



# Letters to Nature Kids

May, 2023 ∞ Number 11

*Dear Nature Kids,*

Last May I wrote to you about a day spent at LBJ National Grasslands, and now a year later I want to tell you about another day when a group of us walked there, finding cool things and enjoying each other's company.



*The grasslands also include woods and ponds—this was on May 7th at about 4:30pm when I arrived*

My friend Kayla West and I established a Facebook group (LBJ Grasslands Project) for people who want to learn about the place and maybe come along on a walk with us. There's a website, too: [www.lbjgproject.org](http://www.lbjgproject.org). The group has taken a number of walks there, and several of us met on May 7th to explore some trails and ponds. If we stayed until dark, maybe we would hear frog calls.

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Shortly after 5:00pm, eight of us got started. We were at a grove of pine trees with several small ponds among the trees. Now pine trees don't normally grow in this area, but the U.S. Forest Service planted them many years ago and they have grown very big and tall.

These loblolly pine trees are "non-native," meaning they are normally found somewhere else, not here. That becomes a problem if a non-native species also causes harm—either to the environment, the economy, or to human health. If that is the case, it is also called "invasive." So if the pine trees were to spread and take over the grasslands, we would say that they were invasive. Maybe this sounds pretty technical, but the problems caused can be a big deal. Just think of fire ants, which are non-native, invasive, and awful! If you'd like to learn more, check out this website: <https://www.texasinvasives.org/i101/>.

Anyhow, the birds, frogs, and other wildlife don't care where the pines came from. Northern cardinals and other birds called from tree to tree, and some frogs jumped into the water as we walked around the pond.

We talked about the water snakes that live around these ponds, and a member of the group said, "There's one!" And there, several feet up from the water, a dark brown snake was partly hidden in grasses.

She was big! I say 'she' because females of this species get bigger than males. She was a plain-bellied water snake, which is a



*The plain-bellied water snake (non-venomous)*

harmless species that tends to live along creeks and near ponds, eating frogs and sometimes fish. Even though her head was almost hidden, she had the big goggle-round eyes and round pupils of a water snake. Also, there were dark edges to each of her lip scales (if she was a cottonmouth, her eyes would have vertical pupils like a cat's and each lip scale would not be dark-edged).

If you found this snake, what could you do? If you were well-trained and positively knew what she was, you could observe her fairly closely, like we did. Otherwise, take a few steps back, and you would be ok. Remember, venomous snakes don't chase people, so if the snake started moving, just step further away.

She did start moving, and didn't really want to sit still again, so we let her go on her way, and I silently thanked her for sharing a couple of minutes of her afternoon with us.



We headed out of the pine grove and walked a trail where lots of wildflowers were blooming. Yellow flowers, tiny purple ones, and the red bracts of Texas paintbrush. Wait ... “bracts”? Yes, the red-tipped part of paintbrush is a leaf-like bract that partly surrounds the actual flower, which is small and yellowish. Anyway, it’s a beautiful plant whose flower spikes can look like they were dipped in red paint.



*Above: Winecup, a type of poppy mallow*

*On the left: Texas paintbrush*

Among the other flowers were beautiful purple ones in the shape of a cup. These were a species of poppy mallow that people call “winecups.”

We visited a couple of other ponds scattered around the woods and prairies, and at times we heard cricket frogs calling. I’ve written about cricket frogs before, and you might remember that they are very small and have a call that sounds like “grick—grick—grick....”

I expected to hear cricket frogs and hoped to hear some others after sunset. So we backtracked and returned to the ponds at that pine grove. By that time it was beginning to get dark, and we began to hear another frog. This one was Cope’s gray treefrog, and its call was a trill, sounding a little bit like “wrrrt—wrrrt—wrrrt.” If you would like to hear this species, go to

[https://youtu.be/IE\\_Sk8Tau-8](https://youtu.be/IE_Sk8Tau-8).



*A cricket frog*





*Several of the group members, walking the trail*

The clouds were gathering and someone noticed that radar showed a storm coming in. We decided to stop at 8:00pm, an hour early, since we weren't sure if what was coming was just a little rain or a thunder-storm with hail and lightning.

We enjoyed the time we had there. We had seen that delightful water snake, lots of butterflies and other insects. I had seen plants whose names I am always interested in, such as "nodding beardtongue." Wouldn't you want to know how that plant got its name? Or "daisy fleabane" - is there some connection with fleas?

I took some time to write about this walk in my nature journal. One of the advantages of keeping a journal is that it can remind you to write about things that make you happy or give you joy. You don't have to write a lot, but it helps to tell about good things that happened, or how sharing a good experience with others makes the day brighter.

When the world gives you a lot to worry about, or when too many days seem to bring hard things, moments of joy can get lost. We may think mostly about the difficulties and even let the bad cancel out the good, so that the world begins to look pretty dark. Writing about beautiful or interesting things can keep them from getting lost. I wrote about the flowers, the iridescent green tiger beetle we saw, the lovely pattern on the monarch butterfly caterpillar, and more.

Being with that wonderful group of people was another good thing about that afternoon. I love sharing nature with people who get excited about hawks or butterflies, or a big plain-bellied water snake. I won't forget that afternoon, especially after writing about it.

I hope you're having a good spring, and that you can spend some of it in the fields and woods.

✍ Michael