

# Nature

Eye on

FALL 2004

A publication of the Wildlife Diversity Branch

Getting Texans Involved

## Creating a Texas Wildscape

By Keith Crenshaw

When Texans want wildlife to come to our gardens, we often put up bird-houses and feeders. We should also remember that there are other wildlife species to enjoy besides the birds and butterflies. In nature, there are other items besides the plants, shrubs and trees available for wild animals to use. As landowners, we can incorporate some of these items to add for aesthetics on our properties. Rocks, logs, debris and ponds are all used to give your landscape a more rustic or natural look.

All wildlife needs water for some part of its life. Reptiles and amphibians are two classes of animals that depend on water for significant portions of their life cycle. Water features are easy to install and attract a variety of wildlife for us to enjoy. When planning your pond, you should remember that birds and squirrels need a gradual slope for them to drink out of. This will also allow any tadpoles that a frog or toad lays in your pond to hop out of after they develop into adults. To prevent overuse of chemicals to keep it clean and free of bugs, you should fill the pond with mosquito fish (*Gambusia sp.*), which you can purchase from any bait store or fish store.

Filling your pond with aquatic plants such as Pickerelweed (*Pondederia cordata*) and water lily (*Nymphaea odorata*) will not only help filter the water but will also supply spring and summer flower blooms. These plants also provide areas for frogs, toads, and lizards to cling to and feed, and for dragonflies or damselflies to emerge. Floating plants such as Floating Heart (*Nymphoides aquatica*) will provide shelter for young tadpoles; as well as, damselfly and dragonfly larvae.

Frogs and toads require cool and damp places to rest in before their next meal. In the Texas heat, cool and damp may be a problem. Providing plants in groups that provide small shaded areas can be complimented with upside-down broken terra cotta pots or colorful



dish bowls. These small microhabitats can provide just enough shade and moisture to attract small frogs. Placing these microhabitats near air conditioner drain hoses or other damp places that already exist are also helpful.

Other sources of shelter habitat can include leaf litter mulch. Leaf litter mulch is not only useful to help keep moisture in the soil for your plants, shrubs and trees; but can also be used by lizards and skinks. The Five-Lined Skink (*Eumeces fasciatus*) is an east Texas inhabitant that prefers to hang out in gardens and compost heaps. The humid environment that this skink requires can also be met by putting in fallen logs as decorations for your yard. Skinks are extremely beneficial because of their diet that includes a variety

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# Winter Nestbox

## Activities

By Pauline Tom



### Eye On Nature Fall, 2004

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department  
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Autumn through early winter is the “off season” for small cavity-nesting birds, including bluebirds. Whether you have one nestbox (birdhouse) or one hundred, there’s no need for “Empty Nest Syndrome!” You can still be actively involved in lending a helping hand to nature by adding more nestboxes; repairing and improving nestboxes; making temporary adjustments to nestboxes for the conditions of winter and early spring; and, preparing each nestbox for the next nesting season.

“Today” is always the best time to install a nestbox. This answer is particularly applicable when temperatures drop into the 70s, creating more comfortable working conditions. Pick a cool day and enjoy being outdoors while you put up a nestbox. If your nestbox isn’t seen by a cavity-nester within hours, it will certainly be spotted before nesting season.

Unless you live in an area with a high population of House Sparrows, add a first, second or third nestbox where you can see it often and enjoy any native birds it attracts. Find a vista where you look out during the spring, and add a nestbox within the field of view. This might be a kitchen window, a computer desk, an easy chair, or a porch swing.

Adding a nestbox in a spot with appropriate habitat away from your property, where you can monitor about once a week during “season” will give others in your community the joy of catching sight of a bluebird or other cavity-nesting bird. You might receive a phone call of appreciation from someone who sees a bluebird for the first time! Think of possible instillation sites ... country cemetery, park, golf course, churchyard. “Planting” a nestbox is akin to planting wildflowers along a roadside!

This is the season when nestboxes can be removed for a few days to add a fresh coat of weather sealant or paint, without affecting the nesting process. Invite a child alongside to dip a brush into the paint and stroke the paint

(light-colored) onto the box. Let the child know that he/she is “helping the birds” because some birds cannot raise a family unless they have a “hole.”

Temporarily adding weather stripping to the vents on one side of a nestbox will obstruct the ventilation, helping to prevent freezing. On a severe night, one or more birds will sometimes enter a nestbox for protection. The first eggs of the season in Texas are laid in February, when protection from freezing may be needed.

Why not seal the vents on both sides for the winter? That would work, too. But, leaving the vent on one side open might provide a warm invitation to a winter home for a Pipistrelle bat.

Before birds begin selecting nesting sites (as early as December), visit each nestbox with a “nestbox preparation” kit, which might include:

- hammer, screwdriver and caulk – for minor repairs;
- wide spatula and plastic bag – to remove any remaining old nests and droppings;
- sandpaper and carnuba wax – to make the pole slick;
- Tanglefoot (a sticky product found at some nursery stores) or grease – to add to the pole to deter predators and prevent fire ants from gaining access to the nest;
- Bright fingernail polish – to add to the tip of the nail or screw that closes the box so it can be easily found if it drops;
- Bar of Ivory soap – to rub on the interior roof to deter wasps from attaching a nest;

In February, nesting can begin. So, it’s time to start weekly “monitoring,” and record keeping. Until you’re certain that incubation has begun, avoid looking in the nestbox early in the morning, because this is the time when egg laying usually takes place.

The nesting season brings the magical time when you and those you mentor have the opportunity be up close and personal (within inches!) of an amazing process ... egg to tiny newborn hatchling to fully feathered and almost-full grown and ready to fly fledgling ... in the course of a few weeks.

Time spent tending to nestboxes in the off season will mean more time to breathe in the awe and wonder of cavity-nesting birds in nesting season.

For more information on how to build and install nestboxes in Texas for best results see [www.texasbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.texasbluebirdsociety.org).

Pauline Tom is a board member with the Texas Bluebird Society out of Mountain City, Texas

[Creating a Texas Wildscape Continued]

of insects and their larvae that feed on your landscape plants; as well as spiders and even small mice.

The green anole (*Anolis carolinensis*) is a common component of the Texas landscape. This small lizard is regularly spotted on fence posts, on walls of buildings, or climbing up and down trees. Green anoles are commonly mistaken for chameleons. While it is not a true chameleon, the green anole can change from bright green to dark brown and any combination in between. Green anoles, like skinks, eat a lot of insects and small spiders. The most common characteristic of the green anole is the dewlap beneath their mouth that when extended displays a bright pink. You will often see them spreading their dewlap and doing push ups on fence lines.

Other benefits of a pond are the other wildlife that will use it for a drink. The opportunity for closer observation of squirrels and birds or the colorful flight of dragonflies and damselflies will be all the reward necessary. Seize the opportunity to attract these wonderful animals to your landscape. Not only do they benefit you by eating a lot of the bugs that you and I think of as pests, but also will make your evenings more musical with their night sounds.



For more information about Texas Wildscapes, please visit the website at [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/wildscapes/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/wildscapes/)

For more information about frogs, toads and lizards of Texas, please visit the website at [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/education/tracker/amphibians/](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/education/tracker/amphibians/)

Keith Crenshaw is one of the Urban Biologists working out of the Houston urban office.

## Fall garden fix up time

By Tom Collins

Each summer our plants get exposed to too much or too little rain, insect invasions, strong storms and maybe a little human neglect. Fall is the time to start correcting what didn't work out and to continue to improve on what is working. Maybe this will be your first try at creating your own wildscape habitat. Just what is a wildscape habitat? For each of us it may be a little different, but basically it always has the same components — food, water and shelter resources for your birds and other native animals. For those of us getting ready to do our fall fix up, we need to keep the same basics in mind — food, water and shelter.

My home garden has a small continuous water drip, mostly native plants that provide bird and animal food, plus

enough shrubs and trees that my wrens, cardinals and squirrels all raise families each year. I supplement natural food with several feeders.

I have also created a certified Wildscape garden at Sea Center Texas Coastal Hatchery in Lake Jackson. Recently it was certified as a Demonstration Habitat Garden. The sites include a large hummingbird and butterfly native garden, and a wildflower garden.

### What do you do first?

I would first consider adding new plants, trees or shrubs. Care should be taken to research their viability in your area. Most Texas Extension Cooperative services have a list of plants that work best in your area. A good list of native plants can be found in *Texas Wildscapes: Gardening for Wildlife and Native Texas Plants* by Sally and Andy Wasowski has some great photos to help with your selection. Make sure you understand how big they will grow. Every year I look at the trees I planted too close to my house some 25 years ago and wish I had known then what I do today. Plant trees and shrubs according to what the maximum growth will be. Avoid the urge to plant too close and too many.

If you plan to plant native wildflowers, fall is the time to get the seeds in

the ground. Get seeds in late summer and start preparing the soil. Most of the Texas native seed companies can provide you with the best seed mixture for your climate zone and also give detailed instruction on how to prepare the soil and plant the seeds. Be careful though, some of these mixes are heavily combined with Californian species. You can also scout areas close to your property where native flowers are present and collect seeds from those plants as their genes are tolerant to your area.

Here are some simple wildscape care guidelines. Please note that several of these techniques are sometimes called Xeriscape gardening, or water efficient gardening.

- Plant mostly native plants found in your area. If they are not successful, then try something new.
- Each plant should have some purpose — food source for birds or butterflies or their larvae, shade, shelter, color...

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# Great Texas Birding Classic Report

By Shelly Scroggs

The 8th Annual Great Texas Birding Classic was a huge success! Thank you to all of our participants, sponsors and host communities for their support of our effort to conserve coastal habitat and wildlife along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail.

New this year, the Great Texas Birding Classic created the Outta-Sight Song Birder Tournament for blind and visually impaired birders. Teams of 3-5 people participated (a maximum of one blind-folded sighted person was allowed per team) and bird species counted were identified by sound only. Thank you to the Valley teams who helped get this fledgling tournament off of the ground this year. We hope to expand this tournament to all sections of the coast in 2005.



- 294 people took part in the competition
- 56 teams from 13 states and the District of Columbia participate in the event
- 19 youth teams, 11 Big Sit! teams and 3 teams in our newest category, the Outta-Sight Song Birder Tournament for blind and visually impaired birders
- The combined species total seen or heard by all teams during the Birding Classic this year was 359! 255 species were counted on the lower coast, 290 species on the central coast and 266 species on the upper coast.

The real winners of the Great Texas Birding Classic are the birds and the habitat that supports them. Through increased awareness of birding and nature tourism, we hope to bring to light the importance of habitat conservation. This awareness, along with the money donated directly to habitat conservation projects each year, will preserve and protect important coastal habitat for many years to come. Over the past eight years, winning teams have donated \$402,000 to avian habitat conservation along the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail through our Conservation Cash Grand Prize grants!

For more information about the Great Texas Birding Classic, please visit our Web site [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/gtbc). E-mail or call the Birding Classic staff to receive your copy of this year's Winners Report at [gtbc@tpwd.state.tx.us](mailto:gtbc@tpwd.state.tx.us) or (888) TX-BIRDS.

Shelly Scroggs is the new Nature Tourism Coordinator after her successful tenure as coordinator of the Great Texas Birding Classic. Shelly works out of the Austin office.



## Projects selected by the 2004 Great Texas Birding Classic winning teams include the following:

### Weeklong Tournament

**\$20,000 – Donated by the ConocoPhillips Cranes and the Swift WildBirders**

Packery Channel Sanctuary Protection – Submitted by the Audubon Outdoor Club of Corpus Christi. This Audubon Outdoor Club of Corpus Christi, Inc., project will protect and manage remaining undeveloped lots in a housing subdivision on Padre Island, creating an island of green for neotropical migrants.

### \$12,000 – Donated by the Environmental Partners

Dickinson Bay Bird Island Restoration – Submitted by Galveston Bay Foundation. This restoration project is intended to replace one of the islands that has eroded from Dickinson Bay over the past six decades, restoring the colonial waterbird habitat associated with it.

### \$9,000 – Donated by the Butcherbirds

Quintana Island Habitat Enhancement – Submitted by the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. This project will revegetate previous land acquisitions with mature native trees and understory vegetation as well as create one or more freshwater ponds.

### Upper Texas Coast

#### \$3,000 – Donated by the Loonatics

Texas Point NWR Woodlot Restoration – Submitted by Texas Point National Wildlife Refuge. This restoration project will create a coastal woodlot to provide stopover, rest and refueling habitat for migratory songbirds through the planting of quick-growing and long-term native tree seedlings.

### Lower Texas Coast

#### \$3,000 – Donated by the Swarovski/WBC Roadside Hawks

Photogenic Water Features – Submitted by the World Birding Center – Estero Llano Grande State Park. This project will provide funds for the building of three solar powered ponds.

### Central Texas Coast

#### \$3,000 – Donated by Team Audubon

Blucher Audubon Center Migrant Songbird Habitat Restoration – Submitted by Audubon Texas (in partnership with Coastal Bend Audubon Society). This project will provide funds for the purchase of pond supplies, native plants and interpretive signs and plant labels.

### Lone Star Bird Award

#### \$1,000 – Donated by Swarovski Sitting Hawks

South Padre Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary (submitted by the Valley Land Fund). Money is to be used for habitat restoration.

# Wildlife Viewing at Cedar Hill State Park

By Linda Dunn

**F**or people living in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, Cedar Hill State Park (CHSP) is a refuge from the hustle and bustle of the city. The 1,826 acres, designated as a nature preserve, provides excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing and enjoyment. The diverse habitats found at CHSP support a variety of wildlife. Tall and mid-grass prairies, escarpment Oak-Juniper forest, remnant Post Oak savanna, bottomland hardwood forest and Hackberry-Elm successional communities support a number of wildlife species.

With a substantial amount of land bordering both sides of the park, ample habitat is available for many mammals including fox, raccoon, beaver and in particular coyote and bobcat. A chance meeting with one of these two animals is likely here at the park. On some evenings, coyotes can be heard throughout the park. Save the raccoons, many of these animals are timid and are a challenge to locate. An unplanned sighting is more likely to happen when it comes to viewing the mammals at the park. Early mornings are the best time to catch a glimpse and sometimes get quite a long look at the park's more popular wildlife.

The variety of bird habitat and being in the path of the spring migration of the neotropical birds makes CHSP a popular destination for birders. Common birds such as the Northern Cardinal, Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse can be seen in the creek bottoms during the day. The Greater Roadrunner is easily spotted, running along the road or grassy field, hopping from tree branch to tree branch with crested head and long tail. With its blue head, bright green back and red under belly, the Painted Bunting is a favorite of those who come looking for birds. The Painted Bunting as well as the Scissor Tailed fly catcher, Indigo Bunting, Cedar Waxwing, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Chuck-will's-widow are all neotropical birds that can be found at Cedar Hill State Park. Although not seen for quite some time, a recent sighting of a Golden-cheeked Warbler, an endangered species, was reported in March of 2004. For a quick birding trip, take a pair of binoculars and head to the Penn Farm. Eastern Bluebirds, Painted Buntings, Cardinals, Scissor-tailed Fly Catchers and the Tufted Titmouse are regularly seen at the farm.

The park is host to many reptiles as well. When walking the Duck Pond trail early in the morning, coming upon a bullfrog, red-eared slider or spiny soft-shelled turtle is not an uncommon occurrence. Another turtle found in both the Duck Pond trail and the Perch Pond is the Alligator Snapping turtle. Be careful! Legend has it that if grabs hold of your finger, it won't let go until it hears thunder!! The Western Box turtle can also be found at the park. The most often asked question concerning reptiles is "Do you have any poisonous snakes?" The answer is "Yes!" Venomous snakes are not the most popular as far as viewing, but are something to be mindful of. When walking the trails be aware of the Western Diamond Back Rattlesnake and Copperhead, especially if riding the mountain bike trails. The Texas Spiny Lizard can be seen sunning themselves, scampering across, and climbing upon the buildings and old farm equipment at the Penn Farm.



With a corridor of undisturbed terrain bordering both sides of the park, a substantial amount of land is available for wildlife to flourish in this area. Many opportunities are available to view wildlife from bird watching to chance meetings out on the trail. Enjoying wildlife not only comes with actually seeing it, but also through the whole experience of discovering it while out in nature. Whether it is the croaking of a bullfrog or the howl of a coyote, Cedar Hill State Park offers many opportunities to enjoy wildlife from the roadside, a hike on the trails or a stroll through the Penn Farm.

Linda Dunn is an Exhibit Technician at Cedar Hill State Park in Cedar Hill.



## Texas Nature Trackers Report

Texas Nature Trackers includes the various monitoring projects undertaken by the Wildlife Diversity Program across Texas each year. Some of the projects include the Monarch Watch, Amphibian Watch, Horned Lizard Watch and Texas Hummingbird Roundup. As the year draws to a close, please do not forget to send in your reports on observations for the 2004 season. Remember also that many of these programs start a new season early in the new year. Watch the TPWD Web site for new kits, or order your kit by sending your request to:

**Texas Nature Trackers**  
3000 South I.H. 35  
Austin, TX 78704

# What about feeders?

By Mark Klym

Whenever the discussion of backyard habitats comes up, the question of whether to use feeders or not is not far behind. While arguments can be presented on both sides, the issue essentially comes down to a question of proper maintenance at the feeders and the quality of the foods provided in the feeders.

"Feeders lead to disease," "Feeders disrupt animal behaviors," "Feeders can cause unnatural concentrations of wildlife." These are just some of the many arguments that are presented encouraging people to avoid using feeders around wildlife. At the same time we have programs like the Hummingbird Roundup, Project Feederwatch, the Great Backyard Bird Survey and others that depend on feeder based information for valuable survey data. Where is the conscientious birder to turn? Is there an answer?

Any time a high concentration of one species is concentrated in a small area, the potential for infection is increased. Think about the last time you were on an airplane and someone in the back of the plane began coughing. What happened the next week? Even if you were the full distance of the plane away from them, you probably started coughing too! The same principle can

occur at the wildlife feeder if we are not careful. One way to minimize this is to clean feeders and the areas around them thoroughly on a regular basis. Rake the area below the feeders to remove spent seed hulls and feces. Wash and fully dry the feeders and their perches between filling. These procedures will help to reduce the probability of spreading infection.

Once in a while though, you may find an animal around your feeder that you just know is sick. The symptoms may be obvious, or the behaviors may be different. Whatever your reason for concern, the wise practice is to discontinue feeding, do a thorough cleanup and allow all concerned materials, including the ground, to dry thoroughly. Since some infections can be spread by contaminated foods, you may also want to replace the feed you have been using. Only then would I recommend resuming your feeding routines.



"Isn't it true that, if I use a feeder, the birds will not migrate?" This common question reflects the misconception that birds migrate because of a lack of food. Nothing could be further from the truth as is reflected by the marvelous migration pattern of the hummingbird! Hummingbirds of several species, including the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Rufous Hummingbirds, Calliope Hummingbirds and others, begin leaving the northern reaches of their ranges in mid to late June and early July. Residents of these areas know that their plants are often just coming into bloom, yet the birds are disappearing.

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[Fall garden fix up time Continued]

- Use only native mulch. For my area that means hardwood mulch and not pine bark mulch. Our city has a mulch pile that is free to the citizens.
- Plants should require little or no watering once established. Be careful not to trim shrubs or trees after winter freezes. Wait until all chances of frost and freeze have passed. Early trimming will cause new growth to begin and any late cold weather will kill the new growth and possibly the whole plant.
- Change the landscape or add a new plant each year. Visit a native plant nursery.
- Consider setting aside a milkweed patch somewhere on your property. The monarch and queen butterflies will come, plus you will be amazed at the other species of insects that will use it.



- Plant shrubs and flowers that can only be used by hummingbirds — tuber plants such as coral honeysuckle, cardinal flower, and turk's cap are a few examples.
- If you don't have live water for your garden, try putting in a small drip. I built a four tier copper pan drip by running a small water line (1/4 in.) just under ground to where the four copper pans (one in. deep) each rest on some hill country rocks. Water drips out of each one to the next lower one. All the birds, squirrels and nighttime visitors use it plus each winter my hummers will skim across the surface of the top pan dipping their bellies into the water.
- Finally keep bird feeders out and keep them refreshed. I have about five seed hanging feeders, a large platform feeder, and a hot pepper suet that the woodpeckers love. I keep hummingbird feeders out based upon the season — three in summer and up to 10 in fall and winter.

Tom Collins is a state Advisory Council member for Texas Master Naturalists and a volunteer naturalist at Sea Center Texas in Lake Jackson.

[What about feeders Continued]

They are coming south in search of abundant foods that are beginning to bloom here — not fleeing an area of famine! Keeping feeders active does not disrupt migratory behaviors.

Why should one choose to use a feeder? It increases the probability that you will enjoy wildlife without having to travel from your place of residence. Often, in the dead of winter, properties with feeders are the only locations where there is a variety of birds or other wildlife. Feeders provide you with an opportunity to observe wildlife closely, often much closer than you would in “natural” situations. Feeders are often the easiest locations to photograph wildlife.



Using a feeder is a personal choice — there are valid points to be made on both sides of the argument — if you are maintaining a clean, healthy and safe environment around your feeders.

Mark Klym is an information specialist with the Wildlife Diversity Program and coordinator of the Texas Hummingbird Roundup.

[Back Porch Continued]

Aldo Leopold said “There are some who can live without wild things and some who cannot.” Most of us who can’t live without wild things got that way early in life without even thinking about it. Is it possible for today’s kids to really experience nature in a world that tells us to stay on the trails and leave everything alone? Where can kids “dig holes to China,” climb trees, get wet and muddy, and discover wiggly, squirmy living treasures during their day to day activities?

Fitch’s message rings loud and true to me — the most powerful conservation tool we have is just getting people ‘out there.’ I can talk about nature all day, but it’s no substitute for allowing folks the opportunity to explore and discover on their own. We’re only restrained by our 21st century fears and cautions — What if a bug bites, a thorn scratches, or a sound frightens? The dangers aren’t really as great as we make them out to be — the real danger is in denying kids the experience itself.

So, as we enter fall, think about how you learned to love nature and try to give someone that same kind of experience. It isn’t just the seasons that change, nature changes people, too — if we’ll let it.

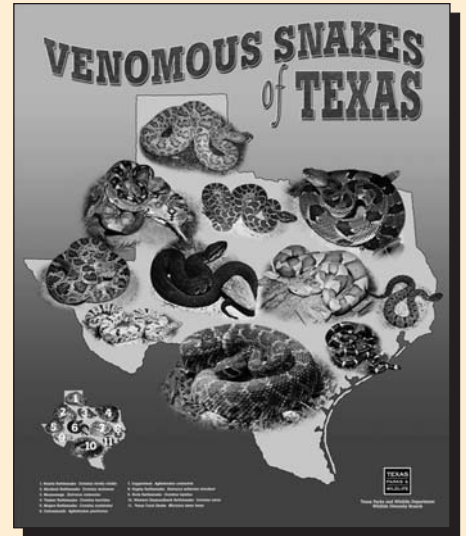
# Wild Stuff!

## Venomous Snakes of Texas Poster

### Love Texas Snakes?

Now you can have your very own color poster of the Venomous Snakes of Texas! This brand new poster features photographic images of 11 different native venomous snakes and an identification key in the lower left corner. Be the first on your block to be able to identify some of the most fascinating animals in the state.

Complete the order form and send it to us with a check or money order for \$5.00 (includes postage and handling) and we'll send you one for your bedroom, classroom or living room wall.



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# The Back Porch

by John Herron

I don't know which season pleases me more — spring's beautiful tapestry of blossoms and its chorus of birds or fall's bounty and abundance of wildlife. I guess it doesn't matter, anytime outdoors is wonderful.

While autumn in Texas doesn't match the spectacular fall colors of the northern states, it still has many unique charms. Wildlife have finished rearing their young. Migrating shorebirds and waterfowl arrive to winter along Texas marshes and shorelines. This is matched with a spectacular fall migration of soaring hawks and songbirds in subdued plumage, ready for a winter respite. With a year's worth of blossoms now fading, our native plants produce a wealth of seeds and fruits that will feed our wild friends through the winter. In the cycle of the seasons, fall sets the stage that leads to rebirth in

the spring to come.

As a kid, I practically lived in the woods and fields surrounding my neighborhood. When school started in the fall, I relished the time I had in the woods even more, chasing rabbits and looking for deer. I have fond memories of fall sunflowers and goldenrod and the smell of fallen leaves in the late fall rains. There were acorns everywhere — good for squirrels and fun ammunition for my slingshot.

I recently read an article called the "Extinction of Experience" by Ken Finch ("Directions: The Journal of the Association of Nature Center Administrators," 2004). Mr. Finch talks at length about the importance of outdoor experiences for kids, quoting Baba Dioum who said



"We will conserve only what we love."

Finch points out that it isn't formal knowledge that makes us love nature, because we feel before we think.

Instead it's our outdoor experiences that create a bond with nature — that bond is what makes us want to know more about how nature ticks. It's that time when "nature experiences are ... part of children's *regular rhythm of daily life.*"

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