



Letters to Nature Kids

February 2022 🌸 No. 4



A song sparrow launching into flight

Dear Nature Kids,

Winter will soon be over. It's exciting to think about what spring will be like – new leaves turning a woodland fresh green, frogs calling, and patches of flowers scattered over the prairie. But wait! Winter is still here, and there are good things about that season, too. Like the song sparrow I saw on my walk yesterday, a bird that visits us only in winter. Each season offers its own wonders, and I like to look for what's wonderful about each of our seasons. When I walked through prairies and woods on February 27th at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, there was plenty to see under sunny winter skies.

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In winter, when the leaves have dropped from most of our trees, it is easier to spot a particular plant that attaches itself to branches and grows in green clumps. Have you heard of mistletoe? You might have seen it at Christmas time. It is customary for people to kiss under a mistletoe sprig that may be hung from a doorway around the holiday. Outside, mistletoe grows from the branches of several kinds of trees. Should people kiss under those trees? I suppose they could.



American mistletoe in the trees. The closer photo on the right shows its white berries.

But wait – how does it get up there, and where is the soil for its roots? Those are some of the very cool and interesting things about this plant, American mistletoe. Birds or other animals that eat mistletoe berries can accidentally carry the seeds to a high branch in a tree. Once the seed is there, it grows roots down into the tree's tissues where it can get water and some nutrients.

That makes it a parasite, right? (Here is a simplified definition: A parasite is a plant, animal, or other organism that lives on or inside another organism and lives at the expense of that host organism.) It is a parasite, kind of. Notice that its leaves are green, meaning that it can make its own food through photosynthesis. A mistletoe gets some of its food from the tree and some from its own effort, so it doesn't take much from the tree. Most trees can live pretty well with a few mistletoe plants on them.

And like most things in nature, mistletoe doesn't just take, it gives back. Many birds eat their berries, and so do a number of mammals such as squirrels. Porcupines apparently love them, but unless you are a porcupine, don't eat the berries. They are toxic to people. Some butterflies depend on mistletoe, and bees

like the plant's pollen. Want to learn more? I got lots of information from the U.S. Geological Survey website: <https://www.usgs.gov/news/featured-story/not-just-kissing-mistletoe-and-birds-bees-and-other-beasts>.



I walked further along the Oak Motte trail, which winds through patches of woodland and then opens up in beautiful patches of prairie or savannah. I was by myself out there, and it was big and wide open and mostly quiet. The warm sun and the tall prairie grasses made it feel great. The Indiangrass had stalks with feathery seed heads that reached above my head.

There's one particular big patch of prairie that I always look forward to seeing. At the top of a rise there is a huge live oak tree that

overlooks an area with a fine, golden grass at the top and little bluestem (which is a rusty pale orange in winter) at the bottom. In between, dozens of yuccas are scattered around. The yuccas have stiff pointed leaves like little swords that poke out from the center of the plant. You should stay on the trail, but if you were walking across that field you would need to step carefully – the leaves are sharp!



The more time I spent in the prairies and woods, the more I was relaxed and happy. Some days we may be worried or sad about things. A walk like I took can change that, at least for a while. Here's why: We could think of our lives having different rooms, and each room is about different places, people, and activities. There's a room for our time at school and one for family and there might be one for things we hear on the news. There can be one for the time we spend in nature. The thoughts we think and the way we feel can be pretty different in each room, because while we are there, *that* is our reality.

When I am in the "nature room," I can choose to let other things stay in the other rooms while I pay attention to the grasses, the trees, birds, and everything else in that nature room. I know the other rooms are still there, and later on I have things to do in those parts of my life. Right now I don't have to think about those other rooms. It feels good to be in this one for now.



My "nature room" on February 27th



A tiny nest

fragments of moss and golden-eye lichen were woven together into a tiny nest whose opening was about 1½ inches across.

If there were woodland elves and fairies, this would surely be their work. Here were tiny things gathered from the woods, leaves from moss and the yellow cups of lichens carefully crafted and hung from two strong little branches.

It was a bird's nest, but it was OK for me to imagine it being more. It's great to see things scientifically and also great to let something awaken our imagination so that we remember stories and legends.



I almost walked past one of the best discoveries of my walk that day. Right beside the trail, hanging from a skinny forked branch was a patch of leaves and stuff stuck together. A few steps past it I said, "Wait ... what was that?" and went back to check it out.

Sure enough, when I pulled the branch down a little I could see inside this miniature pouch that a bird constructed some time last year. Bits of leaves, shredded plants, and

I hope your winter has been wonderful, and that you can get outside and welcome the spring!

🦋 Michael



Moss (on the left) and shelf fungus (on the right) growing at the base of a tree

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