricket frogs. I'd like to tell you about these tiny frogs that hopped around the edge of a pond. They live very short lives - somewhere between four and sixteen months. During that short time they gobble down tiny insects and get away from us in impossibly long jumps.

It was a couple of days after Christmas, but the National Weather Service said that the temperature reached 80° today, and that was weird, even for Texas. I wanted to see how the wildlife was doing at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve in Arlington. I keep track of the frogs, turtles, lizards and snakes at the preserve, helping to find out what kinds live there and which ones are common. In other words, I work with some volunteers to do a survey of those reptiles and amphibians.

➤ *Continued on the next page*



The woods on the way to the pond

I took a walk there in the early afternoon, following a path through oak and juniper trees and across little clearings with native prairie grasses. That brought me to a pond at the north end of the preserve. When I started walking along the very edge of the pond, right by the water, I began to see cricket frogs. Really the first thing I saw was something very small that could jump very far. When they land,

these frogs usually blend in with their surroundings and are hard to see. You have to practice, and after you try to spot cricket frogs for a while, it gets easier. Most of them have bodies no more than an inch long, and their color blends in with the mud and algae at the water's edge.

Walking around the muddy edge of the pond, at least I kept my shoes on. Yesterday I was at the preserve trying to take a close photo of one of the frogs and I stepped on mud that looked fairly dry. But I started to sink in the mud, and before I knew it, I was stuck! I pulled my leg pretty hard and the mud stole my shoe – pulled it right off my foot! You have to be careful when you walk where it's muddy.



The north pond, where the cricket frogs and turtles were having a busy day

🐸 *Continued on the next page*

Often you can find cricket frogs on a sunny day, even on fairly cold winter days when the sun is out. Today was definitely not cold. Using a digital thermometer, I saw that it was 80° at the pond, and that was nearly a record high temperature for this day. I wonder how the cricket frogs and other animals feel about that? How do they figure out what time of year it is? Many of them use things like how warm it is and how long the day lasts to decide if it's time for a long rest until winter's done. We might be glad that we get to wear shorts and play outside at this time of year, but I wonder if this long stretch of weirdly warm weather will confuse some of the insects, frogs, and other animals.



Amazing cricket frog camouflage. The backwards triangle between the eyes helps identify the cricket frog.

At least the cricket frogs knew that this was not the right time of year to breed, or anyway I did not hear any males calling. In the spring, summer, and early autumn, male cricket frogs call out to the females, making a loud “grick-grick-grick” sound. It really sounds like a couple of rocks being hit together. When a bunch of males join in, I guess it sounds a little bit like it's raining pebbles. The

➤ Continued on the next page

ladies listen to the calls to find their guy, and then they lay eggs in the water with the males fertilizing the eggs. Later, those eggs hatch into tadpoles. If you haven't seen tadpoles, they're sort of like swimming commas. What I mean is that they have a little rounded body, no legs, and a tail that they use to move around. After the tadpoles feed and grow for a while, they begin to grow legs and ultimately change into frogs.

Along with the cricket frogs, two kinds of turtles were out at the ponds I visited. Red-eared sliders (we talked about those a little in my last letter) and river cooters were either swimming or pulled up out of the water and basking or sunbathing. The name "cooter" probably came from a west African word, "kuta," meaning a turtle.

Maybe you can get out and see some cricket frogs at a pond or creek somewhere. It's fun to see if you can find them after they jump. Just be careful not to get stuck in the mud, and have a great time!

🐢 Michael



River cooter

Places to Go

The Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve was until recently the Southwest Nature Preserve. It is about 59 acres of Eastern Cross Timbers oak woodland with a few prairie openings and several ponds. The website is

https://www.arlingtontx.gov/city_hall/departments/parks_recreation/parks_trails/park_finder/southwest_nature_preserve. Also have a look at the Friends of Shari Capehart Nature Preserve page on Facebook (@FriendsofSWNP). Exploring the preserve is free, and there is parking but currently there are no restroom facilities. The address is 5201 Bowman Springs Rd., Arlington, TX 76017.

© 2021 by Michael Smith. Letters to Nature Kids is a pdf download from Lives in Nature (www.livesinnature.com). It is free, but your contribution in any amount is gratefully accepted (via [www.PayPal.me/MSmithLPA](https://www.paypal.me/MSmithLPA)). We welcome questions, suggestions and feedback. Please contact us at livesinnature@outlook.com.