

# Letters From the Woods

No.1: From the Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve to you ❖ August ❖ 2024

*Dear Reader,*

What kind of person goes to a preserve on a day when the temperature reached 106°F, sitting by a pond to take in everything that is happening? Rosealin and I did that on August 19<sup>th</sup>, getting there at 6:00pm and staying until 8:00pm. It was hot and sticky, so that as we walked toward the pond, every step felt like I was pushing through hot air. The north pond is one of my favorite places at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve, but early morning is a more pleasant time to be there in summer. So why did we visit at the end of a very hot afternoon?

One reason is that these places are worth knowing in all seasons and all kinds of weather. It's like getting to know a person; if you are with them only at work or school, you understand part of who they are. But if you are with them at home, you see another side of them. If you want to really understand them, you need to know what they are like in lots of situations. After sitting at this pond in every season, I'm starting to understand it more completely.

The water level was holding up despite a dry summer, because much of the water gradually seeps into it from the sandstone bluff that rises above the pond. But at this



*The pond*



*A dragonfly perched nearby*

point the water was dark and algae grew thick in it. Sitting at about water level and looking across, patches of algae were scattered over the surface like wet, green scabs. Around the edge of the pond, black willows are growing and spreading. To the south, the pond once only had a couple of willows but now the whole pond is becoming ringed by them.

Another reason for visiting the pond even on such a hot day is that there is always something to notice, always something going on. For example, sitting under a willow, inches away from the water, I noticed lots of small water striders. I didn't catch one to examine closely, but they scooted around just above the surface of the water, using thin hair-like legs to propel themselves. The little insects moved in short, jerking movements and sometimes they hopped straight up off the water's surface. This seemed more likely when one skated up to another, and it was surprising to see one suddenly pop up several inches above the water.

Most water striders I have seen have bodies about a half-inch long or bigger, but these apparently were a smaller species. All of them are harmless to humans, and they eat small invertebrates that they find in the water.

Other things to notice were bees gathering water to cool a beehive somewhere. Dozens of honeybees landed on the mud or algae at the water's edge to drink, and then immediately flew away. On hot days, these bees gather water and fly back to the hive where they regurgitate it. Workers spread it around and fan it with their wings, cooling the hive. After all, it was 106 degrees that day.





Dragonflies and damselflies flitted among branches and hunted over the water. A female dragonfly sailed a few inches over the water, dipping her abdomen down to touch the water's surface every few seconds and lay eggs. These eggs settle at the bottom or in vegetation and hatch into dragonfly nymphs. Another dragonfly perched on a twig with its abdomen pointed toward the sky in something called the "obelisk" posture. On really hot days, this position exposes less of the body to the sun and limits overheating. And this was a really hot day!

One pair was mating. In dragonflies and damselflies, the male is able to clasp the female just behind her head using the end of his abdomen. The female then extends the end of her abdomen underneath to grasp the male near the base of his abdomen. Fastened together in this way, their bodies form a circle or perhaps a heart-shape, known as the "wheel" position.

There was more to see on this hot afternoon, including paper wasps cruising through while completely unconcerned with Rosealin or me, and two hackberry emperor butterflies. A couple of cricket frogs sat on the mud bank a few inches past my shoe, but because we were sitting still, the frogs stayed where they were. (They moved a little when I shifted, and I had to get up and stretch at least once. Rosealin, on the other hand, is a master of stillness and study.) So much fascinating activity around us as we sat quietly at the edge of the pond.



*Dragonflies in the wheel position*



*A cricket frog*



But there is another reason for us to sit in the heat for two hours: nature in all its forms brings about a feeling of well-being and a sense of being recharged. We might feel rested and less tense even after something exciting like a thunderstorm. Now we have connected for a while with water and sky and living things – even dragonflies and cricket frogs – and we are more prepared to resume the routines and tasks of the week. Time spent in nature has that effect on most of us, and it doesn't have to be on a once in a lifetime trip to a rainforest or a mountain, it can be an everyday experience like sitting by a pond at a local nature preserve.



*Rosealin, watching and journaling*

✍ Michael

If you would like to know more about Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve in Arlington, visit the webpage for Friends of Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve, at <https://www.friendsofscnp.org/>

*Letters From the Woods* is written by Michael Smith, a naturalist, writer, and retired psychological associate. The letters literally come from the woods, or sometimes from prairies or other places in nature. When I'm out somewhere, I write about it in my journal, and that becomes a letter to you. It is a free pdf download from <http://livesinnature.com/letters/> (the page titled "Letters to You")

If you enjoy these letters, I hope you will support my work (my writing and also the talks I give to adults and children about nature and mindfulness) with a donation in whatever amount seems right. You can do that at <https://paypal.me/MSmithLPA>.

You might be interested in some of the walks I lead, for mindfulness in nature and/or nature study. See <https://livesinnature.com/activities-in-nature/> (the page titled "Activities in Nature")