# Letters to Nature Kids

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Dear Nature Kids,

Now that the days are not quite as hot, I want to plan some walks in different places. Where do you think I should go? Where is your favorite nature place in North Texas? (It's a serious question – I'd love to know your favorite place.)

When I am out there, I have two main rules. The first is to **make the time enjoyable**, and second is to **do no harm**.

That second rule means that I don't want to mess things up or hurt anything while I am out there. I don't leave behind any litter if I have a snack with granddaughter Lilly, and I don't tear up logs looking for critters living inside them. Just walking around or exploring might do a little damage. I might step on an ant, but I'll try to step around them. I don't go out of my way to hurt anything.

*A rotten log in a wonderful, twisted shape – lots of critters may live inside, but I left it alone*

Did you know that a plastic water bottle that someone throws away in the woods may take 450 years to decompose? That's one reason I take a metal water bottle with me, and then I wash it and keep using it.

And what about when people turn over rocks to look for lizards or snakes underneath? Do they leave the rocks turned over, or put them back just like they found them? The environment under a

big flat rock can be just right for a lizard ... or a snake, a toad, or some kind of invertebrate. The space underneath the rock may be just the right shape, or the lizard may dig a burrow underneath. The temperature and humidity can be just right. People actually did some field studies and found that when rocks are turned over and left out of place, critters generally did not use them.

Remember the first rule? That one says, “make it enjoyable.” I’ve been out exploring, hiking, just sitting under a tree, or catching small critters for a close look, since I was about nine years old.

Why doesn’t it ever get old? The trick is to notice the details around you. Paying close attention, the creek doesn’t seem like “just another creek,” it’s a creek like no other. Or maybe it’s my old familiar creek, but I’m seeing it in a new season or on a new day.

*A rainbow trout in the shallow clear water of McKittrick Creek in the Guadalupe Mountains*

Sometimes “noticing” means slowing down or even sitting somewhere for a while to really see and hear things. Or it might mean jogging without ear buds so our attention is not pulled away from what is around us. It means that nature is not just the background for something else that we are really doing. For at least some of our time outside, being in nature **is** what we are doing.

*Paying attention to detail made it possible for me to see and photograph this broad-banded copperhead*

When it is hard for someone to stop and notice what is around them, it may be helpful to practice for just a short time, even as little as 15 seconds. Once it’s easier to become still and quiet for that long, you can do so a little longer. And then you start to notice sounds, or an animal that is hard to spot unless you really look. Being able to find those things makes it even easier to slow down and pay attention to details.

And the more you learn about what lives and grows in a place, the more you will find there.

All the plants and animals out there have stories. Each has a name and a particular way of getting food or protecting themselves. That copperhead I saw – you probably know some of its story. You know about its fangs and venom, but you might not know that the venom is used mostly for hunting what it eats. You might not have noticed that baby copperheads have bright yellow tails that they can wiggle like a worm. It's like the snake is fishing (but on dry land), using the tail as a lure. A lizard that comes over to try to eat the "worm" might become a meal for the baby copperhead.

*Mistletoe growing from tree branches*

Do you ever see mistletoe when you're out on a walk? The plant is easier to spot in winter, when the tree's leaves are gone and you see a green clump of mistletoe growing in the branches. Do you know mistletoe's story? Knowing it would answer several questions. Does it hurt the tree that it grows on? How did it get up there in the first place? And why do some people hang it in the doorway at Christmas? I hope such questions make you curious about the natural world and our place in it. And I'll answer questions like this as I write to you in the future.

I hope you will remember the rules, **enjoy** but **do no harm**. And I hope you get out and enjoy the woods and prairies as autumn gets started. Find something cool to observe, and learn its story!

*Michael*

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