

Watching a Bug Crawl Through the Grass

Several years ago, I began a program of walking the same trail around 10-12 acres of woodland/savanna around my house every month in order to observe and record the things in nature that I saw. Initially, I just walked the trail somewhat slowly looking for anything that caught my eye, spending about 30+ minutes doing it.

Then it occurred to me that you miss things while walking, partly because you don't spend enough time in any one place and partly because all the critters know you are there before you ever see them.

So, then I switched and took a milk crate with me and I stopped at various places on the trail and sat down quietly and just sat and looked around for a while before moving on to stop at another place. I would look in all directions for anything interesting but also sometimes just look at the grass or rocks around me, and sometimes I would just stare at the ground between my feet.

On one such occasion, I spent a fair amount of time just watching a bug crawl across the grass. I suspect that most readers will be thinking now that if I was describing the activities of a 6-year old, it wouldn't be a surprise, but an old man?

Why did I stare at that bug for several minutes? For that matter why, as I am typing this, do I keep staring out the window at the butterflies on the mist flower or the squirrels fighting for sunflower seeds under the bird feeder? The answer is simple, I like nature.

I grew up in the country and as a kid I worked on the neighbor's farm for 6 years. My academic training was as a chemist and I spent all of my adult working life doing chemical research in a laboratory. But, as an adult, every single vacation was to some national park or similar natural environment observing nature and native animals. I have never had any interest in visiting cities or anywhere with large numbers of people. I guess it is "natural" for me to be interested in nature.

I wish more people were.

Richard Louv is the author of "Last Child in the Woods" and "The Nature Principle." It was in the first of these books that he first described what he calls Nature-Deficit Disorder. In both books, Louv describes the results of literally hundreds of studies which purport to show that spending even small amounts of time in any "natural" setting has significant mental and physical health benefits. The most recent Consumer Reports Health newsletter lends some credence to the same general idea.

How much validity should we ascribe to these studies? I don't know. I know enough about scientific research to know it is easy to design an experiment to prove what you already believe. Most of us remember when we were first told that coffee was bad for us, then later that coffee was good for us—then bad again and then good again.

I don't think anyone is suggesting that a walk in the woods will cure cancer, or anything else for that matter. But a lot of people in Kerrville drive their cars to get to the River Trail in order to walk along the trail rather than to just walk along their city street. And it has been well documented that when shown a picture of a big city street and another of a park and when asked where they would rather be, most folks chose the park.

Many of the researchers of the studies mentioned above seem to emphasize that in order to get the "nature effect" it is not necessary to hike for miles in a wilderness—just being in the presence of plants, even if it is in your own back yard, is helpful.

Two easy places in Kerrville that allow people to actually "spend time in nature" are the River Trail mentioned above and also, at one of the entrances to the River Trail, Riverside Nature Center. Both are free, although Riverside would appreciate a small donation.

So, who knows, even if it doesn't cure all of your aches and pains, it still might make you feel better and you never know what you will see in nature that you want to stare at for a while--maybe a bug in the grass.

Until next time...

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