



Letters to Nature Kids



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Dear Nature Kids,

Why do I write to you? Why would someone care if you're a "nature kid?" Well, I was one, and still am. Maybe not a kid any more, but the part about loving to be outside in a creek somewhere and noticing the turtles, dragonflies, birds, and fish. This was the world I was most at home in (other than my family's home). It has stuck with me through my whole life, and when something is that good and that important, it ought to be shared.

Not everyone will be a nature kid, but what about you? If you are pulled toward the woods, I want you to be able to walk and climb and explore. If you see some critter and want to know more about what it is and how it lives, I'd like to help you learn about it. If you like birds or if you're curious about bugs, those things are important. And so I write these letters to encourage you and give examples of what it's like to walk in wild places and notice things.

Like when my friend Ruthann and I visited Palmetto State Park at the beginning of spring in 2022. That's a place on the San Marcos River, east of San Antonio. It's named for all the dwarf palmettos growing below the trees. And it is



Palmetto State Park

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a place where lots of reptiles and amphibians live, which is one reason that Ruthann and I wanted to visit. And I hope that by telling the stories of visits to such places, you can imagine being there and then think about where you would like to go. We saw many frogs, and we listened to their calls as the day ended. Just thinking about being surrounded by the sounds of gray treefrogs and green treefrogs as night fell makes me want to go back.



Left: Green treefrog resting on a palmetto frond. The frog's sticky toe pads make it possible to stick to the frond. Right: A gray treefrog on another palmetto frond.

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We also saw a very young watersnake and a small cottonmouth. Since the watersnake is harmless, Ruthann could not resist picking it up and saying hello. The cottonmouth (some people call them water moccasins, but it's the same kind of snake) is venomous, so of course we did not try to pick it up. Just because it is venomous does not mean it was mean or aggressive. I've seen plenty of cottonmouths, big and small, and they never have been aggressive – but they are dangerous. If someone steps on one or grabs one, it will probably bite. So always watch where you step and where you put your hands. I can't think of anything in nature that *wants* to hurt you, but some things *can* hurt you. The better you get at noticing what is around you, the safer you will be (and the more wonderful things you will find).



Left: Ruthann with the baby plain-bellied watersnake. This species is born brightly marked and becomes almost plain brown as it grows larger.

Right: The young cottonmouth. It is not related to the watersnake, but cottonmouths are also more brightly marked as babies and become dark as they grow.



Palmetto State Park at sunset. For more information, see the website <https://tpwd.texas.gov/state-parks/palmetto>

Sharing trips with you is a way to encourage you to go see the prairies, walk in the woods, and explore wetlands. It also gives me a chance to teach a few things about how all these plants and animals live, and how we can visit safely and without doing any harm. And when you get to know some wild places and know more about what lives there, you might care about those places. You may

know when a wild place is healthy and how to play and explore there without trashing it. We need more people who understand how to care for the world and all its places.

I'm trying to learn more about the nature kids of today. The world has changed a lot since I was a kid, and how you experience things may be different than how I did. I think that kids and their families are busier (and sometimes more stressed out) now. A lot of kids spend less time running around the neighborhood finding creeks and patches of nature, and more time inside. Perhaps kids are more likely to find nature online, where only the biggest, weirdest, most far away and dangerous stuff gets attention. (I think the "regular" stuff here in Texas is just as amazing.) Do you think I'm right, or at least partly right?



These flowers are Texas baby blue eyes, Palmetto State Park

I am writing several articles about nature kids for the publication Green Source Texas, and to do that, I'm visiting nature programs and talking with teachers, parents, and kids. I would love to hear from you (but only with parent permission) and find out your likes, interests, worries, or fears about nature. You'll find information about contacting me at the end of this letter, if you'd like to get in touch.

As always, I hope you have plenty of chances to get outside and explore or sit quietly and enjoy.

✍ Michael

All the contents of Letters to Nature Kids is © Michael Smith. If you would like more information about me, or to see more of my writing, please visit <https://livesinnature.com>. You can reach me by using the contact form at my website or by email at masmith.tx@gmail.com.