



Letters to Nature Kids

March, 2024 ∞ Number 17

About Vultures, Flowers, and Cactus Spines



Dear Nature Kids,

The other day I took Elijah to the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, where we met Kayla and her daughters Griffyn and Mavyn. We walked up a steep trail to a ridge where an old stone shelter overlooks Lake Worth. At the Lone Point shelter you can sit and look down at the lake and Greer Island. In winter, white pelicans may be swimming in the lake, and sometimes you might see a bald eagle in the big trees on the island.

I said you can sit on the two rock benches in the shelter, but the kids immediately climbed on the rock slabs that were used to build the shelter. Kayla and I watched and sometimes said "no." I also enjoyed remembering what it is like to be ten - like Elijah and Griffyn - with their strength, balance, and coordination.

We saw a really big feather beside Lone Point, and wondered what bird it came from. Just then, a big turkey vulture soared over us, so close that we could have looked for a missing wing feather. It's fun to watch them

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ride the air currents, dipping and dropping and then pulling up high with those big wings. Their wingspan reaches between five and six feet. The vulture's strength and coordination seemed to match that of the kids.

It was a warm and sunny day, but it was technically still winter. Spring was still a week away, but trees and flowers pay attention to the amount of sunlight, rain and warm weather,

not the calendar. There were dark pink flowers on the redbud trees and in lots of places on the ground we saw beautiful white flowers. They are called "tenpetal anemone." As in ten petals (the parts of the flower that make a sort of circle around the center).



A turkey vulture



Tenpetal anemone—count the "petals" (oops!)



At the top of the ridge, a savannah with lots of yucca and prickly pear cactus

It's such a cool flower, and it's one of the first ones I see blooming when winter is ending. However, the name is a tiny bit misleading. More than a tiny bit, actually. First, those relatively thin, white or pale violet "petals" are really "sepals." For many flowers, the sepals are the green things at the base of the flower, looking kind of like little leaves. However, in some flowers, the sepals are bigger and have color. That's true for these flowers. In fact, tenpetal anemone has no petals at all – they're all sepals! (Don't take my word for it, check out the website for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (https://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=anbe)).

There's something else: It may have more than ten "petals." We counted them on one of the first flowers we saw and that one had ten. But the Wildflower Center said that there can be 10 to 20 sepals. I don't want to tell Griffyn this, because she started counting how many "petals" she had seen, ten at a time. Each flower added another ten, and I think she wound up with a count of about 300.

I suppose we might as well talk about the rest of the name. When I say "anemone," you might think of the sea anemone, which looks a little like a jellyfish that is stuck on a rock with those stinging tentacles sticking up. So

why would a *flower* be called an anemone? It turns out that “anemone” comes from a Greek word meaning “daughter of the wind.” Another name for tenpetal anemone is “wind flower,” and maybe it would be an even better name (though I don’t hear others use it much).

We walked around the top of the ridge, carefully stepping around the cacti and yucca. Elijah used his walking stick to help him hop over one or two, but Griffyn got a few of the tiniest cactus spines (called “glochids”) stuck above her ankle. Her mom came to the rescue, gentle as she could, but it was still no fun because the hairlike spines are barbed and so they stick in your skin. It was over in just a moment and then back to having fun.

We saw some interesting things and learned a little about flowers, birds, and cacti. I hope that you are having some walks that are as much fun as this one was.

✍ Michael



*From the top:
Elijah, Mavyn,
Kayla, and
Griffyn*

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