

The Joy of Watching Nature and How to Spread the Joy

A little while back one morning after a rain the previous day I looked up from my computer and saw a swarm of flying ants rising from the grass outside. They were back-lit by the early morning sun so their wings made a dazzling display of flapping wings against the dark background of the green shrubs. I was pretty sure they were fire ants, and went out and confirmed that they were indeed.

New ant colonies are established from old colonies when at certain times of the year the colony produces many winged males and a few winged females. As they emerge (usually after a rain), the males will search for a female to fertilize, the females will then search for a suitable place to start a new colony, lose her wings and begin digging a new nest.

A little bit later I looked out again and saw that the ants were still flying up to catch the breeze, but then I also noticed that there were at least two large dragonflies that were flying around among them, presumably having a feast—I was too far away to actually observe an ant being caught, but my friend Bill Lindemann says that dragonflies are one of the most voracious predators and I am sure they had plenty to eat that day.

A few days later while sitting on the back porch enjoying the fall weather I noticed two dragonflies (same two?) embraced in a tandem mating flight and flying over my artificial creek. The bottom one of the two dipped her tail into the water occasionally to deposit an egg in the water. My first thought was how neat it is that the dragonflies could use my little creek to lay their eggs in. My second thought was how I expect the frogs to get the larva when they hatch.

A couple of days ago, late in the afternoon, we noticed not one but three Eastern Fence Lizards on one of our window screens. Early the next morning, they were still there, but soon took off. The next evening one was back to spend the night on the screen. I have seen at least one around that side of the house several times now.

I tell all of these little anecdotes because they illustrate a point. None of these observations would have been nearly as interesting and fun to watch if I didn't know something about ants and dragonflies and frogs and lizards. The more you know about a subject the more interested you are in engaging in it, in watching, participating, talking, reading and learning about it. There is nothing unique to nature about this. If you are an expert in quilting, then you will be interested in looking at quilts and learning how the maker made it and in appreciating what you see more than someone who knows nothing about quilting.

I admit to a desire to get everyone more interested in and engaged with Nature, for two reasons. First, I get so much enjoyment out of Nature that I think others will also. And

secondly, we need everyone, especially landowners, to be knowledgeable about the land and to want to take good care of it for the sake of us all.

So I encourage everyone to find time and places to spend time outdoors, to attend lectures at Master Naturalist and Native Plant Society of Texas meetings and at Riverside Nature Center. I encourage folks to go to my website, www.hillcountrynaturalist.org and to the HC Ecology page to find a list of books on various subjects that you might be interested in.

I would particularly suggest everyone read Aldo Leopold's "Sand Country Almanac" and Douglas Tallamy's "Bringing Nature Home", and if you own property in the country, my book, "Hill Country Landowner's Guide".

These books and others make good gifts as well, and the holidays are coming. For younger folks more inclined to electronics than books, there is a really neat app for iPads and iPhones called Texas Nature Guides by Audubon which has great photos and information on a number of categories including Texas birds, butterflies, insects, reptiles and amphibians, trees, wildflowers, mammals and seashore creatures. Another app is called Flowers of Central Texas.

The more you learn, the more you will want to learn and the more fun you will have with Nature.

Until next time...

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