

Journal Entry: The Kissing Trees

January 10, 2023

I took a walk on my own, just before 2:00 pm on a strangely warm winter day at Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge. There were no clouds at all and the sun was very bright when I started down the trail.

The nature center is at the northwest edge of Fort Worth, where the Fort Worth Prairie shades into the Western Cross Timbers. The West Fork of the Trinity River flows through the refuge, and that's where my trail started. I walked along the river for some distance under the tall cottonwoods and other trees whose bare branches scraped the sky.



Trinity River, Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge, 1/10/23

I knew this was going to be a good walk when I spotted a belted kingfisher flying up from the water into a tree across the river. It has a crest of feathers on its head that makes it look like a bird with an



attitude, and a strong, sharp black beak for catching fish. This one spread its blue-gray wings as it landed in the tree, looked around, and flew off deeper into the forest. As it did so, it made the odd rattling sound that is its usual call, more like something made of sticks than a living bird.

This chunky bird with a bed-head and such an odd call might be one of the weirdest birds I have seen, and I mean that in a good way. It's a strong flier and an expert hunter, and it can dig nest burrows up to six feet into the sandy banks of rivers like the one I walked today. Forget about a nest of twigs up in a tree, the belted kingfisher prefers to nest in a cozy cave.

The bird may perch beside the water or hover over it, waiting to see a fish. When it does, it dives straight into the water, headfirst. They prefer fish but will also hunt crayfish. In fact, if they need to, belted kingfishers will hunt down a lizard, insect, or even a mouse or fledgling bird.

When it finds an intruder in its territory, a belted kingfisher may bob up and down, raise that ragged crest on its head, and try to chase the intruder away while rattling noisily.

I kept walking alongside the river, keeping an eye on the logs, big branches, and even whole trees that are sometimes half-sunk in the water. If you're a turtle living in the river, these things are essential parts of your household, because they allow you to pull out of the water and soak up some sun. The ultraviolet part of sunlight is really important to the turtle's health, and so, for them, basking in sunlight is like taking vitamins.

The turtles had pulled out on most of the branches and logs, stretching out their heads and legs to collect as much sunlight as possible. They were drying, warming in the sun, and absorbing ultraviolet rays, and they looked as if they might feel, I don't know – content. I don't really know a turtle's emotions, but these turtles were calmly sunbathing as if they didn't have a care in the world.

And then, when I got too close to them, the contentment vanished and they pushed off the log and plopped into the water. That's the other great thing about these branches and logs. They're inches away from the water, so the turtle can escape to safety in a flash.

I tried to move slowly and not scare them, and I used the camera's telephoto lens to get a really close look. Some were red-eared sliders, and others were eastern river cooters. From a distance, many people would say they look similar, especially if you cannot see a red patch toward the back of the head which



would tell you it's a red-eared slider. Close up, there were yellow lines on dark skin, with necks and legs held in positions like turtle-yoga. Pure contentment.



Turtles – cooters and sliders - basking

I stood there imagining what was going on with the turtles – do you know what it really reflected? My own contentment. This beautiful warm day, with turtles sunbathing, water gently moving past us, and tall trees standing over us, made the afternoon carefree. I put myself in the place of those turtles and imagined what it would be like to pull out of the water to sit quietly in the sun. It felt great.

While sitting with all this, I checked the air temperature near me. A couple of feet off the ground, in the shade, it was 83°F, very unlike a typical winter's day. In fact, the official high temperature set a record for this day in Dallas-Fort Worth.

The trail turned away from the river and back into the woodland. Here, most of the trees are shorter species of oak, and the woodland floor was a thick carpet of fallen leaves. Looking past tree trunks and bare branches, sometimes I could see an opening in the woods with prairie grasses.

Not far up the trail I spotted two trees I have seen before, the ones that grow next to each other and gracefully bend around each other. It suggests a very gentle embrace, and in three places the trunk of the hackberry tree touches the trunk of the cedar elm, like kisses. The two trees now have grown together,



and my friend Sam Kieschnick tells me that the botanical word for this – “inosculation” – can be traced to the idea of kissing.

Imagine an embrace that lasts year after year, bodies joined on bright sunny days as well as dark ones when the wind whips through the woods and rain or hail falls. Together no matter what. I understand that in some places such trees are called “marriage trees.”



A hackberry and a cedar elm – the “kissing” trees

Inosculation happens when the trunks, branches, or roots of trees grow together, similar to grafting. Typically the two parts rub together when the wind blows, and when the bark is rubbed away and the cambium touches, they begin to grow together. The cambium is a layer of growing plant tissue underneath the bark.

Maybe the rest of the trees are not as isolated as we think. Underground, tiny threads of fungi connect with tree roots, collecting and giving nutrients to the trees while taking some of the sugars that the trees make. Looking around me, I saw hundreds of trees, dark and bare, standing in mounds of dead



leaves. What's going on underground? A quiet network of give-and-take, according to the ways of the woods.

The path wound gradually uphill, to a bench where I sat and looked through the trees at all the shades of brown leaves on the woodland floor, warm and bright in the late afternoon sun. Somewhere nearby was the fussy "chee-chee-chee" of chickadees. The little black, white, and gray birds seem to be constantly busy. Otherwise it was quiet. I sat for a while enjoying being there by myself as the shadows got longer and the day moved toward its end.

Have you sat somewhere in nature, by yourself just listening to birds or the wind moving the trees, and noticing the sights, smells, and how the breeze feels? At such times you can feel very connected to the woods or wherever you are, calm and attentive to the details of your surroundings. You might feel like you belong and are a part of the place, and not just a visitor passing through. It's a good feeling.





After a while I started walking again. After all, I was only halfway around a trail that is over three miles long, and the sun would soon set. I followed the trail gently downhill, seeing a blue jay or two and some groups of robins. I passed through an area where the woods opened into little meadows, and the low sun lit up the trunks and branches of the big oaks.

In one of the meadows there were four white-tailed deer who turned and looked at me with curiosity and a little concern. It was nearly sundown and I was probably the only human in this quiet refuge. The deer stood in the deepening shadows waiting to see what I would do. After we looked at each other for a minute, I began to walk again. They moved toward the trees, and then as I kept going, one of them flashed the white underside of her tail as she bounded away.

You have probably heard about these deer warning others (especially young deer) by “flagging” their white tails. In that moment, I saw how attention-getting this can be. The doe’s tail seemed longer and bigger than I might have thought, and the sudden display of all that white fur really grabbed my attention. For fawns, it is a sign that says, “Follow mom – now!” It would be hard to ignore that sign.



Last light in the trees above the river



The trail kept working its way through the darkening woodland. Really it was a beautiful place in shades of brown leaves below and a sky fading from blue to gray above. I hiked down gently falling slopes and over low ridges, always surrounded by scattered dark tree trunks as far as my eye could see.

I walked the last part of the trail, tracing my steps back alongside the river. Darkness gathered over the water while the tops of the tall trees still shone weakly in the fading sunset. I heard an owl hoot. It's hard to find the right words for the experience – lonely, but only like an echo of what real loneliness feels like. Maybe a little mysterious, in a way that makes something more engaging, like something you want to go a little deeper into and explore.

In the middle of all that sunset magic, big wings appeared from the river channel and a big bird slowly lifted into the air. The wings stretched between five and six feet across, light gray near the shoulders and dark gray further out. Great blue herons such as this one are not terribly heavy but they seem massive when you watch them fly up close.



The great blue heron



Silently and slowly this bird lifted through the air, landing in the upper parts of a nearby tree where it gave a hoarse squawk of protest. The sound was more of a hiss at first, as if it was very annoyed. The heron flew to another tree, and then across the river and around me, still hoarsely protesting my coming along to disturb it. It was a dramatic end to a wonderful walk.

