

Frog Calls

Newsletter of Crosstimbers Connection

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Come Take a Walk With Us

At the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, May 25 and 26



On Memorial Day weekend, the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge will host "Snakes of Tarrant County," a display of our local snakes provided by the Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society. To round out that experience, we will provide guided walks to places within the refuge to look for reptiles and amphibians. Anyone who is visiting the refuge on the 25th and 26th is welcome to come with us (there is no additional charge beyond the gate fee).

The specific times are:

Saturday, May 25, 10:00am

Saturday, May 25, 2:00pm

Sunday, May 26, 10:00am

The Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge contains over 3500 acres of crosstimbers forest, prairie, bottomland, marsh, and lake shore habitat. Lots of wonderful reptiles and amphibians (or "herps") live there, and our "herp walks" will visit some of the locations where we are likely to see some of them.

We will meet at the Hardwicke Center building about 15 minutes before the start of the walk. Walks will last between one and two hours. Make sure to dress comfortably with sturdy shoes, and bring a bottle of water. See you there!





The drift of leaves was deep, and I dug through the thin top layer of tan, brown and reddish leaves to reach a darker, damp layer beneath. This spongy layer had a good healthy smell of leaves on their way to becoming rich soil. And among the jigsaw puzzle of oak, elm, and possumhaw leaves, my eye caught a small sliver of coppery movement. The little lizard slipped deeper into the leaves, and I guessed at where it might have gone. Scooping a handful of leaves, I saw that I had missed this little brown skink, which disappeared into the mix with a wiggle that was a little like the motion of a snake. Pulling some more leaves back, I failed to see it for a few seconds as it froze among the various colors. Then it took off again, seeming to swim into the leaves as if they were nothing but water.

Digging deeper, I did not find the skink but I did uncover a millipede, its little two-inch segmented body making its way through the leaf litter on what looked like hundreds of little legs. More than hundreds, if you believed the name "millipede," or "thousand-feet," but millipedes do not have anything like that many legs. They stay in relatively moist places to avoid drying out, and curl into a tight spiral when threatened. This little relative of the insects lived in a perfect microhabitat, pro-

tected from extremes of heat or cold by the insulating layer of leaves and fed by the decaying plant material.

A little further down and the dark leaf mulch was almost soil, damp, crumbly, and with a few white strands of fungus called "mycorrhizae." These little threads and webs help transport water and minerals to plant roots, and in turn receive nutrients from the plant. In the space where the mulch was scraped away, an earthworm was partly exposed, working its way through this dark material and further converting it into soil.

Here in the resting place of dead leaves was a rich, living community. It might be populated by all kinds of small lizards, snakes, salamanders, frogs, insects, spiders, and other invertebrates. A variety of fungi play a role in breaking organic matter down and, as previously mentioned, nurturing plants. And all this activity helps make new soil, which is the foundation of the entire plant and animal community.

Where does it come from, this layer of decomposing leaves that supports these animals and adds to the soil? At the end of every year, many of our trees and shrubs begin to shut down the activity of their leaves, and their colors change to



Secrets of the Leaf Litter (*continued*)

yellows, reds, and browns. These are the fall colors we love to see on a walk through the woods late in the year. The leaf becomes dry and the leaf stem breaks off from the branch. The leaves gently fall to the ground or blow away to form drifts in protected spots. The trees and shrubs that do this are called "deciduous," and this means that they shed leaves at the end of the growing season.

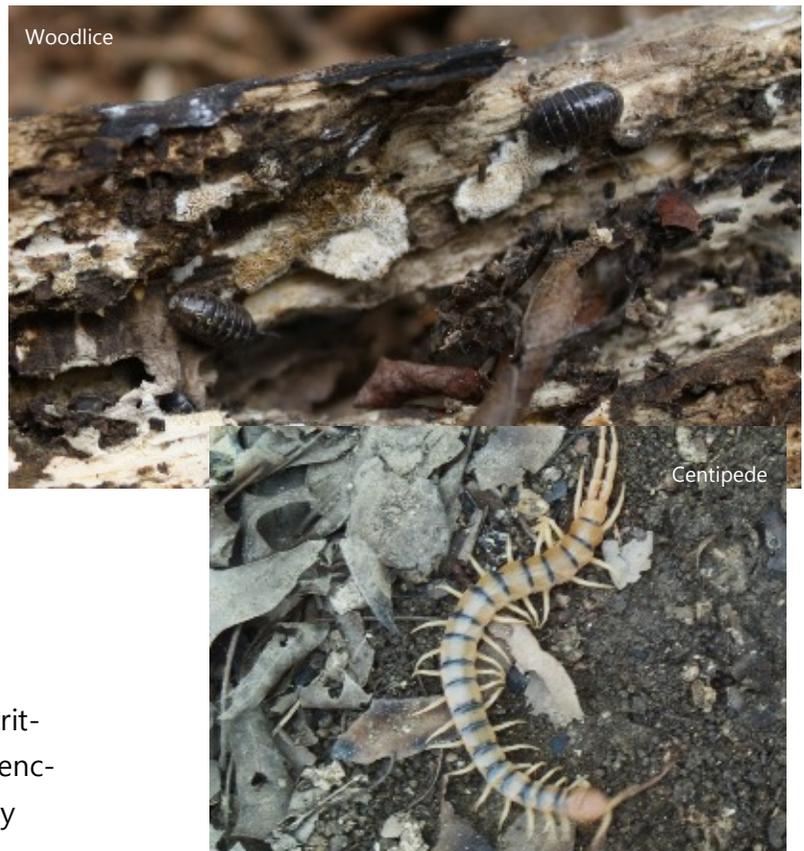
Once on the ground, the carpet of fallen leaves is called "leaf litter," though in this case it is not a bad form of litter at all. As we've seen, it provides cover and camouflage for some animals, and food for others. It insulates the ground from extremes of cold weather or hot sun. Additionally, the leaf litter helps conserve moisture for use by plants and animals. And finally, the leaves are raw material (along with minerals and decomposing animal matter) for making more soil.

How do we explore the leaf litter? We generally poke around or rake through the leaves with a stick first, so if a larger animal is hidden under the leaves we discover it this way rather than with our hands. In some places, the venomous copperhead will shelter in the leaf litter, where it is very well camouflaged. We also wear gloves, since there can be anything from thorny greenbriar stems to the occasional scorpion or centipede under the leaves. If we use a little caution in these ways, we should be able to explore safely.

Dig down through the top layers to the moist, deeper layers. Drop a couple of handfuls into a clear plastic jar and look around at the various critters moving through the litter. Notice the differences between spiders (eight legs and a body clearly

divided into two segments) and harvestmen or "daddy long-legs" (a little like spiders but the body looks like just one segment, and no venom so that they cannot hurt you). Check out the woodlice, which most people call "pillbugs" or "sowbugs." Also notice the difference between millipedes (with their rounded bodies and two pair of legs per segment) and centipedes (with flattened bodies and one pair of legs per segment).

The forest is full of wonderful surprises, from the tops of the tree canopy to the leaf litter of the forest floor. The next time you find yourself on a nature hike through the woods, stop and take a moment to rake back some leaves and discover all of the living treasures that lie just beneath the surface. A little digging can uncover a world of creatures that we never would have seen if we had just walked by.





View from the Oak Motte trail, Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge

Crosstimbers Connection - Connecting People with Nature in North Texas

We take people out into the woods and prairies, looking for reptiles, amphibians, and other wildlife, learning and having fun. And we do it without charging anything (but we gladly accept tax-deductible contributions to keep us going). We are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization - please visit us on the web at: <http://crosstimbersconnection.org>.

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