

Canyon Creek CHRONICLE

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NATURE WATCH

LITTLE ARMORED ONE

by Jim and Lynne Weber

Spanish for 'little armored one', the armadillo is one of the most interesting mammals in North America. All but one of the 20 different species of armadillo live in Latin America, but the Nine-banded Armadillo (*Dasyus novemcinctus*) makes its home as far north as Texas (except for the western Trans-Pecos), Oklahoma, and Louisiana. In fact, this armadillo is the official state small mammal of Texas!

A cat-sized, insect-eating mammal, armadillos have bony plates that cover their back, head, legs, and tail, protecting them from predators. No other living mammal wears such a shell, but contrary to popular belief, the Nine-banded Armadillo cannot roll into a ball and encase itself with its shell. Only the Three-banded Armadillo can accomplish this, by curling its head and back feet inward and contorting its shell as protection. No amount of armor can protect them from the cold, however, and because of their low metabolic rate and lack of fur and body fat stores, cold weather can wipe out whole populations of these little creatures.

Armadillos have a pointy snout and small eyes, and are prolific diggers. They dig for food and dig many burrows, mostly along creekbeds in Central Texas, and they do not survive in areas where the soil is too hard to dig. Armadillos spend up to 16 hours a day digging, mainly active in



Nine-banded Armadillo

the dawn and dusk hours, looking for beetles, ants, termites, and other insects. Their eyesight is quite poor, but they use their keen sense of smell to locate food, and utilize their long, sticky tongues to grasp berries, caterpillars, grubs, fungi, and sometimes even carrion.

Armadillos are quite fond of water, visiting water holes and streams to drink, feed, and even take mud baths. Their specific gravity is high, which means they normally ride low in the water when swimming. For short water crossings, they often just walk underwater across the bottom, but for deeper and longer crossings they voluntarily ingest air to inflate themselves and increase their buoyancy by retaining the air in their digestive tract!

Armadillos are thought to be a pair during the breeding season, sharing the same burrow. Due to their bony shells and the underside location of their genitalia, copulation occurs with the female lying on her back. While breeding occurs in July, the embryo remains in a dormant state until November. Always of the same sex, identical quadruplets develop from the single egg, and four young are born in a grass-lined burrow in March.

While the Nine-banded Armadillo is a unique mammal whose range is expanding northward, there is reason to be concerned about their conservation status in Texas. Encroaching human civilization, overgrazing, and progressive climatic change may be keeping them on the move, and many mammalogists agree that armadillos are rare at best when compared to populations of a few years ago. This decline also appears to be correlated with increasing populations of feral hogs, as well as the propensity for people to make trinkets from armadillo shells. Perhaps our state motto should read 'Don't Mess with Texas Armadillos!'

Send your nature-related questions to naturewatch@austin.rr.com and we'll do our best to answer them. If you enjoy reading these articles, check out our books, *Nature Watch Austin* and *Nature Watch Big Bend* (published by Texas A&M University Press), and our blog at naturewatchaustin.blogspot.com.

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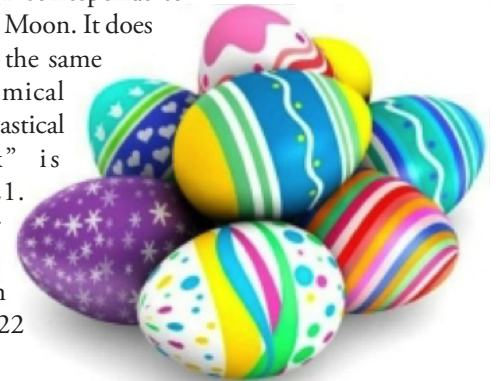
THE TRADITIONS OF EASTER

As with almost all “Christian” holidays, Easter has been secularized and commercialized. The dichotomous nature of Easter and its symbols, however, is not necessarily a modern fabrication. Since its conception as a holy celebration in the second century, Easter has had its non-religious side. In fact, Easter was originally a pagan festival.

The ancient Saxons celebrated the return of spring with an uproarious festival commemorating their goddess of offspring and of springtime, Eastre. When the second century Christian missionaries encountered the tribes of the north with their pagan celebrations, they attempted to convert them to Christianity. They did so, however, in a clandestine manner. It would have been suicide for the very early Christian converts to celebrate their holy days with observances that did not coincide with celebrations that already existed. To save lives, the missionaries cleverly decided to spread their religious message slowly throughout the populations by allowing them to continue to celebrate pagan feasts, but to do so in a Christian manner. As it happened, the pagan festival of Eastre occurred at the same time of year as the Christian observance of the Resurrection of Christ. It made sense, therefore, to alter the festival itself, to make it a Christian celebration as converts were slowly won over. The early name, Eastre, was eventually changed

to its modern spelling, Easter.

The Date of Easter, Prior to A.D. 325: Easter was variously celebrated on different days of the week, including Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In that year, the Council of Nicaea was convened by emperor Constantine. It issued the Easter Rule which states that Easter shall be celebrated on the first Sunday that occurs after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. However, a caveat must be introduced here. The “full moon” in the rule is the ecclesiastical full moon, which is defined as the fourteenth day of a tabular lunation, where day 1 corresponds to the ecclesiastical New Moon. It does not always occur on the same date as the astronomical full moon. The ecclesiastical “vernal equinox” is always on March 21. Therefore, Easter must be celebrated on a Sunday between the dates of March 22 and April 25.



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LADYBIRD BEETLES

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Ladybird beetles, also known as ladybugs, are beneficial insects that can help eat pests in the landscape.

While they help to control various soft-bodied insect pests, they are best known for eating aphids in the adult and larval stage. One ladybug can eat up to 5,000 aphids during its lifetime. Ladybugs may supplement their diet with flower nectar and honeydew in times when prey is scarce.



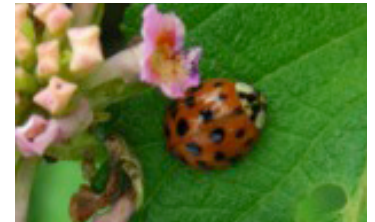
Ladybug eggs



Ladybug larva



Ladybug pupa



Ladybug adult

Ladybugs have a complete life cycle with four life stages- egg, larva, pupa, and adult. Adults come in a variety of sizes and colors. They are oval with a domed body shape, are brightly colored, and have contrasting markings. After mating, female adults lay eggs in clusters on plants, usually near aphids, mealybugs, or scale insects. The eggs are yellowish-orange and look like footballs sitting up on end. Larvae emerge from eggs to feed on the insects that are found nearby. Larvae are alligator-shaped, and often greyish-black with bright markings. Larvae feed on insect prey for several weeks before pupating on the plant. The pupae are non-feeding, non-moving, and are unprotected by a cocoon.

To conserve the ladybugs that you find in your landscape, learn to recognize all stages of the beetles. Make wise pesticide choices and target use to specific areas. Add plants that can provide pollen and nectar for the beetles to supplement their diet.

For more information or help with identification, contact Wizzie Brown, Texas AgriLife Extension Service Program Specialist at 512.854.9600. Check out my blog at www.urban-ipm.blogspot.com

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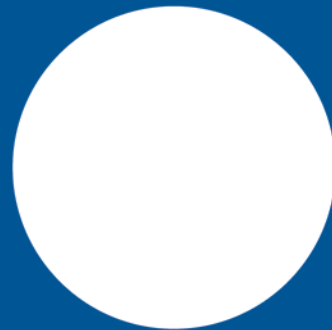
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