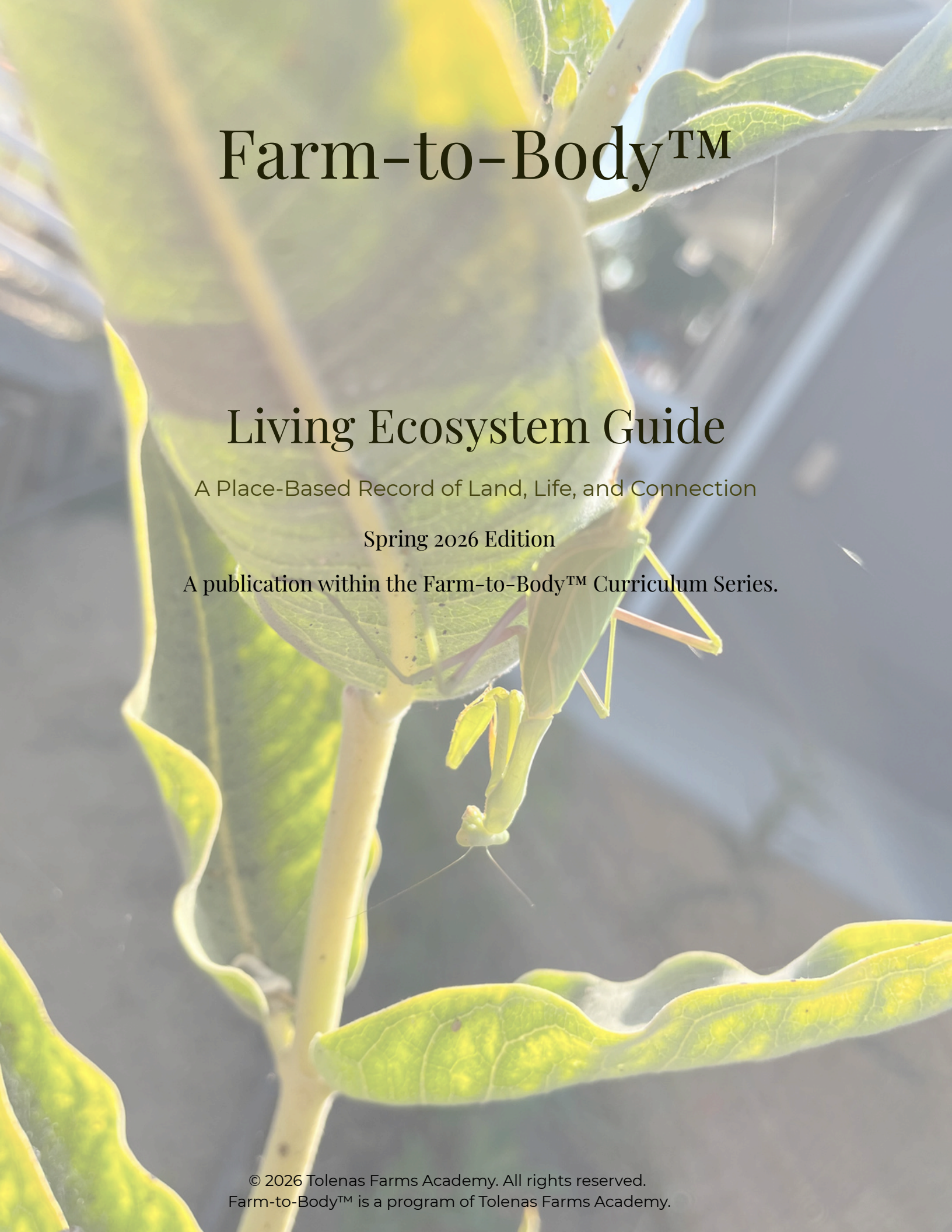


A close-up photograph of a green praying mantis perched on a large, light-green leaf. The mantis is facing downwards, with its long, thin legs and raptorial front limbs clearly visible. The background is a soft-focus view of a building with a blue roof, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall lighting is bright and natural, highlighting the textures of the leaf and the insect.

Farm-to-Body™

Living Ecosystem Guide

A Place-Based Record of Land, Life, and Connection

Spring 2026 Edition

A publication within the Farm-to-Body™ Curriculum Series.

This Land is Alive



This land was not built all at once. It was restored, observed, and slowly understood.

Over time, patterns began to emerge:

- insects appearing and disappearing
- animals moving between spaces
- plants attracting specific life
- water shaping everything

What exists here is not separate parts, but a connected system.

What I Didn't Understand Yet

When I first arrived on this land, the creek felt like a problem. It divided the property, making parts of the land harder to access and manage.

Over time, as the overgrowth was cleared and the space became more visible, something else began to emerge. What once felt like an obstacle revealed itself as a source of life.

In the same way, many of the small creatures I once saw as a nuisance, mosquitoes, insects, movement in the soil became part of a larger system I had not yet understood.

With time and observation, the land did not change. My understanding of it did.

Purpose of This Guide

This guide documents observations, patterns, and relationships discovered through continued interaction with the land. It serves as a record of the ecosystems, species, and connections that support life on the property.

It is not as a complete record, but as an ongoing relationship with the land.

It is a record of:

- what lives here
- how life moves
- and how each part supports another

This guide reflect observations, experiences and learning opportunities explored with children on the land as part of the Farm-to-Body™ curriculum at Tolenas Farms Academy.

The Creek: The Engine of the Land



What lives here

Ducks, tadpoles, mosquitoes, turtles, and a range of birds, including owls, crane and geese are observed in and around the creek. Occasional wildlife, such as a beaver or possum, has also been seen nearby.

What the creek provides

- water
- breeding space
- food sources
- shelter through surrounding trees

Observations

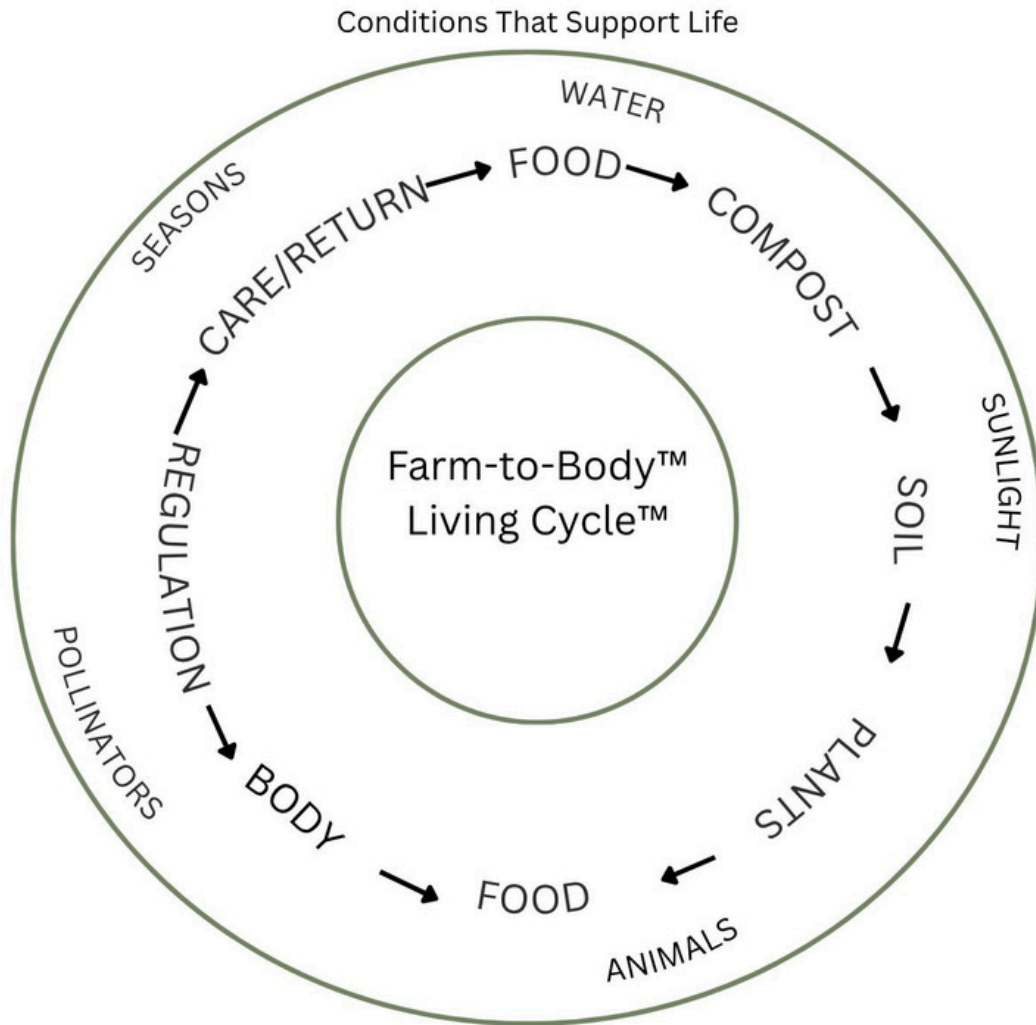
- Dragonfly activity is highest near the creek
- Mosquitoes appear here first, especially in early spring
- Birds use nearby trees for nesting and movement
- Wildlife activity is more concentrated here than in other areas of the land

Insight

The creek serves as a starting point. What begins here moves outward.

Ecosystem Connections

Farm-to-Body™ Living Cycle™



A healthy system provides more than survival. It provides the conditions for life to continue.

Dragonflies: A Story of Connection



The dragonfly became one of the first species that showed me how connected everything on this land truly is.

What I Observed

When I first noticed dragonflies on the property, I simply thought they were beautiful insects passing through.

They appeared near the creek, occasionally flying across the yard or resting nearby. I appreciated seeing them but I did not yet understand their role.

Over time, I began to notice patterns.

Dragonflies were most active near the creek, but they did not stay there. They traveled throughout the property, moving between water, gardens, trees, and open spaces. They appeared near the pollinator garden, around the raised beds, and often near sprinklers during warm evenings.

As the seasons changed, their numbers increased and there became more variation in their altitude.

At least three different dragonflies have been observed on the land, including Common Whitetails, Flame Skimmers, and Blue Dasher.

One of the most frequently observed dragon flies on the property is the Blue Dasher. These bright blue dragonflies are often seen flying at eye level, resting on structures, patrolling open areas and the creek while hunting smaller flying insects.

Dragonfly activity occasionally continues after dark, extending beyond the times they are most commonly observed during the day.

The more I observed, the more I realized dragonflies were connecting different parts of the land. The creek, gardens, open spaces, and surrounding habitats were not separate systems.

They were part of the same story.

What Dragonflies Taught Me

What began as a simple observation became one of the most important lessons this land has taught me.

The Lesson

The creek provides water and breeding habitat. The garden provides feeding opportunities. Open spaces allow movement between the two.

What once appeared disconnected was actually working together.

As dragonfly activity increased throughout late spring, something else became noticeable.

Mosquitoes became less common. Gnats became less common. Flies became less common.

While many factors contribute to seasonal changes, dragonflies are known predators of flying insects and play an important role in maintaining balance within an ecosystem.

What I Realized

The most important lesson wasn't about dragonflies.

It was about connection.

The creek is not separate from the garden.

The garden is not separate from the animals.

The animals are not separate from the soil.

Each part supports another.

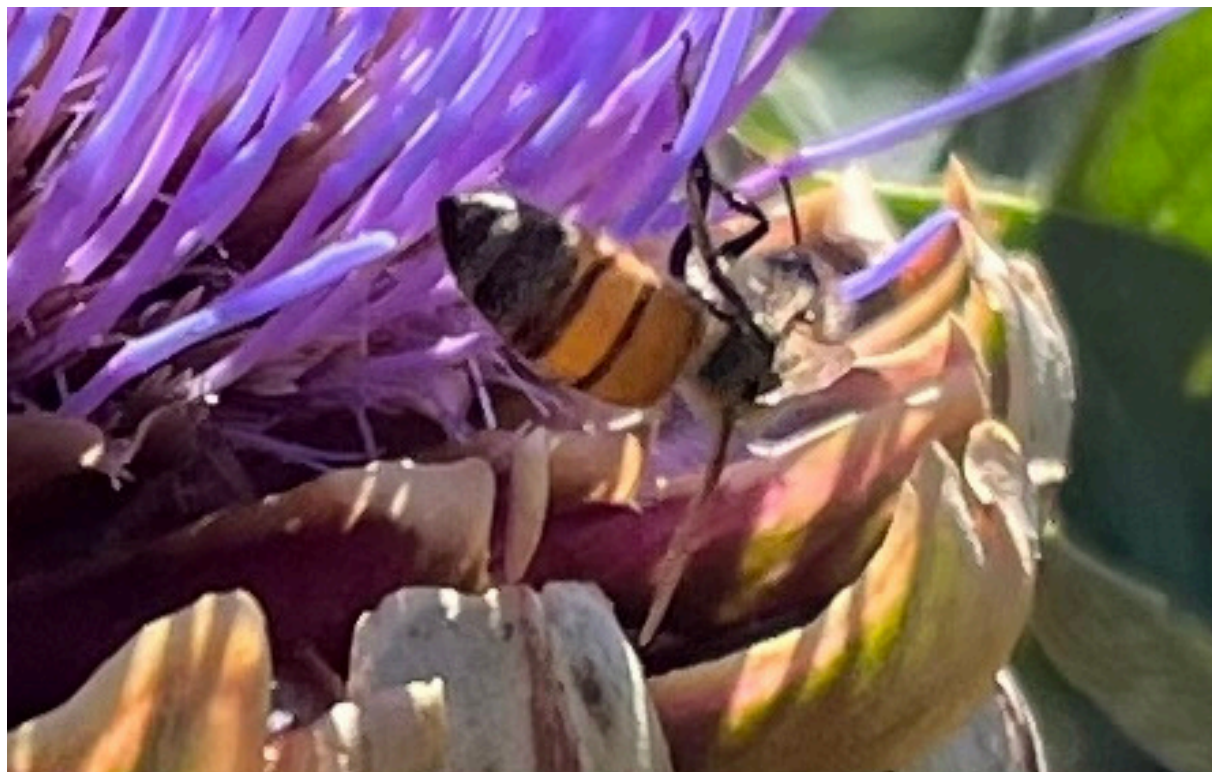
What happens in one area influences what happens somewhere else.

What Changed

Dragonflies became one of the first species that helped me understand how connected everything on this land truly is. What I once saw as a beautiful insect passing through turned out to be a guide.

They helped me see that the story of this land is not about individual plants, animals, or insects. It is about relationships.

Life in the Garden



The garden is more than a place where food grows.

It is a place where insects, birds, animals, and plants interact every day. Some pollinate flowers. Some help manage pests. Some gather nectar, seeds, fruit, or insects for food. Together, they contribute to the balance and activity found throughout the garden. People also participate in this living system by harvesting, gathering, caring for plants, preparing food, and learning alongside the many species that call the garden home.

Bees

What I Observed

Bees are frequently observed visiting flowers throughout the property, especially native plants and flowering herbs. Lavender, borage, yarrow, rosemary, thyme, salvia, milkweed, California Fuchsia and other flowering plants attract a variety of pollinators throughout the growing season.

What Bees Reveal

Bees helped me understand that food production depends on more than planting seeds.

Flowers provide nectar and pollen, while bees help pollinate many of the fruits, vegetables, and plants found throughout the garden.

Without pollinators, many plants would struggle to reproduce and produce food.



Butterflies & Caterpillars

What I Observed

Monarch butterflies and other butterfly species begin appearing in spring. Caterpillars are occasionally found feeding on host plants such as milkweed, while adult butterflies move between flowers searching for nectar.

Yellow and black swallowtail butterflies are commonly observed flying through the property during warmer parts of the day.

What Butterflies Reveal

Butterflies helped me understand the importance of plant diversity. Different plants support different stages of life. Some provide food for caterpillars, while others provide nectar for adult butterflies.

A garden supports more life when it provides resources for the entire life cycle.

Insight

Grasshoppers, beetles, slugs, and other plant feeders are also present, contributing to the food chain and supporting predator species.

Ladybugs

What I Observed



Ladybugs are often among the first insects observed in late winter and early spring initially in grasses. As the season progresses they are commonly found on plants, sunflower leaves and Swiss chard, where other insects are also present.

What Ladybugs Reveal

Ladybugs helped me understand that not every insect in the garden damages plants. Many insects help maintain balance by feeding on aphids and other pests.

Their presence reminds us that healthy gardens often contain both pests and the species that help manage them.

Worms

What I Observed

Worms are commonly observed during late winter and early spring, particularly after periods of rain. As temperatures increase and the season progresses, fewer worms are seen on the soil surface.

They are often found in garden beds, composting areas, and moist soil where plant material is breaking down.

What Worms Reveal

Worms helped me understand that some of the most important work in an ecosystem happens out of sight.

While pollinators move through the air and birds move through the trees, worms work beneath the soil surface. They help break down organic matter and contribute to healthy soil that supports future plant growth.

Worms remind us that healthy systems depend not only on what is growing, but also on what is being returned.

Life continues because nutrients are constantly recycled back into the soil.

Squirrels

What I Observed

Squirrels are most often observed moving between trees, raised garden beds, fencing, and other elevated areas of the property. They are frequently seen running along fence lines, climbing trees, and investigating areas where seeds, fruit, and shelter are available.

What Squirrels Reveal

Squirrels helped me understand that gardens extend beyond growing beds. Trees, fences, and surrounding habitats are also part of the ecosystem. Animals move freely between these spaces, using them for travel, food, shelter, and safety.

The more I observed life in the garden, the more I realized that every species interacts with the system differently.

Some pollinate.

Some feed.

Some manage pests.

Some disperse seeds.

Some help return nutrients to the soil.

Each contributes in its own way.

The garden is not simply a place where plants grow. It is a place where relationships grow.

Gophers

Gophers spend most of their lives underground, where they create tunnels and move soil.

During spring, fresh mounds and occasional sightings reveal their activity beneath the garden. While they sometimes damage young plants and trees, they also remind us that much of the ecosystem exists below the surface.

Birds: Movement Across the Land

Before they are seen, they are heard.



Movement Across the Land

The first sounds of the day on our land are often not the creek, the animals, or the wind.

Before they are seen, they are heard.

In spring, the air fills with birdsong. Mature calls are joined by the quieter chirps of young birds hidden in nests nearby. The sounds carry across the property from the trees, gardens, creek, and open spaces.

Birds are observed throughout every area of the land.

They fly over and through the creek, soar above open areas, move through the gardens, rest near the animal enclosures, and hop along the ground searching for food.

Some are small and quick, like hummingbirds moving from flower to flower. Others are large and easy to spot, such as ducks, geese, and hawks. Sparrows, mockingbirds, and many other species appear throughout the seasons.

One of the most fascinating observations is how constantly birds move. They rarely remain in one place for long. A bird may be feeding near the creek one moment, resting in a tree the next, and later searching for insects in the garden.

Birds seem to connect every part of the property through their daily movement.

They remind us that the creek, gardens, trees, animal areas, and open spaces are not separate places, but parts of a larger system.

Building Homes



While food often draws our attention, one of the most common spring observations is birds gathering materials for nests.

Throughout the season, birds can be observed carrying twigs, grasses, hay, and other materials across the property. Materials are collected from many areas of the land and transported to nesting sites both in trees, structures and on the ground.

One of the most memorable observations occurred near the creek, where a killdeer bird built a nest containing four eggs. Over the course of several days, the parent birds appeared to take turns protecting the nest. After a period of heavy rain, the nest and eggs were no longer present.

Whether hidden high in the trees or resting quietly on the ground, nests represent more than shelter.

They represent the next generation.

The presence of nests, eggs, and young birds reveals something important about a habitat.

Birds are not simply visiting the land to feed. They are choosing to build homes, raise young, and invest in the future here.

A habitat must provide more than food. It must also provide safety, shelter, nesting materials, and places where life can continue.

What Birds Reveal

The more I observed birds, the more I realized they were teaching me something about habitat.

Food is important, but food alone is not enough.

Birds rely on a combination of resources that work together. Trees surrounding the creek provide shelter, protection, and places to nest. Fruit-bearing plants offer food. The gardens support insects that many birds depend on. Animal areas provide additional feeding opportunities and nesting materials such as hay.

Birds are frequently observed near the pony and goat enclosures, especially where hay is present. They are also sometimes observed chasing squirrels through trees and open areas, reminding us that animals are constantly responding to one another.

Some birds fill the air with song throughout the day. Others emerge as daylight fades. The occasional hoot of an owl from the creekside trees is a reminder that the ecosystem remains active even when much of it can no longer be seen.

The birds on this land helped me understand that a healthy habitat provides more than food.

It provides shelter.

It provides safety.

It provides nesting materials.

It provides access to water.

It provides room to move.

When birds are feeding, nesting, raising young, and returning season after season, they reveal something important about the land itself. They reveal that their needs are being met.

A healthy system provides more than survival.

It provides the conditions for life to continue.

Life Between Water and Land

Amphibians (Tadpoles → Frogs)

Observed:

- Tadpoles seen in clusters and individually
- Movement between different areas of the creek
- Frogs appear later in the season on land

Tends to:

- shift location based on water conditions and temperature

Life begins in water, then continues beyond it.



Turtles

Observed:

- Found in water and on land
- More visible on land in warmer weather
- Typically alone when on land, in groups when sunbathing in creek
- Seen moving and resting in open dirt or grassy areas

Tends to:

- move between water and land
- use sun and shade throughout the day

Insight

They do not stay in one environment.

Animals Within The System



What lives here

Chickens, a pony, and goats are cared for on the land and move within designated areas.



Observed Roles

Chickens

- Manure for compost and soil health
- Insect control through scratching and foraging
- produce eggs/nutrition
- potential for future generations through egg production and incubation
- opportunities to observe animal behavior and life cycles

During spring, one hen entered a broody period and remained committed to incubating eggs for extended periods each day. This provided an opportunity to observe nesting, incubation, and protective behaviors similar to those seen in wild birds throughout the property.

Pony

- Grazing and vegetation management
- Manure that supports soil health and compost systems
- Opportunities for children to practice observation, empathy and care through on going relationship and interaction



Goats

The goats helped me understand that not everything grown on the land is meant for people. Some plants become food for animals, and what animals return can help support future growth. Through feeding and caring for the goats, children participate in one of the many ways resources move through the system.

- A meaningful way to return plant material back to the system. Children collect overgrown weeds, grasses, leaves and uneaten garden plants to feed them.
- Opportunities for children to build relationships, companionship, and connection.
- Manure that can be composted and returned to the soil to support future plant growth.
- Experience caring for another living thing through feeding, watering, observation and enclosure maintenance.

What this supports

- daily rhythm and routine
- observation and attentiveness
- consistency in care

Observed Human Interaction

- feeding and watering
- collecting eggs
- maintaining and cleaning spaces
- moving calmly and intentionally around animals

Insight

These animals are supported by humans, but in return, they shape both the land and the way humans move within it.

Plant & Food System

What Supports Everything Else



What is here

Garden beds, pollinator plants, wildflowers, and trees are present across the land, including vegetables, herbs, native plants, and volunteer growth.

What plants do

- produce food
- provide nectar and pollen
- create habitat
- support insects and animals

What they depend on

- pollinators (bees, butterflies, hummingbirds)
- soil conditions
- water

What depends on them

- insects (food and shelter)
- birds (feeding and movement)
- animals (grazing and browsing)
- humans (food and interaction)

Insight

Plants anchor the system everything else responds to their presence.

Humans as Caretakers



Garden beds, pollinator plants, wildflowers, and trees are present across the land, including vegetables, herbs, native plants, and volunteer growth.

What this influences

- which plants are able to grow
- which insects are supported
- how animals move and feed
- the overall balance of the land

Relationship to the system

These actions do not control the land, but shape the conditions it develops within.

When I first began observing the land, I assumed humans were the primary caretakers of the ecosystem. Over time, I began to notice something else. The land was caring for us as well. Through food, shade, pollination, companionship, beauty, and opportunities to learn, the ecosystem was meeting human needs just as humans were helping meet the needs of other living things.

Insight

What is supported here is influenced by what is introduced and what is allowed.

Seasonal Patterns



Spring

- Mosquitoes increase early, then decrease
- Dragonflies increase in late spring
- Ladybugs are most visible late winter through spring
- Praying Mantis begin small and increase in size over time
- Tadpoles shift locations within the creek
- Butterflies emerge and vary by time of day
- Increased activity near water and sprinklers in the evenings

Spring: A Season of New Life

Spring brought a noticeable increase in reproductive activity across the property.

Birds became more vocal and active. Nesting materials were carried into trees and shrubs, while some species, such as killdeer, nested directly on the ground. Adult birds were frequently heard calling, and the sounds of young birds became increasingly common as the season progressed.

Within the chicken flock, one hen entered a broody period and began incubating eggs, providing an opportunity to observe nesting and incubation behaviors up close.

Butterflies, caterpillars, pollinators, tadpoles, and other young forms of life became more visible throughout the property.

Spring revealed that growth is not limited to plants. It is also a season when many species invest energy into producing and raising the next generation.

Late Spring Observation: Dragonflies appear to be flying lower than earlier in the season. One possible explanation is a change in the location or abundance of flying insects. Additional observation is needed to determine whether this pattern continues into summer.

Insight

Patterns repeat, but not in exactly the same way.

Field Notes

Ongoing Observations on the Land

Not everything is captured in the sections above. Some patterns appear slowly, and some are only noticed over time. These pages are used to record what is changing, repeating, or newly observed.

Connected Landscapes

Paper wasp colonies were observed on the street side of our fence expanding during late spring. Nest size, worker activity, and developing brood suggested that reproduction was occurring alongside the nesting behaviors observed in birds and chickens.



The discovery of paper wasp nests reminded me that reproduction was occurring in places I had not initially noticed. While birds built nests in trees and on the ground, paper wasps were building nurseries on fences and structures throughout the property. The more closely I looked, the more examples of new life I found.

A neighboring property owner photographed a Great Blue Heron carrying a gopher. The observation expanded my understanding of how larger birds utilize the surrounding landscape. While often associated with water, herons also hunt in nearby fields and open spaces. This served as another reminder that the creek, fields, trees, and gardens function as connected habitats rather than separate places.



A neighboring pair of Canada Geese successfully raised young on a nearby property. Several weeks later, the goslings were observed wandering onto the patio and moving through the surrounding landscape. This observation served as another reminder that wildlife regularly moves between properties and utilizes habitats beyond a single location.



A Living System



What is documented here reflects what has been observed so far.

The land continues to change:

- seasons shift
- patterns repeat and adjust
- new life appears

Not everything can be seen at once. Understanding develops over time through continued observation.

What exists here is not fixed. It moves, responds, and returns. What grows is supported. What is used is returned.

The more I observed, the more I realized that people are not separate from this system. We depend on many of the same conditions that support plants, animals, insects, and birds.

It becomes difficult to separate learning from caring, or observation from participation. We become learners, caretakers, teachers, and participants all at once.

This is not a complete record, but a continued practice of noticing.