

The Quiet Commotion of Fall and Winter

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Coots visit Texas in large numbers during winter and fall. Their flocks are called "rafts." Larry Sallee Photo.

Many people don't think of fall and winter as being a good time to explore the outdoors, but there's more to the cooler months than just fall foliage. From a purely human standpoint, there are distinct advantages to colder temperatures. Mosquitoes and other biting or stinging insects have either died off or are hibernating for the winter. Because most of the trees are bare, you are more likely to see mammals and birds foraging. Birding hikes can be much more productive during the winter, especially for beginners. On the rare occasions that we get snow, you can see tracks of animals that are normally not heavy enough to leave such evidence. Animals such as squirrels, birds, and even mice leave distinctive traces in the snow that can reveal much about their otherwise unnoticed comings and goings.



An armadillo digs in the brush for grubs. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

Any animal that is warm blooded is likely to be active in winter in Texas. This includes birds and mammals. The weather simply isn't cold enough for these creatures to truly hibernate or even be inconvenienced. Birds are very efficient at keeping warm during the winter. In addition to their insulating feathers, birds' legs have special interlacing blood vessels high in the thigh that warm blood going to the lower leg and keep tissues from freezing. We have an astounding number of northern birds

that arrive in Texas during their winter migration, especially waterfowl. Teal, coots, buffleheads, osprey, and, occasionally, bald eagles will spend their winter vacations at the Refuge. A quiet river in the summer becomes a busy meeting spot for American white pelicans in the winter as they churn up the water hunting for fish. Northern harriers, a land-based bird of prey, will hunt for rodents on the prairie, flashing their distinctive white rump patches. Even our year-round hawk residents will be more visible as they hunt.

Most mammals are also well protected against the cold. Deer grow special hairs during the winter that are hollow like straws. This creates a layer of insulating air that keeps them warm and cozy. Other animals may grow a thick and fluffy undercoat. The only mammals that are at a disadvantage are those that lack fur. Opossums have to be careful not to expose their delicate ears and hairless tails to freezing temperatures. Armadillos change their activity patterns to be much more active during the middle of the day when temperatures are higher. Both of these animals use the insulating properties of the earth to keep warm in underground burrows. The armadillo digs its own, while the opossum hopes to find a burrow abandoned by another animal. Rotting wood and living trees also give off a small amount of heat, so in some cases, a tree hollow may suffice.

The warmth of trees allows butterflies and spiders to wriggle under loose bark and sleep the winter away, but you don't have to be satisfied with a long winter nap. In addition to visiting on your own to see some of these winter wonders, we will be offering many programs, both indoor and outdoor, to help you appreciate the unique attractions of cold weather. Our bison hayrides are an annual highlight and will be held during the school breaks in November and December. These giants of the prairie are well protected against weather much colder than what we have in Texas. The real challenge for these grass-eating herbivores is filling their bellies. Dry winter grass is not as nutritious as spring and summer grasses. Here at the Nature Center, we provide the bison with plenty of hay and high-calorie range cubes (the same cubes that guests throw over the fence during

hayrides), but wild bison must constantly be on the lookout for food during the cold months. In some cases, they find only enough to keep the bacteria colonies in their ruminating stomachs alive until spring, when they fatten up once again.

We will also be offering indoor workshops on basket weaving and providing housing for screech owls and other neighborhood wildlife. One of the lesser-known facts about the Nature Center is that the Refuge contains several archaeological sites, some of which have been extensively documented. Our oldest sites have artifacts that are thousands of years old, left behind by ancient people who camped by the Trinity River. You can imagine during the fall that these people gathered with their families around the cooking fire to tell stories and stay warm while they worked on making tools such as baskets. We don't know exactly how they made their baskets, but we will be making a simple design out of natural materials that might have been used by later pioneers to the area.



*Tiny flowers on big bluestem will turn to seeds later in the fall.
FWNC&R Staff Photo.*

Many birds of prey start their courtship during late winter so they can begin nesting in February or March. You can be prepared by making a screech owl box. This box can also be used by the American kestrel, depending on where it is hung. Boxes act as artificial tree cavities and provide an extra layer of protection from the wind. Natural cavities or human-made boxes also help retain the warmth of the adults while they incubate their eggs.

For prairie enthusiasts, fall is the time when grass identification becomes much easier. Join us for a hike or take a self-guided walk. Take a close look at grasses such as big bluestem during late summer and you will see tiny flowers. Just like larger wildflowers, these miniscule grass flowers later turn into seeds. The distinctive seed head, or inflorescence, of the different grasses are a dead giveaway to whether you are looking at yellow Indian grass, switchgrass, purple top, or one of our other grass species. Birds are attracted to these seeds and can often be seen or heard among the swaying stems.

So take a cue from the animals, put on your winter coat, and enjoy the cold weather while it lasts. You may be surprised at how the Nature Center can be both quiet and busy during the fall and winter months.