

Seeing the Beauty Around Us

Story and photos by Donna Bush



As we navigate through December, many of us may relate to a phrase from the famous poem, *The Night Before Christmas*, “The children were nestled all snug in their beds, while visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.” Though I’m not sure why visions of sugarplums are something to dream of, this month always seems to conjure up special moments. Why can’t we enjoy magical moments throughout the year?

I invite you to take a stroll with me to find the magic in the ordinary. Imagine the crispness of a chilly fall morning as we wake up and start our day. Whether you are a hardcore coffee drinker or prefer a cup of green tea, grab your mug and let’s walk out in my backyard.

The first thing we see are the northern cardinals, house finches, and mockingbirds vying for a spot at the bird feeder. While their physiological adaptations help, such as ruffling their feathers to

trap a layer of warm air next to their bodies and tucking their skinny legs and feet next to their breast feathers, it isn’t enough to keep them warm through a long, frosty night. That’s why we see them visiting our feeders more often than in warmer weather. Keeping warm requires more energy.

Even though songbirds have fat reserves, they often exhaust these in just a day! They can quickly use up to 70% of their reserves, causing a loss of 10% body weight in one cold night. This easily throws them into a survival challenge. During normal temps, a feeder bird gains about 20% of daily calories from bird feeders, with the remaining from natural sources – insects, plant seeds, etc. Cooler temperatures cause them to load up on calories at feeders just to survive. Studies have shown that bird feeders really can make a difference. Feeding high-fat foods such as sunflower seeds, nuts and suet; which usually contains the necessary fat and proteins; along with nuts, fruit

and insects make them irresistible to our hungry, feathered friends.

Beyond the bird feeder is an eastern towhee scratching for insects under the leaves. Even though they are members of the sparrow family, they are heavier and noticeably longer than the average sparrow. Although males and females share the same pattern, their coloring is different. Both have a white chest and rufous sides, with dark coloring on the head, back and tail. In males, the dark coloring is black; where the females are brown. Though not usually found in a group, if you did see them together, they would be called a “teapot” or “tangle” of towhees.

Wait! What was that movement out of the corner of my eye? Oh look! It’s one of our local eastern gray squirrels, joining the birds to forage for food. Often, they hang out underneath our squirrel-proof feeder, snacking on seeds dropped by their flying friends. Additionally, these small furry

rodents gather up acorns and other nuts, burying them or caching them in their nest for winter. Squirrel nests are built of twigs and leaves about 30 feet up a tree where they will snuggle on those cold, brisk days and nights. Opportunistic, they sometimes re-use woodpecker nest cavities in trees as their winter den.

They are fascinating acrobats, able to jump four feet vertically and nine feet horizontally! Nothing ordinary about that! We can pull up a chair and watch as they jump from skinny tree limb to skinnier tree limb, never missing a beat!

Did you see that movement by the flowerpot near the fence? At first glance, I assumed it was a bird foraging for insects on the ground. But upon closer look, I discovered an eastern box turtle on the move. He or she meandered across the sandstone patio to munch on something along the edge; maybe he found some small insects, tiny plants, roots or seeds. Turtles don't

technically hibernate in our area. Instead, they enter a state known as *brumation* which allows them to slow down during colder temperatures, when food is less available. During this time, they burrow deep under the soil and/or leaves.

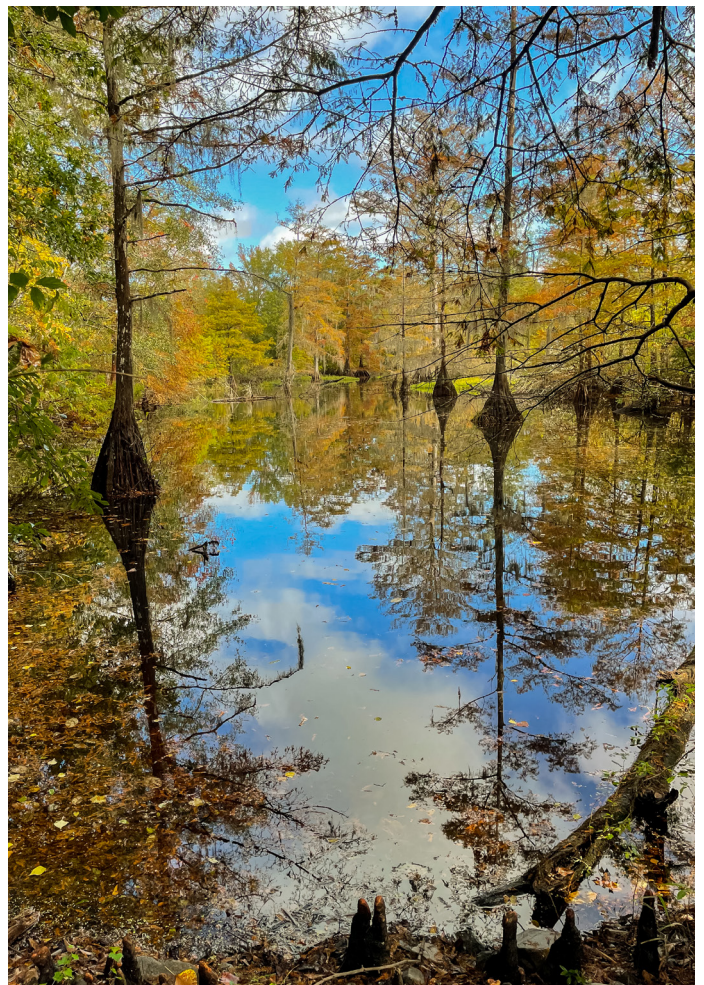
Mating takes place from April to October, with nesting occurring from May thru July. The female will dig a hole with her hind legs and lay from 2 – 8 white, oval-shaped eggs, which will hatch approximately 2-3 months later. One summer, I discovered a female in the process of laying her eggs. I never found the hatchlings but, from my research, this is not uncommon. The young are very tiny when they emerge with much darker shells than adults. They have a tendency to stay in their nest or buried under leaves for protection from predators, such as raccoons, birds, foxes, skunks, dogs and even ants.

Turtles are not the only amphibians we can find in our yards. Here's a bronze

frog, known locally as the "banjo frog" because their call sounds like the twang of a banjo string. These frogs are found throughout the state and love to dine on insects (think mosquitoes), small snakes, fish, etc.

Who hasn't seen our beautiful green tree frogs sporting their lime green suit? They can be found on doors and windows feeding on small insects, including mosquitoes. Their call is most often heard after a rain shower. Although females rarely vocalize, the males sing loudly to attract a mate.

Wildlife is not the only extraordinary magic we can appreciate. Some of the most amazing beauty can be found in a gorgeous sunrise or sunset. Over the years, I've photographed some incredible moments as the sun crested the horizon. Actually, there are various meteorology apps that can help predict the drama to be captured. But, rather than pour over another phone / computer app, just bask in the serendipity of the moment!





As we walk around, a nice breeze stirs the tree limbs, dislodging some fall leaves. I smile as I watch them flutter to the ground, as Mother Nature sculpts a beautiful pattern of colorful leaves on her canvas. Take pleasure in the abstract arrangements created. Sadly, we don't get the drastic color changes found in other parts of the country, but we still see some from sweet gum, cypress, Bradford pear, ginkgo, southern sugar maple and red maple, to name a few.

What causes the leaf color to change? Scientists have pondered this for years. Even though we don't know all the details, we do know that three factors are involved: leaf pigments, length of night, and weather. The primary influencer is the increasing length of nighttime.

Just like the leaves change colors, the birds who visit us ebb and flow with migration. During the year, we have our regular, year-round residents: northern cardinal, house finch, tufted titmouse, Carolina chickadee, eastern bluebird, Carolina wren, eastern towhee, brown thrasher, mourning dove, blue jay, northern mockingbird, red headed woodpecker and red bellied woodpecker. Then, there are our winter seasonal visitors: American goldfinch, purple finch, pine siskin, yellow-rumped warbler, white-throated sparrow, cedar waxwing, indigo bunting, and orchard oriole. I encourage you to get to know the birds who visit your yard and surrounding areas. They can provide fascination for hours!

Beautiful birds are not just found in backyards. Just look around you as you drive on one of our local streets. I frequently see red headed woodpeckers or eastern bluebirds streaking across the road in search of food or, maybe, returning to a nest with food for their young. You might even see a hawk, owl or egret feeding alongside a thoroughfare.

One day, as I drove home from a yoga class, I noticed a barred owl in a ditch, fishing for crawfish. Caught without a camera, I raced home to grab one, praying he would still be there when I returned. I didn't want to waste time changing clothes. So, still in my yoga clothes and flip-flops, I carefully maneuvered around to get a clean shot with a nicer backdrop than Military Road. Next thing I knew, I was in mud up to my ankles and had lost a shoe! But, I got the shot! No crawfish but a nice photo of the owl in daylight.

Owls found in Louisiana are mostly nocturnal. Their excellent vision and hearing make them successful nighttime hunters. Plus, darkness helps them avoid predators and help prevent their prey from seeing them. Their ability to basically fly silently through the trees gives them a distinct edge over whatever they are hunting.

Barred owls are unique in that their eyes are brown while most other owls are gold-colored, like the great horned owl.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the ruby-throated hummingbirds that are regular visitors to both feeders and salvia in our butterfly garden. Who can ignore the sparkling glint of their feathers in the sunlight as they dart around the yard,

whether at a feeder, a plant, or even as they perch nearby to protect food from would-be assailants?

How can you attract hummingbirds to your yard? They are most attracted to red, orange and pink flowers. Feeders with red parts also get their attention. There's no need to mix red food coloring with sugar water in the feeders. I've had great luck with red salvia, bottlebrush and lantana; but there are many more native plants that will catch their interest.

Did you know you can train a hummingbird? First, you will need a feeder with interchangeable colored ports – specifically red, yellow and white. Set up your feeder with one of each and watch to see which your hummers prefer. You can then position that color in the spots you want them to perch.

What other ordinary magic can we discover? Let's not forget about the birds we usually only see flying overhead such as turkey vultures, black vultures, red-tailed hawks, red-shouldered hawks, and swallow-tailed kites.

Why don't we go for a short drive? Less than a mile from my house, I spy something soaring overhead. It's not a vulture or a swallow-tailed kite. But it definitely looks to be in the raptor family. As I get closer, I watch it dip down below the treetops. I gently pull to a stop, out of traffic and harm's way. With my binoculars, I take a closer look and realize the raptor is a red-tailed hawk who has landed in a nest. By the time I have my camera set up, the adult has left the nest, which just so happens to contain 2 healthy juveniles.

Red-tailed hawks are year-round residents and possibly the most common in North America. They are frequently seen on a perch, such as a utility pole or fence post, watching for possible prey: voles, mice, squirrels, rabbits, birds, snakes, etc. Among the largest of the Buteo hawks in North America with wingspans a little over four feet, they are perfectly shaped for soaring. Their call is a unique screech that lasts for 3-4 seconds. Apparently, their call is big in Hollywood, since it is frequently used in many scenes involving eagles. With eyesight eight times sharper than a human's, it is no surprise they can spot a mouse on the ground from 100 feet in the air while circling.

Their nest is made of sticks and leafy branches by both parents, which also share incubating duties. Often the female sits on the eggs and feeds the young after hatching, while the male hunts and returns with food.

Beautiful birds are not the only flying magic we can find in our yards. Watch for butterflies, dragonflies, and other interesting insects/pollinators. Butterflies and dragonflies are among the few insects that bring a smile to the face of young and old.

Each year I have a bevy of spectacular butterflies in our butterfly garden. There are sulfurs, monarchs, swallowtails, American lady, viceroy, common buckeye, gulf fritillaries, and more.

Ideas to Share Nature with Children

- ▶ Put on rubber boots and jump in mud puddles.
- ▶ Pick flowers and make a bouquet.
- ▶ Watch for birds, butterflies or other insects in the backyard.
- ▶ Encourage and educate them to identify what they see or hear.
- ▶ Go on a treasure hunt.
- ▶ Look for tracks and scat. Try to identify.
- ▶ Get a magnifying glass and examine objects up close.
- ▶ Look for shapes in clouds.
- ▶ Create a nature notebook to track what's observed. Re-visit each season to note how objects change throughout the year.





Gulf fritillaries are a bright orange, medium-sized butterfly found throughout the southern United States. They are also known as passion butterflies because of their love of passionflowers.

Monarchs are on the endangered species list. Each spring, the monarch starts its flight from its wintering residence deep in the oyamel forests of Mexico, northward in search of milkweed to lay eggs. Milkweed leaves are the only food source of the monarch caterpillar. Sadly, they are being negatively affected by *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE), a parasite which impedes the success of the butterfly to emerge from the pupae state. Milder cases may allow the emergence of a monarch; however, they usually have a shorter lifespan and are unable to fly as well as a healthy monarch. Many avid monarch enthusiasts believe OE is related to the tropical milkweed found at local nurseries; and recommend cutting it back in early October and keep it cut back to discourage winter-breeding colonies.

Eastern tiger swallowtail are large, colorful butterflies commonly found east of the Mississippi River, but they also are seen in some western states. They can vary in color based on age and sex. The most common sports black tiger stripes on yellow wings. Males are mostly yellow with black edges, while the females display swaths of blue and orange on the edges of their wings.

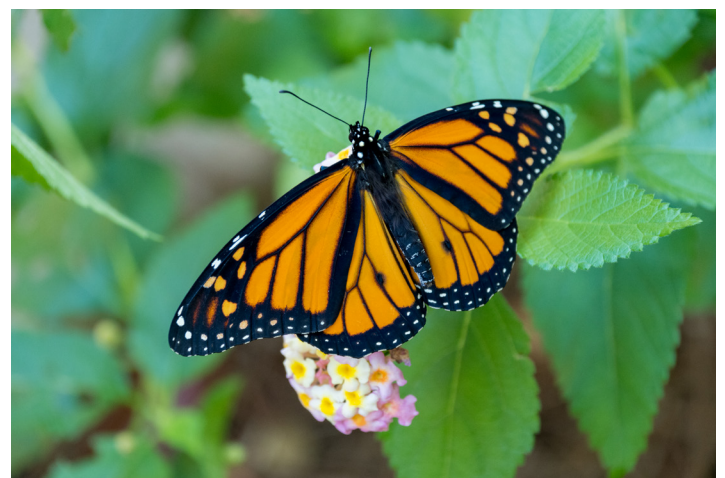
Dragonflies are a fun and challenging subject to follow. Like little miniature helicopters, they can easily hover or flit from one spot to the next, making photography a challenge. These masters of the airways seem to do everything in flight. They mate in flight and catch their food with their feet while flying. One special reason we should all be grateful to see these amazing aerialists is their diet – mosquitoes and midges! Yay!

If you like fresh vegetables and flowers, thank a bee! They are the biggest pollinator source we have. Bees,

unlike wasps and yellowjackets, don't intentionally sting us. Enjoy the buzz of a bee as it dances from flower to flower.

Don't think the extraordinary magic is only available during the daytime! One evening, we were sitting on the porch after dinner and I noticed some movement in the yard. It wasn't quite dark, so I grabbed my camera and went to investigate. Low and behold, we had an adventurous raccoon in our backyard! Who doesn't love the "masked bandit?" This little guy was a camera ham, putting on quite the show as he posed for me. As cute as they are, raccoons can be a nuisance – raiding garbage cans and gardens. They are omnivores - dining on crawfish, snails, insects, fruits and berries. But be careful! Never try to pet one, as they can carry rabies and other diseases.

As a kid, did you ever lay on your back in the grass and watch clouds floating



overhead? It was one of my favorite pastimes. I would try to determine what animal or object I could imagine the cloud to be. With a vivid imagination, I would determine the cloud to be a mystical unicorn or a dragon just like Puff, the Magic Dragon. Sometimes I picked out a castle or a cat; a horse or a dog. How long has it been since you really looked at clouds and applied a bit of youthful imagination to see what you can discover? Give it a try!

Of course, we don't have to stay in the backyard. Let's venture to one of my favorite places, the Boy Scout Trail in Big Branch National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). There's always something magical to see and enjoy throughout the year. In the springtime, Louisiana irises put on a stunning show of purple flowers.

Louisiana irises are not just in our state. They are found in the lower Mississippi River valley from southern Illinois and southeast Missouri into the Gulf coastal plain, and Atlantic coastal plain north from Florida to South Carolina.

There are five species of Louisiana irises here. National and State Wildlife Refuges are wonderful places to see these colorful springtime-blooming plants. But they can also be seen in ditches along local roads and highways.

Blooming Louisiana irises are not the only extraordinary vision to be seen. Regardless of the season of your visit, a slow walk can present blooming flowers, buzzing insects, a treasure trove of various birds, interesting flora and fauna. And don't forget to admire the blooming lotuses and water lilies.

Try using all five senses as you stroll:

Sight: a glance around brings visions of a beautiful pine savannah habitat, home to the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

Hearing: Stop and listen. You can hear birds singing in the trees and underbrush. The call of a red-bellied woodpecker can be heard nearby.

Smell: Maybe you can detect the smell of the fragrant water lilies or lotus flowers; or the pine sap dripping from fresh pine tree pecks by a resident woodpecker.

Taste: This one might be a little trickier. Don't try eating any plants in the wild without the authenticated knowledge of a Master Naturalist.

Touch: Feel the sensation of a soft breeze as it wafts over your skin.

I am showing you a lot of pictures of the ordinary magic around us. But I want to encourage you to not always take a photo of every subject you

see. Sometimes, we (myself included) should just appreciate the beauty of the moment and not become obsessed with capturing a photo. Recently, I was driving to Lacombe on Highway 434 when, to my surprise, a bald eagle fluttered down and landed alongside the road within a few feet of my vehicle. I slowed, hoping he would not fly into the path of an approaching car. My first thought, "I should stop and take a picture." My second thought, "It is not safe to stop on this busy highway." My third thought, "I should just enjoy the moment;" which I did. I continued about a half mile further and saw a great egret on the opposite side of the highway. All the same thoughts passed through my mind!

My purpose with this entire story is to inspire you to see the beauty all around us; to stop and smell the roses; to appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary; to embrace the magical moments occurring around us all the time, especially those times when we are rushing to and fro, focused on our next task at hand. I encourage you to try to find at least one thing each and every day that brings a smile to your face and brings back a child-like moment of excitement and joy!