



# Letters to Nature Kids

December, 2024 ∞ Number 21



*Cross Timbers woodlands at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge*

*Dear Nature Kids,*

In these mostly sunny, clear days lately, I have been getting out into the woods and prairies whenever I can. The sun streams low through the trees and grasses as if it is late afternoon, even in mid-day, and everything seems clear and quiet.

At Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve in Arlington, many of the oak leaves changed from green to shades of yellow and orange, and mostly fell to the ground. But some trees hang onto their leaves even when they are dry and brown instead of letting them drop to the ground.

This is called "marcescence" and botanists don't know for sure why one oak tree drops its leaves while another is marcescent. Some say it might be a way of protecting the tree's tender buds that will grow in the spring, so that a deer would have to munch through stiff brown leaves before it could get to stuff that they would like to eat. There are no deer at this preserve, but the trees don't know that.



*Trees showing marcescence at  
Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve*

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*Moss (above) and lichen (below) at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve*

There are plenty of other living things there, thankfully. One bird I love hearing is Bewick's wren, whose song can include beautiful notes mixed with fast chattering or almost buzzing. In one of my favorite Texas bird books, the call is described as a "sweet, complex warble".

Switching my attention from above to below, I noticed the moss and lichens that grow on sandstone boulders in the preserve. Mosses are simple plants with very tiny stems and leaves, without flowers. You've seen them – usually in some shady place, growing together in mats so you don't notice individual leaves, just something that looks like soft, green velvet.

The lichens mostly grow on rocks and tree branches. The sandstone boulders look like they are "splatted" with different colors like yellow, gray, and pale blue-green. It's not paint, and not exactly a plant. Lichens are fungi teamed up with algae (or sometimes a kind of bacteria), and they are incredibly tough. Think about surviving a Texas summer, plastered on a sun-heated rock, or lasting through months with no rain. You could read more about lichens at the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's website under "Young Naturalist"<sup>1</sup>.

It's the season of holidays, of Christmas, Hanukkah, and other traditions. In one home after another you may see families getting together and giving each other gifts, maybe lighting candles in a Menorah or stringing lights on Christmas trees. A common theme for people of several religions is renewal and new beginnings. And outside of our homes, there is a new beginning after the winter solstice on December 21<sup>st</sup>, when our days begin to be longer.

On the last full day of autumn, December 20<sup>th</sup>, I visited the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge. It was another sunny and cool day. In the shade, the temperature was in the mid-50s, but in bright sunlight it felt warmer.

The first trail was half-way between a ridge and the river, with lots of oak trees and plenty of Carolina chickadees



*A tufted titmouse at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge*





*Carolina chickadee hanging on a branch at Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge*

and tufted titmice. Both of these birds are in the same family, and mixed groups often fly through the woods together, looking for insects and spiders or, if those aren't around, seeds and berries.

About that weird name, "titmouse," John Tveten's book<sup>2</sup> says it comes from an old Icelandic word for something small and an Old English word for a little bird. The "tufted" part comes from the little crest of feathers on the bird's head. Their musical call is described as sounding like "Peter-Peter-Peter."

The Carolina chickadee is also a small bird, rounded and very athletic. As they look for food they often hang onto a tree branch upside-down. Males and females look the same, like they are wearing a black cap and a similarly black bib under their beaks, and otherwise their faces and breasts are white. If you hear a high-pitched "chick-a-dee-dee-dee" in the trees, it's one of these birds telling you its name!

I also walked along the river for a while and saw a great blue heron, American coot, and other birds in and around the water. This was becoming a day with lots of birds, including some that I could not identify. I only know a few things about birds, but I did not let that stop me from enjoying seeing and hearing them. Does it ever seem like you are supposed to be an expert at something or else you should not even try? I hope you never think that. You





*Above: A patch of prairie with a live oak, surrounded by woodlands.  
Below, right: The inner tree trunk where insects got underneath the bark and tunneled around making a squiggly design.*



can appreciate things you don't know much about. That Bewick's wren sounds just as sweet if I only know that "it's some bird somewhere." With things that really interest you, find ways to learn as much as you would like. But please enjoy all the things around you, even without being an expert.

I still had some time, so I walked the newest trail in the refuge, winding up through patches of prairie and oak woodland. For a while I sat on a bench, looking down through yellow grasses toward a live oak tree and the bare branches of post oaks and other trees.

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It was a day at the edge of winter, getting late in the afternoon. A crow's call echoed through the woods and a few dragonflies flew low around the edge of the grasslands. Other than that, this place felt like it could be sleeping – still, quiet and peaceful. We all need to sit quietly in a place like that sometimes, don't we?

Happy holidays to you! You don't have to follow any particular religion to celebrate this season with gifts, gratitude, and love for each other. And the greatest gifts don't come from the store.

✍ Michael

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1. Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. Young Naturalist. [https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/nonpwdpubs/young\\_naturalist/](https://tpwd.texas.gov/publications/nonpwdpubs/young_naturalist/)

2. John Tveten, *The birds of Texas*, Shearer Publishing, 1993

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