



Letters

to Nature Kids

May 2022 🌸 No. 5



A killdeer at Lyndon B. Johnson National Grasslands

Dear Nature Kids,

I hope your spring is going well, and that you have been able to get out among the trees, creeks, ponds or grasslands. The sunshine feels great since it is not yet too hot during the day. Plants are putting out leaves and growing like mad since we got some rain.

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Many of the counties in north Texas are in moderate to severe drought (<https://www.drought.gov/states/texas>), meaning that the rain has not come like it should and things are too dry. Every bit of rain is welcome and will help flowers, trees, wildlife and people. My wish is that we get plenty of rain without damaging storms, with maybe a chance to watch distant lightning and hear the rumble of thunder. For me, sitting outside and watching and listening to those things from a safe distance is one of the best things ever – I wonder if it is for you, too.

I would like to tell you a little of how spring is going for me.

On May 1st, I spent about twelve hours in a big, wonderful place where all kinds of beautiful and interesting things live. That place is the LBJ National Grasslands, north of Decatur, TX. The day started with a killdeer, a fast-walking shorebird that nests on the ground. There were flowers and cacti, and a nice tarantula minding her own business under a rock (we peeked at her). The day ended with three of us standing in darkness at the edge of a pond where treefrogs were loudly calling.

The killdeer has a funny name but believe me it has no bad intentions towards deer. The bird has a high-pitched call that some say sounds like “kill-deer, kill-deer.” I have been around them for many years, and I associate that call with creeks and other places I love, and so that noisy call is something I enjoy. The one I saw did what killdeers do: it fast-walked a short distance, stopped and checked out whether I was following it, and fast-walked some more. They can fly, too, and some of them migrate long distances. Since they scrape out a very simple nest on the ground, they are very watchful of people or animals walking nearby. If it needs to, the parent will make noise and act as if it has a broken wing, trying to lure an intruder away from the nest.

My friend Meghan soon joined me, and we started exploring all the little flowers, bees and bugs. We went slowly because it takes time to notice all that interesting, sometimes weird, and usually beautiful life. Meghan took lots of photos, contributing to the City Nature Challenge (<https://citynaturechallenge.org>).

Ever hear of a “bioblitz?” What if you wanted to know what lives in your favorite park or nature preserve? I mean all of it, the birds and butterflies, the spiders and beetles, the trees, flowers, tiny plants growing along the



A Missouri foxtail cactus (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

ground, mice, mushrooms – all of it. Let's say you invite as many people as possible to go out during a few days and find ... everything! They take photos and upload them to the iNaturalist app where the computer program says what it thinks the species is, and volunteers look at the photos and confirm what was seen. Each person has different interests, so bird people may focus on birds, plant people photograph lots of plants, and people like me look for reptiles and amphibians. Most of us like just about everything so we may take pictures of all kinds of things. If a lot of people participate, they can create a pretty good picture of all the things that live in a place (<https://www.inaturalist.org/pages/bioblitz+guide>).



The "limestone barrens" on the ridge

We were at the top of a ridge where there is limestone that is full of fossil oysters. That happened millions of years ago when this area was under a sea and lots of oysters lived and died and then the shells and the silt at the bottom of the sea eventually became limestone. How different that was from the prairies and woodlands that now live there. Along that ridge there are places where big areas of limestone are exposed to the sky, where long sections of rock cracked and plants take root in those cracks. As a result, there are rows of grasses and other plants with bare limestone between them. In a few places, chunks of limestone are scattered around, and underneath

one of those, Meghan and I discovered a tarantula.

Tarantulas are big spiders and many people consider them scary. This one, the Texas brown tarantula is not aggressive and generally tries to run away from humans (<https://mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/field-guide/texas-brown-tarantula>). I respect and admire tarantulas, but Meghan is the expert – and she says that if grabbed, the spider could become stressed and bite. She is not saying that tarantulas are aggressive or dangerous, not at all. What she is saying is that, like any other wildlife, if we surprise it, corner it, or touch it, the tarantula may try to defend itself. One other way that it



The tarantula (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

defends itself is to rub the hairs on its back, and some of them come loose and are irritating if they get in your eyes or skin.

The venom is not dangerous to people but a bite with those fangs would hurt. Here is what happened: the tarantula stayed very still while Meghan took several photos. She then herded the spider to safety while I put the rock back down just like it was before. When moved back to the edge of the rock, she (the tarantula) never seemed very stressed and never behaved aggressively.

What should you do if you find a tarantula? First, there is no reason to be frightened, as the spider is not going to try to hurt you if you do not threaten it. Just notice the pretty shades of dark and light brown, watch it if you like, but leave it alone. Please do not grab, tease or taunt this shy creature.

My friend Carly, a field biologist and bird specialist, met us at a nearby location. The rest of the afternoon was filled with grasses, flowers, a very fast eastern yellow-bellied racer (a medium-sized harmless snake; see my article here <https://livesinnature.com/2020/03/30/the-racer-and-the-jump-to-light-speed/>), dragonflies, and a little bird that Meghan and Carly photographed. The blue-gray gnatcatcher stays up in the trees, busy catching insects (bigger than gnats, actually) so it takes patience and a good lens to get a photo.



Blue-gray gnatcatcher (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

At the end of our day, around 9:30pm, we took a walk in an area where pine trees were planted long ago and now tower overhead. There are several ponds. We used headlamps to find our way around because it was very dark. It was the kind of walk that makes you stay focused because it is so different to be in the woods at night. You use your hearing more and watch where you step. We have been in this place many times and we know it well. We could be confident that there was little danger.

Nearby, a group of coyotes were howling. They do this to tell other coyotes where they are, so it need not frighten us. Standing in the darkness, it added in a good way to what we experienced. It felt a little mysterious, even though Carly, Meghan and I knew what it was.

We walked down to a pond where gray treefrogs were calling. The calls sounded a little like “w-r-r-r-t” repeated over and over, and at the water’s edge when a frog was close, it was loud! There were dozens of frogs calling, and in the darkness it overpowered any other sounds. If breezes stirred the trees, we didn’t hear them, just the repeated frog calls. There were a few bullfrogs nearby, too, and a few cricket frogs calling. Tonight this was definitely the place to be if you wanted to see – and hear – frogs.



Gray treefrog (photo by Meghan Cassidy)

What a day filled with wonders! If you would like to visit this place, I've included a little information below. There are prairies, oak woodlands and ponds. If you get in touch with me, or join the Facebook group below, maybe you can join us on a walk out there. Wherever you are, have a great spring.

👁 Michael

Places to See

The LBJ National Grasslands is managed by the U.S. Forest Service and is located north of Decatur, Texas. It is a big place, with areas of protected land scattered among private farm and ranchland. You can learn more about it here https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/texas/about-forest/districts/?cid=fswdev3_008440 and also at the Facebook group Kayla West and I manage here <https://www.facebook.com/groups/lbjgrasslandsproject>.



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