

Making Ripples

Natural History in the Natural State

by Amanda Bancroft

Everything tells a story. No tree, shrub, insect, animal or rock is separated from our vast, interconnected ecological drama that has played out over millennia. The bony white sycamores are not just trees; they are saying, “Water is nearby.” The daffodils that spring up seemingly in a random location are not just flowers; they tell stories of homesteads that used to exist in that spot ages ago. Mushrooms growing in a line across the forest floor may indicate that an old tree from a virgin forest fell and decayed there. The exotic Japanese honeysuckle bushes that are about to bloom are waging a war as invaders in the story of our local ecosystems.

This story includes what we did today, what our ancestors did generations ago, and what happened in this region before humans existed here. The unique adaptations of a particular plant could indicate a relationship with a giant creature long extinct, as in the case of the honey locust tree and the North American mastodon: the tree evolved huge thorns to protect its bark from mastodons. A fencerow planted by farmers over a hundred years ago will leave its story on the landscape even in our time. And the actions we take today - deciding what to plant, or whether or not to let our pets roam free, or to dig a well - are part of this ongoing story hidden in the shapes of our hills, the roughness of tree bark, and even the speed at which a tadpole can escape a dragonfly predator. Tadpoles develop for a quick escape when aerial predators are present. The existence of one organism often tells us what else is around, or what once was there.

The tracks in the mud near your front door tell of the nocturnal visitors (like opossums, raccoons, or armadillos) that walked by in search of food or mates. Fortune-cookie-like tracks are probably those of the white-tailed deer. We can often determine intimate details about an animal through its tracks: was it caught in a trap, or was it moving quickly, perhaps being pursued by a predator?

Nothing is exactly what it seems or what can be immediately observed. A hole may not just be a hole, but a nest cavity or burrow dug first by one species and then used in consecutive years by a myriad of other species needing shelter and nest sites.

According to “The Natural Divisions of Arkansas,” a digital resource guide by Thomas L. Foti and made available through the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, there are six natural divisions of Arkansas: Crowley’s Ridge, Mississippi Alluvial Plain, Coastal Plain, Ouachitas, Arkansas River Valley, and the Ozarks, a flat-topped mountain range that is the remnant of plateaus of ancient sedimentary rock. These divisions are natural systems that extend over large geographical regions. For educational resources, news, and videos on Arkansas natural history, visit the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission at NaturalHeritage.com.

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