



Letters to Nature Folks

From Michael Smith

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Dear Nature Folks,

I've been writing letters for several years. They didn't have your name on them, but I hope it felt a little like I was writing to you. I said they were "letters to nature kids," and I was writing for older kids who like reading about nature and also to adults who haven't lost touch with that child that they used to be, full of curiosity and wonder. Starting now, I'll just say they are "letters to nature folks."

What will we do in 2025? I plan to send you photos and write to you about wild (and sort of wild) places and the animals and plants we find when we take a walk in the woods or prairies. How and where do they live, and are they doing ok? If I am writing about a walk I have taken, I hope you can imagine what it was like there.

Mostly I'll keep it fun, but you might have seen in earlier letters that I sometimes talk about things like being afraid of spiders or how nature can be a refuge when we're feeling upset. I'm interested in how we live in nature and what it means to us.

So let's get started. I was lucky enough to see this Northern Mockingbird up close recently.



Northern Mockingbird at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve

I'll bet you have seen them, all shades of gray until they take flight and then you see those white patches on the wings flash. They really grab your attention. The other thing that they're known for is singing and imitating the calls of other birds (the reason they are called "mockingbirds"). Both sexes sing, but males' songs can be long and persistent, especially when attracting females.

If you visit the "All About Birds" site by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, you'll find an article about the Northern Mockingbird that includes recordings of songs and calls.

([www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern Mockingbird/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Mockingbird/sounds)) The songs include very musical phrases, some copied from other birds (or other sounds they hear), along with some raspy sounds or trills. Each phrase may be repeated several times before switching to something new.

I also love the little book titled "The Mockingbird," by Robin Doughty, which describes what it is, where it lives, what it eats, and so on. It

tells us that bird songs come from an area where the windpipe divides into the bronchial tubes and enters the lungs. The area is called the syrinx, and it serves the same purpose as our larynx or voice-box.



I saw the mockingbird at the beginning of a walk at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve. I'm there a lot, and I think you know that the place is like a second home to me. Right now, you can see that spring is starting. Trees have leaf buds that are swelling or have already got new, green leaves. Well, a lot of them are green—what about



New Blackjack Oak leaves surrounded by catkins

those little clusters of red leaves that look a little bit fuzzy? They are new oak leaves. Many were surrounded by greenish-yellow strings called catkins. The bumpy things on the catkin are male flowers, and they release lots of pollen that, for a while in the spring, dusts everything with yellow. The same tree also has female flowers but they are harder to spot.

Anyway, those red leaves have a tiny spine at the end of each lobe, and they are Blackjack Oak leaves. As they grow they will turn green.

I'm looking forward to more flowers in this preserve. They are coming, and already the Southern Dewberry vines have some white flowers. I found a little black-and-white moth feeding on those flowers recently. The moth is called a Mournful Thyris, though you might mistake it for a small butterfly since it flies around from flower to flower in the day-time. I have tried to discover how it got the name "mournful," as if it were mourning some loss. Its scientific name is *Pseudothyris sepulchralis*. Check that species name, with the word "sepulchral" meaning "having to do with a tomb" or "gloomy." Sometimes I wonder about the names of things in nature. Where did those names come from, and why is this one so sad? The moth itself is dark, yes, but look at all those bright spots!



The Mournful Thyris feeding on a dewberry flower

On the same day that I saw the moth, I also spent time at the south pond at the preserve, and watched a bird come soaring in and land in the water. I wanted to get a good look, but it dove down underwater and stayed there for a while before coming up in a different part of the pond. Soon, it dove again for a long underwater swim. And then I was able to get a good enough photo as the bird paddled along.



The Double-crested Cormorant at the pond

This Double-crested Cormorant might have caught one of the sunfish that live in the pond, but if so I did not see it. The All About Birds site tells me that fish are just about all that this species of bird eats, and that their webbed feet help them swim very well. The cormorant's hooked beak helps catch food, also. We see them in Texas in lakes or ponds and along the coast, but at the end of winter they migrate northward. They breed in the northern U.S. and into Canada during the warmer parts of the year. So we don't get to see the tufts of feathers behind the eye that gives them the "double-crested" part of the name. That is part of their breeding plumage, looking showy to attract a mate. They lose those feathers before migrating back to Texas and beyond.

What a generous place this preserve is, offering shelter and food for so many kinds of living things. And although we don't live there, when we walk through the preserve it gives us so much to wonder about and to enjoy. I'm grateful for this place, and for being able to spend time there so often.

- Michael



Above: The south pond at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve, where the cormorant was swimming

Left: A young River Cooter with moss growing on its shell pulls out of the pond to enjoy some sunshine

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