



# Letters to Nature Kids



*One of many Blanchard's cricket frogs enjoying a warm day on February 8*

*Dear Nature Kids,*

I've been going to Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve a lot. On the first day of February it was warm and spring-like, and on the 6<sup>th</sup> it was 85 degrees at the sandstone bluff, among prairie grasses and oak trees. On the 8<sup>th</sup> I sat at the north pond, watching turtles basking in the warm sun and cricket frogs jumping away as I walked by the water. When I walked up to the top of the hill near the bluff, the temperature was nearly 87 degrees in the shade. It felt hot, and we are still in the middle of winter.

It feels good to walk in a t-shirt like we do when spring is just about here, listening to birds and seeing bees buzzing around honeysuckle flowers. I enjoyed these walks, seeing butterflies and lying back and watching clouds. It also was a little weird. But what could be wrong with beautiful, sunny, warm days? Here is a little story that may help:

Imagine your alarm going off, and your mom is gently shaking you.

"Get up! You're going to be late for school!" It's dark outside, but the clock says it's time to get up. You quickly get dressed, grab something to eat on the way out the door, and walk to school. A few of your friends are there, but the doors are locked and there seem to be no teachers. What's up – what do you do? Wait for school to open and

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risk getting sick while standing around on this very cold morning when the sun is barely up? Walk back home and maybe miss the first part of school?

Somehow, you're out of sync with the world, because your clocks are off. You're trying to follow your usual routine, but it doesn't match what's happening in the world.



*A honeybee feeding on honeysuckle blooms on February 8th at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve*

Plants and animals follow a routine, too, and for a lot of them the timing needs to be right for waking up from winter, for blooming, finding food, and reproducing. Flowers bloom and insects show up to pollinate them so that plants can make new seeds, and the flowers feed the insect. If their timing is too far off, if the alarm clock was wrong and they don't show up for each other at the right time, both of them suffer.

So our day was off because we use clocks to tell time, and our clock was wrong. Of course, nature tells time without clocks. As one season moves into another, nature uses things like temperature, length of the day, and weather to figure out time. Here in north Texas, as winter ends and spring begins the days get longer and it gets warmer. Typically there is more rainfall. This is how nature knows spring is coming.

The word we use to describe the kinds of weather that we can usually expect in each season is "climate." And we expect the climate to be predictable, even if every year is a little different. But within my lifetime, the climate in most places has become warmer, more dry, and less predictable. By "less predictable," I mean the weather may



swing back and forth between too hot and dry (and there may be wildfires), and then storms with too much rain and flooding.

Changes like those harm places in nature and they harm us as well. Winters that are too warm let pine beetles survive and kill massive numbers of pine trees, and they trick plants into growing new leaves and flowers too early so that a freeze can kill the new growth. Low rainfall harms the food crops that we eat. And there is a lot to like in every season, so I don't want to see winter become too warm.

Oh, one other thing: the word for how life changes according to the seasons is "phenology" - an odd word that is pronounced fee-NAH-lo-jee. When I talked about the importance of insects showing up at the right time with flowers and all the other things that need to be in sync with each other, that's about phenology. If you want to learn more, check out the webpage from the National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/exploring-seasonal-changes-with-phenology.htm>.

Do you keep a nature journal? If you do, you could make notes about when you see the first flowers blooming, when you see oaks and other trees starting to grow new leaves. When do you see summer birds start to return and



*The trees are still bare—it's still winter at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve*





*Less than a month ago there was some ice and snow at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve—it's too soon for spring!*

the winter ones disappear? I'll be looking to see when the Texas spiny lizards start hanging out on tree trunks. Your journal can help you look back and see when the seasons change, and if some years they change in new ways like earlier springs or longer summers.

Some people create "phenology wheels" (or you could call it a "wheel of the seasons") to show what you observe about changes in each season or each month (more information is here [https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2021-05/Learn\\_CCSC\\_Nature-Learning-Downloads\\_Phenology-Wheel.pdf](https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2021-05/Learn_CCSC_Nature-Learning-Downloads_Phenology-Wheel.pdf)). You could visit the same place at different times and write or draw about the new things that you see.

I hope you get outside when it's warm, and I hope you enjoy it a lot! Even if it's warmer than it should be, don't worry while you are on your walk, just notice as many things as you can and have a great time. When is the right time for worry? I'm not recommending worry, but I do think you can pay attention, learn, and do what you can to make the world a better place. Worrying really doesn't get that done, but learning and taking action can.





Two birds at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve. (Above) A northern cardinal seen on February 6th—they're here year round.. (Below) A white-throated sparrow is here in winter. I saw it on January 8th



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