

## Journal Entry: Elijah and Lilly

### At the Creek with Elijah

I've been lucky to know Elijah since the day he was born. The lives of his family and mine have been woven together for many years, and he is family. As he has grown, we have spent time together in several semi-wild places like Mary's Creek that flows into Fort Worth from the prairie west of the city.



I was introduced to that creek in about 1962 or '63, when I was about twelve. It was a place with clear running water rippling over white limestone and gathering in shaded pools. In deeper, still water the sunfish guarded their nests and hid in shadows. I would spend entire days there, chasing chalk-white earless lizards over jumbled limestone rocks and plunging into the water to



catch the nonvenomous water snakes that were common at the creek. It's hard to imagine a more carefree existence than spending a day discovering the life of that creek.

A place like that might be what people call "larger than life." More accurately, it is "as large as life," completely occupying that wide open space we give it when we live in it regularly and get to know it intimately. As we become adults, that space narrows; by then we spend our lives in a lot of places, often in brief and fragmented chunks, making use of places in utilitarian ways. That can leave little room for opening ourselves to some beautiful place and living in it, getting to know its little mysteries and its seasons in an unhurried way.

*April 21, 2020*

He was six when I took him there for the first time, just Elijah and me. We were prepared with a net and walking sticks. When wading the creek, the stick becomes a third leg to help balance on algae-coated limestone, and while the old man didn't fall, Elijah did get a couple of soakings.

Along a part of one side of the creek, in dappled shade, I saw some water pennyworts like parasols on thin little stems. I called Elijah over, saying "Look, they're like little umbrellas." At the time, I didn't know what name to call them when Elijah asked. They were just some kind of pennywort. After another question or two, we moved on.

He was on a Pokémon jag so that the dragonflies sailing on the sun-warmed air were "dragonfly-Pokémon," and the turtles we looked for would have been "turtle-Pokémon." We did find fish, all of which were too fast for our net. The group of shiners swimming close to the bottom scattered in front of the



Elijah, playing in the creek



net, and the sunfish scooted out of reach with a flick of its caudal fin. We saw a small bass as well, but it was getting nowhere near the net.

After our explore was done and we were back at the car, Elijah asked how I knew so much about nature. I explained that I had been doing it for a lot of years, had read many books, and had hung out with people who knew a lot, just as he was doing with me today. He told me, "When I'm older and I can read better, we will find things and I'll look them up in the books and we'll know which plant we saw." Such a beautiful dream only comes along once in a great while, and I would gladly see it come true.

*January 18, 2022*

Fast forward a couple of years, more or less, to a warm winter day when he was almost eight. The National Weather Service said that the temperature in Fort Worth reached 75°F and the sun was out, so I picked Elijah up from school and we headed straight for the creek. On this day, we wanted to find a small kind of fish called the western mosquitofish and maybe see a fossil ammonite.

Mosquitofish - you might wonder if the fish got that name because they are so tiny that they're no bigger than a mosquito. That isn't it; they're named because they eat mosquito larvae. Mosquitos lay eggs that hatch into little wiggling larvae that hang just below the water's surface, breathing through a tube that goes from their abdomens to where the water meets air. The mosquitofish is designed to eat small things at the surface of the water, like mosquito larvae and other small prey. If you look at one, you'll see that its mouth is near the top of its head, which makes it easy to slurp something up while cruising along the surface.

On our drive, Elijah thought of several strategies for catching fish. He understood that when a fish is caught in a net and pulled out into the air, it cannot breathe. He wanted to catch one without hurting it. That compassion for everything around him, people and animals, is one of the wonderful things about Elijah. He thought perhaps we could put the container in the water and scare the fish into it, or maybe pull the dip net toward the container and trap the fish that





way. We didn't try those strategies, because being pulled out of the water for only a few moments does not hurt the fish.



The cricket frog

The creek had water flowing in it, but the water was not deep where we were. We were grateful for that because the water was very cold. We walked along the white limestone rocks of the creek bottom and waded into the water that flowed downstream. At first it felt very cold and then our feet became more and more numb. Somewhere along the way I saw a cricket frog jump into the water, and I dug it out of its hiding place and showed it to Elijah. Every time I put the frog into his cupped hands, the frog jumped away. However, it could not get very far because the very cold water had slowed the frog's activity down quite a bit. After I took a photo, Elijah carried it over to some

vegetation so that it would have a hiding place away from the icy water. Once again, Elijah was being that great compassionate kid.

Soon I was netting a couple of small mosquitofish out of the creek, and along with them a tiny, rounded thing about the size of a pea. Looking closely, I could see the two sides of a tiny clam sealed shut. There are many freshwater clams living in Texas waters, and as adults they are much bigger than this little one in my net. They help filter the water and make it clearer.

Spiders were also on our list of things we might find, even though today was in the middle of winter. On a warm day like this, a spider might be moving around. Sure enough, near the edge of the creek I spotted a little wolf spider prowling around the rocks. Wolf spiders usually stay on the ground, just like this one was today. People always wonder if a spider could hurt them, but there was no reason for us to worry about this one. What I teach young naturalists is: watch it, photograph it, but don't pick it up unless you have the right knowledge and experience.



We were doing very well on our winter walk at the creek, seeing a cricket frog, mosquitofish, a little mussel, and a spider. I remembered that we also wanted to find a fossil ammonite. Just about that time Elijah said, "uh, Michael," giving me a look as if to say, "you missed it!" He had picked up a fossilized part of an ammonite shell. It was right there in front of me!

Ammonites were a little like a prehistoric octopus living in a coiled shell. The fossils found around here have a spiral shell that is ribbed. Often the fossil that we find is just a part of the shell, but we can tell what it is because of those wavy ribs. They swam in the ancient seas even before the dinosaurs lived and disappeared at about the same time as the dinosaurs.

Despite the numb, cold feet, we had a great time on this walk. I was proud of Elijah's knowledge and his compassion, and I looked forward to more visits to the creek.

*March 7, 2025*

Three years later, we waded the creek, finding the shells of modern-day clams and prehistoric ammonites. We admired a spider web as well as the beauty of water moving over limestone. And Elijah's stories of tiny people who lived there added a delightful creative mythology.

It was an afternoon with temperatures in the 80's, perfect warmth at the boundary between winter and spring. Would we see a turtle, one of the sliders and cooters that sometimes travel from one pool to another through the riffles? There's always something to discover there. I saw a small spider in the branches overhanging the water and we found the just-right angle where the sun lit up the practically invisible web of interconnected circles. Elijah tried a few swipes with a net, trying to get mosquitofish, but came up empty-handed.

We found a shelf under the clear water, where layers of limestone overlapped. I said something about the fish or crayfish that might shelter there. Elijah began telling a story about people who once lived here, under that shelf.



"They were so tiny, they could fit under that shelf," he said. They rode mosquitofish like horses, fitting a bridle over them and darting through the water. Over time, though, they got bigger. He gestured toward the openings in the soil where seep water trickles into the creek and mounds of mosses grow. "They lived in those caves," and we decided that the mosses must have been their crops.

And while they didn't exactly have money, they did use leaves for exchange. Elijah told me that the leaves higher in the trees were worth more, while the lowest leaves were maybe worth a penny. I guess you could climb a tree and get rich, but in autumn when the leaves come falling



At the creek in 2025

down, it's like a Jubilee year when all debts are forgiven and the playing field is leveled. Anyway, eventually they reached the size of humans and elected mayors and ... well, Elijah did not take the mythology much beyond that, maybe because the real delight and wonder was when they were tiny and rode mosquitofish.

So the day began to end, and we started back toward the car. But what a great afternoon, with fossils and spiders and rock-skipping and storytelling! We need more days like that.

Here was all the stuff I've written about and experienced in my own life, how being in nature restores us and benefits both body and mind. When I was his age, I was beginning to explore this creek, finding wildlife and applying what I learned at the museum. As a twelve-year-old, I



know I skipped rocks and tested my strength picking up rocks, but I don't recall making up such great stories. It's okay, there are many ways to visit the creek and come away with joy and well-being. "Playing" in nature can be the nature study and snake-hunting that I did, or it can be looking for doors that open up into the imagination.

There was room for some nature study alongside the stories. Shale breaks and crumbles more easily than limestone, and both were laid down long ago when dinosaurs were alive. In that same limestone are fossils of ammonites as well as a kind of prehistoric oyster. And today there are clams living in the sediment of this creek just as we had seen in past years. Water seeps down through the soil and when it hits a shelf of rock, it trickles out and feeds the creek. And on and on, bits of natural history that you pick up even if you are more focused on storytelling and throwing rocks.

Walking back, we came to a place where, under the water, the tan color of limestone was dappled with the green of algae, and there was the reflection of sunlight on the heaving, rippling water.

"That's so beautiful!" Elijah said and wanted to try sending a photo to his mom. He gets it, about the beauty of this place, and wants to share it. That does my heart good.



I single out Elijah in this section not only out of affection for who he is, but also because he might represent how the average boy might feel about nature. He probably won't grow up to be a biologist and may not consider himself a naturalist. But I think he will carry with him the positive memories of Mary's Creek, the LBJ National Grasslands, a couple of nature preserves, Caddo Lake, and other places. I believe that experiences like these are good for kids, for their health and well-being and hope this is the case for Elijah. And I'd like to think that he will grow up to be a friend of nature, so that when the fate of wildlife and wild places is on the line, he would put in a good word for them. And that he would share some places like these with his own kids.



## Lilly's Adventure Walks

*Jan 16, 2025*

A four-year-old can be a delightful companion on a nature walk. That's especially true if the child in question is my granddaughter, although I suppose you could say I'm biased. I took Lilly to the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge a couple of weeks ago, and she said she would like to return and maybe see birds. On that last walk (an "adventure walk," she would say), we heard crows, and one of them flew in and loudly announced his presence from a nearby tree. What a wonderful, big black bird, like a druid of the woods with secret knowledge of who lives among the trees, some to be welcomed and others to be chased away. Did he welcome Lilly and me? I don't know, but I think Lilly welcomed him.

She and I have been taking adventure walks since she was two, and now she is four. She loves climbing on boulders and looking at creatures we find. A little before her third birthday, she discovered a small, harmless DeKay's brownsnake on the trail. She had nothing but gentle curiosity as she looked closely, and with my guidance she was able to touch it and wish it good-bye as it disappeared into the leaves and grasses.

She managed to hold herself back and not touch until I could have a look at the snake, and she also could accept letting it go. Lilly has a healthy wish to be independent along with an ability, most of the time, to negotiate shared control. She has what child development experts would describe as an easy temperament, meaning that she is pretty adaptable to changes and new situations and her mood is generally positive. She is active but not so much that it interferes with everyday situations. Temperament styles are largely a part of who the child is (these styles are not taught by parents), though they can shift some with experience and parents can bring their own flexibility into play and work around some difficult temperament.

In one of our visits to Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve when she was still two, we looked at flowers of the tie vine (a kind of morning glory) where honeybees, bumblebees, and other bees were visiting. She was fearless but did not impulsively try to grab one (thankfully). We talked





about just watching and not touching, and we had a good time. Her dad - my son Geoffrey - understands that her loving and careful grandpa is in charge of his own wild nature impulses, and I've never brought her back with bee stings or other boo-boos. However, I encouraged and was proud of her fearlessness as we sat there.

When she was three, we had been to a number of parks and preserves, and sometimes she would walk along the top of a series of small boulders, enjoying her physical ability and coordination (and being up there as tall as papa). She has spent plenty of time sitting in the trail drawing in the dirt with fingers or sticks. As the famous developmental psychologist Jean Piaget would tell us, the typical child at age 3 can think about things that are not present and talk about them or make drawings of them. Sometimes she may have been drawing herself, or it might have been the turtles we saw earlier or a bird she wished to see. Drawing in the dirt is an imprecise thing, and I often could not tell.



Lilly, climbing on boulders at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve

For Lilly, an adventure walk is a learning walk, but hopefully not because I'm turning it into "school." I try to check myself if I start saying "...and that tree over there is an oak." Better to follow her lead, and then I will throw in the name of something or ask a question we can both wonder about. If she almost steps into a cactus, I'll help her stop and say a couple of things about it being "pokey" but also some animals do eat them. If she asks a question, I'll try to answer it, but if she is ready to move on, I'll go with that. (I did start a game at one point by



saying, "Let's see how many cacti we can see," and she walked along noticing each one, calling out "Cactus!")

An adventure walk is also a way for us to learn about each other and share with each other. We better understand each other's likes, abilities, and attention spans. And we experience the delight of a pond, and ants following a path across the trail, or a crow fussing at us from a tree. We open each other's eyes to wonderful things that we might have missed.

Being a guide for a child's becoming acquainted with nature is a privilege to be honored and taken seriously. I'm enormously grateful. And I'm ready to see that crow tomorrow!

**"Aye, Aye, Cap'n"**

*Jan 17, 2025*

We arrived at the nature center just after 2:00pm, when the clouds retreated and the sun warmed the afternoon. She had wanted to see birds, and we did see vultures as well as some sparrows in the dead stalks and branches along the marsh boardwalk. We wanted to get a picture of one of those turkey vultures, and so Lilly took a photo, with some help with zoom and focus.

From an overcast and cool morning, it was becoming a really wonderful day with beautiful clouds. We walked the trail eastward, and after an elevated wooden walkway across a low area the trail climbs up a little, overlooking the marsh. Lilly had decided that we were pirates, and that I was to tell her "Aye, aye, cap'n," which of course I did. She runs a very egalitarian ship, trading off periodically and making me the captain.

At a high spot along the shore there is a bench, and we stopped and had a drink. She dug for buried treasure in the gravel and came up with some caps from acorns. We drank candy from these acorn cups, as pirates always do, and she even spoke in a harsh pirate voice.

And so it was a great walk on a very nice day, and she noticed turkey vultures as well as greenbrier (she really doesn't want to get scratched, so she kept calling out "greenbrier" when





Captain (left) and First Mate

she would see one). A nice combination of natural history and pretend play, and I think that is one way to make such a walk successful, especially with a preschooler. Follow the child's lead, have fun, and let some learning of nature facts just happen here and there, when the time is right.

### **A Sleeping Raccoon, Soft Sand, and a Grasshopper Friend**

8/8/25

She grabs her backpack, picks out several essential snacks, gets her hat, and is ready for another adventure walk. Back to Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve where she loves the ponds, grasshoppers - and sand. We hop out of the car around 8:15am while it is still pleasant outside, and head for the north pond. Along the path, we find footprints in the dry mud, and I point out



the miniature handprints of a raccoon. Lilly is not too sure she likes having a raccoon nearby, but I tell her that the raccoon is sleeping. She said we have to "walk like this," tiptoeing past the imagined sleeping raccoons.

As we arrive at the pond, she says she would be afraid of a bumblebee "because it could sting you," and the dragonflies that swooped around us make her a little jumpy at first. I would love for her to be mostly fearless but careful when caution is needed, and so I invite her to watch for a dragonfly to land, greeting it joyfully.

Maybe we haven't done this regularly enough to make 'bugs' seem familiar and fear unnecessary. It's also likely that she's hearing other kids or adults talk about bees and their stings, passing along their fears. Maybe during a child's development we have to keep revisiting potentially scary things, at each age, to push back against fear and against the messages telling kids what to be afraid of.

She wants to explore further, so we climb the hill toward the north prairie, stopping to rest - well, grandpa needed a little rest - under the oaks. For Lilly it's time to break out some snacks.

I'm not sure how the I Spy game started. I had pointed out the thorny Greenbrier and asked her to listen to a bird. She looks at me and invitingly says, "I spy, with my little eye ... something green!" I make a wild guess, pointing to some plant, and she laughs and shows me the right choice. Now it's my turn, and then we keep taking turns. She picks up a piece of wood which becomes the pointer and also the baton, passed to show when it's my (or her) turn.

"I spy, with my little eye ... something wrinkled and tall," I say. She immediately points to the same tree trunk I have in mind. It's a fun game, and I think of how it encourages attending to what is around us in a mindful sort of way. Not a bad way start to a naturalist's way of noticing our surroundings. But, importantly, it's a game that Lilly initiated and is delighted to play.

When the game is over and we emerge from the woods into the bright sunshine of the north prairie, Lilly decides she's really done, so we start walking back. Down the hillside, around





the pond and past the sleeping raccoons, with her suggesting that she's tired and I might have to carry her. She's four, and every experience and state of mind or body is pretty intense.

And then we reach a part of the trail with some of that soft, beautiful sand from the constant weathering of the sandstone in this place. Sand can be a tactile wonderland if you don't mind it sticking to your skin and getting in your hair and clothes. Lilly absolutely doesn't mind.

And so she drops to her hands and knees and digs through the sand, scooping and raking and feeling the slight dampness beneath. She wants to lie in it - and so she does. On our adventure walks, experiencing nature can be immersive as long as it's safe and won't do any harm. And when is the idea of immersion any more powerful than when you're very young? She experiments with touching her face to it and comes away with a sandy nose. Next, her shoes come off. All thoughts of tiredness are gone!

The tiredness has disappeared to the point that, when we reach the car, she is ready for more. We stash the backpacks in the car and head for the south pond. Along the way, we pass some boulders, and I remind her how she used to climb onto them and say she's "on top of the world!" But the desire to stand on top of them seems to be pushed aside at the moment, and we walk down the sidewalk to the pond.

In the terraced seating area known as the "amphitheater" we find a grasshopper. Remembering some recent fun in the back yard in which she loved seeing and holding them, I catch this one and she is delighted with the little insect. She cups her hand and then covers it with the other, gently trapping the grasshopper inside. Looking at the tan thorax, short antennae, and legs results in a couple of escapes but I am able to recapture the fugitive. I have to tell Lilly that we cannot take the little guy home.

"But I love him," she protests. And then accepts that he needs to stay here, in his home. That our delight with him should not translate into harming him.



We agreed that she could carry him some distance as we returned to the car. We see a couple of other grasshoppers, but she has hers and that is enough. And then it is time to release him and I ask her to pick a spot. She gives him a small toss toward some grasses, laughing as she sees him go.

I'm very grateful for these adventure walks, and I think she is, too.