

Nature is Interesting Even in Winter

A non-naturalist friend of mine remarked the other day that, "This must be a slow season for you naturalists", which I guess seemed like a reasonable statement given the fact that we were looking out at a rather bare, drought-stricken, winter landscape. But in fact, it is a lot more interesting than my friend realized. Here are just some of the interesting things I have observed in the past few weeks.

First, not everything is brown and leafless. In addition to live oaks and cedar (Ashe juniper), we have Texas mountain laurel, evergreen sumac, cenizo and all the native cacti and succulents (yuccas, agaves). The rosettes of many of our favorite wildflowers such as bluebonnets, Engelmann daisy, standing cypress and big red sage are green now just waiting for longer days to begin their growth spurt.

Where the grazers haven't eaten it faster than it can grow, our Texas wintergrass (some call it speargrass) is responding to our December rains and is greening up nicely. This year I have not seen the rescuegrass and other bromes that usually begin growing this time of year.

As I watch our lesser goldfinches at our thistle seed feeder, I reflect on the fact that I haven't seen any American goldfinches this year, and didn't see any last year either, although they have been abundant in previous years. We had lots of pine siskins a few weeks ago, but they seem to have moved on for now.

Just a few days ago we had our usual winter flock of cedar waxwings attacking the cedar berries. They are always fun to watch as they descend on a bush in mass and depart together the same way, chattering to each other the whole time.

Flocks of robins seem to come and go. They were challenging the cedar waxwings a few days ago for the cedar berries, but the robins also spent a lot of time on the ground finding fallen berries, while the waxwings stayed in the trees. The robins appear to love the re-circulating stream to bathe in, sometimes crowding each other for the best bathing spots.

I noticed a male cardinal bathing in a spot that was apparently a favorite spot of the robins also, as several robins appeared to be standing around watching the cardinal splash around. But the cardinal stood his ground and the robins had to wait their turn.

I also rediscovered how much titmice really love peanut butter. I have a hanging piece of cedar with holes drilled in it that I can fill with peanut butter or suet, especially in cold weather. A few days ago I decided to refill the holes that had been empty for several weeks, and then noticed that within 5 minutes of returning from filling the holes with peanut butter, a titmouse was eagerly pecking away at it.

I was driving past a friend's house the other day and noticed him standing out by his car, so I pulled in to chat. As I drove up, he never turned his head to look at me, although I know he knew who it was, and even when I stopped, he remained motionless looking ahead in front of his car, finally pointing to the front of the car. As I followed his point, I saw a roadrunner, not 5 feet in front of him just slowly turning her head back and forth obviously looking for something to eat. Then, after perhaps spying something behind us, she took off at a moderate pace almost stepping on my friend's toes.

The normal breeding season for our white-tailed deer is November and December, so the rut should be over by now, the third week of January. But I just saw a buck with his head down sniffing the ground in the usual posture when they are stalking a doe. I guess his calendar didn't show him the season was over for now.

Finally, yesterday we noticed a bat roosting on our porch, hanging from the limestone rock near the ceiling. I don't know for sure what kind of bat it was (probably a Mexican free-tail), but I am told that some bats overwinter here and can be active on warmer nights. We wished we could have communicated to the little critter that we had just put up a bat house out front. Maybe he found it as he didn't return the next morning.

For a naturalist, the Natural World is always interesting.

Until next time...

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